



Precious Things

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she whispered.

His thumb nudged her chin upward. Slight furrows wrinkled his brow, questioning her. She realized her foolishness. Benjamin couldn’t read her lips when she looked down. The extraordinary blaze and glow of his brown eyes looking down on her, forced her heart to skip a beat. Her lips parted, and she struggled to keep her thoughts in order. *Was this really happening?*

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she managed to say again. The volume of her voice was almost indiscernible.

The space closed further. His body settled against hers, and Jewell was acutely, almost painfully, aware of his hard contours.

“He isn’t?” An irresistibly devastating grin tugged at his lips and his eyelids lowered as his gaze fell on her lips.

The effect was as tangible and powerful as a caress. She tried to shake her head, but couldn’t stand to move away from his touch. Acting on its own accord, Jewell’s hand moved from the desk’s edge to the waistband of his slacks. His breath caught and Jewell smiled at the involuntary reaction her touch created in him. It gave her a heady sense of power over a man who was infamous for his intimidation of others. Riding on the euphoria of her newfound ability, Jewell shifted her body against him and watched the muscle jump along his jaw.

“No,” she managed to say. “He’s my best friend.”

“Is there a boyfriend, Jewell?”

“No.”

His open mouth covered hers. There was no prelude to the kiss. No slow overture to its intensity. Jewell had no option, no choice, but to give in to its power without restraint. Their tongues met as a conduit, and thunder arched her body against him.

***What They Are Saying About
Precious Things***

“What truly makes Ms. Delaney's book outstanding is her deep perception and understanding of how a hearing impaired person lives in and communicates with their environment. A reader will gain a depth of understanding as the characters come alive and share their love.”

—Lois Wencil, Author
A Mistress Gets A Master

“Ms. Gail R Delaney has the magical fingers to weave inspiring characters into a love story and the talent to keep the reader enthralled throughout each chapter... [She] knows how to write a gripping love story that will bring a smile to your face.”

—Phyllis Campbell, Author
My Knight, My Rogue

“Delaney has created a spunky heroine in Jewell, and the use of ASL is interwoven seamlessly into the tale. Background stories nicely carry the theme of why we become the people we are. *Precious Things* is an easy story to get caught up in.” 3 Stars

—Karen Sweeny-Justice
Romantic Times Book Club

This story mesmerized me from the beginning till the end. It was written in a way that sweeps you off your feet from the very beginning... It's a very unique love story where you won't feel like you've read it before and it's definitely a TOP debut!! Thumbs up for this excellent new writer! Five Hearts!

—Eveline
The Romance Studio

Wings

Precious Things

by

Gail R. Delaney

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Dedication

This book is dedicated first to my husband, Patrick. Without him, I may have given up a long time ago.

And my undying gratitude and friendship goes to Chrystal and Jamie. More than my critique partners, they are my best friends.

And in special memory of my mother, Jewell. She kept everything I ever wrote in a box. Every poem. Every book report. Every story. And I know this book would hold a special place of honor. She believed in me, and although she wasn't with me long enough to see my first book in print, her love is here and her inspiration will last a lifetime.

One

“Ruby! If you want a ride to the campus, you’d better get your butt out of bed right now,” Jewell yelled through her open bedroom door.

She rummaged through the assorted costume jewelry on her dresser. The matching earring to the emerald green one already in her left ear was here just a second ago. Brooches and strands of beads were pushed aside in a panicked search. Finally, the earring surfaced and Jewell snatched it up in triumph. With a frustrated harrumph, she jabbed the post through her lobe and exited her bedroom.

“Ruby, now!”

The door to Ruby’s bedroom opened. The force of the movement fanned the air between them. Jewell’s younger sister leaned into the doorjamb. Her cropped brunette hair spiked away from her skull and she glared at Jewell with bleary brown eyes glazed in half-sleep. Remnants of her dark eyeliner smudged along her lower lashes.

“Have I ever mentioned that you can be a real pain in the ass?” Ruby mumbled.

Jewell puckered her lips and blew a kiss at her sister. “My job interview is at ten on the dot. If we leave in the next fifteen

minutes, I'll have barely enough time to get you to the college and back across the city."

"Jeez, sis. Calm down. I'll be ready in five minutes. Can I eat a muffin on the way?"

"I don't care, Ruby. Let's just go," Jewell said with a groan as she went back to her bedroom.

The shower turned on in the bathroom and Jewell looked at her wristwatch. "Ten minutes, Ruby!"

By the skin of her teeth, Jewell managed to drop Ruby off fifteen minutes before her first class. She pulled out into traffic and made her way to Bulwark Mutual Funds on the other side of Boston proper. A flicker of apprehension caught in her throat and her stomach knotted and twisted nervously. Her knuckles whitened as she hung on to her steering wheel. Jewell hated job interviews. No matter how prepared she tried to be, or how qualified she was, she always drove herself nuts.

Half an hour later she sat in the office of Mr. Travis Traynor. Her stomach still flipped and knotted, but after speaking with Mr. Traynor for several minutes, her heart no longer pounded erratically in her chest. He had already gone over most of the human resources aspect of the interview, highlighting her benefits and the company code of ethics, but Jewell was pretty sure she had missed most of it.

"I'm the first step for you, Jewell," Mr. Traynor explained. "The position is administrative support to Kevin Burke, one of our portfolio managers. Each manager has both an individual who acts as administrative support and another as executive support. The woman currently working with Mr. Burke is having a baby and has chosen not to return after her leave. The next, and really final step, is meeting with him."

Jewell nodded. "Will I meet Mr. Burke today?"

“Definitely. We can walk down to his office now and you can speak with him. I told him you would be in so he is expecting you.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

They stood and exited Mr. Traynor’s office. He took her several doors down, to a desk where a very pregnant woman sat. She wore a telephone headset and was involved in a conversation. Mr. Traynor wrote her a brief note, explaining why Jewell was there, and left her to return to his own office. The nameplate on the woman’s desk read LaTrisha. The woman held up a finger to indicate it would be a short wait. Jewell nodded and stepped back to allow the conversation to remain private.

A door slamming down the hall made Jewell jump, as well as many of the other people seated around her. An older woman stood outside one of the many doors along the hall. She looked about ready to collapse. Her hand shook as she pressed it to her blouse and looked around her. The assistant seated near her jumped up, and with a sympathetic look on her face, went to the woman and made her sit down. They spoke together in hushed voices as the most distraught one of the two shook her head and brushed her cheeks with her hands.

Jewell glanced back at LaTrisha, who was still involved in the conversation. Assuming it might be several more minutes before LaTrisha might be done, Jewell walked the few feet to the two women. There was a water cooler on the way and she stopped to fill a cup, thinking the drink might calm the woman and help her find her bearings. She set it down on the desk and the older woman took it with a grateful nod.

“Thank you.”

“Is everything all right?” Jewell asked, keeping her own voice low.

The woman shook her head. "He gets so angry. I can't help it if I don't always understand him the first time. Then his hands start flying and I'm lost!"

"It's not you, Carol. That's just Mr. Roth," said the younger woman whose desk was next to where they stood. "Everyone knows he can be just miserable."

Tears came to Carol's eyes. "I don't think I can do it anymore. I've tried. I've tried so hard. It's not like I don't know what I'm doing. He just won't let me do it! I'm just too old for this."

Jewell's heart went out to the two women. Obviously, the man they worked for was a jerk. She had worked for enough difficult employers since college to know exactly how these two women felt, although she'd never had a boss reduce her to tears. Jewell felt helpless, not knowing the Mr. Roth they spoke of, and not feeling it was her place to comment.

The younger of the two women stood and extended her hand. "My name is Justine Baker. This is Carol Hannigan. Are you applying for the position with Mr. Burke?"

Jewell nodded. "Yes."

"I hope you don't think this is what it's like to work here. Most of the fund managers are very nice. It's just Mr. Roth. He's demanding and has a very short temper."

"Justine is being gracious in her description," Carol added wryly. "B.P. Roth is beyond demanding. And his short temper runs very hot."

Jewell smiled. "I've had some pretty bad bosses myself. I understand."

The door opened again and the commanding presence of B.P. Roth stepped into the hall. He was not at all what Jewell expected. She was surprised to see a young man, perhaps early thirties, with caramel-blond hair and a distinctly chiseled chin. There was an inherent strength in the set of his jaw. The

starched-white shirt and tailored slacks accentuated a tall, and obviously athletic, build. His distinct profile turned from Jewell, deep brown eyes sought out and found the two hapless women in his employ. Carol looked up and Justine stood straight.

He barely glanced at Carol. “Get me an appointment with Rowlings tomorrow. Book a conference room and inform senior management on the incubated Asian fund—everyone is to attend.”

The slight rounding of his syllables immediately caught Jewell’s attention. His voice held a softer, somewhat incomplete quality despite its rough huskiness, and Jewell recognized it as the speech qualities of someone who was either hard of hearing or completely deaf. Jewell had heard the same type of speech pattern many times in her life.

Justine nodded and jumped into action at his sharp tone. Mr. Roth turned away and his gaze fell on Jewell. Hard eyes took her in, from head to toe, in one powerful perusal. He looked straight into her face. Something about the way he assumed he had the right to look at her that way spurred Jewell into action.

She laid her hand against her chest, palm flat, and moved it in a circular motion. His left brow rose slightly and he scowled.

“Please, what?” he demanded.

“*Book a conference room, please,*” she signed. “It would be much more polite.” Jewell made sure to face him and pronounced her words clearly, so he could read her lips without a problem.

Mr. Roth’s hands sat at his waist and he shifted to an arrogant stance. His eyes widened slightly as he stared back at her. With two long strides he moved closer to her.

“And you are?”

Jewell was shocked by the momentary disorientation of her senses when he closed the space between them. His presence

was so overpowering, it acted like a force field around his body pushing against her when he neared her. A hint of the masculine scent he wore filled her senses. Her cheeks warmed.

Not allowing his presence to daunt her, she spoke and signed together, spelling out her name. "*Jewell Kincaid.*"

Justine and Carol's heads moved back and forth as they watched the exchange. Justine hung up the phone in her hand. Jewell heard them whisper, but didn't turn from their boss and bring them again to his attention.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

Jewell shook her head. "No."

"*Who are you to tell me I should say please?*" The curt movements of his hands expressed his annoyance.

"A human being." Jewell set her briefcase down to utilize both hands. "*Who are you to think you can be so rude to people who are here to help you?*"

His eyebrow arched again, higher this time. "*Are you here on an interview?*"

She nodded.

"*With whom?*"

"Mr. Burke."

Mr. Roth's hand shot out, palm up, in demand. "Give me your résumé."

Jewell met his stare, not willing to yield to his lack of manners. "Please?"

His lopsided smirk told her she wouldn't get the satisfaction of him asking nicely. He wiggled his fingers in an impatient gesture. Jewell shook her head and crouched down to retrieve her extra résumé. She handed it to him. After he took it and said nothing, she touched her fingertips to her lips and brought her flat hand down.

"You're welcome," she added.

He didn't respond to the sarcasm and skimmed her résumé.

“You have your Series Six and Series Sixty-Three licenses?” he asked.

She waited until he looked up before answering. “I’ve had my Six for seven years, and my Sixty-Three one year less.”

“No Series Seven?”

Jewell bit back a snappy response and pulled her lower lip through her teeth before answering. “No. I haven’t decided what state to test in. I lived in New Hampshire until recently.”

“How long were you on the research team at Putnam Fiduciary Trust for the Europe Growth fund?”

“Three years.”

After he read the whole sheet, Mr. Roth handed it back to her. “*What position are you interviewing for?*”

“Administrative support for Mr. Burke.”

He shook his head adamantly and waved his hand in argument. “You are over-qualified.”

Jewell conceded with a nod. “Perhaps.”

LaTrisha waddled down the hall to them and touched Jewell’s arm. “Ms. Kincaid? Mr. Burke is just about ready to see you now.”

Jewell nodded in the direction of the two women who still stood at Justine’s desk. Their eyes were wide and they raised slow hands in farewell. As she turned away, her eyes connected once again with Mr. Roth. His direct stare unnerved her. If he weren’t so pushy and argumentative, he might be attractive. Although she found the audacity to confront him about his manners, Jewell wasn’t sure how long she could keep that type of exchange up before falling under his powerful glare.

“Perhaps I will see you soon, Mr. Roth,” she said as she turned away.

Jewell followed LaTrisha back to Mr. Burke’s office, but could almost feel Mr. Roth’s eyes burning into her back. Kevin Burke met her at the door with a smile and ushered her into his

office. They sat and talked for the next forty-five minutes about the responsibilities involved in the position. Jewell listened and she realized Mr. Roth had been right. This was to be strictly an administrative position. She was overqualified. Most likely, she would be bored out of her mind within a week.

But even as administrative support, the position offered \$6,000 more a year than her current job at AG Edwards. Right now, her concern was money not job satisfaction. Jewell resolved within herself the drop in responsibilities would be worth it in the end. Of course, it didn't have to be forever.

As she left the opposing building some time after one o'clock, Jewell decided she felt good about the entire interview process. She made a good impression, and felt confident the offer would come. But how would it be to work down the hall from Mr. B.P. Roth? Especially after what happened today.

What did B.P. stand for? Who gave him such intense brown eyes? And why was he such a jerk?

Jewell shook off the thoughts as she got in her car. She had enough time to go home and change, maybe get something to eat, before heading back out to pick up her sister. The oil change for the car would have to wait.

~ * ~

"How did your interview go today?" Cecil Kincaid, the patriarch of the Kincaid family, asked.

The entire Kincaid family sat around the dining room table. Jewell signed as she spoke, so her mother knew the answer as well. All the Kincaid children made it habit to sign whenever their mother was in the room. It was no longer a conscious action, just the way things were.

"I think it went well. The man I'd be working for was very friendly. He seemed like he would be a nice person to work with."

“She’s not telling you everything, Daddy,” Ruby added, tilting her head with a smirk on her lips. “She had it out with another manager in the office.”

“Ruby! If you don’t watch it, you’re going to find ice cubes in your bed tonight!” Jewell threatened under her breath.

“Did you actually argue with a manager?” Jewell’s older brother Garnett asked.

“I wouldn’t even call it that. He was very rude to the two women who worked for him, and I pointed that fact out to him.” Jewell did her best to sound nonchalant.

Garnett laughed and shook his head. Curly, black hair bounced on his shoulders. “So typical Jewell.”

“What our dear sister is leaving out is that he was very young and very good looking,” Ruby tossed in. “And deaf.”

“What does any of that have to do with it?” Jewell snapped. “He was rude and disrespectful. There’s no need for people to be like that.”

“Well, he’ll know who you are now, won’t he.”

Jewell rolled her eyes. Her sister didn’t know when to quit. She knew it was a mistake to tell Ruby what happened. It was an even bigger mistake to confide in her how attractive B.P. Roth was.

Opal Kincaid tapped the table to draw her children’s attention. “*Leave your sister alone. You don’t like being teased. Don’t tease her.*”

Jewell smirked and went back to eating her roast chicken. The family fell into silence for several minutes while everyone ate. Then Pearl, the youngest of the Kincaid children, nudged Jewell’s arm. Jewell looked at her and smiled. Wisps of white-blond hair framed her sister’s face. Pearl tried to hold it back with a ponytail, but her hair was so fine the elastic slid down her skull to leave the bunched hair sagging behind her. The

youngest Kincaid was very pale and her ice-blue eyes only heightened her light complexion.

“Jewell, can I come stay the night this Saturday? Maybe we can go shopping?”

“Sure. We can probably do that. Did Mom say it was okay?”

Pearl nodded. “Yup.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Great,” she mumbled.

“Knock it off, Ruby.”

As they finished the meal, Jewell heard her cell phone ring inside her bag. She excused herself to the hall and dug it out. After five rings she managed to answer.

“Hello, Jewell. This is Travis Traynor at Bulwark. Have I called too late in the evening?”

“Not at all, Mr. Traynor.”

“Good. I tend to work late and forget the rest of the world actually has a life,” he said with a chuckle. “As you can guess, I’m calling about your interview today.”

“I assumed so, yes.”

Mr. Traynor seemed to struggle for words and Jewell had the sinking feeling this was a different kind of call than she expected. Apparently, the interview didn’t go as well as she thought.

“Well, Jewell, there has been a change of staffing needs. That is to say, we no longer need to fill the administrative position. Another individual internally will be taking it.”

“I understand, Mr. Traynor.”

“The truth of it is, Jewell, we were wondering if you would consider a *different* position at Bulwark.”

Jewell stood up. Her interest was peaked once again. “What kind of position?”

“Instead of an administrative position, we would like to offer you one in executive support. It’s the next level up and

would pay an additional \$10,000 a year from administration, with quarterly bonuses and a possible raise after six months.”

Jewell’s jaw dropped. *Another \$10,000 a year? That would give her nearly \$16,000 more a year than she made right now.*

“Do I need to come in for another interview? Is it for Mr. Burke as well?”

“No, you don’t need to come in. It’s not for Kevin, but the fund manager you will be working with seemed comfortable with your qualifications. When can you start?”

“I’d like to give a two-week notice to my current employer.”

“Well, I understand. But I want to let you know Mr. Roth offered an additional \$2,500 signing bonus if you can begin on Monday.”

“Mr. Roth?” A nervous wave tickled over Jewell’s skin.

“Yes. You will be working for our best international fund manager, Mr. Benjamin Prescott Roth.”

Two

A different tumbling sensation fluttered around her stomach the next time Jewell left her apartment for Bulwark Mutual Funds. Instead of the anxious tension associated with a job interview, the excited anticipation of new possibilities and challenges bubbled in her blood.

Another jumbled commotion mingled surreptitiously beneath the excitement. It had haunted her since the night Travis Traynor offered her the job. Coupled with the intense awareness of her new beginning was the memory of events on her last visit. Those memories fueled her giddy nerves. The recollection of one man in particular was most prevalent of all. Mr. Benjamin Prescott Roth.

All the way to work, Jewell wrestled with her thoughts. One moment thinking of the handsome fund manager, and the next chastising herself for thinking of her new boss in such a purely carnal way. She parked her car and made her way to her new office.

“Good morning, Justine,” Jewell said as she reached Mr. Roth’s administrative assistant’s desk.

“Good morning, Miss Kincaid,” Justine said with a smile. “Mr. Traynor told me you’d be starting today. Welcome to Bulwark.”

“Thank you and please, call me Jewell.”

The young woman nodded. “Mr. Roth said to tell you to wait for him in the office. He has a meeting every Monday morning, but it will be over soon.”

“Tell me? Not ask me?”

Justine smirked. “That’s the way Mr. Roth is. You saw that last time you were here. ‘Please’ and ‘Thank You’ aren’t part of his vocabulary.” She shrugged. “You get used to it after awhile.”

“Do you?”

Justine met her eyes, but didn’t answer the question. A small smirk tugged at the corner of her lip. Finally, she looked away.

“Would you like some coffee or tea? I think there are some fresh donuts and bagels in the break room. I’d be happy to get you one.”

Jewell shook her head. “No. And if I want coffee, I am perfectly capable of getting it myself. As is Mr. Roth.”

The woman chuckled beneath her breath and shook her head slowly. With that, Jewell opened the door to Mr. Roth’s office and went inside. The room was large and spacious, with a bank of windows on the outside wall. The blinds were open and sunlight streamed through to cover his desk in its brightness. The desk itself was huge, being a good six feet across the front, in a rich walnut finish. A laptop and zip drive sat on one corner of the desk. Several framed degrees and plaques hung on one wall. Curiosity took her to them.

“Harvard School of Business, Masters Degree in World Economics. Bachelor’s degrees in both Accounting and Economics. Very impressive, Mr. B.P. Roth,” she mumbled to herself. She moved on to the wood and brass plaques. “Businessman of the Year 1997 and 2000. Top Fund Manager 1997, 1999 and 2000. Mutual Fund Magazine top named fund

2002. Smart Money top named fund 1999 and 2001. You've had yourself some good years."

There was an open door further down the wall. She walked to it, still taking in the details of his office as she went. The open door led into another office. It was smaller than his, but not by much. Sunlight lit it up nearly as well as his. A good-sized desk sat near the door, as well as standard office furniture. Another door to her left remained closed, but she assumed it led back out into the hall behind Justine's desk. A giant bouquet of flowers on the desk caught her attention right away. She couldn't name most of the blossoms filling the large vase, but their aroma filled the room. Jewell leaned into the heady scent and let it fill her senses.

Nestled amongst the blooms was a small card with her name neatly written on it. She took it out and opened it to read the single word inside. "Welcome."

"They're from Travis Traynor," said Mr. Roth's subtle voice behind her.

Jewell jumped and turned. He stood in the doorway, his shoulder against the jamb and his arms crossed over his chest. Her stomach tumbled and her pulse skittered at her throat. With her hand pressed against her pounding heart, she fought to calm the flutter beneath her breasts. Mr. Roth straightened and stepped into the office.

"You startled me," she said.

"I see you found your office."

She nodded. His direct stare roved from her eyes and down to her throat. Jewell felt its powerful effect create a whispered tingle on her skin. Heat rose high in her cheeks and she turned away. Jewell walked to the window before turning back. Unfortunately, it was impossible not to face him.

"*It is very nice,*" she signed, her hand sweeping the room.

He nodded. "Come back in my office. We can cover the basics. There is a meeting this afternoon we both will attend."

Mr. Roth turned and she followed him back into the adjoined room. He moved to the desk and sat down in the leather executive chair, indicating with his hand for her to sit across from him. Jewell was thankful for the wooden barrier between them. At least he couldn't see her hands wring nervously in her lap.

"I assume Mr. Traynor explained to you what the position entails. You will be responsible for doing research, compiling data and so on for me. You have a strong knowledge of world economics?"

Jewell nodded. "Yes. I'm sure you saw on my résumé I hold a degree in World Macro-economics. I minored in European Micro-economics."

"From the University of New Hampshire?"

His slight smirk and arched brow irked Jewell. Heat rose in her cheeks. She straightened her spine and squared her shoulders before answering.

"I didn't attend Harvard, Mr. Roth, but I know what I'm talking about if that's your concern."

An amused grin pulled his slight smirk higher. "If I had concerns about your ability you wouldn't be here, Jewell."

His smugness unnerved her. She pulled a deep breath in through her nostrils and cleared the lump in her throat. "Is that the only reason I'm here? My credentials?"

One eyebrow arched. "You're not only a smart woman, but you've got courage. I like that. I don't like working with people who won't stand up and speak."

"Is that why you were so hard on Carol Hannigan?" He didn't want her to hold any punches? Fine, she wouldn't.

“Carol Hannigan was hard on herself. She didn’t put enough effort into her work because she was afraid to fail. She was intimidated by the position well before she ever met me.”

“You didn’t make it any easier for her, from what I saw.”

What was it about this man that riled her up so quickly and so easily? He ignited her defenses full force, and made her want to come back at every comment with an equal ferocity. If Jewell didn’t watch it, she’d talk herself right out of the job.

“I won’t make it easy for you, either. That doesn’t mean I will intentionally make it more difficult. You’re getting paid very well to do a hard job. If you’re not up for it, we have nothing further to discuss. If you don’t think you can handle it, tell me now. But I don’t think that’s the case.”

Jewell smiled slowly and held his eyes without wavering, raising her chin in subtle defiance. *“I can handle anything you send my way, Mr. Roth,”* she signed slowly.

“Good.” He leaned back in his chair. *“I will require one further responsibility from you. It is obvious you are fluent in ASL.”*

“I sign as well, if not better, than I speak.”

“Good. From now on you will attend all meetings I attend. Although most of the time I don’t find it necessary, on occasions it would be helpful if I have an interpreter. Especially in large groups when some are too far away for me to see their faces clearly.”

“I understand. Will I be welcome at some of these meetings? I am sure Executive Assistants do not usually attend many of the same meetings as Fund Managers.”

“You are welcome if I say so,” was his response.

His statement made her heart skip. Mr. Roth was apparently a very powerful man at Bulwark Mutual Funds. More powerful than she originally speculated at their first meeting.

“Do you have any problem with working late on occasion?” he asked, bringing her out of her musings.

“On occasion, no. But I do make plans ahead of time once in awhile. If you can give me as much warning as possible, I would appreciate it.”

Mr. Roth touched his fingers to his mouth and tapped his fingertips against slightly pursed lips. “I understand, Ms. Kincaid. A young, attractive woman such as yourself probably has a boyfriend to fill her free time.”

Jewell kept her face neutral but shrugged slightly. “Various things fill my free time.”

She purposefully left the boyfriend remark hanging between them. Who was he to ask such a thing anyway? Did he need to know her evening and weekend plans usually consisted of visits to her parents and maybe helping Ruby with her homework? Jewell thought not.

He nodded. “Fine. What about company functions? Dinner parties and conferences. I am often required to attend. Were you to accompany me on occasion, it would be,” he paused and his stare seemed to intensify. “Helpful.”

“As long as I don’t have other things going on.”

His shoulders bounced in a silent chuckle. “There is a dinner party next Thursday evening at the Ritz-Carlton on Boston Common at seven. Are you free?”

Jewell paused before answering. She didn’t want him to think her calendar was so wide open she didn’t need to think about it. Of course she didn’t have anything planned. Greg might come over, but that was about it. After a sufficient pause, she nodded.

“I’m free.”

“Good. It is, of course, a formal dinner. I will pick you up at six. Leave me your address.”

Jewell nodded. Why did she feel like they'd just set up a date? Of course it wasn't. So, why did she have a funny twittering sensation around her heart? Her thoughts raced to trivial things, such as what she would wear and how she would do her hair. She pushed them away and brought her thoughts back to the conversation.

Mr. Roth picked up a packet of paper from where it sat ready near his elbow. He leaned forward and passed it to her over the desk. Jewell raised up off the chair enough to take it from his hand. Their eyes met and the heat of his stare caught Jewell's breath in her throat. His eyes shifted momentarily from her eyes, then back again. It was so fast, Jewell wasn't sure she could trust what she saw. Did he have any idea how much power he held with those eyes?

"This is the first project I'd like you to work on. I'm researching a breakout company in Singapore for possible investment in our Pacific Rim Advantages Fund. They just began trading on the Hang Seng Market last week. If they prove to be as promising as I suspect, I want to get in while the stock is young."

"You didn't choose to purchase at IPO?"

Jewell was surprised a man known for his aggressive investment style wouldn't snatch up a company he believed in at the first opportunity. Buying at Initial Offering Price would provide him with the benefit of any gain the company had from that point on.

He shrugged, and in the action Jewell recognized a kind of concession, like maybe the decision wasn't fully one with which he agreed. Fund Managers hold a great deal of power when it comes to the buying and selling of securities within a mutual fund, but the guidelines and prospectus are predetermined by the fund trustees. Perhaps the trustees were more conservative than Benjamin Roth.

“The trustees have chosen to avoid IPO’s in this particular fund. It isn’t provided for in the prospectus.”

Jewell nodded and scanned the paperwork he gave her. There were photocopies of some articles from the Wall Street Journal and some other trade magazines, as well as various figures regarding growth. The first page also listed some technological advancements and devices offered by the company. She was impressed by the profits already achieved in the first quarter of the year.

“You seem to have a great deal of information on Hirotachi already.”

“Numbers, yes. I want more than that. I want to understand their philosophy and business plan before I determine their growth potential.”

Jewell understood his approach and nodded her understanding. “When would you like it by?”

“One week.”

She saw the challenge in his eyes. He tested her willingness to jump in with both feet and her confidence to get the job done. Jewell raised her chin slightly and met his gaze. A slow smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“I’ll have it to you by Thursday afternoon.”

The corner of his eyes wrinkled when he smiled. It was a full, honest grin. She had just met the challenge. Now all she had to do was carry through with it.

“Good,” he answered. “Do you have anything you want to cover now?”

“I want to set the ground rules,” Jewell came back. “I don’t like playing guessing games, so I need to know how you like things.”

His smile slowly straightened, and although she didn’t think it was possible, his eyes grew more intense. Several feet separated him, but suddenly he felt as close as the chair beside

her. Mr. Roth pressed his fingertips together in front of him and watched her.

“What do you want to know?”

“I realize we’ve spoken verbally for the most part, but is that your preference? Or do you prefer Ameslan? Here, when it’s just us.”

Once she said it, Jewell realized the intimate connotation of the statement. When it’s just us. She cleared her throat and was thankful he couldn’t hear the nervous twitter in her voice.

“I’m a Manualist in an oral world,” he answered with a shrug, his hands moving fluidly. *“Manual communication allows us to speak freely, without worrying about being overheard. Not that there is a great deal discussed here of a confidential manner. Unless your hands are otherwise occupied,”* the smirk on his face was disarming, *“Or speech seems more prudent, we will stay with sign.”*

Jewell bobbed her ‘a’ hand in affirmation. *“Fine. Outside of us, I’ll use my best judgment. Have you used an interpreter before?”*

He shook his head. *“I’ve never met someone who was fluent enough, and had enough knowledge to be useful. Anything else?”*

“No, Mr. Roth.”

“Good. Because I do.”

Jewell assumed he would want to express certain desires as to how his office was run. Asking the question about ASL allowed the door to be opened without it being out of the blue. She sat back in her chair. The hardest part about this job, and she could tell it would be ongoing, was having to meet his gaze constantly. He had such an intense face and overpowering stare, it was hard not to look away and regain her composure.

"I believe in formality. Everyone here, with the exception of Mr. Traynor and one or two other fund managers, refers to me as Mr. Roth."

Jewell nodded her understanding. She recognized from the start the formal air he seemed to exude. He was respected and demanded respect with his very nature. A sign of that respect would be the manner which people addressed him. It came as no surprise to her the formality was his expectation.

"Out there," he signed, "I would prefer you call me Mr. Roth. Especially when speaking at meetings or with others. But in here, when it is just the two of us, feel free to call me by my name."

His repeating of her own previous phrase caught her off guard. Somehow, a sense of private intimacy crept into the room. The space between them shrank even further. Jewell drew in a slow breath and cursed the heat she felt in her cheeks.

"Do you prefer Ben or Benjamin?"

She felt, more than saw, his gaze fall to her lips as she mouthed the names to accompany the finger spelling. Again, his eyes darkened and his lids slid slightly lower. A concentrated energy spanned the desk to bombard Jewell, its power hitting her chest like a hammer. Dear God! She had to build a resistance to those eyes! He could melt iron with them!

"Call me Benjamin," he said.

"Benjamin," she repeated.

His eyes closed abruptly and Jewell thought for a moment she heard a soft moan in his throat. Benjamin twisted his chair slightly towards the bookshelf along the wall, and didn't open his eyes until his motion stopped. She didn't move as he took a deep breath. He turned back to her.

"That is all I have for now. I have some things to go over before the meeting. Get started on the research."

Jewell nodded and stood. Something just happened but she didn't know what. When he looked back at her, and abruptly ended the conversation, his face was a plastic mask. He watched her stand and they both nodded in farewell before she walked to the adjoined room. Once outside his vision, Jewell's shoulders dropped and she sighed. She would have to limit herself to short doses of Benjamin Roth until she was able to build up an immunity to his effects. Pray it be fast!

~ * ~

Benjamin watched her walk across the room and into her office. The subtle sway of her hips, and the slight hollow behind her knee just below her skirts hem, mesmerized him. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat.

What are you doing? Don't go there, Roth!

Benjamin shook his head. What had possessed him to march down the hall last week and bargain with Traynor to let Ms. Kincaid work for him and not Burke? At the time, he convinced himself it was because of her qualifications. She was tremendously overqualified to work as just a glorified secretary. It was a stroke of good luck for Benjamin to find a woman as qualified as Jewell Kincaid, who was also so fluent in sign. She was a gift from the gods. After an hour of persistence and powerful demanding, Travis agreed to give her up for a better position. Now, here she was.

But he was no idiot. She was outrageously gorgeous and ten steps beyond sexy. With the hot two-inch heels she wore, Jewell stood close to five-ten. The top of her head would just hit his nose if he embraced her. Her figure was one of a real woman, not flat and thin like the popular models and celebrities. Although Jewell wore a professional, tailored suit, it did little to disguise the tempting curves and valleys of her body. Femininity embodied her. Benjamin knew having some

nice eye candy like her around the office would certainly take the boredom out of his day.

He inhaled and the delicious scent she left behind filled his senses. The top layer was a musky, floral perfume with the slightest hint of oriental jasmine. Benjamin took another breath. Beneath the manufactured scent was her true essence. Mingled with the perfume was a sweet, fruity trail that was probably her shampoo. Peach lotion and the clean aroma of ivory soap completed the layers. Together they were an intoxicating and heady combination. Individually, each was incomplete and hollow.

Benjamin had learned at a young age the complexity of the female scent. It didn't come just from the sprays and lotions she used, but how those created aromas reacted with her feminine essence to create a stimulating bouquet. He couldn't wait to discover Jewell's.

He shot out of his chair. *Knock it off, Roth! You boxed yourself into a corner this time. She's right in front of you, and you can't even think about touching her. Not without having a sexual harassment suit thrown in your lap.*

Annoyed, Benjamin raked his hair with his fingers. He just had to keep his libido in check. No matter how nice a tousle in the sheets would prove to be, it was impossible. Benjamin guessed she wasn't the type of woman who would be involved in an office fling. She wouldn't be happy with two or three sexually charged tumbles in bed and just forget about it. In just two meetings with her, he already knew that much. No, now he would have to work with her, closely, every day and learn to deal with his persistently aroused state. All because he let his penis do his thinking for him. It was like cutting off his nose to spite his face.

Benjamin stalked the room. He was better off with Mrs. Hannigan! She certainly didn't do this to him!

He stopped near the door to her office and leaned back to spy on her. Jewell sat at her desk, her back to him, as she familiarized herself with the computer system. She seemed competent as she moved through the custom-designed programs which piggy-backed the basic PC set up. Her hand came up so her fingers touched the small curls at the nape of her neck. Absently, she tucked the auburn escapees back into the tight twist. Benjamin found himself wondering how much hair she hid in the prim style, and how it would look flowing free around her shoulders.

Benjamin closed his eyes. Rather than the enticing picture of her flowing hair, his mind filled with the erotic image of her lips as they formed his name.

“Benjamin.”

Those full, luscious lips pursed ever so slightly when she said his name. They pressed together and slowly separated before drawing together and back in a soft pout. He felt the rumble of a groan in his chest and his eyes snapped open to make sure she didn’t notice. Jewell didn’t look up. For all he knew, she was playing music or something and had no idea he watched her.

Frustrated, he spun on his heels and went back to his desk.

Three

Jewell scanned Benjamin's handwritten notes once again with a frustrated huff. In her first week she had learned to decipher the jaunty, angled hieroglyphics he called penmanship without much problem. The difficult part was filling in the 'holes' in his notes. He seemed to have developed his own form of language where words were left out, phrases left incomplete and acronyms were used whenever he felt appropriate.

This was one of those times when it just didn't make sense. She read the scribbles over and over again, each time rendering a different interpretation. The rest of the report was done, except for this one final point. Jewell took off her reading glasses and stuck the end of one bow between her teeth.

She sat back in her chair and crossed her legs with a quick glance at the clock. It was nearly four o'clock. With clarification on this final issue, she could finish the report and skip out early to get ready for the dinner party.

With a decisive nod, Jewell stood and headed for the door adjoining their offices. Most of the time they left it open so she could hear him come and go. Against the wall by the door leaned an elaborately ornate wooden cane. To most it looked like a decorative piece, but for Jewell and Benjamin it served a purpose. It was her suggestion to bring it in and the cane had

proven itself useful. She picked up the rod and tapped its tip against the floor three times with a solid impact.

Benjamin looked up. A slow, lazy smile lifted one corner of his lips. It was the same smile he always greeted her with, and despite its repeated appearance, Jewell was still disarmed by it every time. He sat back in his chair and it reclined slightly.

"Do you have a minute, Benjamin?" she signed with one hand. He nodded and she crossed the room to stand behind his desk.

Despite the riotous, tumbling sensation that overtook her whenever they were close, Jewell felt incredibly comfortable with Benjamin Roth. It was a complicated, confusing paradox. They'd fallen into a relaxed ease with each other right away. She was positive it was because she hadn't backed down to him from the beginning. Benjamin told her on her very first day he liked her spunk. So, from then on, she decided not to tremble at the feet of the 'fearful giant' known at Bulwark as B.P. Roth.

Jewell set the paperwork down on his blotter and pointed out the section she questioned. *"I'm sorry, but I just can't decipher this. Are you referring to the PE Ratio, or the Annual Percentage Earnings?"*

"Where?" he asked.

Jewell crouched down, trying to keep her balance on the balls of her feet. The new position brought her line of vision just below Benjamin as he sat in the chair. He swiveled to face her better and scooted closer to look at the paper. Feeling precariously balanced on her toes, Jewell hung onto the edge of the desk with one hand.

"This section right here," she said. There was no way she could sign and hang on at the same time. "I understand you're comparing Hiramitsu to Hitachi, Samsung and Nokia. This chart represents the rate of growth for all four in their first five

years. But this number looks like it could be either a rate of growth or a price to earnings ratio.”

Benjamin leaned closer and touched his fingertip to the paper. His palm partially covered the back of her hand. Immediate heat warmed Jewell’s skin and electric sensations raced up her arm. Alarmed by her own reaction, Jewell moved to pull back. The quick movement threw off her center of balance. Jewell cried out and jerked to try and stay off the floor.

Benjamin’s arm wrapped around her body as she reached for the nearest thing to hold onto. His thigh. Benjamin pulled her towards him and Jewell’s undignified fight to keep upright ended as she leaned into his lap. By the time she stopped, one hand clutched desperately to the muscle above his knee and the other grasped the opposite side of his chair. The arm that caught her remained in place and Benjamin’s bicep brushed the side of her breast.

Jewell’s body tingled and heat rose high in her cheeks. Tentatively, she looked up.

His dark stare was bold and frank in its assessment. Jewell was intensely conscious of his nearness and the masculine scent that surrounded him. A slight late-day beard speckled his strong jaw. With the afternoon sun coming through the window, each whisker appeared as a golden fleck on his skin. Jewell’s lungs burned from holding her breath. She slowly released it as she came back on her heels.

The arm behind her slowly pulled back, but his fingertips left a searing trail as they moved across her back to her side. His palm remained against her ribcage, the pad of his thumb painfully close to the bottom side of her breast.

“Thank you,” she whispered, thankful once again he couldn’t hear the weakness behind the words.

He nodded slightly. His intense gaze remained on her face and one tight muscle jerked along his jaw. Jewell’s heart

skipped when his eyes diverted for a split second downward to the valley between her breasts exposed by the opening of her blouse. In a reflexive move, she tightened her grip on his thigh. Benjamin's arm shot from her side to cover her hand with his own. His fingers lifted her palm off his leg, but they remained wrapped around her hand.

There was a quick knock at the door before it opened and Kevin Burke stepped in. Jewell shot straight up, her entire body burned hot. She tugged down on her skirt, which had worked its way several inches up her thigh in the process.

"Good Afternoon," Kevin said, but Jewell didn't miss the momentary expression of shock on his face as he looked from her to Benjamin. "I don't know why I knock, but I always do." His statement was slow, belying the amusement only Jewell heard in his voice.

Benjamin stood slowly and picked up the paperwork from his desk. His slow smile and cool demeanor only added to Jewell's heightened embarrassment. How could he be so calm? Did he have any idea what Kevin Burke *thought* he saw? Jewell could only imagine. With a trembling hand, she took the papers Benjamin handed to her.

"I was referring to the Price to Earnings Ratio on the stock, Jewell," Benjamin said in a steady voice. "Did you have any other questions?"

Jewell shook her head and stepped back from the desk. "No, that should be fine, Mr. Roth. I'll have this done in fifteen minutes." She cursed the nervous twinge in her voice.

"No rush. I don't need it until tomorrow."

Jewell nodded and did her best to make a graceful exit from the room. Her face was on fire and her breasts felt heavy and alive. Somehow she managed to move around the desk and walk across the room without her legs giving way beneath her.

Before closing the door to her office behind her, Jewell glanced back at Benjamin and Kevin.

They were deep in conversation, Benjamin standing on one side of the desk and Kevin on the other. Kevin's back was to her. Benjamin didn't look her way, but she caught his finger movement where his hand hung seemingly quiet near his thigh.

"*R-E-L-A-X*," his fingers spelled.

She dared another glance at his face, and a slow grin lifted his lips although he didn't look her way. The smile was meant for her. Jewell sighed and shut the door to allow the two fund managers to speak privately.

~ * ~

"So, your head was in his lap when the other guy came in?" Greg said as he chuckled.

Jewell covered her eyes in embarrassment. "It sounds so much worse when you put it like that. My head wasn't *in his lap*, but I'm sure it looked pretty close to that from the door. The desk would've hidden me from view for the most part. Until I stood up."

"What did he do?"

"Who? Benjamin or Mr. Burke?"

"Either one," Greg worked his fingers against her scalp as he styled her hair.

Jewell sighed and enjoyed the gentle pressure. Since she was a little girl, she'd always loved her mother to comb and style her hair. It was a calming, soothing kind of contact. Now, when Jewell's mother wasn't around to do it, her best friend Greg worked his magic.

"Well, needless to say, I saw the shock in Kevin Burke's face. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what he thought."

"What about Benjamin?"

Jewell shook her head and his hands flattened against her hair to silently tell her to sit still.

“He was so incredibly unaffected,” Jewell declared as she lifted her hands up off her lap. “After the fact, when I had a chance to think about it, I found it highly annoying! He just stood up, handed me the report, and acted as if nothing unusual at all was going on. He even told me to relax!”

“With the other guy there?”

“Well, he spelled it, kind of down by his leg where Mr. Burke couldn’t see.”

Greg shook his head and met her eyes in the dresser mirror. Jewell nervously tapped her polished fingertips against the bare hollow at the base of her throat. He had been there for half an hour, and Jewell hadn’t stopped talking since he’d arrived. She was so thankful for a friend like Greg she could confide in. Greg listened, comforted, sometime lectured, but never judged.

He picked up her hairbrush and pulled it through the thick waves of her auburn hair. Jewell already wore the black dress, and had put on the sparkling jewelry to go with it. Her make-up was done. All that was left was her hair. Greg gave the thick mass a twist and held it against her crown. His other hand pulled down stray curls. With a shake of his head, he let the coil drop.

“You want my honest opinion, hun?”

“Of course,” Jewell answered.

“Wear your hair down. I’ll fix it so it will stay off your forehead, but just leave it down. It’s so thick and alive; it’s a shame to hide it. Besides, it’ll be sexy as hell.”

Jewell diverted her eyes from the mirror. “I’m not trying to be sexy, Greg.”

Greg’s eyebrows rose with an amused smirk on his lips. “Oh, really? When you saw yourself in that knockout dress, you didn’t think you were sexy?”

Jewell smiled. “Don’t you think it would be inappropriate?”

Greg made a dismissive sound with his lips. "Absolutely not. I think it's time you show your boss a different side of you. I mean, you've been in his lap once already."

"Behave!"

He laughed and worked on a new approach to her hair. Half the time Jewell hated the thick, heavy mass of reddish-brown waves. It had a mind of its own and didn't like to be confined to the prim, businesslike styles she preferred for the office. But the other half of the time she was happy with the deep copper highlights and natural body. Maybe tonight was the kind of night it would be an advantage versus a burden.

As Greg worked his fingers through the waves, Jewell's mind drifted. Despite her embarrassment over the events of the afternoon, a warm sensation danced over her skin when she remembered it. Jewell recalled the hard definition of his thigh beneath her hand. The muscle of his biceps pressed against her side, creating pleasant ripples through her. He smelled so damn good! Like sandalwood, mountain air and menthol shaving cream. Was there such a scent? If there was, Benjamin was its essence.

She sighed heavily. Greg's laughter broke her reverie. Jewell glanced in the mirror and saw the red flush in her cheeks.

"Oh, leave me alone," she ordered.

"Is he attractive?"

Despite herself, a wide smile spread across her face. Greg tilted his head back and laughed loudly.

"I guess that's my answer," he roared.

"Is this absolutely horrible of me?" Jewell asked, and her hands rose in question. "Fantasizing about my boss? I mean, isn't it completely unprofessional and stupid?"

Greg's mouth opened and he pointed at her in the mirror. But before he could respond, Jewell continued on in a hurried

voice. Her pulse beat at a furious pace in her throat, fueling her need to talk as quickly as possible and get it all out.

"It's not like I want this. I don't. But he just—I swear, Greg, from the moment I saw him..." She couldn't finish the sentence. It was too hard to describe how she felt the first time. "I am horrible."

"Horrible? No. Unprofessional and stupid? Only if you or he act on it. Romance in the workplace is not smart, hun. At all. You'll get burned. It's inevitable." His hands rested on her shoulders. "You know what happened with Mark and I."

She nodded. The fallout had lingered for months after Greg's five-year relationship with his boss had ended. Although their relationship was great while it lasted, the break-up was nasty and drawn-out. Before they'd started seeing each other, Jewell had been the one to warn her friend against business entanglements. Now, the shoe was on the other foot.

Jewell's shoulders slumped. "I know. And I have no intentions to allow anything to happen. Besides, this is all one-sided anyway."

~ * ~

Benjamin watched the cars and buildings move by slowly as he sat in the back seat of his limousine. He could have driven to the dinner party himself, and usually preferred to do his own driving, but not tonight. If he had to focus on navigating the crowded streets of Boston he wouldn't be able to keep his attention on Jewell. He could talk as he drove and catch her signs here and there, but that wasn't enough.

He wanted to be able to look at her. It was impossible to take in too much of Jewell Kincaid. She was stunning, sexy, and enticing as all hell. At first he dreaded the sweet torture of her presence. Now, he avidly looked forward to it.

Jewell certainly added spice and heat to his day. It was now something beyond the bland, sometimes monotonous routine of

meetings and research. There was absolutely nothing routine about having her practically fall in his lap that afternoon.

Benjamin took a deep breath and his fists clenched in his lap at the memory. No woman, however wanton and inviting, had ever looked so tantalizing as Jewell while she fought for her balance. It was instinct that shot his arm out to support her, but the incredible feeling of her body kept it there. Her dainty hand on his thigh heated his blood until it threatened to blow unceremoniously out his ears. Despite his usual control of iron, Benjamin's eyes were drawn to the deep valley nestled between her breasts. The conservative suits she wore did little to hide her feminine silhouette, and at the angle she leaned into him, the view was unadulterated.

He knew the tension of the moment wasn't one-sided. Jewell's cheeks had flushed, her glistening eyes looked up at him with hesitation, but no irritation. When his gaze lowered to her beautiful breasts the grip on his thigh was an excruciating torture. Benjamin pulled her fingers away, not because he didn't want the contact, but because if it continued, common sense might not have prevailed.

Benjamin constantly reminded himself of who he was and who she was. They worked together. He had a rule never to become sexually involved with a co-worker. It left nasty entanglements and lingering resentments when things stopped. Many times over the years he'd witnessed peers who had given in to the temptations, and paid later. Inevitably, one side of the arrangement would want more than sexual rendezvous. And the other could not or would not comply. The sex would be great, but anything more would weigh him down. Besides that, Benjamin had no interest, intent or need for anything beyond physical gratification.

He shook his head. Even if Jewell didn't work for him, he knew instinctively she wouldn't settle for only a physical

relationship. She probably had a boyfriend anyway. Some smart guy out there held her heart, and several soft body parts, in his hands.

It was a bad idea to spend time with her outside the control-imposing walls of Bulwark. Benjamin convinced himself this still qualified as work, thus completely above board. The dinner party was to wine and dine some adventure capitalists who had expressed interest in developing a working relationship with Bulwark. If it worked out, this could bring millions of dollars in assets to the firm. Having Jewell with him would just make the evening easier. That was the only reason he'd asked her to come.

Benjamin shook his head. He knew better, but the excuse sounded good. How many countless parties and functions had he attended without someone to act as an interpreter? In the past he had done just fine.

The limousine pulled over to the curb and stopped. His driver, Stephen, turned and signed through the window this was the address. Benjamin nodded and exited the car. Outside, he stood and looked around him. It was a nice neighborhood. The streets were lined with brownstones, most of which were probably converted to apartments decades earlier. He frowned against the heat outside the air-conditioned interior of the car. It was so damn hot in the city!

Benjamin checked the number on the front of the buildings to find Jewell's. Stephen had done well to park directly in front of it. He adjusted the black tie of his tuxedo and bounded up the granite steps. Inside the first door of the building were a series of locked mailboxes and the control panel of an intercom system.

He found the button with 'Kincaid, J & R' beside it. Benjamin frowned. *J and R? Who was the R? Could Kincaid be a married name, and somehow she managed to keep it a*

secret? She always avoided any implied questions about her personal life. Was this why? A black cloud moved over him.

With his thumb, he pressed the button. His other palm covered the speaker. Seconds later, a slight vibration ran across his skin.

"It's Benjamin," he spoke towards the wall speaker. His hand then moved to the door. The handle pulsed in his grip and he pulled back. The door opened.

The halls of the building were stuffy and humid. By the time he reached the third floor, Benjamin wiped away a light sheen of sweat from his upper lip. As he walked down the hall, he read the numbers on the door. Finally reaching hers, Benjamin fought down the vicious clenching of his gut at the anticipation of seeing Jewell. He mentally scolded himself for such a foolhardy and uncharacteristic reaction. Sexual attraction had never been this debilitating before.

The door opened before his knuckles hit the wood a second time. He tried to hide his surprise at the person standing there. She was maybe nineteen or twenty years old, with spiked brown hair and an assortment of facial jewelry. Without even attempting to hide the fact, she took him in from head to toe and smiled. Her hand came up in an arched wave.

"She is almost ready," she stated. "I'm Ruby, her sister."

Benjamin nodded, both in recognition and understanding, and shook her hand briefly. This was the 'R' on the mailbox. To his own surprise, he felt relieved. It wasn't a secret husband after all. Mentally, he jerked himself back. *What did he care if she was married, or not? Involved, or not.*

He pushed his hands into the front pockets of the tailored tuxedo slacks and stepped into the entry hall of Jewell's apartment. Immediately in front of him was the entry to a small kitchen painted in bright yellow and cream. The hall extended to his left and right. On the left, three doors lined the way. All

were closed. The end of the hall to his right opened into a roomy space that seemed to serve as both living room and dining room.

The walls were laden with framed photographs of all sizes. Some hung in clusters, while larger portraits remained on their own. On the section of wall between the kitchen and living room hung one such frame. It was a professionally shot family portrait in a gold painted frame. Ignoring Ruby's unwavering eyes, Benjamin examined the picture.

He assumed right away that it was Jewell's family. She stood in the back of the clustered group. On one side stood Ruby, dressed only slightly less shocking than right now. On the other side was a man who appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties. His hair was coal black, and his skin was dark in comparison to Jewell. She seemed pale beside him. Her red hair and emerald eyes stood out prominently. Neither Ruby nor the man had such intense eyes.

Jewell stood an inch, maybe two inches, taller than her brother. They weren't lined up by height. If they were lined by age that would make Jewell the next to oldest. How old did that make her? If he went purely by her face, Benjamin would guess Jewell was barely a legal adult. But he knew from her résumé the years she attended college and the number of years of work experience she had behind her. Making an educated assumption based on those facts, Benjamin put Jewell somewhere between twenty-seven and twenty-nine.

Seated in the picture was an older couple. The man's hair was white, but appeared full and thick. He wore thick-framed glasses and an old-fashioned wool jacket. In his hand was a smoking pipe. On his knee sat a small sprite of a girl with white-blonde hair and pale blue eyes. Her skin was even paler than Jewell's, almost appearing translucent. Bright red lips smiled unselfconsciously at the photographer. Finally, seated

beside the man was a delicate, frail-looking woman. Her salt-and-pepper hair was wound in a feminine yet demure hairstyle. At least one hand of each of her children rested on the matriarchal figure's shoulders.

They were the most diverse and unconnected group Benjamin had ever seen.

A movement down the apartment's hall drew his attention. All air sucked from his lungs. Benjamin caught a glimpse of Jewell as she came down the hall. In a tailored suit and pedantic hairstyle, she emanated sensuality. But now, in a slinky cocktail dress of black silk that accentuated every feminine curve of her luscious body, Jewell was a goddess.

She stepped towards them, a beautiful smile on her lips and demure color in her cheeks. One delicate hand reached up to adjust the sparkling stud in her ear, and she wiggled the fingers of her other hand in greeting.

"Hello, Benjamin," he read on her lips and his lungs constricted. *God, those lips!*

She raised her hands to sign as she spoke, and Benjamin caught a glance of bare skin beneath her arm to her waist. He swallowed and pulled his eyes away to focus on what she said.

"*This is my sister, Ruby,*" she told him, indicating the younger girl who answered the door. "*Ruby lives here with me.*"

Ruby had a wide, knowing smile on her face and she raised her hand in another wave. She even winked at him.

"Nice to meet you, Ruby," he said and extended his hand. "Benjamin Roth."

Benjamin turned back to Jewell in time to see a man exiting the bedroom at the end of the hall. He was tall and broad shouldered. Immediate resentment hit Benjamin's chest. When the new man reached Jewell his hand went to the small of her back, and he leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“Have a good time,” Benjamin watched him say. The man turned to him and extended his hand. Ben took it. The grip was firm and direct. “Hi. Greg Jacobs.”

“Benjamin Roth,” he said again in introduction.

The newcomer made his farewells and moved past Benjamin to leave the apartment. *Okay, so she might not be married, but she was apparently involved.* Again, for the second time in five minutes, Benjamin cursed himself. *Who cares! I don't! I shouldn't! She might be beautiful, but she is a peer! Off limits!* Especially for the kind of things he had in mind.

“I just need to get my evening bag and I'll be ready to leave,” she told him and turned to go back to her room.

She walked away and Benjamin's throat constricted. The sight of her nearly took his breath away. Auburn waves of luxuriously thick hair flowed to the middle of her back. She turned her head and the waves undulated like the surface of the ocean with a light wind. Beneath the ends of her hair he saw bare skin until the dress came to a point beneath the small of her back. The cut of the dress accentuated the indentation of her waist and the soft curve of her hips. Liquid fabric shifted around her calves as she walked. Benjamin thought he caught a glimpse of two small dimples on either side of her spine just within the outline of the dress.

Ruby leaned back against the wall and watched him. Benjamin pulled his eyes away from Jewell's enticing derrière and met her sister's stare. Her grin was huge and expressed some secret knowledge she was unwilling to share. Looking at her, he thought to himself there was absolutely no family resemblance between the two sisters. Of course, one or both of them might have colored their hair—no, Jewell's hair was too beautiful to be fabricated—but there was no similitude in the facial structures. This girl was willowy with dainty features.

Jewell was considerably taller and her body more womanly and curvaceous. A change like that might come with time, because Ruby had to be several years younger than Jewell, but he just didn't see it happening. Then again, there was no resemblance between any of the people in the portrait.

"Nice tux," Ruby signed.

Jewell came down the hall again, a small rhinestone evening bag held in one dainty hand. She handed her sister a twenty-dollar bill, and for his sake, signed the conversation.

"Call in for dinner tonight. I'm sorry, but I didn't get a chance to throw anything in the oven."

"Okay. It's too hot to cook, anyway. I'm going out later with some kids from school. We're going back to campus for some research in the library. We might go to the movies."

Benjamin wasn't sure why, but it surprised him both sisters were so competent in ASL. Jewell said once she was very fluent. *Who was deaf that both sisters would know it so well?*

"Fine. I'll see you when you get home."

Benjamin opened the door and held it for her as she stepped into the hall. He pulled the door shut, and as he did, his arm came in contact with the bare flesh of her back. The intoxicating scent of her hair drifted to him and he inhaled deeply. Her heels were slightly higher than the ones she wore to the office because the top of her head was closer to eye level with him.

He released the doorknob and rested his palm at her waist. Beneath his touch he felt her draw up straighter. Jewell turned her head and looked up at him. Benjamin never realized before how deeply emerald green her eyes were. They were prominent and bright in the photo, but in living color, they were mesmerizing. Her features seemed more glamorous tonight, whether it be from the make-up or the hairstyle, but he liked it.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said, not wanting to take his hand from her back to sign. “I think you should wear this to work sometime.”

Jewell smiled and he saw the color rise in her pale cheeks. She tipped her chin down and looked up at him through her lashes. “Thank you. But I don’t think this is appropriate for the office.”

Benjamin met her gaze. “No. If you dressed like this every day, I don’t think we’d get much work done.”

Unable to avoid the purely carnal temptation, he reached up and touched the thick mass of copper hair. It was softer and lusher than he could have conceivably imagined. Filaments of fine silk wrapped around his fingers and tickled his palm. He lifted a luxurious tress near his nose and inhaled deeply.

“You should wear your hair down more. What a sin to hide it in braids and twists.”

Jewell’s eyes widened and he felt her breath catch. He was dangerously close to making a very big mistake, so with gentle pressure, he urged her towards the stairs.

Four

“Good morning,” Justine said cheerfully as Jewell reached her desk. “How was your weekend?”

Jewell smiled and shifted her paper-wrapped bouquet of flowers into her elbow as she set the customary cup of Starbuck’s coffee on Justine’s desk. The two women began a tradition during Jewell’s second week at Bulwark. Justine made a special trip each morning to Bruegger’s Bagels for one sesame seed bagel with lite cream cheese and one egg bagel with vegetable cream cheese. The bagels were split in the office so each woman had half. It was Jewell’s duty to make it to Starbuck’s for her medium French Vanilla decaf with extra cream and Justine’s large regular with cream and sugar. For three weeks the system went uninterrupted.

“Oh, it was fine. Between doing research for Mr. Roth, I went to a cookout for my little sister’s Girl Scout troop and helped my mother do some canning. I’m tired, but I feel like I accomplished something.”

Justine removed the cover to her coffee and inhaled deeply of the rousing aroma. “Mmmmm. Nectar of the Gods.”

Jewell looked towards Benjamin’s closed door. Anxious tension gripped her insides. “What kind of mood is he in this morning?” she asked hesitantly.

Justine moaned. "Black. Very, very black."

Jewell sighed. With steel resolution, she picked up her briefcase and moved to her own open door. Despite the lack of necessity to do so, she moved around the office in silence. As she did every Monday morning, Jewell replaced last week's flowers with a fresh bouquet that filled the room with a calming fragrance. She turned on her terminal and opened the blinds on her window. Just as she was about to sit, Benjamin's voice called out loudly from the adjoined office. For someone with no concept of his own volume, his voice could be bone chilling and ear piercing.

"Ms. Kincaid," he yelled again.

She tugged down the hem of her suit jacket and squared her shoulders in preparation for battle. With resolute steps, she crossed the room and entered his office. Benjamin stood at his desk, one fist planted at his hip. In his other hand he held a bound report Jewell recognized as the one she compiled for him the previous week. A dark scowl distorted his features. As she neared him, he tossed the report down.

"What the hell is this," he demanded.

"It's the report on England Associated Bank and Trust you wanted."

"I'm talking about these figures. They are completely off and contradict everything I told the board." His hands moved quickly and abruptly, expressing his anger.

"They are completely accurate."

"Bullshit," he yelled.

Jewell closed her eyes and clenched her fists. When she opened them again, Benjamin stood only feet away, having come around the desk. Now both fists pressed into his trim waist. His forehead furrowed deeply, and his lips formed a thin, straight line. Dark storm clouds rolled behind his stern eyes.

"You are yelling," she signed slowly.

"I don't care!"

"You might not, but I do." She accentuated the statement with a sharp jab of her finger into her own chest. *"The figures in that report are accurate and up-to-date as of September 15th."*

"They don't coincide with the predictions."

Jewell threw her hands up in frustration. *"I'm sorry, Mr. Roth, if they didn't live up to your expectations. Perhaps someone should have told the president of the bank what your wishes were. I'm sure he would have worked harder to please you. But those are the facts. Introduction of the Eurodollar and its integration into their banking system has slowed profits. As far as I know, you didn't hire me to fabricate information. You hired me to research and provide you with truthful and precise numbers."*

"These can't be right."

"Do you want me to pull them out of the air?"

Jewell's frustration got the best of her. She walked to the desk and snatched up the report. Turning to make sure he watched her, she dropped it on the edge near her. As if pulling fruit from a tree, Jewell grabbed at empty air with her fingers. With a scowl, she glared at Benjamin and pretended to drop the imaginary numbers onto the report cover. Report in hand again, she stalked to him and slapped it against Benjamin's chest. Shock registered on his face and he lifted a hand to hold it.

"There," she threw at him. *"Next time I'll pull them from a hat. Or do you have another preferred method of fabrication?"*

Benjamin stared at her for a long time. Jewell stared right back. She was sick and tired of his dark moods and nasty attitude over the last three weeks. Enough was enough! Her chest rose and fell with the exerted effort to calm her nerves. There was no way in hell she was going to put up with him any

longer. He might have managed to send other women cowering away with their head hung low, but damn it if she would!

He looked down at the report and turned it so the title read the right way. Benjamin's stormy eyes snapped up at her. His face was stoic now, almost solemn. The sudden change from his previous rampage disarmed Jewell.

Benjamin walked by her. His shoulder brushed hers as he made no effort to step around her. It wasn't a rough contact, but enough to throw her slightly off balance. The report fell loudly on his desktop. Jewell turned and watched his back. Broad shoulders seemed to drop just slightly.

He didn't turn back to her again, but took his suit jacket off its rack and headed to the door.

"I'll be gone the rest of the day," she heard him say to Justine.

Then he was gone.

Moments later, Justine stood in the doorway with a look of bewilderment on her face. Jewell was pretty sure the same look was on her own. What just happened? After three weeks of snappy comments and nasty diatribes, had she actually won an argument with him? Had this ever happened before?

"What was that all about?" Justine asked.

Jewell raised and lowered her shoulders slowly, not even sure in her own mind. "He flipped out over some numbers he didn't like. I guess he just pushed me too far. I got angry, and probably did something I shouldn't have."

As she explained, her voice slowed and a dreadful realization formed. She probably just cost herself a job.

"I think the guys in accounting heard the yelling," Justine told her. "I've never heard him like that. And I've worked for Mr. Roth for two years." A kind of worshipful awe tinged Justine's voice.

Justine had never heard him like that because no one was ever stupid enough to be so belligerent back at him. Jewell crossed her arms over her body and walked to Justine. She extended her hand, and the woman took it in a kind of farewell shake.

“It’s been nice working with you, Justine, but I have a feeling I won’t be here much longer.”

Justine dismissed Jewell’s comment with a pass of her hand. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous. He wouldn’t fire you because you stood up to him. If that were true, you would’ve been gone weeks ago.”

Jewell wished she could believe the affirmation, but right now it was impossible. She turned and went back to her office. Until the ax fell, she figured she would continue with the latest bit of research he wanted.

Fifteen minutes later, a soft knock at her door drew Jewell’s attention from the website she was reviewing for information. She looked up to see Kevin Burke leaning into the doorjamb with his hands in his trouser pockets. Jewell slipped her reading glasses off and set them on the desk.

“Good morning, Mr. Burke. Can I help you with something?”

“Please, call me Kevin,” he insisted as he came into the room. “I think we’re beyond silly formality.”

Jewell nodded. “Okay, Kevin. What’s up?”

He shifted his hip up on the edge of her desk and looked down at her. “I heard the yelling awhile ago,” he stated.

Heat rose up in Jewell’s cheeks. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. With a subtle push off, Jewell moved the chair back to create some space between Kevin Burke and herself. “I think everyone heard the yelling. I’m very embarrassed over the whole thing.”

“Lovers’ quarrel?”

Jewell momentarily lost the ability to speak. She realized her jaw fell open and looked away to regain her composure. When she again met Kevin's stare, an all-knowing grin spread across his face.

"I'm sorry?" she managed to ask, her dry throat reducing the volume of her voice.

"It's certainly not a secret, Jewell," he said. "Everyone has noticed the little glances and subtle touches that pass between the two of you. Anyone in attendance at the dinner party a few weeks back had to be blind not to see the chemistry. You looked very hot that night, and Benjamin wasn't the only one taking advantage of the view." One eyebrow bobbed up and down suggestively.

Jewell stood up, no longer feeling comfortable sitting below his line of sight. "You are mistaken, Mr. Burke," she stated, stressing her return to the formal address. "You and everyone else who believes there to be anything but a professional connection between Mr. Roth and myself."

"Oh, come on! Are you telling me nothing happened when the two of you disappeared out onto the balcony for half an hour?"

"I needed some air," she exclaimed, annoyed at the high-pitched twinge in her voice, and his insinuation.

Kevin smirked. "You arrived together and you left together. Benjamin Roth has never spoken to his EA's outside of work, let alone taken them to formal dinner parties." He leaned forward and winked. "Not that I blame him."

Jewell struggled for words. Why was it she could so easily counter Benjamin's arguments, but when this jerk tossed out lewd and vulgar comments, she had nothing? She was in shock. Burke took some very innocent, very meaningless events and made them into something scandalous.

“We both know you two were more than reviewing some numbers that afternoon I interrupted you. B.P.’s been around enough. He should know better and lock his door before getting you on your knees.”

Kevin’s head snapped sideways with the force of the slap. His eyes rounded in surprise. Jewell’s palm stung with the impact, but as soon as he turned back to her, she hit him again. He jumped to his feet and had her pinned back against the desk before she could step clear of his reach.

“I guess I shouldn’t have given you up so easily. When Traynor came to me and said Roth specifically requested you, I should have known then you were a catch to hold on to. Don’t worry, sweet cheeks, you can always come work for me.” His voice slithered like Lucifer’s in the Garden of Eden.

“Justine,” Jewell yelled. “Get security down here, *now*.”

Kevin stepped back. When he didn’t step back far enough, Jewell gave his shoulders a firm shove. The arrogant smile on his face pissed her off. She went around her desk and picked up her attaché and headed for the door.

“Never mind,” she told Justine. “I’ll just go right to Human Resources and report this myself. Do you understand the definition of sexual harassment, Mr. Burke?” she threw back at Kevin. “Once I’m finished there, I’ll be gone the rest of the day, as well.”

Donna Gallant in Human Resources was highly apologetic and didn’t seem all that surprised by Jewell’s claim. She imparted enough vague information for Jewell to surmise this wasn’t the first time Kevin Burke’s name was associated with a claim of sexual impropriety. Mrs. Gallant took down all the details of Jewell’s incident report and asked her to sign a sworn statement. She also told Jewell they would ask Justine about anything she might have seen or heard. There would be more questions later, but for now Jewell’s part was done.

It wasn't until she was in the commuter rail station that the heaviness of the situation fully hit her. Jewell sank down on a molded plastic bench. Her forehead dropped into a trembling hand. The day had started out like any other in the last three weeks. Within hours she had told off Benjamin Roth and slapped Kevin Burke—twice! *When the hell did everything go so wrong?*

~ * ~

Benjamin threw back another shot of whiskey. It warmed his tongue and burned his throat all the way down. Unfortunately, it did little to clarify anything for him. He stared at the facets of the Waterford Crystal decanter on the lamp table beside him. Sunlight from the huge windows behind him played on its angles and peaks, momentarily mesmerizing him.

He took a deep breath and set his tumbler beside the vessel. If drinking half the contents hadn't cleared his thinking yet, neither would the other half. One of the few things he had ever learned from Jonathan Roth was the answers to life's problems were never found at the bottom of a bottle of liquor. Benjamin saw his father fail in his search far too many times to leave any doubt.

Benjamin looked over his shoulder. The evening sun, as it started its descent behind the horizon, was still intense enough to make him blink against its brightness. Today was the first day in all his years at Bulwark he hadn't put in a full day. Not once had he called in sick, left early, or taken a vacation day. There was no doubt in his mind tongues now wagged.

Never before had he run from a fight, either. The fight today was one he could not win, and had no business starting in the first place. Jewell was right, he was being an ass. The only thing he could do was walk away.

No, he could have admitted he was wrong. He could have apologized. Benjamin only started the fight in the first place to

get her into his office. To see her and maybe catch a hint of her perfume as it drifted in the air. But he was a Roth, right? Roths don't apologize. They don't ask. And they are never, ever wrong! Was that another lesson he'd learned from his father?

Jewell didn't deserve his anger and frustration. The only thing she had ever done was be the most competent EA of any at Bulwark, and be so completely desirable he could think of little else. The last three weeks had been sheer hell.

Since the night of the Bulwark dinner party, Benjamin thought of nothing but Jewell. Never had a woman looked so beautiful as she did that night. Every set of male eyes in the place were on her, and Benjamin was glad to be the one she stood beside.

But she wasn't just beautiful. Jewell Kincaid was intelligent and witty. He didn't have to pull the conversation along, or fill in the gap where her input might have lacked. She was beauty and brains wrapped in one utterly feminine package. Were there any woman in the world compatible enough to devote a relationship to, it would be Jewell.

Benjamin shot up off the couch and paced the Oriental rug spread out in front of his fireplace. *Where the hell was that coming from?*

He remembered the infuriated look on her face that morning. Her outburst and the outrageous example she'd made by plucking imaginary numbers from thin air and throwing them in his face, now made him smile. No woman, or man for that matter, had ever dared come back at him like that. Her indomitable courage was highly admirable. Besides, wasn't that the reason he'd fought tooth and nail to get her? Benjamin was sick of cowering, nervous people who backed down whenever he raised his voice to speak or hand to sign. If they expected an ogre, that's what he gave them.

For three weeks he had pushed her hard. In the back of his mind, he realized it was to drive her out. If he pushed hard enough, she would quit. If she quit, she would no longer be an employee of Bulwark and other possibilities would be open to him. That explained only part of his nasty mood. The other, much larger part, was born of pure sexual frustration.

It was obvious now she wouldn't be shoved out. Jewell was too strong willed and self-confident to let that happen. Leaving would be accepting defeat, and Jewell wouldn't do that. They couldn't go on like this. She was the best Executive Aid he'd ever had, and could ever hope to find. Benjamin was an idiot to want to get rid of her.

He would just have to get over his pounding libido and idiotic pride, and get on with the job at hand. There was only one way to fix things now.

Benjamin went to his bedroom, taking a quick detour through the kitchen for a cup of black coffee, and stepped into the giant glass and stone shower stall in his bathroom. Cold water assaulted him, making his heart beat faster and clearing his muted senses. The icy barrage did little to cool his thoughts of Jewell.

He stepped out of the shower onto Italian marble floors. The elaborate and lavishly decorated bathroom opened into an even more lavish bedroom decorated in sage and white. The details of the room went ignored.

Benjamin walked into his bedroom, towel in hand. The darkness outside his window shocked him. How long had he sat on that couch and pondered Jewell? It had to have been hours. Paying little attention to what he grabbed, he dressed and ran a quick comb through his damp hair.

With resolution in his step, Benjamin went downstairs to get the keys to his car. He pulled a slip of paper off the corkboard in the kitchen with Jewell's address written on it. Within

minutes, he had his silver Lexus out of the garage and drove though the quiet streets of Boston.

~ * ~

Jewell curled up into the corner of her couch, a pint of Haagen Dazs in one hand and the remote control in the other. Despite the fact midnight quickly approached, sleep eluded her. Too many thoughts raced in her head when the lights went out and the apartment was silent.

How was she going to find another job? How could she explain leaving Bulwark? That was inevitable. Benjamin alone had enough reason to let her go. But she had struck a fund manager. Yes, he made crude sexual comments, but that was beyond the point. She shouldn't have let her anger get the most of her to strike out physically like that. Two wrongs didn't make a right, even if they were two different kinds of wrong.

She tugged at the hem of her cotton shorts as she tried to get comfortable. They were her favorite pair, but could only be worn around the house because they were far too short to be worn in public. Some might, but Jewell couldn't bring herself to do it. Short shorts and tight tank tops with no bra were saved for bedtime and midnight television viewing.

With a press of the power button, her 20" television came on in the middle of an old horror flick. She flipped back her loose hair and dug into the ice cream with her spoon. Jewell almost wished Ruby would wake up. At least then she'd have some company.

The knock on the door came at a tense moment of the movie, and Jewell jumped two feet off the couch. She nearly choked on her mouthful of ice cream. With a glance at the clock on the television, she shook her head. Who could be at her door at eleven-thirty at night? And how did they get into the building? A nervous flutter hit her stomach. Who indeed.

She set the pint down on the coffee table and stood up. Moving quietly, Jewell went to the door. Whomever it was knocked again. Jewell jumped despite herself. She didn't answer, but looked through the small peephole into the hall. Surprise brought her back. With quick hands, she undid the double locks on the door and opened it.

"Benjamin?" she signed, "*What are you doing here?*"

He stared at her, his eyelids dropping slightly as his gaze lowered a fraction. Right away he met her eyes again. Jewell felt immediately self-conscious. She wanted to cross her arms over her breasts, but feared it would only draw attention to the fact she wore nothing under the ribbed cotton of her tank top. Her hair was mussed and haphazard, and she knew she must look a fright. Certainly not anything like she looked in the office.

Benjamin seemed to snap out of his trance. "*I followed another tenant in through the front door. Did I wake you up?*"

Jewell shook her head and opened the door further. "*No, I was watching television. Come in.*"

He stepped in, his arm brushed hers as he moved by her. Jewell nearly gasped at the immediate reaction of her body. Mortified, she finally did cross her arms over her breasts. She watched him walk down the hall to the living room. More tumbling sensations clutched her stomach and tightened the flesh around her nipples. A small groan worked its way free of her throat.

Benjamin wore a faded pair of jeans that clung to the sexy contours of his backside. His blue tee shirt fit close, but not too tightly. Enough to accentuate the defined muscles of his back and shoulders. The sleeves fit snugly around his upper arms and accentuated his biceps. Jewell's breath caught and her throat went dry. She had seen Benjamin in professional suits and fancy tuxedos. All in all, she definitely liked him best in this

relaxed kind of look. Jeans and tee shirts brought out the sexy shape of his body the other clothing just hid.

She shook her head to clear her mind of such dangerously ridiculous thoughts and followed him down the hall. A depressing realization hit her. Benjamin probably wasn't here on a social call. Most likely, he was here to fire her and tell her not to bother coming in. Jewell wondered if he had heard about the incident with Kevin Burke. If he did, it would have obviously been Kevin's side. A distorted and one-sided version of the truth. Just remembering what he said made Jewell angry all over again.

Benjamin stood in the middle of her living room and looked around him. He stopped and watched the movie playing out on the television. It was a particularly cheesy scene with some buxom blonde running through the woods from some unknown horror. She clutched at her heaving breasts to hold on the flimsy shirt as it was torn away by tree branches.

He turned to her, a smile on his face. *"High quality programming."*

Jewell touched the power button on the set and the screen went black. *"There isn't much on this late at night. It's either this or an infomercial on some new piece of workout equipment."*

Benjamin looked at the clock. Shock registered on his face. *"I didn't realize it was so late."*

She flipped her hand in dismissal. *"Do you want something to drink? I don't have much, but I have soda and juice. I don't keep alcohol in the house. Ruby isn't twenty-one yet."*

He shook his head.

Jewell sighed. Obviously, it was going to be a hit and run firing. If he had a drink in his hand, it could make the exit awkward. Her heart pounded against her ribs. She looked away to try and calm her nerves, only to have them electrified when

she turned back. Benjamin stared at her, an intense seriousness darkening his face. His brown eyes roved quickly over her, and heat touched her exposed skin wherever his gaze fell. When he fixed his eyes again on her face, Jewell felt a small shudder move through her. One corner of his lips moved up in his offhanded grin.

Jewell couldn't take the stress anymore. *"What did you need, Benjamin? It must be important to bring you out so late."*

He motioned toward the couch in an unspoken request to sit. Jewell nodded and they both sat down. Benjamin sat at one end, his body turned towards her as far as the furniture would allow with his sneakered foot dangling over the edge of the cushion. Jewell did the same, facing him. The couch was small, and despite her best effort to avoid it, her bare knee brushed the soft denim of his jeans. It might as well been his hand for the effect it had on her. Jewell wondered what she would do if she didn't have these sweet sensations to contend with on a daily basis anymore. She knew nothing would ever happen between the two of them, but the sweet torment was almost worth the endless torture.

"Is your sister here?" he asked.

The question surprised her and Jewell blinked. "Yes. She's in bed."

"Is she a sound sleeper?"

Jewell squinted her eyes, staring at him. *Where on earth was he going with this? Or was this just small talk?* She almost laughed. Maybe he was here to ask if her sister was available. Wouldn't that be cruel! Here she sat with her skin on fire, and he was interested in her sister!

"A hurricane won't wake my sister," she answered, almost regretting he couldn't hear the sarcastic lilt in her voice.

His smile was disarming. *"No need for everyone to be awake."* His hands rested on his thighs as he seemed to think about what to say. *"I wanted to talk to you about today."*

Here it comes! Jewell folded her hands together in her lap to hide their shaking. He paused again, his gaze moving over her face and hair. It was as though he searched for what to say. *How difficult could it be? You're fired, Jewell. You're fired. Not so tough.*

"This isn't something I do very often," he began again. *"My father drilled into my head that men just don't do this. Especially Roth men."*

Jewell was confused. *His father told him men don't fire people? That made no sense.*

He stared at the melting pint of Haagen Dazs before looking back to her. With deliberate slowness, he lifted his hand and made a loose fist. Benjamin pressed his fingers into his chest and made a circle. His tee shirt shifted beneath his hand.

"I'm sorry. I was out of line and had no right to take my bad mood out on you. It had nothing to do with the report, or anything else you've done for me. You are doing a great job. I couldn't ask for better work. What happened this morning, and for the last few weeks, is all me."

Jewell was in shock. She knew she stared, but couldn't seem to stop. *He was apologizing?* Justine had told her never once had she heard the words 'I'm sorry' pass his lips. No matter what he had done.

Benjamin's smile widened and he reached out to nudge her knee. *"Hello. Are you still with me?"*

She nodded and laughed at herself. *"Yes. I'm sorry. You just surprised me. I thought you were here to fire me."*

It was Benjamin's turn to look surprised. *"Fire you? I can be stupid sometimes, but not that stupid. Why would you think that?"*

“After this morning, I just thought you wouldn’t want to work with me anymore. When you showed up, I assumed you heard what happened with Kevin Burke—”

His hand wrapped around hers to stop her signing. “Kevin Burke? What happened with Kevin Burke?”

Jewell explored his face. She knew by the confused look in his eyes that he didn’t know what happened. Good lord! Now she would have to explain. How could she tell him what kind of rumors were going through Bulwark? Could she say with a straight face, without bursting into humiliated flames, what Kevin assumed she was doing the day he came in?

With a fortifying breath, Jewell lifted her hands and explained. She told him everything, knowing it would all come out in the end anyway. As she explained the stories and rumors of their affair, his brown eyes seemed to darken. Jewell tried to put a light air to the whole thing, saying how silly everyone was to take such innocent actions and make them into things they obviously weren’t. As she finished, she informed him she had already filed a report with Human Resources about the entire incident.

His powerful stare held hers. She was unable to look away. *“There is something you aren’t telling me,”* he signed slowly.

Jewell looked down at her hands. When she looked back, she had to find a point beyond his shoulder to look toward. She couldn’t meet his eyes again.

“I slapped him. Twice.” He requested she continue with a movement of his hand. *“Do you remember the day he came in your office and I was...”* She couldn’t find the words to explain their positioning that day without sounding like a fool. *“When I nearly fell and you caught me?”* Benjamin nodded. *“Kevin Burke assumed I was...”* She had to stop. Jewell didn’t know the sign for what Kevin thought she was doing. How could you

sign oral sex without looking crude, and without dying of embarrassment?

Her stomach clenched and a wave of nausea hit her. This was just too much. Anyone else and this wouldn't be a problem. But Benjamin was different. Just the thought of... oh, God! Hot tears burned her eyes, and she looked away to hide them.

Benjamin's fingertip touched her chin. "Jewell, look at me," he said.

Fighting the humiliation and devastating effects of his slight touch, Jewell looked at him again. His eyes had softened, and the special smile she liked to think of as her very own spread across his face. His fingers caressed her cheek and his thumb brushed away the tear wetting her skin.

"Kevin Burke is an ass and an idiot not to realize you are far too classy and too much a lady to do what he suggests. I will be behind you one-hundred-percent in whatever you decide to do. One way or another, he's not welcome in my office again."

Jewell nodded, thankful he let it go at that. The unspoken was still there between them, but it was coupled with the understanding that words didn't need to be attached to it.

"Now," he said, clapping his hands together. "Are we friends again?"

Jewell smiled. "Again? Were we friends to begin with?"

Benjamin grinned and nodded. "Can I get that drink now?"

"I'm just going to change my clothes," she said, quickly indicating her scant shorts and tight top.

His smile took on an amused tilt. "Don't change on my account."

Heat rushed over her entire body. Jewell stood and walked to the kitchen for a can of cola from the refrigerator. When she went back into the living room, Benjamin was reclined in a

more comfortable position against the assortment of pillows on the couch. He looked through a small photo album she kept on the coffee table. One leg was lifted with his ankle balancing on the other knee. Instead of sitting on the cushion, Jewell put her knees on the couch and sat back on her own feet. Benjamin took the cold can from her and pointed at the album.

"You were a cute kid," he commented.

"How do you know which one is me?" she said.

Benjamin balanced the open album in his lap. *"I saw your family portrait in the hall. You are the only one with red hair. You don't look anything like the rest of the family. What? Were you adopted?"*

Jewell touched her nose with the finger of one hand and pointed at him with another. *"On the nose."*

Benjamin's face grew serious. *"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."*

Jewell shrugged. *"Why be sorry? Actually, we're all adopted. All four of us."*

His eyebrows arched. *"All of you? That explains why you don't look alike."*

Jewell laughed. She scooted closer and pointed at the people in the array of pictures. *"You've met my sister, Ruby. This is my older brother, Garnett. And the blonde-haired angel is our little sister, Pearl."*

"Your names are Garnett, Jewell, Ruby and Pearl?"

Jewell nodded. *"My mother's name is Opal. Daddy figures it was fate that we should all be named after precious gems. Garnett's legal name is just that. Put that with Mom's name and next thing you know, we've got a pattern forming. Daddy says it was providence because they considered us all to be extra precious gifts, so we needed extra special names. They had our names legally changed: myself, Ruby and Pearl."*

His face was serious, and she held her breath as he touched the feathery ends of her hair where it hung over her shoulder. *"Jewell is a perfect name for you."*

She touched her fingertips to her lips and lowered her hand, palm up. *"Thank you."*

Benjamin went back to the album, smiling at some of the photographs taken more recently. As the pages turned, Jewell explained whom everyone was and when the snapshot was taken. One of the last was a picture from her father's sixty-third birthday party just two months earlier. She and her siblings stood around him, each of them kissing some part of his head. The funniest part was her brother, who had to push down Cecil Kincaid's thick hair just to be seen.

"Your parents couldn't have children?" he asked.

Jewell shook her head. *"No. My mother had Reyes Syndrome as an infant. She nearly died. As a result, she was left unable to have children. She's also deaf from it."*

Understanding crossed his face and he nodded. *"I wondered where you learned ASL so proficiently. There's a difference between learning sign in the classroom and having it spoken at home. I can always tell."*

Jewell leaned into the back of the couch. It was amazing. The tension and stress of the last three weeks was gone in a matter of ten minutes. Once again, the comfortable camaraderie between them was back.

"I went to live with my parents when I was four. I don't think the actual meaning of deaf hit me until I was eight or nine years old. I was so young and felt so much love from them from the moment I arrived, it just didn't matter."

"You were four?"

Jewell nodded. *"I bounced around in foster homes and hospitals up until then. My parents adopted the kids no one else seemed to want. They took on challenges no one expected them*

to be able to handle. Most of us were older, which in itself is a disadvantage when you're in the system. My brother Garnett was six years old. He was orphaned when his parents and four other siblings were killed in a car accident.

"Ruby was younger. She was two. But she came from an abusive home. She says she doesn't remember any of it, but I wonder sometimes. Pearl was almost two. She was in a diabetic coma for two weeks. Her mother was on welfare and there was no father around any longer. She signed off all parental rights and put Pearl up for adoption. My parents got a call right away, and she was home with us a week after she woke up."

"It seems your parents were very open and forward about the whole thing."

She nodded. *"It was never a secret."*

His warm palm rested on her bare knee. She looked down and examined in awe the difference between their skin tones. Benjamin's flesh was darker and warmer, but something less than tan. Her skin was pale and translucent in comparison. Even after a full summer of sun, she remained fair and freckled.

His fingers pressed gently into her thigh. The pad of his thumb ran back and forth across the sensitive skin of her knee. Jewell felt warmth grow inside and spread out to her limbs. The heat worked down her leg, as if seeking out the source of the ardor. She fought down the desire to reach out and test the wave of his hair. Was it as soft and thick as it looked?

"What about you?" he asked. "You explained about your brother and sister. What brought you to the Kincaid home?"

Jewell met his gaze. This wasn't something she spoke about often. Her memories before Cecil and Opal Kincaid loved her were fuzzy, but unpleasant all the same. Years after the fact, she realized how thankful she was to have a new name. The old name seemed foreign and mismatched, and she didn't even connect it with the person she was. For that reason, she didn't

tell anyone what it was. It wasn't her. In fact, very few knew Jewell wasn't her birth name. What spurred her into telling Benjamin, Jewell wasn't sure. She swallowed against the dryness in her throat and the havoc in her chest.

"I was born addicted to heroin. Child Services took me away from my mother immediately. But detoxification takes months, and the effects last for years. No one wanted to take on the responsibility of my medical care. I'd go to foster homes and be there just long enough for them to realize how extensive it really was. At four, the Kincaids accepted the responsibility."

"A very big responsibility."

Jewell agreed. *"I don't think most people realize heroine addiction isn't a lifetime affliction for a baby—if treated right. It's not like I crave it or anything. It's been twenty-eight years, after all. It slowed my ability to learn until I was about eight. But my mother was persistent and my father is a college professor, so they worked with me until I was caught up where I needed to be. They never gave up or backed down. If for nothing else, I respect them just for that one fact."*

He smiled slowly. "I admire you."

"If someone should be admired, it's Opal and Cecil Kincaid," she said, tapping her father's photograph in the album.

He set the book down on the coffee table. "Show me another one. I want to find something I can use for blackmail at a later date."

Jewell laughed and stood up to retrieve another album from the bookshelf behind the television. The early morning hours slipped away.

~ * ~

Benjamin's groggy mind acknowledged the stiffness in his back before he ever opened his eyes. When he did, he had to blink against the lamp that was on just behind his head. For

several seconds he remained disoriented, glancing around the unfamiliar room.

He looked down and drew in a sharp, aroused breath. Jewell curled against his side, sandwiched between himself and the back of the couch they both lay on. Her cheek rested on his chest and her fingers curled against his tee shirt. Waves of auburn hair cascaded over his arm that sat across her shoulders.

Then he remembered. He came here last night to apologize. Somehow the conversation extended late into the night. Benjamin recalled the heavy, dreamy look in Jewell's eyes around three a.m. After the fourth or fifth yawn in as many minutes, it was Benjamin's suggestion to recline back into the abundance of pillows on the couch.

She fell asleep almost instantly. In the midst of a sign her fingers slowed and rested on his chest. Benjamin remembered the deep breath that pressed her breasts against his ribs as she sank into slumber.

He didn't doze off until after four. Benjamin spent an hour memorizing the facets of color in her hair. Shadows of deep gold, rich red and burnt copper mingled in a mesmerizing pattern of light. His fingers explored the softness of her skin. The sparse spattering of freckles on her bare arms made him smile. She smelled so sweet and fresh and feminine.

Benjamin shifted enough to look at the analog clock on the wall over the television. It was nearly half past five. He had only slept about an hour and a half. Yet, somehow, he felt refreshed. The only negative was the catch in his spine from the angle they held against the arm of the couch.

He tried to shift into a more comfortable position. As he did, Jewell stirred and he felt a soft vibration against his ribs. She rubbed her cheek against his chest and drew a bent, bare leg over his thigh.

Benjamin held his breath. What sweet torture!

His hands itched to touch her, to stroke her silken hair and learn the fullness of her breasts beneath his fingertips. Benjamin let his head fall back into the pillows and pressed his eyes tightly shut. How many personal rules had he broken so far? Too many to count, that was for sure. They had crossed the 'professional' boundary long ago.

Reluctantly, Benjamin slowly worked himself out from beneath her slight weight. With her cheek cupped in his hand, Benjamin crouched beside her and positioned a pillow beneath her head. A slow, soft smile bowed her full lips when Benjamin paused to touch her temple and smooth back her hair.

He pulled a small afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over her bare thighs and exposed midriff. Jewell didn't stir. She had to be deep in sleep. Benjamin contemplated lifting her off the couch and carrying her down to her bedroom. In the end, he decided against it. What if he met with Ruby in the hall? How would he explain that? Hell, how would he explain it should Jewell wake up in the process?

Benjamin sat back on his heels and stared at her. She was beautiful in her sleep. Her cheeks held a soft glow and sooty black lashes curled gently along her eyelids. How incredible it would be to wake up to that angelic visage every morning.

He shook his head slowly. It did no good to think lustful thoughts. Now that he no longer had her warmth against him, fatigue worked its way into his body. Benjamin's limbs were heavy and his back ached. What he needed to do was go home, take a long, hot shower, and try to get through the day.

Benjamin leaned forward and pressed his lips against her temple. With a rumble in his chest and an ache in his thighs, he stood and looked down at her before he turned and walked to the front door.

Five

Jewell held herself back to keep from sprinting down the hall to her office. Her heels slowed her down and prevented her from taking off at full speed. She looked at her watch as she rushed from the elevator.

“Damn. Ten o’clock.”

She reached the desk outside Benjamin’s office, and Justine looked up with amused surprise on her face.

“Well, good morning,” Justine said, and looked at her desk clock. “Yup, it is still morning.”

Jewell took a deep breath. “Very funny.”

“What happened?”

Instant heat rushed to Jewell’s cheeks. *Oh, I spent the entire night on my couch with Benjamin. We talked. We joked. I fell asleep in his arms. When I woke up this morning, it was after eight and he was gone.* She cleared her throat. “Oh, I just overslept.”

“I guess that happens to the best of us once in awhile. I missed my coffee this morning, though.”

“I’m sorry,” Jewell said in earnest.

Justine laughed. “That’s okay. I survived.”

She finally caught her breath and tilted her head toward Benjamin’s door. “Is he in?”

“Of course. Mr. Roth is *always* here. Well, except for yesterday, that is.”

“What kind of mood is he in?” Jewell asked, pulling her lower lip through her teeth. She wanted to know what she was walking into.

“Seems to be much better.”

Jewell smiled and sighed in relief. That was definitely a positive sign. “Good.”

“Do you know something I don’t know?” Justine’s eyes squinted slightly and her voice carried a curious lilt.

Jewell shook her head, probably a little too adamantly. “No, just wondering. If anyone from Human Resources should call, put them right through.”

Justine nodded her affirmation and Jewell walked to her office. Her nerves, frazzled from being late, calmed a bit. She took pride in never being late to work. Then again, last night was not her usual evening at home. A smile pulled at her lips as she thought about it.

The last time she remembered looking at the clock it was almost three in the morning. At the time, she hadn’t felt tired at all. They were too busy talking. Other than Greg, she had never felt comfortable enough with a man to talk so freely. Of course, Benjamin was different. It was a strange sensation. Yet, not completely unpleasant. Without the tension of the last three weeks, which she still didn’t understand, they fell back into their comfortable comradeship. Because it was in her apartment and not in the confines of the office, the feel was even more relaxed and easy. Yet, behind the joking and laughing was his immense and powerful effect on her.

Benjamin brought her nerves to life. Her senses were finely tuned to every move he made, every word he said, and every nuance of his body. No man had ever sparked her fire like Benjamin. Frankly, she began to wonder if any man ever

would. Where was the spark and flame her girlfriends told her about in giggly whispers? Or the intense need and desire writers wrote about in the romance novels she read once in awhile?

Jewell worried it was just her inability to be receptive. More than one boyfriend told her she was cold and unresponsive. She recalled, with a slight tensing of her stomach, one particularly hurtful accusation from a boyfriend in college. When she decided to go back home, rather than spend the night in his dorm, he called her a tease and told her it was over between them if she didn't stay.

With a sharp shake of her head, Jewell shook off the unpleasant memories. Maybe things were different now. Jewell at least knew she *could* feel something, even if nothing ever came of it.

Jewell decided to forego her normal morning routine and go directly into Benjamin's office. Besides, most of the morning was gone anyway. Routine seemed silly at this point. With a smile, she wondered if he was as tired as she. Jewell peeked through the open door.

Benjamin reclined in his chair. His elbow rested on the arm and folded fingers supported his temple. Just as he had on the couch the night before, one ankle rested on the opposite knee in a relaxed position. Jewell giggled when he stifled a yawn behind his hand and blinked his eyes to focus again on the papers in his lap.

Jewell walked in, not bothering with the cane at the door. He looked up and his slow smile sent butterflies fluttering behind her ribcage. There was a faint glimpse of mischief in his eyes. Benjamin sat forward and set down his papers.

"Good morning."

With her hip leaned into the desk edge, Jewell said good morning back. *"Are you as tired as I am?"*

His smile widened. "I'm exhausted."

Jewell felt like the night before was some wonderful secret to be shared between just the two of them. Not a shameful or indecent secret. Just a special, private one for her and Benjamin. He wore a dress shirt and silk tie, but the image of Benjamin in worn jeans and a well-fitting tee shirt stayed prominent in her mind. She knew beneath the loose Van Heusen shirt his arms were muscular and his chest defined.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I didn't wake up until well after eight this morning. Ruby didn't even wake me up when she left for school."

Benjamin came up out of his chair and stood near her, his hands pushed deep into the pockets of his trousers. His gaze moved over her face and hair. She wore the rebellious mass down today, with just a gold clip at her crown to hold back the worst of the curls around her face. There hadn't been time to fidget with it enough to get it up in a professional style. It was a miracle she had on nylons with the speed she'd gotten dressed. Her entire body flushed when he touched some of the long tresses behind her ear.

"You were sound asleep when I left," he said in a slow voice. "I was careful not to wake you."

A small shudder danced up Jewell's spine. She shifted to hide the effect of his nearness. Jewell found it harder to breathe in a steady rhythm. Her pulse throbbed at the base of her throat. A trembling hand reached up to cover the spot. The pounding seemed so violent she thought he must be able to see it. If she were anyone else hearing their conversation, she would assume they had spent the night together. They had, but not in the most carnal of ways.

"What time did you leave?" she asked. She was afraid to sign. He would surely see the tremors in her hands if she did.

Benjamin shook his head slowly. His powerful gaze held hers. "I'm not sure. Around five, maybe."

He stepped closer. Jewell's bottom rested on the edge of the desk, and Benjamin stood so close their bodies nearly touched. But not quite. Her knees felt weak. Before she had the chance to rationalize the stupidity of her actions, Jewell reached out and took his tie between her fingers. She smoothed it down his chest and felt his abdominal muscles tense when her knuckles brush the buttons of his shirt.

Don't do this, Jewell! Don't let this happen! He's your boss! You're kidding yourself!

Jewell ignored the warnings screaming in her mind. With all the strength she could muster, Jewell lifted her chin and met his stare. The smoldering depths of his brown eyes burned deep into her soul.

Benjamin raised his hands and made small signs in the minimal space left between their bodies. When he spoke to her, his fingertip brushed the lapel of her suit jacket.

"Will your boyfriend be upset when he finds out we spent the night together on your couch?"

"Boyfriend?" she asked. Her hands on the edge of the desk were the only things holding her upright.

"Greg Jacobs. The big guy I met at your apartment."

His finger lingered on the fabric of her clothing. Jewell looked down to watch his touch brush her blouse. She was painfully aware of how close his hands were to her breasts. One curl fell forward over her shoulder, and he let it brush the back of his hand.

Jewell slowly drew in a breath to ease the burning in her lungs. She shook her head. Benjamin's fingers pushed up into her hair and wrapped around the column of her neck, her copper curls intertwined amongst them. His thumb pressed

against the pulse spot beneath her jaw. She felt her heartbeat pound against the pressure.

Her eyes were drawn down again to the space between them. It grew smaller by degrees. She watched as one of Benjamin's legs slipped forward and gently edged between her knees. His hips made contact with hers. Gentle pressure pushed her back into the desk's edge. Jewell drew in a sharp breath.

"He's not my boyfriend," she whispered.

His thumb nudged her chin upward. Slight furrows wrinkled his brow, questioning her. She realized her foolishness. Benjamin couldn't read her lips when she looked down. The extraordinary blaze and glow of his brown eyes looking down in her forced her heart to skip a beat. Her lips parted, and she struggled to keep her thoughts in order. *Was this really happening?*

"He's not my boyfriend," she managed to say again. The volume of her voice was almost indiscernible.

The space closed further. His body settled against hers, and Jewell was acutely, almost painfully, aware of his hard contours.

"He isn't?" An irresistibly devastating grin tugged at his lips and his eyelids lowered as his gaze fell on her lips.

The effect was as tangible and powerful as a caress. She tried to shake her head, but couldn't stand to move away from his touch. Acting on its own accord, Jewell's hand moved from the desk's edge to the waistband of his slacks. His breath caught and Jewell smiled at the involuntary reaction her touch created in him. It gave her a heady sense of power over a man who was infamous for his intimidation of others. Riding on the euphoria of her newfound ability, Jewell shifted her body against him and watched the muscle jump along his jaw.

"No," she managed to say. "He's my best friend."

"Is there a boyfriend, Jewell?"

“No.”

His open mouth covered hers. There was no prelude to the kiss. No slow overture to its intensity. Jewell had no option, no choice, but to give in to its power without restraint. Their tongues met as a conduit, and thunder arched her body against him.

Her fingers clutched desperately at the starched cotton of his shirt. Benjamin’s hands held her head in place with a gentle pressure as his tongue parted her lips and plunged inside. His fingers pressed into her scalp. A low purr reverberated in her throat and her stomach tumbled.

The kiss was hungry. Jewell never realized how desperately she craved this. All consequences vanished. All logical thought disappeared. Their bodies slowly started to recline onto the desk surface.

With a jolt, Jewell came out of the revelry Benjamin’s kiss created. She grabbed his wrists, and with overpowering regret, pulled back from his touch. His gaze met hers. How amazing! Those eyes were an even deeper mahogany. God! She wanted to move back to him.

The knock came again that originally interrupted the moment of passion. Benjamin moved back to kiss her, and her hand shot up.

“Someone is knocking on my door,” she signed.

Benjamin sighed, his gaze dropping to her mouth. The pad of his thumb ran across her lower lip, now swollen by the strength of their kiss.

The knock came a third time. “Jewell?” Justine’s voice called through the wood. She sounded miles away through the blood pounding in Jewell’s ears.

“I’m in Mr. Roth’s office,” she called out. Her voice cracked and she quickly cleared it. “Come in.”

Benjamin stepped back just in time to avoid being seen by Justine as she came in through the other office. Jewell ran a quaking hand over her mouth before turning to face the woman. Not daring to look down, she hoped her clothing wasn't mussed and twisted beyond explanation. He sat down in his chair and moved close to the desk.

"What's up, Justine?" she asked.

"You have a call on line one. It's your brother. He said it's urgent."

Panic slammed into Jewell's chest. "Thank you," she said.

Jewell snatched up the phone and pressed the flashing button for the outside line. Right now Jewell was thankful she asked to have a phone put in Benjamin's office. There hadn't been one previously. She doubted her legs had the strength to make it across the room.

"Garnett?"

"Hey, kiddo," her older brother said, but Jewell heard the uncertainty in his voice. "Now, don't get worried—"

"What!" she exclaimed. She hated it when Garnett tried to ease the way for her. It just made things worse. "Is it Mom? Dad?"

"It's Pearl. She had a diabetic episode at school. They've taken her to the Elliott Hospital. They don't believe she's in any danger, but I knew you'd want to know."

"Is everyone there?"

"There, or on the way. I'm leaving work now. Jewell, she's okay," he reiterated.

Jewell hung up the phone, tears burning her eyes. She jumped when Benjamin's hand came down on her shoulder. When she turned to look at him, his face registered the concern at her tears. He squeezed her hand before signing.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Pearl. They took her to the hospital. Diabetic episode. That was my brother."

"Go," he said, pointing to the door. *"Go to her."*

Jewell went to her office for her bag and headed out. Benjamin stood in the doorway and watched her as she moved about the room. Three feet short of leaving, she jerked to a stop and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Damn!" She stomped her foot.

Benjamin was beside her again. "What?"

Jewell couldn't think. Her mind couldn't switch from arousal to concern fast enough. Everything got muddled in the middle somewhere. She waved her hand in the air in frustration. Benjamin grabbed her arms and made her turn to him.

"Jewell," he said firmly.

"I don't have my car," she choked out. "It's in the garage. I don't have a way out of the city."

His palms slid down her arms. With a quick, reassuring squeeze of her fingers, he turned and went back to his office. Seconds later, he returned with a set of keys in his hand and his jacket over his arm. His hand pressed into the small of her back and guided her towards the door.

"Justine," he said as they exited. "Miss Kincaid has a family emergency and I will be driving her to where she needs to go. Please cancel our meeting this afternoon and reschedule for Friday. We will both be gone the rest of the day."

Jewell stopped him with her palm pressed against his side. "Benjamin," she said, breaking the rule of calling him anything but Mr. Roth around others, "I can't ask you to miss another day of work. I can get a cab. I just couldn't think."

He shook his head. "No."

That was the only argument he offered. They walked to the elevator and waited as the illuminated strip of numbers lit up as

it approached. His hand still remained pressed against her back. The simple contact was reassuring.

She knew she should chastise herself for letting what happened in his office happen. But not now. First, she had to know her little sister was okay. These episodes had hit Pearl previously. Some were mild, but one turned serious and they all worried about losing her. Jewell prayed this would be mild and Pearl would be home by that evening.

~ * ~

They stepped off the hospital elevator hand in hand. Jewell hung on to his silent strength, needing it until she knew one way or another. The hour drive from Boston to Manchester, New Hampshire took an eternity. The entire way she thanked God there was very little traffic on Route 93 this time of day.

Finally there, they checked in at the front desk and found out Pearl was now in the pediatric ward. The fact she was no longer in the Emergency Room, and not admitted to the ICU, was an encouragement.

Garnett stepped into the hall from a room as they rounded the corner near the nurse's station. He looked up and relief washed over Jewell when she saw the relaxed look on her brother's face. Benjamin's grip on her hand tightened and loosened quickly; an unspoken acknowledgment he interpreted Garnett's expression the same way.

Garnett kissed her cheek and embraced her when they came together in the hall. "She's fine, kiddo," he said into her hair. "They administered the insulin and some other drug to help balance things, and she came out of it pretty quickly. She's going to stay overnight, but everything is fine."

Jewell stepped back and blinked against tears of relief. "Thank God. All I could think of was the time when she was eight. I was so scared."

Garnett nodded. "I know."

She remembered her manners, and turned back to Benjamin who had stepped back a few paces. Jewell held out her hand and motioned for him to join them. He shook Garnett's hand as Jewell made the introductions.

"Benjamin, this is my brother Garnett. Garnett, this is Mr. Benjamin Roth, the Fund Manager at Bulwark I work with."

"I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Roth," Garnett told him. Jewell shot him a warning look and he smiled. *"From Ruby. Of course, I take anything Ruby tells me these days with a grain of salt."*

Benjamin nodded and smiled. *"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."*

Jewell quickly filled Benjamin in on the progress her sister had made, providing him with the information Garnett gave her when they arrived. Benjamin's lips broke into a wide, open smile and he sighed deeply. His expression of relief for a little girl he didn't even know warmed Jewell's heart.

The three of them entered the hospital room. Jewell went through the process of introducing Benjamin to her mother and father. Ruby wasn't there. Garnett let them know she had gone down to the cafeteria. He explained she had gotten a ride to the hospital with a friend as well. Jewell moved to the bed where Pearl lay sleeping.

Her fair skin and white-blond hair made her look like a china doll against the bleached sheets of the bed. An IV pole sat beside her, dropping clear liquid into her vein. Pearl took a deep breath and let it out in a long shudder. She was such a tiny little sprite. Jewell adjusted the blanket over her and sighed against the heaviness in her chest.

She turned to see Benjamin and her mother in silent conversation. He towered over Opal Kincaid. To lessen the difference, Jewell watched him crouch down beside her

mother's chair. His hands moved slowly, expressing his empathy and encouragement.

Opal dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, continuing to explain to Benjamin with dainty hands how frightened it made her when Pearl was this sick. It happened once or twice a year, and it was always a shock and strain on the family until she was well and home again. Benjamin patted the back of her hand and signed words of encouragement to a woman he didn't even know.

Benjamin looked in Jewell's direction. With a quick wink and soft smile, he turned back to her mother.

Sweet warmth wrapped around Jewell's heart. Not the passion-fueled heat his touch and smile created. A different, more subtle warming. A realization slowly crept up from deep inside and made its way into her consciousness.

She loved him.

Despite his bursts of anger and frequent lack of manners, she loved him. Because he fueled a fire in her and electrified her blood, she loved him. He sat up all night to talk and eat half-melted ice cream, so she loved him. Because he cared enough to drive her here, then made the effort to comfort a woman he didn't even know, she loved him most of all.

~ * ~

Benjamin came through the garage door into his kitchen with a heavy step and a tired yawn. He dropped his keys on the counter and worked the knot out of his tie without conscious thought needed for the actions. Nothing in the refrigerator looked appetizing or sufficient to really satisfy his thirst. Settling for a can of soda, Benjamin popped the top and took a long drink.

He looked around the kitchen, his eyes following the natural flow into the connected dining room. Everything was meticulously clean and tastefully decorated. Cream colored

carpets and imported tile covered the floors. Copper pots hung from a rack in the ceiling. The canisters and appliances on his countertops each had their specific place.

This townhouse was too big. What did he need with five bedrooms, five bathrooms, and a half dozen other rooms designated by name for some special purpose. The Den. The Library. The Sitting Room. The Media Room. What did he need with a Media Room? On nights like this, when not another soul occupied the huge house with him, his silence seemed too quiet. Nights like this, silence was something beyond the lack of noise. It was the lack of life.

Where were thoughts like that coming from? Perhaps he was just overtired. He remained at the hospital with Jewell until visiting hours ended, then drove her and Ruby back to Boston. After essentially having no sleep the night before, the drive seemed longer than usual. Jewell dozed off in the seat beside him, and he and Ruby had a brief conversation in the rear view mirror. He spoke and she signed. The all-knowing smirk on her face had him wondering what secret Ruby hid.

As Benjamin leaned back into the counter, a folded piece of paper on the center island caught his attention. Feeling tired deep down into his bones, Benjamin leaned forward and picked it up. It was probably a note from the housekeeper. A smile spread across his face when he read it. Leaving the half-empty can of soda on the counter, Benjamin bounded up the stairs. He didn't knock on the spare bedroom door, but walked right in.

Victoria sat reclined on the bed, an ice pack pressed to her forehead and a box of tissues beside her. Her eyes were swollen and red, but the tears seemed to have stopped. Benjamin's good mood at reading Victoria's note plummeted when he saw her.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

Whatever tears had dried up before his arrival came back in a full torrent. His little sister's face distorted in a sob, and she held her arms out, begging to be held. Benjamin wrapped her in his arms. Her small body shuddered against him.

When the trembling stopped, he pushed her back and wiped his thumb across her cheek.

"Vicki, what's wrong?"

Her hands shook violently as she signed. *"Everything is so screwed up, Ben. Can I stay with you?"*

He nodded. *"Of course. Tell me what's going on."*

"Daddy is trying to dictate my life again. He's even forcing his way into my love life now."

Benjamin smirked and shook his head. *"That doesn't surprise me at all. I take it he found out about David McDaniel?"*

"Worse than that. David asked me to marry him. He went to Daddy and asked for his blessing."

"Vicki, did you really think Jon would accept David? What were you thinking?"

Benjamin's sister shrugged her shoulders. Black curls bobbed around her head. *"I told David we had to just run off and elope. I knew Daddy would never give his blessing. But David wanted to do it the right way. He came to the house this afternoon to speak to Daddy."*

"So what happened?"

"Daddy had been drinking all afternoon. I tried to catch David before he went in to see him, but I was too late."

A shudder danced over Benjamin's nerves. Several nasty images and scenarios danced in his mind. When Jon Roth, alcohol, and bad news came together the result tended to be explosive. As a boy, Benjamin had spent many of his evenings at home hiding in some remote corner of the house. It seemed

the very sight of Jon Roth's eldest child was enough to send him into a tirade.

Until his adolescence, Benjamin was almost thankful for the months he spent at Bridlethorpe. While away at school he didn't need to worry about what he might do to trigger his father's rage. But as Victoria grew older, Benjamin's concern turned to her. Would she be another target? Fortunately, Victoria didn't seem to inspire the same outrage as Benjamin.

"*What happened?*" Benjamin asked, not quite sure he wanted to know, but needing to all the same.

"Daddy went crazy! He locked me in my room and kicked David out. Physically removed him from the house. George tried to calm Daddy down, but you have to know it did no good. I snuck out as soon as I could, but I haven't been able to get in touch with David yet."

Benjamin shifted to face away from her. He knew David McDaniel. David was the grandson of George McDaniel, Jon Roth's butler, chauffeur and whatever else he was told to be. No matter how great David might be to Victoria, no matter how much Victoria loved him, he was the grandson of a chauffeur. He wasn't a member of the 'old money only' country club. His name wasn't synonymous with wealth. For those reasons alone, David would be deemed unacceptable. Jonathan Roth wouldn't allow his progeny to marry so low.

Jon had told Benjamin once "You can sleep with whatever trollop you want, just make sure no one knows it. Don't father any bastard kids who could come back to haunt you later. It happens every day. Trust me."

"You can stay here as long as you need to," Benjamin told his sister as he turned back to her. *"David is welcome here, as well."*

Victoria burst into tears again. Benjamin wrapped his arms around her and held her until she fell asleep.

Six

“In conclusion, it is Bulwark’s goal to continue a steady but conservative rate of growth throughout the Bear Market. If we need to tone down our aggressive approach to investing, it is what we will do to assuage the fears of our shareholders. Capital Retention must be our primary objective over the next quarter to complete the year on a highly positive note.”

Jewell signed the speech of their CFO, Barry Westmoreland, to Benjamin. Even as the words came from Barry’s mouth, Jewell winced. She knew exactly what Benjamin’s reaction would be to Westmoreland’s conservative approach. Benjamin’s eyes darted from her to their CFO, and back again. He shifted in his chair, the leather upholstery squeaking with the movement.

“*Is he kidding?*” Benjamin asked, one eyebrow arched high and his wrist twisting in question.

She shook her head as subtly as possible.

“Does anyone have anything they want to discuss to close out the meeting?” Barry asked.

Jewell relayed the question, and saw the answer formulating in Benjamin’s eyes. With slow intent, he sat forward and stood

up. They sat on Barry's left, several chairs down from the end along the marble-top conference table.

"I want to clarify something," Benjamin said. "Obviously, this conservative approach will only apply to those funds where it is most prudent. It can't be an across the board tactic."

"Ben, the shareholders are worried. The Dow is taking more twists and turns than a thrill ride roller coaster. We need to take a step back and assuage their fears."

Benjamin shifted his stance. "Barry, that goes against the general principal of mutual fund investing, and a conservative approach contradicts a good portion of our fund objectives. We can't do that without a shareholder proxy vote.

"Every one of the funds I manage quotes an aggressive approach to international or global investing. It's the investors who have multiple holdings in U.S. companies who are concerned. The individuals invested in my funds are, by their very method of investing, taking an aggressive approach to investing. If they have a diversified portfolio, they fully expect some funds to not perform as well. They expect funds like mine to pull their weight and bring up the average."

"If shareholders are concerned about capital loss, they are going to liquidate. We need to preserve our capital," Mr. Westmoreland came back with.

"Shareholders are going to liquidate one way or another. They'll get bad financial advice, or worse yet, no advice at all. Some will panic and some will exchange into bonds or money markets. Hell, some might just liquidate for a trip to Jamaica or the down payment on a house. But capital is going to leave. If we stay aggressive in the funds where it's called for, and come out at the top of the industry, we will not only retain

shareholders, but we will gain new ones. Playing safe won't get us to the top."

"We need to reassure our investors—" Westmoreland tried to interject, but Benjamin continued.

"How much money came into Bulwark the first quarter after Smart Money named five of our funds as top performers in the industry? How much above projections?"

"I'm not sure, Ben, I don't have—" Westmoreland answered.

"Four-point-three billion. Two-point-seven billion more than projected. The last half of last year sucked. But we stayed aggressive where we were supposed to. We won over people who might have otherwise been lining up at the bank for CD's. They came to us because we didn't back down. We stayed honest. Why should we now reverse direction?"

A stern look overtook Barry Westmoreland's face. His lips formed a tight line beneath the short moustache. "I think we should continue this discussion at a later time. Privately."

Taking that as their cue, the other managers in attendance stood and gathered their notes to leave. Benjamin stood in his place, his hands deep in the pockets of his slacks. His face was set and he made no move to exit with everyone else. Jewell didn't stand, but remained in her chair by Benjamin's side. She folded her hands and waited.

The two men faced off over the expanse of the table. The tension in the room was tangible. It crackled like electricity. The difference in management views between the two was no secret. Jewell had heard other Executive Assistants discussing the difference of opinion. That, coupled with the strong wills of each man, made for clashes of ego.

He reached back and touched her shoulder briefly before signing. "*Jewell, go back to the office. I'll be there in awhile.*"

Benjamin didn't look down as he signed, his stare holding on Westmoreland. Jewell nodded and stood. The motion brought her body within a breath of his. She wanted to touch his hand or brush his arm as a sign of support, but didn't dare. There were enough rumors floating about without adding to them.

Kevin Burke was aware of Jewell's report to Human Resources. In just under two weeks he'd managed to spread a plethora of dirty, vindictive gossip about Jewell and Benjamin. Justine usually reported to Jewell once or twice a day the new string of stories, often with blushing cheeks and diverted eyes. Some of the stories were so raunchy Jewell stopped Justine mid-description. She realized most took the comments with a grain of salt, knowing they came from a man accused of sexual harassment. But there were others who didn't know the whole truth, or didn't care to know, and willingly helped him spread the lies. For now it was best to not add any fuel to their fire.

As Jewell reached the door, Barry Westmoreland rounded the table and headed for Benjamin. He threw down his presentation folder and planted his fists at his nonexistent waist.

"What the hell was that, Roth? How dare you—"

The closing of the heavy wood door shut Mr. Westmoreland's voice off mid-sentence. Jewell paused, her hand resting on the doorknob. She knew there was nothing she could do to help him. Benjamin didn't need her help, or anyone else's. Nonetheless, her heart ached and she wanted to stand beside him. With a sigh, she dropped her hand and turned down the hall.

Justine was away from her desk when Jewell reached their office. With a glance at her watch, she realized the woman was probably away for lunch. It quickly approached one o'clock, and Jewell's stomach grumbled in a nasty reminder her lunch sat on the kitchen counter at home. She could just go down to the company cafeteria, but couldn't quite bring herself to pay \$3.95 for a tuna melt. The tight fist she'd once kept around her money was somewhat looser now. Her roomier budget allowed that. But it was completely against Jewell's frugal nature to spend more than what was necessary. And as long as she had peanut butter and jelly in her fridge, buying lunch wasn't necessary.

Jewell went into Benjamin's office and sank down onto the leather couch near his bookshelf. Her gaze moved around the office, eventually falling on his desk. Memories danced in her thoughts and Jewell's pulse sped up with a jolt. She took a deep breath. Just looking at the desk brought an erotic rush to her blood stream.

A week and a half had passed since the kiss. It was the most powerful, arousing, fireworks-going-off-and-melt-your-toes kiss Jewell had ever experienced.

Neither had spoken of it since then. Of course, things got crazy with Pearl and the hospital. For several days afterwards, Benjamin seemed distracted and not very talkative. He didn't say what was wrong and Jewell didn't ask. One kiss certainly didn't give her the freedom to pry into things he might or might not want to share. No matter how much she worried, she kept it to herself.

She still sat on the couch when he returned. The door swung open quickly as he entered. With his hand on the knob, Benjamin quickly searched the room and stopped when his eyes

fell on her. Jewell smiled at him and raised her hand in greeting as he shut the door. Benjamin walked across the floor, his hands deep in his front pockets, and fell onto the couch beside her. She laughed at the theatrical force of the fall. Benjamin slouched and rested his head on the back of the couch, his arm over his eyes.

She let him relax several minutes, listening to the deep resonance of his breathing, before nudging his knee gently.

He looked at her from beneath a slightly lifted arm. Benjamin's slow, disarming smile created a sweet flutter in Jewell's chest.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

Benjamin waved his hand in dismissal. *"Fine. Westmoreland blew off some steam, I doused his argument, and he gave in. He left me the freedom to run my funds the way I want. The way they're supposed to be run. We go through this about this time every year, especially when the markets are giving us the worst headaches. You just haven't been here long enough to have the pleasure of seeing it."*

"I wish someone had warned me."

Benjamin's shoulders shook with silent laughter. *"What, and take all the fun out of it?"*

Jewell laughed and looked away. Her pulse pounded at her throat as she struggled to keep her breath at a normal pace, but her skin tingled and her breasts ached from his closeness. She might be able to bury and deny what feelings her heart had for this man, but there was no denying the awe-inspiring reaction his physical proximity created in her blood. His aftershave played on her senses like a potent aphrodisiac of pure male pheromones. As inconspicuously as possible, Jewell took in a

deep breath through her nostrils and relished in the heady effect.

She jumped and caught her breath when Benjamin twisted on the couch and reclined, his head falling easily into her lap. His eyes were closed, giving her no means of argument. A subtle smirk rested on his lips. At first Jewell sat motionless, her arms held up to keep from touching him. Then he rocked his shoulders and his head settled further against her thighs. One eye opened, looked at her, winked, and closed again. Benjamin sighed deeply in contentment.

Jewell smiled. Unable to resist the temptation, she lowered her hands. One rested on his chest, her palm on the soft silk of his tie. The other fulfilled a fantasy she dreamed about for weeks.

Jewell fought down a gasp when her fingers combed through the softness of his hair. She started at his brow and ran her fingernails along his scalp to his crown. The beautiful golden waves wrapped around her fingers and slid over her skin like satin. It was thick and alive and amazingly sensual.

Benjamin's chest rose and fell beneath her other hand. She smoothed her palm down his tie and continued to caress his hair.

"This is dangerous," he said softly, but didn't open his eyes. "But it feels incredible."

She wanted to whisper 'Why is it dangerous?' but the tactic of keeping his eyes closed prevented any further discussion without forcing the issue. That was something Jewell didn't want to do. They both shifted to get more comfortable. Benjamin swung his legs over the arm of the couch and folded his hands across his flat abdomen. Jewell wiggled deeper into the soft cushions and tilted her body into him.

This felt nice, very nice. So comfortable and natural. They could be sitting in the living room at home rather than in his office. She continued to stroke his hair and hummed softly to herself. Benjamin's hand moved up and covered hers, holding it firmly against his chest. His heartbeat drummed beneath her fingertips. Soon, the rhythm of his breathing slowed and grew deeper. The features of his face relaxed. All tension in his body fell away. Jewell smiled and almost laughed. He was asleep in her lap. How sweet was that? A low sound in the back of his throat worked its way out and Jewell stifled her giggle behind her hand.

She stroked his forehead with her fingertips and followed the chiseled line of his cheekbone. This was a rare opportunity, to examine him in such a relaxed and natural state. In sleep, his countenance lost the harsh sternness that often furrowed his brow. Jewell's hand moved over his shoulders and down his arms as she memorized the contours of his muscles through the crisp cotton of his shirt.

"Oh, Benjamin," she whispered to herself. "What am I going to do about you?" Jewell pressed her fingertips against her lips and transferred the kiss to his own mouth with a gentle touch.

His hand came up in a quick movement. Strong fingers gently wrapped around her wrist. Jewell gasped and looked down into deep brown eyes that glowed with a sheen of purpose. Not releasing his hold on her wrist, Benjamin sat up. His stare held hers as he rose off the couch, turned, and knelt beside her. She was vaguely aware of the shifting sound of the leather cushions as he moved.

Jewell couldn't breathe. Her heart pounded an erratic and rapid tempo against her ribs. Benjamin's intense look sent

waves of warmth over her skin. With her wrist still held captive, she could do little but look up at him and melt beneath his overpowering presence. His other hand touched her cheek. The rough pad of his thumb ran across her lower lip and Jewell's eyes fluttered shut.

The revisitation of his lips against hers was the reliving of a sweet dream. He drew her into the kiss without effort, sipping at her mouth with erotic tenderness. A soft moan escaped from the back of her throat and her free hand moved to his side.

They shifted together on the leather couch, their only communication a physical response to each other. The delicious weight of Benjamin's body pressed her back into the soft upholstery. He released her wrist and moved his hands to her hips. With open mouth, Benjamin's kiss pummeled her body with erotic sensation. The hot tip of his tongue probed persistently, requesting entry. Jewell's lips parted and she met his demand. His tongue made slow entrance to caress her own, stealing her breath as the circuit sparked between them.

Without breaking the contact of their lips, Benjamin shifted her body and nestled his hips against hers. Jewell gasped. Tingling sensations raced over her body.

His tongue probed deeper, demanding an equal response. She could not deny him. Jewell clung to him, spinning out of control, as the kiss deepened.

Her body arched and Jewell pulled back when his hot palm pressed against the bare flesh of her stomach. Shock and sensibility suddenly overtook the sweet sensations of his kiss from a moment ago. Benjamin responded immediately. He pressed his hands into the cushions of the couch and lifted his weight off her. His deep gaze scanned her face, concern and question as evident in them as their rich color.

A flutter danced around her heart. The grip of a steel fist clenched her gut. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing would come. Jewell's fingers curled around the fabric of his shirt in a desperate attempt to hang on to the delicious pleasure of his nearness.

Benjamin took one arm away as support, the weight of his body increasing slightly. His fingers caressed her cheek and a kind smile hinted at his lips. He leaned down and pressed a long kiss against her cheek before shifting and standing to his feet.

Jewell immediately felt the loss of his presence. Hot tears burned her eyes, but she choked back the sentiment and sat up. With a rough jerk, Jewell straightened her skirt. She covered her eyes with her hand and leaned her elbow into her knee. Total mortification burned hot in her cheeks.

Benjamin stood near her. She was painfully aware of his presence without even opening her eyes. A nauseating pain shot through her stomach as she wondered what he might be thinking at that moment. Jewell wrapped her arms around her abdomen to ward off the queasiness.

He sat back down beside her, his hands clasped together in the space between his knees. She couldn't look at him, too embarrassed by the knee-jerk reaction to pull away from his tender touch. The worst part of it was that she didn't want him to stop. His touch was glorious, his kiss heaven.

Benjamin reached out and took her hand. His fingers laced between hers and the other covered their linked hands in a gentle squeeze. She could only bring herself to look at the joined fingers. The simple act of holding his hand calmed her nerves and eased the tumultuous fluttering in her stomach. Jewell took a deep breath and lifted her chin to meet his gaze.

He kissed the back of her hand before releasing it. *"You are an amazing woman, Jewell. Without even trying, you've made me break my cardinal rule about women I work with."* He paused to run his fingertip along her jaw line. *"I'm sorry about what just almost happened. It's neither the time nor the place."*

Jewell smiled with sincerity. *"I can't say I am."*

His slow, sexy smile sent short bursts of energy through Jewell's bloodstream. Benjamin slapped his hands down on his knees and stood. He walked to his desk and turned to lean into the edge. Jewell relaxed back into the couch cushions. The smile meant only for her remained on his lips. A huge part of her wanted to call him back to sit next to her and continue where they left off.

"I tell you what," he said. "I think this topic warrants further discussion."

Jewell chuckled. "Oh, you do?"

He nodded. "Come to my house tonight. I'll cook you dinner and we'll," Benjamin paused, "Talk about it."

Jewell stood, a flirtatious muse inspiring her. She walked slowly to him, making sure there was more sway to her hips and more seduction in her stare. This could be fun if she let it. When she reached him, Jewell slipped her hand beneath his tie and slid it up his chest. He took in a deep, slow breath and his gaze burned into her. Fully giving in to her newly found inspiration, Jewell deftly released a single button on his shirt and slipped her hand inside.

His flesh was hot and smooth. Jewell smiled to feel his abdominal muscles clench and restrict beneath her caress. Benjamin yanked her against him in a rough embrace. His heart pounded so hard, she felt its erratic cadence against her breasts.

"I hope you plan on doing more than just talk," she said.

Benjamin hummed. He moved to capture her lips in another kiss when Jewell heard a soft knock on the door. Justine called through it.

Jewell pointed towards the door and stepped back. *They definitely had to find a better place to be alone than an office with people coming and going*, Jewell thought wryly. That thought in itself was a contradiction in propriety. She quickly moved to the chair opposite Benjamin's at the desk.

"Come on in, Justine," she called as she sat down.

Justine came in, a package in one hand and a day planner in the other. She sat down in the chair adjacent to Jewell's and Benjamin moved behind his desk. A small smirk tugged at Jewell's lips when she saw him inconspicuously refasten the button she had undone. The three of them went over phone calls, scheduled meetings and upcoming projects. Jewell only dared one or two sideways glances in Benjamin's direction, but each time she found him surreptitiously watching her. His sexy smile was ever-present and always succeeded in warming her blood. It would be a very long day.

~ * ~

Victoria sat on the kitchen's island and watched Benjamin move around the large space. He set a variety of fresh vegetables on the counter near her and chopped up a head of iceberg lettuce. With a mischievous grin, she stole a baby carrot and popped it in her mouth.

"This must be some hot chick to have you slaving in the kitchen for her," she signed. *"Chicken Parmigiana, fresh garlic bread, homemade pasta and salad? I hope you took out a good wine."*

Benjamin smirked. "Of course. A delicious merlot."

He chopped and dumped the vegetables into a large glass bowl. His younger sister continued to steal carrots and olives, and he ignored each theft. Benjamin thought it was funny, but hid his amusement by keeping his face down. Once the salad was done, he wrapped it and moved on to breading the boneless chicken breasts. After getting everything combined in a glass pan and in the oven, Benjamin sat down on a tall stool and sipped at his cola. Victoria was still on her perch on the counter.

"I thought you didn't date women you work with," she pointed out with a wink.

Benjamin wondered how long it would take for her to get to the question. "For Jewell, I think I might make an exception."

Victoria's jaw dropped. *"Benjamin Prescott Roth!"*

Benjamin raised the hand that held his soda and shrugged. "Don't act so surprised. I said I might, not that I would."

"You already have. I've never known you to see a woman more than three or four times. Most women can't stand your attitude much longer than that. As far as I know, you didn't care if they liked it or not. Are you telling me this woman is special enough to make you change your bachelor ways?"

He smiled and set down his drink. *"She's very special."* With careful avoidance, he didn't directly answer her question.

Victoria made a surprised face. *"Is she the one?"* She emphasized 'the one' with over-dramatic movements of her hands and widened her eyes.

Benjamin shook his head. *"You know me, Vicki. I'm incapable of taking care of another human being. Isn't that what Old Jonny Boy always said?"*

“Since when do you believe anything Daddy ever said about you? You didn’t listen when you were a kid, why would you listen now?”

He shrugged. His sister was right. Why he let some things his sonovabitch father said get through, while completely ignoring others, was just as much a mystery to him as his sister. When his father told him he would be lucky if he ever graduated from high school, he pushed himself harder than anyone else and graduated not only with honors, but also early. His father called him a deaf mute and swore he would never function in the real world. Benjamin couldn’t change the deaf part, but he worked for years to master speech and lip reading. Jonathan Roth complained Benjamin would be a financial burden for the rest of his life. So, what did Benjamin do? As soon as he graduated high school he never accepted another dime from his father. He went to college on full academic scholarship and worked his way through graduate school. It didn’t take many years before Benjamin went from living in a one-room studio over a Chinese laundry to the multi-level townhouse in Cambridge.

“You’re ten times the man he is, Ben. Don’t let him ruin something for you by not letting it happen. You’ve never opened your heart to love.” Her eyes shined brightly with moisture. *“Love can be a salvation. It can save your life.”*

He raised his hands and shoulders in a questioning shrug. *“Who’s talking love? I just made her dinner.”*

“Have you ever cooked for a woman before?”

He shook his head in answer.

“Then I guess there’s a first time for everything,” she said with a smirk and a meaningful glance through her lashes.

Victoria hopped down from the counter and came to him. She kissed his cheek and Benjamin put his arm around her. Then she ruffled his hair.

"Benny's got a girlfriend."

He shoved her back playfully. "Cut that out."

She stepped back, a smile on her face. *"Sorry. I wouldn't want to mess up your hair before the big date. David is coming by to get me, so we'll be out of here most of the night."*

"How are things with the two of you?" he asked, letting the conversation take a different route.

"Good, now that we're here. We're thinking about moving to Boston. David's company has a branch office in Newton. They're willing to transfer him if he wants."

Benjamin stood to check on his garlic bread. "That's great. It would be nice to have you closer all the time."

"Really? You wouldn't get sick of me?" she signed with a sarcastic smile.

"Of course not. When you're not here, I miss you."

Victoria's eyes shined brightly with unshed tears, but her smile was warm. With slow emotion she signed, *"I love you."*

"Hey, I love you, too."

With sincere seriousness, he looked down at his sister. She was beautiful. Victoria didn't look like either of his parents. Her dark hair and eyes had to come from some long forgotten ancestor he didn't know or remember. Then again, he didn't really look like Jonathan or Barbara Roth either.

"You're the only person in the entire world I love."

She punched his arm lightly. *"Give this Jewell chick a chance. She might pry the words from your mouth or your fingers."*

The lights over their heads blinked off and on in a quick progression, indicating someone rang the front doorbell. Victoria's head snapped in the general direction.

"Someone is banging on the door," she told him. *"Hard."*

Benjamin dropped his dishtowel on the counter and headed for the door. Even before he reached the front entrance he knew it wasn't Jewell. She wouldn't knock on the door. He also couldn't picture her pushing the doorbell violently enough to make the lights blink so rapidly. The force of impact on the wood vibrated through the knob when he grasped it. As soon as the door opened, Benjamin was shoved aside and into the entrance hall.

Only one man possessed the strength, coupled with the balls and stupidity, to push Benjamin around. Jonathan Roth. He didn't look in Benjamin's direction and continued into the house. Benjamin saw him open his mouth and yell down the hall. His mother followed behind, a tight expression on her face. She grabbed Jon's elbow to pull him back, but he pulled away sharply.

"What's going on?" Benjamin demanded.

Victoria rounded the corner, shock on her face. "Daddy?"

"Victoria, what is going on?" Benjamin demanded again.

His father continued to yell. Benjamin saw the redness rise from his collar into his face. Spittle flew from his lips as he raged in the entranceway. Jonathan wagged his finger in the air, pointing at Victoria as he yelled. Once, his accusatory finger came around to Benjamin's face. Benjamin slapped it away. He still didn't know what his father was shouting, but he didn't really care.

The elder Roth turned back on Victoria. Benjamin moved around and pushed his body between them. Victoria stepped

behind him and rested her hands on his arms as she found shelter with her big brother. With his arm wrapped behind him and around Victoria's hips, Benjamin shielded her from their father's rage.

"Either calm yourself down right now or get the hell out of my house," Benjamin demanded.

His father's face flamed red and his mouth clamped shut. Large fists doubled at his side.

"Get out of my way. She's my daughter and I intend to bring this stupidity to an end. I'll be dead before I let her whore around with some no-good gold-digger like David McDaniel."

The rancid stench of alcohol assaulted Benjamin's senses as his father shouted just inches from his face. He fought back the initial revulsion and turned away for a split second to recollect his senses. Victoria moved to shout something over Benjamin's shoulder at her father, but Benjamin couldn't read her lips to know what it was. Without a doubt, it was retaliation to their father's ignorant classification of her fiancé.

"She's a grown woman," Benjamin added.

"How dare you think you can hide her from me. Who the hell do you think you are! You have no right to interfere!"

"Do you know what you're saying?" Benjamin asked, the heat of anger pounding in his temples. "You speak as if I'm some stranger interfering with your family. She's my sister."

"You are nothing to this family," Jon Roth spit out. "Haven't you figured that out yet? Or are you too stupid?"

Despite the walls he'd built over the years, his father's stinging words hit him harder than Benjamin ever expected. He bit back the rage and clenched his fists at his side. Benjamin's lungs burned and his ears pounded.

"Get out of my house," he demanded.

“Listen to me, you little asshole. You have done nothing but make this family look bad your entire life. You’ve defied every rule I’ve ever put down. You’re a disgrace. I will not allow you to drag my daughter down with you.”

Victoria stepped around him and pressed her hands into both men’s chests. Benjamin pulled deep breathes into his lungs through his nose to keep his adrenaline rush in check. His sister looked from their father to him.

“Stop it.” She signed and spoke at the same time. *“Daddy, stop it. How can you say such ugly things? About David or Benjamin. He’s your son.”*

“Since the day he was born—”

“Since the day I was born I was deaf. Isn’t that the real problem?”

In an instant Benjamin was thirteen again, rebelling against his father’s iron fist and underlying revulsion for his own son. Even now, despite Benjamin’s height and build, his father stood taller than he. When he was thirteen, his father was a frightening, oppressive force. At thirty-three, Benjamin refused to be intimidated. Despite his resolve, cold memories flashed in his mind like fireworks.

Everything came back to him in a vicious burst. His father refused to learn ASL because he said it was the coward’s way out. If Benjamin wanted to function in the real world, he had to get off his ass and not ask anyone to coddle and accommodate him. Even when he learned to speak, and could communicate with those around him, Benjamin was considered less than acceptable by his father.

Benjamin was not allowed to be alone with his infant sister because his father said he was untrustworthy and incompetent to care for a small child. The sickening pain of seeing his

mother say he was better off at the boarding school hit him once again, feeling just as horrible as it did twenty years before.

Jonathan Roth continued to yell, his fists waving before Benjamin's face. He only caught some of the words now, his mental state unfocused on the outburst. The hazy edges of the room lost focus and disappeared in a red miasma of anger, rage and pain. Benjamin shook his head and shot his hands up in a sign of frustration. Chaos happened around him. No matter how he tried, he couldn't keep up with the three fighting people.

"Stop it" he yelled. "I don't know what you're saying."

His father swung around on him, his face inches away. "You worthless, useless waste. Isn't it bad enough you've squandered your life, that you have to drag Victoria along with you?"

Benjamin looked from his father's red, infuriated face to the ragged, strained face of his mother. Barbara Roth yanked again on her husband's arm.

"Jon, stop this. You said we were coming here to talk. What are you going to accomplish by calling Benjamin names and dragging your daughter out by force?"

Jon Roth shot a vicious, seething look at his wife when she referred to their children. "Shut up, Barbara. Stay out of this."

"I won't. These are my children."

"That's right, Barbara. Your children. You can't deal with them, so leave it to me." He pushed his wife back.

Benjamin forced his father's grip of steel from his mother's arm. He was one man, but he did his best to protect both his sister and mother from Jon's physical abuse. With his shoulder, he pushed his father away. Again the disgusting odor of the alcohol his father had consumed prior to coming here wafted in the air to churn his stomach. Victoria's small hands clutched the back of his shirt.

His mother pushed his hands away. Benjamin's first reaction was shock at her rejection of his help. Barbara Roth's eyes flicked up for just a split second to meet his before turning away completely. She crossed her arms over her body and closed her eyes. Heaviness slammed into his chest and shoved him back like an invisible fist.

What had he done, besides being imperfect at birth, to deserve the absolute hatred of the two people who parented him? He covered his face with his hands, attempting to block out the turmoil erupting around him.

Then Jewell was there. Her hands were on him, pushing him back from the melee. Dainty fingers wrapped around his wrists and uncovered his face. Brilliant emerald eyes looked up at him. Concern and shock registered in her delicate features. Benjamin was mesmerized. He took her hands from his wrists and held them in his own.

"Benjamin?"

His father's arm shot between them. Jonathan's large palm hit Jewell's shoulder and shoved her. She stumbled back and bumped the hall table. A ceramic vase tumbled and fell to the floor. Pieces shattered in all directions. Jon's forearm slammed into Benjamin's chest and heaved him back against the wall, his arm pressing against Ben's throat.

Enraged, Benjamin pushed back. Hard. His father stumbled and grabbed the still-open door for support to keep from falling. Barbara Roth jumped forward.

"Don't," she shouted with a dramatic flare of her hand.

Benjamin caught what she said, but chose not to respond. He moved past his father's hulking form to Jewell and took her hand to draw her away from the wall. Not looking in his parent's direction, he reached back for his sister. With a

woman's hand in each of his own, Benjamin walked away. He didn't care if his parents left or if they stayed. They could continue to yell all they wanted. No longer were they worth his time.

The three reached the den. With emotional exhaustion dragging at his limbs, Benjamin shut the door and leaned his forehead into the smooth wood. Gentle hands touched his back, and instinctively he knew it was Jewell. Warmth rested where her hands touched. Benjamin turned and wrapped her in his arms, burying his face into her auburn hair. It smelled of fruit and flowers and Jewell. She held him as tightly as he needed, and he needed her embrace more than anything he had ever needed in his life.

That sonofabitch! His father could have hurt Jewell and he didn't even know who she was. All Jonathan Roth knew was her presence in his son's house, which translated into the demeaning of her value in his eyes. Nothing mattered but appearances outside the walls and in public. But inside...

Benjamin pressed his lips quickly against her cheek and pulled back. Her verdant gaze searched his face, the brightness of her eyes asking a thousand questions in one moment. Two deep lines of concern appeared across her delicate brow.

He cradled her face in his hands, tried to smile, and looked beyond her to Victoria. His sister stood near the window, looking out. Moisture glistened on her cheeks and she held a tissue to her lips. As he watched, she sank into a chair and let her head rest on the high back. How much more chaos could Jonathan Roth create? Benjamin looked back to Jewell.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head within his grasp. "No. Benjamin, what is going on? Was that your father?"

He nodded, ashamed to admit a link to the man, though it be only biological. "I'm sorry you had to be here for any of that. I never expected him to show up here."

Victoria stood and walked to them. *"They left. I watched them get in their car."*

With one arm Benjamin pulled his sister against his side and kissed her forehead. "When there was no one left to fight, it wasn't worth sticking around." He stepped back from both women and sighed. *"This isn't the way I wanted it. Jewell, this is my sister Victoria. Victoria, this is Jewell Kincaid."*

Both Victoria and Jewell smiled and exchanged brief greetings between them. Then both snapped their heads around to look towards the door leading to the hall. Victoria turned back.

"There's someone at the door. It might be David."

Benjamin signed for them both to stay put and headed back out. He highly doubted his father would come back to continue the fight, but would rather be safe than sorry. There was no need for either Jewell or Victoria to deal with Jon's arrogance and antagonism again. The light in the hall blinked slowly, indicating a more rational suppression of the button outside.

Benjamin stepped on the broken vase in the hall, feeling it crunch beneath the soles of his shoes, and opened the door. David McDaniel stood outside, a wide smile on his face. As soon as he took in the state of the front hall, and most likely the dark expression on Benjamin's face, his smile faded.

"What's wrong?" David asked.

Benjamin motioned his sister's fiancé into the house. With a quick glance up and down the street to look for his parent's white Cadillac, he shut the door. He kicked some of the vase against the wall. David looked down and moved some of the

pottery with the toe of his shoe. Confusion pulled his eyebrows together when he looked back to Benjamin.

“Victoria is in the den. Our parents were just here.”

“Oh, shit.”

Ben nodded, agreeing with David’s sentiment. Victoria came out the den door and jumped into David’s arms. The tall, dark-haired man Benjamin had known since childhood embraced Victoria and kissed her hair. He saw them speaking, but made no attempt to understand any of it. Jewell now stood in the doorway of the den and watched. Her face still read strongly of concern and alarm.

“Why don’t you two go? Get out of this house for a while. Try to enjoy the rest of the night,” Benjamin told them.

Victoria wiped again at her cheeks and nodded. “Yes, okay. Ben, I’m sorry for causing so much trouble.”

He shook his head and held up his hand. “No. That bastard caused the trouble, Vicki, not you.”

Her eyes were sad and angry, but she gave him a watery smile and nodded her head. Victoria stepped away from David and turned to Jewell. She squeezed Jewell’s hand quickly.

“I’m sorry you walked in on our dysfunctional family. Trouble seems to follow us everywhere. Don’t let it discourage you.”

Jewell shook her head and touched his sister’s arm. Victoria and David joined hands and headed for the door. As it shut behind them, Benjamin released a long sigh and crossed his arms over his chest. The shattered vase shouted out a violent reminder of the hostile pandemonium that followed his father like a plague of pestilence. Deep gouges now scarred the high polish of his hardwood floor. He closed his eyes and leaned

into the wall. His fingers pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to ward off the growing headache behind his eyes.

This wasn't exactly the way he thought the evening would go. Benjamin hoped for something along the lines of a short dinner and a quick exit to the living room couch. Holding Jewell in his arms for three, four, or twenty-four, hours would do wonders to elevate his mood.

Thinking of her, he opened his eyes. Benjamin straightened; surprised to see Jewell crouched near the door with hand broom and dustpan in hand. She balanced on the balls of her feet and swept the bits of broken pottery into the pan. As Jewell twisted to reach some pieces in the corner, her back turned more to him.

Benjamin drew a breath into suddenly tight lungs. Never before did he have the pleasure of seeing Jewell in slacks. She always wore tailored, straight, just short enough skirts. He wasn't sure what was more enticing: skirts that showed off the long taper of her thighs and calves, or slacks that emphasized the round perfection of her bottom. Of course, witnessing her with nothing on at all would be the ultimate pleasure.

He stepped forward and stooped down beside her. *"I'll get this,"* he signed and took the half-full dustpan from her.

"I broke it. I'll clean it up."

A jolt of anger pummeled him and he grabbed at the dustpan. "You had nothing to do with it," he said through a clenched jaw.

Her expression darkened and he saw moisture build in her brilliant green eyes. It just fed the anger smoldering inside. His father was such an asshole the effects of his rampages lingered even when he was gone. Anyone and anything that brought tears to those beautiful eyes deserved to be hurt the same way.

Whether it is him, his father, or anyone else. For Jewell's sake, he bit back the anger and circled his fist on his chest in apology.

She nodded and gave his hand a quick squeeze. Jewell refused to give him the broom, but brushed it across the floor and added the final remnants to those in the pan as he held it. With all bits off the hardwood, she allowed him to take the small whisk. Benjamin indicated with a tilt of his head for her to follow him into the kitchen. Once there, Benjamin dumped the trash into his compactor and hung the items back in the small closet where Jewell had found them.

"Dinner smells wonderful," she signed, rubbing her hand over her stomach.

"It's Chicken Parmigiana. Do you like Italian?"

Jewell nodded. He opened a cupboard door to take down two plates and two wine glasses. She moved to his side and pressed her palm against his shoulder blade. Despite his attempt to hide his immediate physical reaction to her contact, Benjamin sucked in a short breath. The tenderness of her touch was near unbearable. It set him off balance. He dared a look over his shoulder at her.

"Benjamin."

His name on her lips, the way they pursed and wrapped around the word, grabbed his gut like a fist. Benjamin let his gaze wander over the delicate planes of her features. Small, scant freckles danced across the bridge of her dainty nose. Her eyelashes were dark and thick, with the slightest whisper of an auburn tint at the end of each. The thick cinnamon and ginger waves of her hair fell unhindered around her shoulders, and the bright green of Jewell's eyes held surprising flecks of gold

around the dark iris. Benjamin laid his palm against her cheek and rubbed the pad of his thumb across the soft skin.

“Benjamin, do you want to tell me about what happened earlier?” she asked. Her face expressed the tentativeness her hands could not. *“The things your father said were horrible.”*

“Not tonight,” he said. *“For tonight I just want to forget it. I don’t want to talk about anything. Or think about what’s going to happen tomorrow. I want you. I want to spend the evening with you. Is that okay?”*

She nodded and smiled. The smile was accepting, reassuring and sincere. Her palm moved up and down his arm. Needing to hold her, Benjamin turned and pulled her against him. Responsive to his touch, Jewell’s arms circled his neck. Their bodies aligned from knee to chest.

Their lips came together, and like the two kisses they’d shared in the past, lightning and fire came to life in his blood in an instant. It was as intense as any metal-soldering heat, uniting them in an unbreakable bond. She tasted so damn sweet! Fire and ice came together in a tumultuous storm. Cold fingers danced over his flesh and immediately warmed to a boiling heat.

He pressed his hands against her back and pulled her against him as close as possible. Jewell’s body was pliant against him. Benjamin’s lips parted hers in a desperate hunger and searching massage. Monday morning he would worry about the consequences. Tonight he needed to hold her and forget the ugliness of the past.

Seven

“Mom sent me out with a sweater for you,” Garnett said as he walked across their parents’ back yard.

Jewell sat in the A-frame swing in the corner of the yard. She smiled as her brother approached and scooted to the end of the seat to give him room. A crisp autumn breeze stirred the dry leaves littering the lawn and the scent of earth and rain hung heavy in the air. October slowly faded away and November was just around the corner. It was Jewell’s favorite time of the year.

Garnett sat down and wrapped the bulky sweater around her shoulders as she slipped her arms into the big sleeves. It was her father’s sweater. Jewell smiled as the comforting scent of pipe tobacco and cologne wrapped around her heart and warmed it as surely as the wool warmed her arms. A hundred wonderful memories came back to her in an instant, all triggered by the smell of Daddy. Sweet emotion tightened her throat and Jewell wrapped the rough wool close to her chin. Her brother’s arm moved around her shoulders and squeezed gently, and Jewell let her head fall against him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, a concerned, questioning tone in his voice. “All day you’ve seemed quiet. Is there something bothering you?”

Jewell sighed. There was no one in the world that knew her like Garnett did. From the first day she walked into the Kincaid home he assumed the position of big brother in full force. The first few months, when she woke during the night crying, he came to her, told her stories and stroked her hair until she fell asleep again. He told her nothing bad would ever happen to her again because Mama and Daddy loved her. Their love was special, and that made her special. For a long time it was just Jewell and Garnett.

“Garnett, do you remember much before coming here?”

“You mean before I was adopted?”

She nodded.

“Some. Not much. Just some quick images and feelings more than anything else.”

“Do you remember your parents?” It was his turn to nod.
“What do you remember about them?”

Garnett looked off across the yard to the tree house they built in the Oak tree. Small smile wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes. “I remember going to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park. My dad bought me a foot long hot dog and nachos. We were on the third base line and he caught a foul ball for me.

“I remember my mom tucking me into bed at night. She always kissed my forehead, then my cheeks, then my nose. We’d say our prayers together and she’d sing to me before leaving. And she smelled like roses. Just little memories like that. I remember feeling empty and black inside until the social worker brought me to this house.” In emphasis, he nodded towards the large farmhouse they all grew up in.

The sway of the swing soothed Jewell like the rocking of a cradle. Her brother’s embrace made her feel safe and at ease. Jewell smiled when she saw her mother’s face peek through the kitchen curtain to check if she wore her sweater.

“Do you remember anything?” Garnett asked in turn.

“Nothing like you remember, no. I never lived with my mother. I have no memory of her at all. All I remember was moving. Leaving one foster home for another. Lying in a hospital bed with no one there but the nurse to talk to me. Lots of faces, but no names. The first really clear memory I have is the day I came here.

“I was scared. I was always scared when I went to a new place. But the lady who brought me told me I wouldn’t move again. I don’t think I believed her. Then we came into the foyer and I was amazed at the size of the house. It seemed huge to me. And Daddy seemed even bigger. He picked me up and hugged me so tight.” Jewell’s throat constricted around the powerful emotion the memory created. “He called me Pipsqueak and his beard tickled my cheek. His jacket was rough, but it smelled so good. Then Mama held me, and she was so soft and warm. It was the first time in my life I ever understood what love felt like. I didn’t have a name for it then, but it wrapped around me and made me feel safe.”

Garnett kissed her temple. “What’s got you thinking about this? It seems like more than just recalling old memories.”

She nodded slowly. “It’s Benjamin. I witnessed something at his house Friday night. Ever since, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

“What happened?”

“I was walking up the front walk and all I could hear was yelling and screaming. It was Benjamin’s parents. His father called him all kinds of horrible names. Said terrible, terrible things. He wasn’t signing, just yelling. And Benjamin’s mother just stood there, doing very little to stop any of it. Benjamin tried to tell him he didn’t understand. When I came through the door, Benjamin had his hands over his face and his father just kept yelling. His sister was there and the man kept calling her a

little whore and as stupid as her brother.” Tears choked Jewell’s words.

Garnett’s arm tightened around her shoulder in comfort. She wiped at the tears as they cooled on her cheeks. With a shaky breath, she continued.

“I have never seen anything in anyone before like the pain I saw in Benjamin’s face. He puts up walls. I knew that the moment I met him. Once in awhile I think the real Benjamin sneaks through. But that night...” She couldn’t continue, the massive emotions in her throat choked out all speech.

Hot tears burned her eyes and she wiped them away with a vicious hatred for the words that had caused Benjamin pain, and hatred for her inability to make it go away. Her heart ached for him. Jewell remembered how hard he’d worked to comfort her mother when Pearl was sick. She wanted so much to give him the comfort he needed, but didn’t know how. Partially because she somehow knew he wouldn’t admit to it in the first place. What a horrible feeling to love someone and not be able to be everything they needed!

“What happened?” Garnett asked in a soft, gentle tone.

Jewell reined in her emotion and took a fortifying breath. As best she could, she described the events of the evening. Everything from the shove that broke the vase, to his father’s attempt to choke Benjamin against the wall. Because it was Garnett, and they had always been close, she told him about the desperation and need she felt when he embraced her. He held her until her lungs burned to breathe.

When Benjamin kissed her, there was something in the intimate caress that hadn’t been there previously. Jewell sensed need, anguish and desperation in the way he devoured her mouth with rough intensity. His fingers pressed into her skin so hard, trying to bring her closer to him, the flesh showed slight bruises the next morning. But Jewell didn’t begrudge the faint

marks. His embrace was so powerful, she wondered if he would ever let go.

“You never said there was something going on between the two of you,” Garnett stated.

Jewell shrugged and sighed. “Garnett, I don’t know if there is or isn’t. We’ve kissed. We’ve spent some time together. If that constitutes ‘something going on’, then I guess there is.”

“I’ll probably get in trouble, but I know a little secret about the two of you,” he said with a conspiratorial tone.

Jewell looked up at him and arched one eyebrow.

“Ruby told me something she saw,” Garnett finally offered.

“Ruby? Something she saw?”

“She said she got up one morning about two weeks back and saw you and Benjamin on the couch. Apparently asleep. Looked like you’d been there all night, she said. She hid in the kitchen when she saw him get up.”

Jewell slouched down in the swing and crossed her arms over her body. Her face warmed, and she hoped Garnett would attribute the color to the cool wind blowing across the yard.

“He showed up at the apartment around midnight. For weeks he had been acting like a jerk in the office. It kind of came to a head that day and we got in a battle of wills. Benjamin left the office and was gone the rest of the day. When he came to the apartment, he said he wanted to apologize for the way he acted. I know it wasn’t easy for him! He even said so. It was strange because I assumed he came to fire me.”

“So he stayed all night?” Garnett said with a chuckle.

“We just started talking. He saw a photo album on the table and looked at it. Things like that. We fell asleep, or at least, I fell asleep. When I woke up the next morning, very late I might add, he wasn’t there.”

“Then here’s a little fact you didn’t know. Ruby said he kissed you before he left. She saw him fix the pillows, cover you with an afghan, and kiss your cheek before sneaking out.”

Jewell’s heart nearly burst and new tears rushed to her eyes. They were no longer tears of anger or sadness. What a precious, utterly sweet thing for him to do!

“Really?” she managed to whisper.

Garnett smiled and nodded. “That’s what Ruby said. I don’t see any reason for her to make it up.”

They fell into comfortable silence as the swing rocked brother and sister back and forth. The dry leaves on the ground swirled up in miniature twisters as the evening breeze swept through the yard. The dry rustle was a soothing song.

“Do you think you love him?”

Heat rose high in Jewell’s cheeks again, despite the crisp breeze. “That’s a hell of a question.”

“That’s no answer.”

She looked at her brother and smiled at the curious twinkle in his dark eyes. Jewell knew she could hide nothing from him. Finally, she nodded. “I think I do. No, I know I do.”

“How does he feel?”

“We haven’t talked about it.”

“Have you been intimate?”

Her face burned hotter. The thought of making love to Benjamin sent a tingling flush over her entire body and a sweet ache in her center. Jewell folded her hands together and squeezed them between her knees.

“No. Honestly, Garnett, just two or three kisses. He has been a complete gentleman.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

“You’re pushy this evening!” Jewell jumped off the swing and stepped away across the lawn. Her leather boots scuffed on the damp grass. “I thought I was in love before, Garnett. What I

felt then was nothing, *nothing*, compared to the way I feel with Benjamin. I don't want to mess anything up."

"Kiddo, if the two of you fall in love, then that's it. Nothing is going to make him love you if he doesn't, or make you not love him if you do."

"Oh, that is *so* encouraging. Thank you."

Garnett stood and wrapped her in his arms. Jewell willingly gave in to the embrace and let her head fall on his shoulder. He smoothed and kissed her hair and rocked her gently. The back screen door opened and shut with a loud bang. They both looked to see Pearl running across the yard dressed in a fairy princess costume. Silver gossamer wings flapped behind her and taffeta petals in multiple pastel shades danced around her legs.

"Garnett! Jewell!" she called as she ran, magic wand high in the air. "Look at my costume. Mama just finished it."

They pulled their sister into their embrace, and she looked up with glowing cheeks and twinkling eyes. With a smile the size of Texas, Pearl showed them each little detail and nuance their mother lovingly put into the costume. She took their hands and tugged them toward the house.

"Come on," Pearl begged. "Mama just took some pumpkin chocolate chip cookies out of the oven. She said I could have one for my sweet this week. Let's get 'em while they're hot."

They both chuckled and followed the fair-haired fairy into the house where the enticing aroma of cookies and gingerbread met them at the door. It was good to be home.

~ * ~

Benjamin stared up at the ceiling, his hands folded behind his head, as he watched the slow rotation of the ceiling fan. The silver light of the setting moon came through his window and created an eerie semi-illuminated glow in the room. A cool autumn breeze caught the drapes of his French door and they

billowed slowly. The crisp bite of the gentle wind brushed across his exposed torso like the gentle touch of a woman.

He sighed. Everything made him think of Jewell. The caress of the wind on his skin was her touch. The heady aroma of fresh cut flowers was her scent. The gentle flow of his brocade drapes was the feminine curves of her body and graceful way she moved. Benjamin's eyes closed. With little effort, his mind drifted to the memory of holding Jewell in his arms, against his body, with her hands pressed on his back.

Never in his life had Benjamin wanted a woman like he wanted Jewell. It was a bizarre and foreign sensation. Before, if he saw an attractive woman, Benjamin thought nothing of pursuing her to the end and eventually taking her to bed. Sex was not something he ever really lacked. He wasn't flamboyant, or licentious, at least by his own definition. Benjamin knew the names and faces of every woman he had been with in that regard. But Jewell was different.

The first time he'd kissed her, he knew beyond any doubt simple sex was out of the question. Once Benjamin had a taste of her, delved into the delicacy of her body, one time would never be enough. From the beginning he told himself Jewell was above a sordid office affair. Benjamin had vowed to stay clear of her for that very reason. Now that he knew her even better, Benjamin was even more convinced of that fact. But he was pulled in far too deep to simply ignore her beguiling beauty and enticing sexuality now.

He wanted her. Even now, his body ached and throbbed at the thought of having her beneath him. To have her hands learning his body, as he educated himself in each of her curves and swells, was a fantasy that made Benjamin's blood pound in his temples.

Lying in the dark, as morning approached, Benjamin acknowledged within himself his feelings for Jewell far

exceeded a physical need for sex. He wanted the company of her gentle personality and nurturing touch. Benjamin needed the soft, enthralling glances she gifted him with when she looked at him. Without any effort at all, he could look into the emerald depths of her eyes and never tire of their glimmer. Jewell touched his hand, his soul, and his heart, all in one simple caress.

How bland and colorless his life would be without her in it. Inevitably, the time would come. Just as he couldn't kid himself about the way she affected him, he couldn't kid himself about the possibility of things continuing on the path they were. Eventually, she would realize there was no future in the passionate kisses and stolen office moments. Jewell would want more, and he would not give it. Or, Benjamin would be the bigger man and end it before it went too far. It would stop before she was hurt, or before he lost the strength to walk away. His was not a life to be shared.

Benjamin turned to his side and glanced at the large numbers on his clock. It was just past five-thirty in the morning. Another forty-five minutes or so and the strong vibrations of his alarm mechanism would shake the bed and tell him it was time to get up. This morning it would not be necessary. Sleep eluded him and wouldn't come before the sun peaked through his window.

His bedroom door opened slightly. Benjamin pushed up onto his elbow and stared through the semi-darkness at the small space. Victoria's head came through the opening.

"Are you awake?" she signed.

Benjamin sat up and turned on the small light on his side table. He motioned her into the room.

"Unfortunately, yes. Are you just coming home?" His sister still wore the dress she'd put on for her night out with David the evening before.

Victoria nodded. As she stepped into the light, he saw her eyes were swollen and red from crying. She sat heavily on the end of his bed and wiped at her flushed nose. Benjamin tucked the bed sheet around his waist and swung his legs over the side to sit near her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Victoria's young face distorted in anguish and new tears poured from her eyes. She hit her thigh with a bunched hand and swiped roughly at the moisture on her cheeks.

"Vicki, tell me what happened," he signed with stern, quick gestures.

"David and I fought. He wants me to give up on Daddy. Wants me to make a choice. David doesn't think it'll work, doesn't think we can be together, if I don't."

Benjamin saw the pain in her eyes. His first thought was the same as David's. He knew as long as she let Jonathan Roth run any aspect of her life, Victoria would have no peace or happiness with David McDaniel. Many times he had told his sister the same thing, even before she became involved with David. Their father was a manipulator and a controller. For Victoria's sake, Benjamin would not openly agree with her fiancé to try and prevent any further pain to her.

"What did you tell him?"

"What could I tell him? I love David, more than anyone else I've ever known. But how can I leave Hartford?" Victoria's eyes rounded and she leaned toward him. *"Ben, you know how Daddy feels about me leaving. I'm supposed to fulfill some undetermined dream of his, and I don't want to think about what would happen if I defied him."*

Benjamin's mind screamed to tell her Jonathan didn't give a damn about her so she shouldn't give a damn about him. He reined in the snap.

"Did you tell him that? Did you tell David you couldn't choose?"

She nodded and began to cry again.

Benjamin opened the drawer in the table beside him and pulled out a small box of tissue. Victoria took a fresh one and blew her nose. He didn't need to ask David's response. Although he could understand the man's frustration at the situation, Benjamin didn't agree with David's ultimatum.

"What are you going to do?"

Victoria threw up her hands. *"I don't know. Daddy is furious with me for defying him, and David says we are over unless I do what he asks."*

"You will stay here until you know."

"What do you think I should do?" she asked. Her hands shook as she signed the question.

Benjamin sighed. *"I think you know the answer to that question. But it's not my decision to make."*

She nodded, acknowledging her acceptance of his response. Like she did when she was just a child, Victoria turned into him and buried her face against his shoulder. Benjamin wrapped his arms around her and rocked her until the sporadic spasms of her crying jag tapered off and finally stopped.

He still held her when the firm pulsation of his alarm shook the bed. Benjamin eased his sister back onto the mattress, turned off the alarm, and rose on tired legs to move to his bathroom and prepare for another day. Victoria was still asleep, curled into herself in a tight ball, when he finished tying his tie and left for work.

~ * ~

Benjamin looked up when he felt the telltale vibration across the soles of his feet. He glanced to the doorway between his office and Jewell's. Sweet heat immediately flowed down his limbs when he saw her. Jewell leaned into the jamb, her

hands folded in front of her and resting on the cane she used to knock on the floor. A bright smile spread her gorgeous lips.

“Good morning,” she signed as she walked across the room to his desk. *“You are here early.”*

He leaned back in his chair and managed a tired smile. *“I was awake so I came in to get some research done.”*

Jewell reached his desk and came around to his side. Her delicate scent wrapped around him. Benjamin fought to keep his breath steady when she touched his hair near his ear. The caress of her fingertips lingered and whispered down the side of his neck.

“You look tired. Didn’t you sleep well?”

Benjamin took her hand, and with little urging, Jewell lowered herself down to sit in his lap. It amazed him what little weight her body put on his thighs. Jewell’s arm moved behind his neck and she settled with ease against his chest. Her gorgeously dimpled knees draped over the arm of the chair with her ankles modestly crossed. He laid his hand on the outside of her knee and the silky feeling of her nylons rubbed across his palm.

“I couldn’t sleep. Someone was on my mind all night, keeping me up,” he told her.

Jewell smiled. The depth and vastness of the simple expression heated his blood. Benjamin wanted to pull her mouth to him and sip at its sweetness until it filled him up. Somehow, he knew his appetite for her would never be satiated. Unable to keep his gaze away, Benjamin focused on her mouth. She drew her bottom lip through her teeth, following it with the tip of her tongue.

“Who were you thinking of, Benjamin?”

Benjamin felt the groan rumble up through his chest just as he devoured his name on her lips. He lingered in the kiss to savor the divine ecstasy. Jewell slid deeper into his lap. Her

head fell heavily into his hand as Benjamin supported it to allow him the deepest access to the minty caverns of her mouth. As his tongue explored, Jewell's fingers laced into his hair and she clung to him.

With deft fingers, Benjamin released the single clip that held the mass of hair at her crown. Auburn waves tumbled into Benjamin's hand and he forced his fingers deep into its softness without breaking contact with her delicious lips. With one hand pressed against her scalp, Benjamin moved his other hand down Jewell's side to cup her hip and hold her in place.

Finally, when neither could continue without reprieve for air, the kiss broke. Benjamin's gaze roamed over her face, his chest heaving with the need for oxygen. Jewell's eyelids hung heavily over her emerald gems and she looked up at him through auburn-tipped lashes. Her lips were moist from their kiss, and a soft flush brightened her cheeks. Soft, rufescent tresses flowed behind her and covered his arm and shoulder. The fruity scent of her shampoo that had been trapped in the conservative hairstyle was now free and wafted around him. Each breath Jewell took strained her breasts against the buttons of her silk blouse.

"I was thinking of you," he said, finally answering her question. "What is it about you, Jewell, that makes me forget all common sense and propriety? What makes me forget every rule I've set for myself? You make me act crazy."

Jewell shook her head slowly, a flush of pink staining her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to."

Benjamin smiled and touched her cheek with his fingertip. "Oh, don't be sorry. I'm not."

He ran his finger along the line of her jaw and down the ivory column of her throat to the exposed skin that disappeared beneath Jewell's blouse. Benjamin pulled his eyes away from

her face to watch the path his hand took. With one finger and a thumb, he flipped the first button of her blouse open.

Jewell's breath caught. A small tremor moved through her body. Benjamin's gaze snapped up to her face. She watched him with wide eyes, but he saw neither apprehension nor fear in them. The glimmer of arousal darkened the green depths.

His fingers moved into the valley between her breasts and released the next button. The next two followed suit quickly behind the others. With the gentle care used when unwrapping a precious and delicate gift, Benjamin pushed open the sides of her blouse to reveal two beautiful breasts demurely hidden behind a scant lace brassiere. Three small freckles dotted the creamy swells. The black material hid from him very little, but enough to kick his imagination into high gear.

With a deep sigh that came from his soul, Benjamin pulled her to him and pressed his lips against the soft flesh. He inhaled the intoxicating scent of her skin. Jewell wrapped her arms around his head and cradled him. Benjamin felt her press a kiss against his hair.

With strength he didn't know he possessed, Benjamin pulled back. He rested his head on the back of his chair and closed his eyes. Without looking, he felt her shift and re-button her clothing again. When she swung her legs off the arm of the chair and moved to stand, he opened his eyes and reached for her. They stood together, their bodies not an inch apart. Unwilling to lose the physical contact with her, Benjamin wrapped Jewell's womanly body in his arms and pulled her against his chest.

"I don't know how much more control I have," he told her. "You tempt me beyond any point a man should be tempted. The most vicious part is that I know you don't try to. You don't mean to."

Her lips parted, and he knew she would try to apologize again for something she never intended to do. Jewell was the type of woman who had no idea what affect her subliminal sexuality had on a man who wanted her, especially as much as he wanted her. Before she said anything, Benjamin pressed his finger against her lips.

“That wasn’t an accusation. If anything, it was a compliment.” He smiled and ran his fingertip across her bottom lip. It curled into a smile beneath his touch. “Unfortunately, it is Monday morning and we have a meeting at ten with the man replacing Kevin Burke.”

“They’re letting Mr. Burke go today?” Jewell asked.

Benjamin caught the slight look of panic in Jewell’s glance. Her body tensed in his hold. Since the incident, and her subsequent complaint, the other fund manager had been vindictive and malicious towards both Jewell and himself. Burke lashed out at Jewell for going through with the complaint, and Benjamin for supporting her. Benjamin couldn’t care less what the asshole thought of him, but Burke’s actions toward Jewell infuriated him.

After further investigation, and going back to past ‘possible’ allegations, Bulwark’s Human Resources department came to the decision to fire him under the charge of sexual harassment. Benjamin knew beforehand that the firing would take place today, but had withheld the information from Jewell to keep her from worrying about it too much. Perhaps once Burke was gone she would feel more at ease, and be less concerned about the Bulwark rumor mill.

“Yes,” he answered and held her chin in his thumb. “As soon as he gets here. That’s also part of the reason I came in early. I wanted to be here in case things got ugly.”

Jewell smiled up at him. "I thought you were just here because you couldn't sleep," she said with an arousing twinkle in her green eyes.

Benjamin moved to kiss her, unable to fight off his need to taste her for more than ten short minutes. She met him mid-way, using her grip on his shirt to pull herself taller. Jewell was an addictive drug, and Benjamin a full-blown junkie. Reluctantly, they broke the contact.

Jewell looked down to the intercom system on his desk she had asked Justine to install. Stepping back from him, Benjamin watched her press a button and speak into it. Naturally, he assumed it must have buzzed and Jewell responded to the call. She nodded and looked back to him.

"I have a call. As soon as I'm done, we'll go over the agenda for the meeting?"

Benjamin grinned wickedly. *"Maybe. But I want to take you to lunch today. Keep that on your schedule."*

Jewell nodded and gifted him with a brief kiss before she headed back to her office. Benjamin watched her walk across the floor, enjoying the sway of her hips and the subtle flip of her short skirt against her thighs. With a sense of frustrated satisfaction, he ran his hand over his face and fell heavily into his chair.

Without much attention being paid to the figures before him, Benjamin stared at the spreadsheet on his computer screen. A steady, demanding ache still throbbed through his body and the image of her perfect breasts floated in his memory. Jewell was so willing for his touch and giving with her own. Benjamin shifted against the uncomfortable evidence of her effect on him.

He nearly jumped when Jewell stepped quickly in front of his desk. Immediately Benjamin recognized a distracted, almost distressed look in her eyes. Concerned furrowed her brow.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he sat forward.

Jewell shook her head and smiled weakly. *"I need to leave for a little while. I'll be back as soon as I can."*

Benjamin stood. *"Is it Pearl?"* he asked, remembering their visit to the hospital only weeks before.

Jewell shook her head again. She avoided meeting his eyes, and shrugged. *"No. I promise, I'll be back as soon as I can. I don't know when it'll be, but I shouldn't be long."*

He nodded and tried to read the illusory expression on her face, but she avoided his eyes. *"Is there anything I can do for you?"*

"No. That's very sweet, but no. I'll be back."

Then she was gone, leaving Benjamin confused and concerned. He stared at the door she'd left open in her departure. What the hell was that all about? Maybe the thought of being around when Kevin Burke was fired bothered her more than Benjamin realized. As if on cue, Travis Traynor and Barry Westmoreland stepped into his line of sight through the open doorway. Both had set, grim expressions.

"It's time, B.P.," Travis stated and motioned for Benjamin to follow them. "We're going to Kevin's office now."

Benjamin stood and followed the two men down the hall.

Eight

Jewell didn't bother to lock her car doors when she stopped outside her apartment building. She grabbed her purse, slammed the driver's door shut, and hurried up the front stoop. It took a lifetime to unlock the front door and climb the stairs to her apartment. The knob turned without effort in her hand, and Jewell stepped inside.

"Greg?" she called.

Greg stepped out of the kitchen, a glass of orange juice in each hand. Stress lines creased his brow and he smiled wryly when their eyes met. His shoulders sagged slightly.

"I'm glad you're here. I was running out of things to talk about," he said with a slight chuckle wavering his deep voice.

"What happened?"

He shrugged and shook his head, expressing the events he had to tell were just as much a mystery to him as to Jewell. "I came by to drop off the DVD's you let me borrow last week. She was actually sitting in the hall outside the apartment. She looked scared as hell. When she figured out I knew you, she asked me to call you. Did you tell Ben?"

Jewell shook her head in answer. "Where is she?"

With a slight inclination of his head, Greg indicated the living room. Jewell moved by him, dropped her purse on the

hall table, and headed into the room. Victoria sat on the end of the couch. Her spine curling her forward and her hands clenched tightly between her knees. She rocked slowly forward and back.

“Victoria?” Jewell called in a gentle voice.

Victoria looked up. She seemed surprised at Jewell’s presence, as if she hadn’t heard the door or Jewell and Greg’s conversation. As soon as she saw Jewell, she stood to her feet.

“Hi,” she said with a nervous twitter in her voice. “I’m sorry, Jewell, to drag you out of work. I just—I just felt like I need to talk to you. I remembered your address from a note Benjamin has at the house.” Her hand moved from her own chest, out in Jewell’s direction, and back again.

Greg set down the two glasses of orange juice on the coffee table and laid his hand on Jewell’s shoulder with a gentle squeeze. “I’m going to take off and let the two of you talk.”

Jewell nodded and leaned slightly into the kiss Greg left on her cheek. When the apartment door shut again, Jewell motioned for Victoria to sit down. She sat on the other end of the couch and moved a glass of juice more within the woman’s reach. Victoria picked it up with a slightly quivering hand. Her manicured fingers pushed back a thick mass of hair.

“Can I just ask you something first?” Victoria managed to finally ask.

“Sure.”

Jewell still tried to make a guess why Benjamin’s sister worked so hard to find her and speak with her like this. When Greg called and told her Victoria was here, needed to see her, and Jewell wasn’t to tell Benjamin, a multitude of scenarios raced through her thoughts. None of which made sense. She could have just as easily called Bulwark and gotten Jewell herself. Why come here? Why wait for her? And what had her so frazzled?

“Did I misinterpret your relationship with my brother?” Victoria asked. Jewell didn’t miss the protective pitch to her voice. “I was under the impression something might be developing between the two of you.”

Jewell sighed deeply. “No, you didn’t misinterpret anything. At least, I don’t think so. There is something there. What, I can’t define quite yet. We’re both trying to figure that out.”

Victoria pointed toward the door. “What about him?”

Jewell looked in the direction Victoria pointed and realized she referred to Greg. It must seem odd to someone who didn’t know them. Greg was a very good looking man, and often got third and fourth glances from women on the street. His sweet personality endeared him to anyone who knew him. For Victoria to see him here, with keys to her apartment, and the affection obvious between them, of course it would raise questions. She knew that to many, their relationship seemed much deeper than mere friendship. In all actuality, it was. It was vaster and more intense than that. No wonder Benjamin himself questioned Greg’s position in her life.

Jewell shook her head and looked back to Victoria. “Greg is a very good friend. We’ve been friends for many, many years. But we’re not involved beyond friendship.”

“Have you ever been involved?”

“No.”

Victoria looked shocked. “Never? Not that I’m trying to veer you away from my brother, but your friend Greg is very, very good looking. He seems so nice.”

Jewell shook her head. “Never.”

Victoria’s eyebrows arched and Jewell smiled. She held the small chuckle in her throat and shook her head.

“I’ll put it to you this way, Victoria. Greg and I tend to have the same taste in men.”

Understanding hit Victoria's eyes and her lips rounded into a silent 'oh!'. Jewell smiled and laughed. But far too quickly, the two women fell into a nervous silence. Victoria took another sip of her juice, and Jewell fidgeted with the hem of her skirt. Not knowing the point of the visit, Jewell couldn't urge the woman into conversation. Victoria obviously had something on her mind and found it difficult to express it.

Victoria cleared her throat. "I'm here for Benjamin. You need to understand that first and foremost. I couldn't call you at work, or go there, because I don't want him to know about this discussion. I really came here not knowing how I would get in touch with you. Do you understand?"

Jewell mentally steeled herself and sat back on the couch in a relaxed position. This was going to prove to be a very interesting morning.

"I understand," she said. "I don't like keeping secrets, but if you say it's necessary, I'll do it."

"Has Benjamin ever told you about our family?"

Jewell shook her head. "No. Whenever I ask, he manages to change the subject. The only person he talks about is you."

Victoria smiled and looked down at her hands. "Ben and I are very close. I think we were each other's salvation when things got bad."

The hairs on the back of Jewell's neck prickled to life. A quiver of concern sat in her chest. "Bad?"

Victoria's gaze became distant. "Benjamin was eleven years old when I was born. I can only imagine how it was for him when he was young. He has told me so little. My brother thinks it's a sign of weakness to complain, or even talk, about it."

"What do you know?"

"Ben was born deaf. The full extent of his impairment wasn't realized until he was about three years old. All this information I've gotten from my Aunt Rachel, my mother's

sister. Supposedly it's a recessive genetic birth defect. It must go way, way back because they never figured out where it came from.

"By what I've been told, Mom and Daddy took the news fine at first. But Aunt Rachel told me it was like something snapped in my father the more tests they ran and the more they found out. Daddy started drinking and turned into a jerk overnight. He refused to have anything to do with Benjamin. By the age of five, Ben was enrolled in a boarding school and sent away to live there. Aunt Rachel told me it was the best thing for him, no matter how cruel that sounds. Daddy's drinking made him violent, and my understanding is that Benjamin was often a target for his anger."

A tightness surrounded Jewell's heart, and heat burned her eyes. She remembered the rage and darkness in their father's eyes when he'd pushed her and yelled at Benjamin. The terrible image of that rage being visited on a young child filled her mind. How terrible!

"Benjamin only came home when the school insisted, even staying through a good part of the summer when they offered additional academics.

"My father refused to learn sign language, and forbade my mother from learning. I can remember my father stating it would do Benjamin no good to be coddled. He had to learn to live in a world that didn't give a damn he wasn't normal. He was expected to conform to us, not us to him. It took years to do it, but Benjamin learned to speak and read lips. Of course, not with any help from them." Victoria's voice held a sarcastic twinge.

"Why didn't someone do something about this?" Jewell asked.

"In my parents' circle of society the dysfunction of a family might be discussed in private, but one never steps in or

acknowledges they are aware of any of it. Most let it go because Benjamin wasn't in the house anymore."

"Did you know about all this when you were young?" Jewell asked. Her words came with effort around the huge lump in her throat.

"Benjamin tried to shield me from the worst of it, even before I knew what all the tension and yelling was about whenever he was home. But my parents did nothing to hide anything from me. In fact, when I was nine or ten, my father told me I should steer clear of my brother when he came home because he brought nothing but disgrace and hostility with him. My father told me he was a strain on the family and a burden I would have to carry when they were gone, because he would never amount to anything."

The young girl shook her head and Jewell noted how her lips twisted in a wry grin. "You know what the most ironic thing was? How blind my father was to the truth? As he's telling me this Ben was twenty-one years old, had graduated from high school at sixteen, finished college and was working on his master's degree. All on full academic scholarship. But according to my father, Ben would never amount to anything. How ignorant is that?"

Jewell couldn't answer. There was no explanation for that kind of blindness.

Victoria talked for another hour. The more she talked, the heavier Jewell's heart grew and the tighter her throat restricted around the emotion choking her. Benjamin's younger sister shared some specific instances she remembered from her childhood, but most of it was general sharing of an overall theme. Benjamin is the black sheep of the Roth family simply because he is deaf. No matter what he does, what he accomplishes, what he achieves, he will never be good enough to be in his father's good graces.

They considered Victoria the salvation of the entire family. It was her job be more successful, wealthier, and shine brighter than her big brother. The Roth name sat on her shoulders and was emblazoned across her forehead. Benjamin was the son Jon Roth refused to acknowledge, so in essence, she was the son their parents never had.

Finally, with cheeks damp with shed tears, Victoria sat back on the couch and sighed. Both women sat in silence and Jewell fought to compose the raging emotion in her chest. She shifted her weight in the worn cushions and ran her fingers over her cheeks to dry them.

“Did you come from a happy home, Jewell? Did you enjoy your childhood?” Victoria asked. Her voice hung heavy in the air.

Jewell nodded. “I was adopted by my parents; all my siblings and I. We were all very happy.”

“They taught you how to love someone, didn’t they?” Jewell could only nod in answer. “Do you know who taught me to love? Benjamin.”

Jewell didn’t know how to respond to the things Victoria told her, or answer the question she asked. Through it all, a clearer picture of Benjamin formed for her. He was abrasive and conflictive because that was the world he grew up in. She also looked at the incident at his house on Friday in a different light. It wasn’t a one-time event. That glimpse of violence and cruelty was a brief representation of the life of Benjamin as a child. It was unfathomable to Jewell to imagine being a child, desperately wanting the affection and pride of your parents, only to be ridiculed and cast aside. She was blessed with her parents’ love well before her young heart was marred forever.

“My parents kept me at home. I was tutored and coached and raised by nannies and nurses. I ate dinner with them every night, but was allowed to say nothing. The highlight of my life

was when my big brother came home for brief visits,” Victoria continued. “My earliest memories are of sneaking into his bedroom in the middle of the night. We’d hide under the covers of his bed and he would let me talk for hours about dolls and storybooks until I would finally fall asleep. I was probably four or five, so he was already a teenager. He looked so big and handsome and wonderful to me. And he always smiled at me. Benjamin was the only one who ever smiled...” Her voice trailed off as she spoke of him.

Victoria’s eyes were distant and dreamy. After a brief pause, she continued. “He spent all his time at home with me. Or at least as much as Mother and Father would allow. When I was very little, he wasn’t allowed to be alone with me. Daddy said he was incompetent and couldn’t be trusted. But when I got older, Benjamin snuck in and played with me for hours on end.

“He taught me sign language. It was as natural for me to learn as English. We weren’t allowed to use it around grown-ups, so it was our private little language. We could speak across a room without anyone knowing it. But beyond everything else, I remember loving him. I adored him. Until I met David, my fiancé, Benjamin was the only person I think I ever loved.”

“I’m glad you’ve found someone,” Jewell interjected.

A smile spread across Victoria’s face. “David is wonderful. I just hope I haven’t lost him.” Again, her voice diminished and faded away as she spoke.

She turned and looked at Jewell. Victoria’s face was intense, and her dark eyes held Jewell’s gaze. “I’m the only person Benjamin has ever loved. He’s told me that. But he has to love me. Does that make sense, Jewell?”

“I think so,” she answered.

Victoria plunged onward before the words were fully spoken.

“He doesn’t believe in love. Doesn’t think he can love. Benjamin doesn’t love himself. He won’t admit to any of this, or acknowledge it if you point it out to him, but I know him so well and know all this to be true.”

Jewell sat forward, leaning towards her. “Victoria, I’m glad you’ve told me all of this. I know Benjamin would never tell me any of it. But why are you?”

Victoria closed the space between them and clutched Jewell’s hands. Her fingers gripped tight and hard around Jewell’s.

“Love him, Jewell,” she said with a desperate edge in her voice. “Love him with everything in you. I know you do. I can see it in your eyes. I saw it when you stepped between him and my father. Love him, and keep loving him, no matter what he says or what he does. Love him no matter what happens. Love him even if he says he can’t love you back. Love him when he walks away. Love him when he stays. Love him when he thinks there is nothing left to love. Give him something to love when there isn’t anything left.”

Jewell’s breath caught and fluttered from her chest like a frightened bird. Tears flooded her eyes and blurred Victoria’s face. She squeezed Victoria’s hands and nodded because no words would come.

~ * ~

Jewell stopped in the ladies room and patted a cool towel on her cheeks before she took the final walk to their office. The redness and puffiness around her eyes had diminished when she finally left her apartment, but the sudden jags of tears that assaulted her on the way back to Bulwark had them again showing signs of her distraught emotions. She hoped her make-up hid it well enough so things weren’t obvious to those who saw her.

She checked her watch as she approached Justine's desk. It was 11:45. How upset would Benjamin be that she missed the meeting this morning? He counted on her to clarify some reports and projections with the new fund manager. Up until now he had been very forgiving about the time she took for family issues. There had to be a limit to his generosity, budding relationship or not. Jewell was here to do a job.

Justine looked up from her keyboard and smiled as Jewell approached. "Hey! You were here and gone before I even arrived this morning. Thanks for the coffee."

Jewell smiled. "You're welcome."

"Your bagel is on your desk, but I don't know if I would eat it now. It's been there awhile."

She grimaced in response. "No, I think I'll pass. Is Mr. Roth back from his meeting yet?"

"He's in his office."

Jewell nodded and moved to the door. She should let him know as soon as possible she was back. Benjamin looked up as she entered, and the slow smile on his lips surprised her. He leaned back and his chair reclined slightly.

"*You're back,*" he signed with enthusiasm. "*I was getting worried.*"

"*I'm sorry I was gone so long. Did the meeting go okay?*"

Benjamin waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "*I moved the meeting until later this afternoon. This new guy seemed relieved we moved it. He's probably digging through the mess Burke left in his rampage.*"

Jewell's spine straightened in surprise. She forgot about Kevin Burke's firing once Victoria called. "*Rampage? Was it that bad?*"

Benjamin rubbed the back of his neck with one hand and looked at her from the angle his head tilted with the action. "He apparently got wind of it before we got there this morning.

Burke completely ransacked his office. Files were dumped out on the floor and he wiped his hard drive clean.”

Her jaw dropped. *“Oh, my God. Did Security have to remove him?”* she asked.

“Eventually, yes. We’re pretty sure he managed to get some internal documents out of the building before this morning. We won’t know for sure until the mess can be sorted through. Once we know, Westmoreland plans on reporting him to the SEC for Breach of Ethics.”

A shudder ran up Jewell’s spine. *“Just think. I nearly worked for him.”*

Benjamin didn’t respond, but Jewell saw his eyelids slip lower over his dark stare. His chest rose and fell in a slow, deep breath. Jewell’s heart skipped a beat. The touch of his eyes affected Jewell just as strongly, and as sexually, as his hands. She swallowed and went back to the original point of the conversation.

“You moved the meeting?”

He stood up and came around to the front of his desk. With his arms crossed over his chest, Benjamin leaned into its edge. A sweet flutter spread out from Jewell’s stomach into her arms and down her thighs. The urge to step toe-to-toe with him and lean into his body, to feel his heart pound against her breast, was almost undeniable. Every moment she spent with him made it harder and harder to deny the hunger and need for his physical presence and touch.

“I didn’t want to go in there without you. You’re my right arm gal,” he said through his seductive grin.

“Well, I’ll get right back on those reports I should’ve been doing this morning. What time did you move it to?”

“Three-thirty,” he indicated with his right hand against his left palm. *“But don’t worry about the reports. I’m sure they’re fine. Besides, it’s noon. You promised to have lunch with me.”*

"But that was before I took off on you."

He leaned forward far enough to take her hand and pulled her closer to him. "Speaking of which, is everything okay?"

Jewell nodded, but the memory of her conversation with Victoria formed a lump immediately and fiercely in her throat. She was thankful at times he couldn't hear the strain in her voice.

"I'm sorry I left you hanging. Everything is fine."

He dipped his chin and bent his knees to meet her stare on the same level. His brown eyes looked straight to her soul. Jewell fought the quiver in her veins when he reached up and touched her cheek with his thumb. His fingertips brushed her throat and flirted with her hair.

"You've been crying. Don't try to hide from me, Jewell. You make me worry."

Jewell's heart swelled with his concern. She felt the tears sting her eyes again. To hide them, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, pressing her face against the side of his neck. His aftershave filled her senses and the slight roughness of his midday beard rubbed her cheek. Without hesitation, his arms encircled her. The embrace was firm and strong and comforted her. Benjamin's fingers pressed into her back, and the force of the contact lifted her to her tiptoes.

"I love you," she whispered against the collar of his shirt. "God, I wish I could tell you how much I love you."

Benjamin pulled back enough to meet her eyes.

Her cheeks burned hot. She realized he probably felt the subtle movement caused when she whispered. "Everything is fine. Honestly. You're sweet for caring."

A wry grin pulled up one corner of his delicious lips. "Sweet? I don't think anyone has ever used that particular word to describe me. Asinine. Jerk. Stubborn. Those are the kinds of words I'm used to hearing."

Jewell covered his lips with one finger, effectively stopping his list of personality faults. “They don’t know you like I do.”

Benjamin’s lips pursed and he kissed the finger she held against his mouth. Her stomach tumbled. Jewell’s stare was pulled to the contact of skin to lips. His hand took hers and shifted, so he could press his mouth against the sensitive palm of her hand. The warm tip of his tongue brushed tingling flesh before he repeated the kiss there as well. A slow smile followed a brief kiss to her knuckles.

“Let’s go to lunch.”

Nine

*Date: November 6 08:19:46am Wednesday
To: BPRoth@Bulwark.Managers.com (Benjamin Roth)
From: LilPrincess@aol.com (Victoria Roth)
Subject: I'm sorry...*

I couldn't tell you this face to face this morning. But I think this is for the best.

I've gone back to Connecticut. Don't bother coming home. My suitcases are already in my car, and as soon as I hit send, I'm going out the door. I know you don't approve, and I know you don't think I should do what Daddy tells me, but I don't have the strength to fight him anymore. He's more powerful than you, or I, or God I think.

I don't know what else I can do. Please don't hate me. I couldn't live without you. I love you.

Vicki

Benjamin stared at the computer screen. His teeth ground together until his jaw hurt and the muscle in his cheek jerked sporadically. Hot blood pounded in his ears and the room

around him clouded in a red haze. Tightness akin to suffocation sank into his chest. The pencil he braced through his fingers snapped in two.

A hand touched his arm briefly and Benjamin's head snapped up. Jewell looked across the desk at him. A curled lock of hair rested on her forehead, only slightly disguising the furrows of concern there.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Roth?" she asked.

Benjamin looked from her to the four fund managers occupying the other chairs across the desk from him. All eyes were on him. He sat up straighter, mentally steeling himself, and dropped the broken pencil on his desk.

"What's up, B.P.?" Alexi Rouan asked.

With a slap, Benjamin folded his laptop to effectively hide the monitor. The source of his frustration disappeared. The lingering effect did not dissipate despite the absence of the confession.

"Nothing," he stated and turned into the desk to show his attention was back on the meeting. "I apologize for that. Where were we?"

"We were going over the projected earnings on our international and global funds," Jewell clarified. "Thus far most have nominal long-term gains, only three have any short-term. All but the America's Fund are without dividends."

Benjamin nodded. "In the Bulwark Family of Funds it appears our segment shows the strongest performance levels for total growth and the lowest tax implications."

Phillip St. Ormand slapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously, a huge grin on his face. "Once again. Good job, Roth."

Benjamin's eyes moved from one man to the other as they discussed the expected success of their particular funds in a whirlwind American market. This would be the third consecutive year his international funds finished at the top of Bulwark's list. With the rates of return they projected, he suspected they would finish among the best in the nation. For reasons Benjamin couldn't define, the financial victory didn't hold the same satisfaction as it had in the past. While he knew he succeeded in the objectives set out, the thrill of the 'stock' hunt lacked enthusiasm.

Despite the conversation going on between the four men, and the self-created acclamation party, Benjamin's thoughts drifted again to the email from his sister. For weeks she stayed in his house to hide from the tyrannical oppression of their father. After Jonathan Roth's outburst and violent eruption weeks before, she avoided his phone calls and the topic of her return to Connecticut was not discussed. Benjamin assumed nothing would make her go back.

She had not been able to resolve things with David as of yet. Benjamin believed it would be only a matter of time before they both capitulated and renewed the engagement. As long as she stayed here, away from their father, things would work out in the end. If she went back to that mausoleum there would be no chance of reconciliation.

The sensation of being watched pulled Benjamin from his contemplations. He looked up and met Jewell's emerald stare. Her gaze was intense. One elegant eyebrow raised in an inquisitive arch. Benjamin locked his eyes with hers, neither of them wavering from the hold. Jewell's eyes asked questions as clearly as if her lips spoke them or her hands signed them. With

a deep sigh, he slowly shook his head in a subtle motion. She dipped her chin and looked away to the other men in the room.

Benjamin stood up and the others followed suit. "We'll meet in two weeks to confirm all final figures and start formulating our strategies for next year."

The four men walked to the office door and Jewell followed them into the hall. Benjamin remained at his desk and watched them leave. From his vantage point he saw St. Ormond, Rouan, and Johanssen separate and go their separate ways. While Jewell leaned down to say something to Justine, Carl Donahue stood a respective distance back and seemed to wait for her to finish. Jewell nodded her head as she finished speaking with Justine and stood up.

From this distance Benjamin couldn't read his lips, but he saw Carl say something and Jewell turned to him. They stood facing each other and Benjamin leaned forward in a restrained attempt to see her lips. Despite his effort, he couldn't make it out. But what he interpreted in the scene he didn't like. Hot prickles shot up the back of his neck and his face flushed. His heart pounded rapidly against his chest. Benjamin's jaw clenched again and he shoved his hands deep into his trouser pockets.

~ * ~

"Could I speak with you for a moment, Jewell?" Carl said as she turned away from Justine.

"Sure, Mr. Donahue. What can I do for you?"

"Please, call me Carl."

Jewell recognized a difference in his voice from in the meeting. It was restrained and hesitant, almost shy.

"Mr. Donahue is far too formal between you and I," he added.

Jewell nodded once. "Okay."

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Jewell stole a glance from the corner of her eye into the office. Benjamin stood at his desk; hands deep in his pockets and a stern look on his face. She wanted to get inside and find out what had upset him during the meeting. The change on his face when he read the message on his computer was blatant and obvious to Jewell. Perhaps to someone else it wouldn't be, but to her it was plain and undeniable.

"I wondered if I might ask you something," Carl went on.

Jewell pulled her attention back to Carl. She forced a smile and looked up at him. "What's that?"

He smiled wider and chuckled once. "Boy, it usually isn't this tough for me."

Jewell fought the gasp when he reached out and took her hand. He stepped slightly closer.

"Jewell, I wondered if I might be able to take you out to dinner some time. Maybe a play or dancing?"

Jewell's jaw dropped slightly as she fought for a response. The question caught her completely off guard. "Mr. Donahue—I mean... Carl—I..." Her mind refused to form a complete thought.

His thumb rubbed across the back of her hand. Were it Benjamin doing the same thing she would be tingling from head to toe and wishing for more. Carl's touch did little more than distract her. She desperately wanted to look and see if Benjamin were watching, but didn't dare. As politely and as firmly as possible, Jewell pulled her hand from Carl's hold. Jewell shook her head slightly.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline."

He looked disappointed, but let her withdraw her hand. “Is there any way I can change your mind? Did I get my information wrong? Are you involved with someone?”

Jewell caught the slight action of his eyes darting past her shoulder to look into the office. She wanted to follow the motion to verify it was Benjamin he looked at, but really didn’t need to do so. Was that a knee-jerk reaction to the rumors Kevin Burke had spread? Did Carl suspect they were involved, and this was his way of confirming it? Of course, not everything being whispered around Bulwark was wrong, but that was no one else’s business but their own. Jewell cleared her throat to snatch back Carl Donahue’s attention.

“No, thank you for asking me. It’s very sweet and very flattering. I’m just not looking to date right now.” She hoped she managed to skirt the last question all together.

Carl stepped back and nodded. “Okay. I had to try. If you change your mind, I’m first in line, okay?”

Jewell smiled and took a step towards the office. “Okay.”

He turned on his heels and walked away down the hall. Jewell sighed heavily and moved across the front of Justine’s desk.

“Don’t say a word,” she mumbled without looking at the woman.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Justine whispered behind a stifled giggle. “I’ll say three. He is gorgeous.”

Jewell shook her head and went into Benjamin’s office. He still stood in the same place she’d seen him at a few minutes ago. Whatever the message said, it seemed to still have him upset. The taut muscle of his cheek, just in front of his left ear, twitched and relaxed with each grind of his jaw. The change in

his pocket jingled and the front placard of his trousers shifted as he bounced his hand off his thigh from inside the pocket.

She tried a small smile as she approached him. His facial expression did not change. Intense russet eyes watched her move across the office. Heat fluttered to her cheeks under the powerful force behind them.

"What's wrong?" she asked as she reached the desk. *"You looked so upset when you read your e-mail."*

His hands didn't leave his pockets and his jaw didn't relax. Benjamin's lips formed a thin, straight line and his nostrils flared ever so slightly as he took deep breaths in through his nose. A tangible tension sparked in the air between them and uneasiness ran down Jewell's spine.

"Benjamin?" she asked and walked around to stand beside him.

He didn't shift his body, but his head turned and his stare stayed with her. It was dark and almost menacing in its power.

"What is wrong? Was it the e-mail? Talk to me."

He stared at her, long and hard, before speaking. "Nothing you need to worry your pretty little red head over."

For a man who had never heard a voice to understand the subtle nuance of sarcasm and antagonism, his tone dripped with it. Jewell drew back and crossed her arms over her abdomen in a defensive stance.

"Excuse me?" He might not be able to hear the heightened pitch of her voice, but he sure as hell would see it in her face. "Do you want to run that by me again?"

Benjamin shrugged and turned his lips down in a dismissive expression. "No, I don't think so."

"Benjamin you're acting like an ass."

"That's who I am, remember?"

He turned his back to her and ended the conversation. Jewell watched his retreating back in shock. In a single breath the shock turned to fury. *What the hell just happened? Before the meeting everything was fine. He even stole several brief, but nonetheless hot, kisses before the other fund managers arrived. What could have been in that email to create this one-hundred-eighty degree turnaround?* Jewell stood dumbfounded as he kept himself busy looking through some ancient and useless records in his file cabinet.

Not willing to let him have the last jab and walk away, Jewell sucked up her courage and closed the space between them. *Kill 'em with kindness.* Isn't that what her father always said? With only the slightest hesitation, Jewell lifted her hand and rested it on the hard muscle between his shoulder blades. It tensed beneath her touch. With her other hand, she hooked his arm and tried to turn him enough to face her. Benjamin resisted with determined stubbornness. Jewell urged harder until he dropped his file and turned abruptly on her.

"Don't you have work to do?" his hands demanded.

Jewell met his angry stare and tried to keep her face as soft and noncombatant as possible. *"Benjamin, please. Explain to me what happened. What's bothering you?"*

He planted doubled fists at his waist and glared at her. "Why don't you explain things to me instead, Jewell?"

She shook her head slightly. *"What do you want me to explain? What's upset you?"*

He thrust out a hand and pointed at the door leading out to the hall. *"Explain that."*

Bewildered, she followed the gesture look at the closed door. She didn't understand. After no explanation emerged from the empty space, Jewell turned back to him.

“Explain what? Benjamin, I don’t understand.”

“Your little one-on-one with Donahue out there. Making plans for later? Make sure he buys you a very expensive dinner before you put out.”

The force of the slap snapped his head to the side. Jewell didn’t know where the sudden, intense anger came from but it burst out before she could rein it in. To hear such things from Benjamin was an infuriation she never imagined. Her eyes stung with hot tears that blurred his face. Benjamin’s head remained where the slap left it for several seconds before he turned and looked down at her. The expression on his face hadn’t changed.

“How dare you,” she choked through a whisper. “After everything that has gone on between us you dare say something like that to me?”

“What’s gone on between us, Jewell? Little more than juvenile make-out sessions when you come down to it. I certainly don’t have any ties on you. You damn well don’t have any on me.”

A lead weight, formerly known as her heart, sank into Jewell’s stomach. Pain ripped through her chest and seized her lungs. Her shoulders dropped and Jewell swallowed hard against the dryness in her throat. She managed to find the strength to nod and take a step backward. With no regard for the small tremors shaking her hand, Jewell raised them to speak.

“Answer me this, Benjamin. If nothing has been going on, why are you so pissed another man dared to ask me on a date? If you want to ignore all the time we’ve spent together when we weren’t having a juvenile make-out session, fine.” She

punctuated his own words with imaginary quotation marks in the air. *"But you have no right to be this way to me."*

"Don't make things out to be more than they are."

"I wasn't!" She expressed her frustration with the fast, jerky motions of her hand. *"You're the one who got jealous because another man spoke to me. You're the one all hot and bothered to think I might consider it."*

"I don't give a damn what you do. Just don't flaunt them through my office."

Unable to withstand the onslaught of painful emotion, Jewell stepped back and crossed her arms over her body. She nodded, the only response she could muster to his demand. With a vicious swipe, she banished the hot moisture from her cheek. His intense glare and cold expression was too much. As she reached the door leading to her own office, she flinched at the thunderous crash when the metal drawer of his file cabinet slammed shut. Without looking back, Jewell shut the door behind her.

Jewell leaned back against the wood and her head fell back with a soft thud. The ache in her chest was so excruciating it made it hard to breath. Tears ran unabated down her cheeks and throat.

His abrasive, rough personality had been easy to deal with when they'd first met. Partly because she knew it wasn't personal, it was just the way he was. In the last few weeks she became very accustomed to the sexier, more attentive side he showed her when they were alone. It wore her guard down. Jewell wasn't prepared and didn't know how to handle this attack. *Why would he say such horrible things?*

Jewell wanted to crumple up on the floor and cry until the ache went away. But she refused to let herself do it. Not here.

Not now. With legs of jelly she managed to walk across the room and sink into her chair. She pulled a tissue from her box and blew her nose with resolution.

With a swish of the mouse, Jewell's pipe maze screen saver disappeared. She stared at the home page of Bulwark's internal email system. A box flashed she had five new messages. Trying to divert her thoughts to something more constructive, Jewell brought up the messages. They all were FYI and market reports and schedule changes. Nothing of interest. Jewell reclined back in her chair and stared at the screen.

If it *were* an email, it would have come through the company system. People outside of Bulwark could email to the system as long as they had the address. Jewell's thoughts churned and her conscience fought against the things she contemplated. She knew Benjamin's password. He'd given it to her so she was able to check his messages when he couldn't. It would be easy as pie. In two minutes, she would know exactly what it was that set him off.

Jewell shook her head and jabbed the button on her mouse to exit the system. No! She would not invade his privacy like that. Besides, one might not have anything to do with the other. Maybe he really was pissed at her.

Damn it! He had no right to be. She did nothing worth that kind of treatment. All she ever did was love him. A voice from the not too distant past whispered in her mind.

Love him, Jewell! Love him with everything in you. Love him, and keep loving him, no matter what he says or what he does. Love him no matter what happens. Love him even if he says he can't love you back. Love him when he walks away. Love him when he stays.

Jewell sighed. The trembling breath flowed from her lungs through her body and left a tingling sensation on her skin. *Love him no matter what he says or does.* Maybe the two things didn't have anything to do with each other, but in Benjamin's mind, they did. Whatever the first thing might be, it didn't allow him to see the conversation with Carl Donahue for what it was.

A small smile edged up the corners of Jewell's lips. In all actuality, the whole incident was an indication of bigger things. If he didn't care and if there wasn't something else beneath the flirting and brief moments of erotic sensation, he wouldn't have gotten so upset.

"He's jealous," she said to herself in a low voice. A small laugh made its way up through her throat. "He can't say he wants me, but he can't stand the thought of someone else having me."

A new plan formulated in Jewell's mind. She wasn't about to go back in there begging for his attention. But she might just get him begging for hers. With a low hum on her lips, Jewell unbuttoned her suit jacket and draped it on the back of her chair. Beneath it she wore a modest halter-type blouse with thin straps, made to wear beneath jackets and sweaters. One flick of her wrist released the barrette in her hair.

~ * ~

Benjamin stared into empty space. Blood still pounded in his temples and tightness clenched around his gut. Boy, he could make a real ass of himself sometimes.

He looked toward Jewell's door. It remained closed. Despite the desire to forget it, the look in her eyes hovered in his mind. Benjamin touched the tender corner of his mouth. Jewell had a pretty good swing. It caught him by surprise. With a wry smile,

he remembered Jewell telling him she hit Kevin Burke. Was he as surprised as Benjamin to meet up with that kind of spunk?

Where had the anger come from he'd hurled at her? In retrospect he couldn't answer his own question. At this point, he'd be lucky if she ever looked at him again, let alone...

He let the thought go uncompleted. Nearly three months ago Benjamin had argued with himself over the possibilities with Jewell Kincaid. Back then, he chose to ignore them and continued to test his limits of self-control. Now the realities were more real, and harder to swallow.

Benjamin leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His fist bounced rhythmically on the arm of his chair. What he wanted to do when she came in from talking to Donahue was throw her down on his desk and kiss her senseless so she would never, ever consider another man. He wanted to explore the delicious valley between her breasts and discover just how high her skirt would go before she made him stop. Did her entire body taste as sweet as her lips, her throat, and her shoulders?

A slow heat and throbbing pressure moved through Benjamin's body. He groaned and felt the reverberation in his own throat. What would it be like to feel Jewell's moans against his lips? Benjamin shifted in his chair to ease the discomfort and opened his eyes.

She stood beside his chair, looking down at him with eyes that sparkled brighter than emeralds. Heavy lids created the image of arousal. Tumultuous waves of auburn hair fell around bare shoulders and a seductive, hot smile danced on her lips. As if an angel in a dream, she leaned over and turned his chair. Benjamin was gifted with a glorious view of her delicious breasts as her top fell open.

Jewell braced her hands on each arm of the chair and leaned further forward until their faces were mere inches apart. Citrus-scented tresses fell forward and filled the air between them with sweet aroma. One sexy, slender knee edged his legs apart as she moved even closer.

For several seconds Benjamin wondered if this were some lack-of-sex induced erotic daydream. After what he'd said, and did, only minutes before this could not possibly be real. Jewell touched her fingertips to his thigh. A sharp breath caught in his throat as she moved the delicate touch up his leg, coming dangerously close to a part of his body that throbbed and ached for it. Her palm flattened on his stomach and moved to his chest. Finally, Jewell touched his lips with her thumb and pulled them apart with a gentle touch.

She remained far enough back so he could see her lips. His eyes could not leave their seductive sheen as she spoke.

"You can say anything you want, Benjamin Prescott Roth, and be as nasty as humanly possible." Her lips wrapped around the words and played cruel, vicious games with his body. "But I know the truth. You know what you want. You just don't know how to come and get it."

Her parted lips met his and immediately he was sucked into a vortex of intense pleasure. Benjamin reached out and sank his fingers into her hair and held her head firm to deepen the kiss. In a fluid motion, he leaned the chair back and took both of them into a reclined position. Jewell's slight weight pressed down on him and everything was gone except the sensation of her body on his own. Both were fully engrossed in the kiss, meeting the intensity of the other with each motion and stroke of their tongue.

Then she pulled away and stood. The chair fell back into its original position with a jerk. Before he could reach out and grab her wrist, she was too far away. Tousled hair framed her face and her eyes glistened as she looked down at him. Benjamin swallowed hard as he noticed the impression of her nipples pressing against the red fabric of her top.

"When you decide this is what you want," she signed with slow hands, indicating her entire body with a movement of her hand. *"You know where to find me. And I think you know what to do."*

Then she turned on her high heels and sashayed out of the room. Benjamin covered his face with his hands and pushed off with his feet. His desk chair spun around several times before coming again to a stop.

~ * ~

"She gave you no hints she was planning to leave?" Jewell asked across the table. She was sure the surprise was evident on her face.

Benjamin put a forkful of Chicken Marsala in his mouth and set down his fork before responding. *"None. I don't understand it either. I know she was upset over the thing with David, but I thought she knew going back to Connecticut would be the last thing she should do to fix it."*

She studied Benjamin's face through the candlelight between them. The tension in his features had eased only slightly in the two days since he'd gotten his sister's email. His deep brown eyes looked back at her, and that slow heated smile she loved edged its way onto his lips. Benjamin swirled his fork in his pasta, but his gaze held hers.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

"If you hadn't flirted with Donahue, I would've."

Jewell tried to look offended. *“Don’t go there, Benjamin. You got yourself in trouble last time.”*

Benjamin’s laugh rang out and pleasant warmth spread over Jewell. She realized this was the first time she had ever heard him laugh. What a gloriously deep, completely unabashed sound!

“Sweetheart, if that’s trouble—I’m going to end up in prison before I’m done.”

Jewell smiled and took a sip of wine. The waiter came to their table and cleared away some empty plates. He asked if they would be interested in seeing the dessert cart. Benjamin met her gaze across the table and winked.

“No, I think we’ll be having dessert later this evening,” he said in a low voice.

Heat rushed to Jewell’s cheeks and she took his hand across the tabletop. The tuxedo-clad gentleman nodded as Benjamin handed him a platinum credit card. Within minutes they made it out to the lobby and Benjamin helped her slip a shawl around her shoulders before they walked into the crisp November air. For the outing this evening Benjamin decided to use his driver. An elongated Mercedes sat against the curb, and as they approached, the man Jewell now knew as Stephen climbed out to open their door. Before she got in the back seat of the car, Jewell handed him a small take-out bag.

“Benjamin didn’t know what you liked, so I got you a plate of spaghetti and meatballs. Is that okay?”

The older man smiled widely. “That’s just fine, Miss Kincaid. Than you very much.”

She sat down and slid across the seat as Benjamin climbed in behind her. Soon they pulled away from the curb and Benjamin pushed a button to close the opaque screen between

the front and back seats. His arm wrapped around her shoulder and pulled her closer to his side.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are this evening?" he signed with one hand in front of them.

Jewell nodded. *"I think you've mentioned it a time or two. But I don't mind hearing it again."*

Rather than repeating the complement, Benjamin touched her chin and turned her face towards him. His kiss was a delicious combination of red wine and Marsala. Gentle fingers caressed her throat and pushed aside her shawl to expose the deep neckline of her dress. A shiver raced through her body.

The kiss deepened and their bodies shifted slightly as he edged her back onto the seat. Jewell tensed and pressed her hands against his chest. Benjamin pulled back to look into her face. His eyes asked the question. With a slight tilt of her head, Jewell motioned toward the screen.

"He can't see us," Benjamin said.

Jewell didn't say anything more, but the look in her eyes must have been enough. Benjamin smiled and straightened back up, pulling her with him. He kissed her again.

"Okay," he signed. *"But when we get to your apartment, I'm sending him home."* That slow, sexy grin melted Jewell to her toes. She answered him with another kiss.

The trip across the city only took minutes with the lack of daytime traffic. They reached her building and Stephen again opened the door for them. Benjamin waited until she started up the front stoop before signing to his driver to go on home. Jewell's skin burned with embarrassment. Imagine the kind of things Stephen thought would be going on tonight! The flush moved over her whole body. Probably the same things she

hoped would be going on. She waited at the top of the steps while Benjamin and Stephen talked.

Then he looked up at her. Benjamin stopped mid-sign and turned his full attention on her. His special smile tugged on one corner of his gorgeous mouth and those deep, seductively intense eyes moved up and down her body with a caress as tangible as his touch. Stephen drove the car away and Benjamin slowly ascended the steps. He stopped one step down and set his hands on her hips. Jewell gasped and laced her fingers into his hair as he pressed his face into her stomach to kiss the silky fabric.

His hands and mouth moved up her body as he took the last step. Benjamin's arms wrapped around her and held her impossibly close.

"Open the door, Jewell, before I die."

With his hands on her the whole way, Jewell unlocked the building doors and eventually the apartment door as well. She pushed it open, but it was Benjamin who shut it with a firm thud. Jewell turned to see him toss his jacket on the hall floor. One hand reached out and snatched away her shawl. Her back pushed against the wall as his body came against hers.

The kisses were furious, needy and on fire. In moments, her hair was free from the pins that held it all night. It cascaded over their shoulders as he nipped and sucked at the sensitivity-heightened flesh of her throat and shoulders. Jewell clung to him in desperation.

Benjamin pushed back and looked down at her, his brown eyes smoldering. "Where is Ruby?" he asked, his voice strained.

"At Mom and Dad's," she whispered, her mouth doing little more than forming the words.

“Where is the bedroom?”

Jewell lifted a weak arm and pointed down the hallway to her bedroom door. Just like in the old black and white movies Jewell watched on Turner Classics, Benjamin swept her up into his arms and carried her down the hall. She pressed her face into the stubble-rough side of his cheek and drew his earlobe between her teeth. His fingertips pressed hard into her thigh and side where he held her.

Benjamin kicked open her door. It hit the wall with a loud bang. The neighbors would wonder what was going on in their usually quiet apartment, but right now Jewell didn't care. He knelt on the bed with one knee and set her down on the quilt covering it. Jewell had never known such a feeling of being swept out of control. She was enflamed and uncontrollable. In moments, Benjamin's tie was ripped away and they both made fast work of the onyx buttons on his shirt. Jewell caught her breath, and her blood turned to molten lava when he pulled the shirt off and tossed it away.

His body was beautiful. Ever since seeing him in a tee shirt that night weeks before, she imagined what he would look like without any clothing. It didn't hold a candle to the truth. Benjamin wasn't muscle-bound or over-bulky, but toned, hard and tantalizing. Jewell skimmed her palm over his biceps and pectorals down to the buttons at his waist.

Benjamin moaned and the weight of his body pressed her into the mattress. She memorized the feeling of his back beneath her palm as his hands moved up her thighs and worked the hem of her dress higher. His hips settled against hers and his fingers slipped inside the top of her thigh-high stockings. The thin material that remained between their bodies did little to hide the evidence of his desire. Every time he moved against

her, she nearly crawled from her own skin. Jewell did her best to keep from digging her nails into his back.

The phone rang and she ignored it. The zipper of her dress was open beyond her waist and his strong hands kneaded her backside and thigh beneath the fabric. The phone rang again. The straps were off her shoulders and his hot mouth burned her nipple through the flimsy fabric of her corset. A third ring, but her fingers released the button of his pants and his moan vibrated against her throat. Ring four. The machine picked up and her annoyingly cheery voice asked them to leave a message.

Go away! Leave us alone! God, Benjamin, touch me again!

Her thought splintered in thousands of directions but nothing mattered. Somewhere through the oblivion outside his touch a voice reached Jewell's senses. She tried to push it away, but it made it through nonetheless.

"Miss Kincaid, this is Stephen. I have a message for Mr. Roth, most urgent. Please, if you are there, pick up. It is very, very important." The distress in Stephen's voice snapped through her ecstasy.

With desperate effort, Jewell pushed up on Benjamin's chest. Before he could pull her back, she slipped away and rolled toward the phone on her bedside table. Before the message ended, she held the phone to her ear. She turned and saw a very bewildered Benjamin watch her.

"*It's Stephen,*" she signed as she tried to hold her dress against her breasts and the phone at the same time. "Stephen? It's Jewell. What's wrong?"

Benjamin swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat watching her.

“Miss Kincaid, it’s just horrible. I’ve just received a call from Mr. Roth’s family. They called me in the car as I haven’t reached the townhouse yet.”

Jewell relayed the information to Benjamin. His face clouded over.

“Yes?” she said into the phone.

“It’s Miss Victoria. She’s dead. She was shot and killed, and her fiancé is in custody.”

Jewell’s heart froze and her knees buckled. She nearly collapsed back onto the bed. “Dear God,” she managed to whisper.

“You’ve got to tell Mr. Roth. His presence is requested at his parent’s home in Connecticut immediately.”

Jewell hung up the phone and swallowed hard against the hot lump in her throat. Her hands shook as she set the phone down. Benjamin grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. Deep lines furrowed his forehead and his eyes searched her face. With Herculean effort, Jewell raised her hands and told him.

His jaw fell open and immediate tears welled in his eyes. Benjamin shoved her hands away as she signed, as if in an attempt to silence her.

“No,” he yelled.

“*I’m so sorry.*” Jewell couldn’t speak, the words caught in her throat. “*Benjamin, I’m so sorry.*”

“No! It’s not true!” His voice was loud and painful, expressing his sorrow in a way she could never imagine. “No!”

He jumped up, but she touched his back and he sank down again into the bed. Benjamin held his head in his hands and shook it side to side.

Jewell draped her arm across his back and pressed her lips against his shoulder blade. He tried to pull away, but she didn't let him. Now, if ever, she needed to hang on.

Benjamin slid from the bed, his knees hitting the floor with a loud thud. His body fell across Jewell's lap and a heart-wrenching sob shook his shoulders. Jewell leaned over him and wrapped her arms around him as best she could. Arms circled her waist and he buried his face into her lap. Silent cries rocked his body and his tears soaked through her dress. She could do nothing but hold on and pray.

Love him when he thinks there is nothing left to love. Give him something to love when there isn't anything left.

Victoria's words echoed in Jewell's heart and pounded in her ears. Tears poured down her cheeks and left damp trails on Benjamin's back. He cursed, moaned and called them all liars, and cried until Jewell's heart nearly burst. She held him. Held him and loved him with everything she had.

Ten

Jewell drove Benjamin's car the near-two hour drive to Hartford, Connecticut. Benjamin didn't speak a word from the time they left his house until they reached the Hartford city limits. His silence worried her and made Jewell's heart ache. She wanted to ease his pain somehow, but didn't know what to do. The only thing she could do, that he would allow, was to hold his hand across the center console. But his fingers were flaccid in hers.

At first he planned on going to Connecticut alone. Eventually the shock wore off and his steel resolve returned, Benjamin stood and picked up his clothing. When Stephen called she told him he didn't need to come back, so Benjamin asked her to do him the favor of calling him a cab. She said she would go home with him, and at first he actually looked shocked. When Jewell said she wanted to be with him, and to attend the ceremonies, Benjamin finally conceded. Jewell packed quickly and they took a cab together to his home to get whatever he needed. They were on the Mass Pike heading south by one in the morning.

As they came into Hartford, Benjamin provided only enough instruction as was necessary. Turn here. Next exit. Stay on this road. They moved through downtown and headed into

the suburbs. The buildings changed from brick apartments to small cottages and colonials, to larger colonials and Victorians, finally growing in size to huge homes and mansions. The lawns grew in size in proportion to the size of house. Benjamin indicated an upcoming right turn into what looked like a side street.

"It's right here," he said quietly. His voice cracked as he spoke.

Jewell slowed and turned the car. When she did, she realized it wasn't a side street, but instead the entrance of a driveway. White granite pillars stood on either side of the drive with an iron banner bridging between them. The name Willow Wood Manor was formed within the arch. The iron gate stood closed and foreboding.

She stopped the car. Like a speaker at a fast food drive thru, a small box protruded from the ground on the right side of the car. Jewell looked to Benjamin.

"Just tell them it's me," he signed in a tired, slow action.

Jewell nodded and rolled down the window.

"State your name and business," said a dull, deep voice through the static of the speaker.

"Jewell Kincaid and Benjamin Roth." The words stuck in her throat. What else should she say? How could she say it?

She heard a click and the gate slowly open. An ominous sense of dread settled into her bones. As they pulled through, Jewell felt like an inmate on death row walking the green mile. Silver moonlight bathed the expansive piece of property. Jewell drove slowly up the winding drive of paved cobblestone. Giant, ancient willow trees lined them on both sides with their long branches drooping down to nearly touch the ground. Green-silver leaves covered the grass and stone.

"Oh, my God," Jewell mumbled as the house came into view.

It was huge. Jewell had only seen houses like this on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Or maybe *Gone With The Wind*. Four marble columns, three stories high, framed the front entrance that was reached by a dozen marble steps fifteen feet wide. The entire house glimmered a pristine white in the moonlight. Rows and rows of oversized windows created the front façade of the house, and light streamed onto the ground through half a dozen of them. The drive opened up in front of the house to create a large parking area. Jewell pulled the car to an open spot on the left side of the space and shifted it into park. She turned off the ignition and the car fell into darkness as the dashboard lights went out.

Jewell looked across the small space to watch Benjamin's profile. The fingers of his right hand drummed on his thigh and he stared at the lights of the house. Tears burned in Jewell's eyes and the ache that had sat on her heart since the call came grew to an almost unbearable weight. More than anything in the world, Jewell wanted to take some of the darkness from his eyes and carry some of the weight for him. She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder, kneading gently the tense muscles beneath her fingers.

He didn't take his eyes off the house. With a weary slowness, Benjamin lifted his hands just far enough off his lap to sign.

"I want to apologize now for the next few days. You shouldn't have come here."

Jewell moved across the seat until their hips touched. She leaned her cheek against his arm and signed in abbreviation with one hand in front of them.

"I'm here for you. Don't worry about me at all. You do what you need to do, and I'll be beside you when you need me."

He reached up to wrap his fingers around her hand and press her knuckles against his lips. Still, Benjamin didn't look at her.

Jewell wished he would show some sign of emotion beyond the detached and stoic expression. Since his initial and intense reaction to the news of Victoria's death, Benjamin had shown no other emotional sign. Granted, only a matter of hours had passed, but it worried her.

Benjamin sighed heavily. He released her hand to sign. *"You've seen a small glimpse of what my father is like. You have no idea the extent of contempt he holds for me. Because you are with me that contempt will also fall on you."* He shook his head roughly. *"What the hell was I thinking? Take the car and go back to Boston."* The firm jerk of his hand indicated it was a demand, not a request.

Jewell shook her head. *"No, I'm here for the duration. For you. I can handle whatever comes."*

He finally turned his head to meet her eyes. *"I believe you can handle it, Jewell. I don't think you should have to."*

She gave him a small smile and touched his cheek with her fingertips. Her heart reached out to him, and Jewell wished more than anything in the world Benjamin knew how much she loved him. How far she would go and how much she would do for him.

With a deep sigh, Benjamin opened his door and pulled himself from the car. They each took a suitcase from the trunk, and Benjamin held her hand as they moved towards the house.

He opened the substantial front door, shedding light across their bodies and over the top step. Jewell heard voices coming from somewhere in the house, but couldn't determine from what direction. The front hall was huge and seemed to gleam. White marble made up the floor, and the crystal chandelier that hung two stories over their head bathed the pristine marble in a warm glow.

Benjamin set their suitcases at the foot of an open, winding staircase and held out his hand. Jewell took it and allowed him

to pull her forward. His grip was firm, almost too firm. If he had to hang on a little tighter than usual, Jewell wouldn't refuse him. If he hung on so tight it took her breath away, she wouldn't say no.

A man dressed in a dark suit came out of a door down the hall that branched off the foyer. Benjamin recognized him as the head of security for his parent's estate, Tom Declan.

"Jimmy informed me you came through the front gate," the man said, his expression flat and unfriendly. Benjamin couldn't recall ever seeing a smile on Tom's face.

"Where is everyone?" Benjamin asked.

"They're in the sitting room."

"Fine. I'll go down."

Tom raised his hand. "I don't think that's wise, Mr. Roth. Tensions are high right now."

Anger momentarily filled the black hole in his chest, and he clenched his jaw. Benjamin shook his head. "No, I'll go."

"Mr. Roth."

"This is not up for debate, Declan."

The security guard nodded his head only slightly. He motioned with his hand down the hall, a half-hearted concession to Benjamin's statement.

He turned to Jewell, who still stood at his side, her small hand engulfed in his. She looked up at him and her gaze was like a cooling salve to his fury. For her benefit, he tried to smile. "Jewell, why don't you go get some sleep? It's been a long night for you. You can take any room along the hall to the left."

Jewell shook her head and put her hand in the bend of his elbow. "No. This is where I'm staying. The sooner you accept that fact, the easier it will be."

Benjamin laid his palm against her cheek and stroked her lips before he kissed them. Just a brief touch, but the kiss was

enough to make his feet move down the hall. She wrapped her arms around his body and squeezed him tightly. With her arm behind his back, and his across her shoulder, they walked past Tom Declan and down the hall. He saw her take in the silver accents and crystal chandeliers and overly opulent décor, but avoided looking around himself. For Benjamin, this wasn't a homecoming. This place held no positive memories for him except for the ones with his little sister.

Something in him seized. It nearly knocked him to his knees. Pain shot through Benjamin's chest as if his heart were truly breaking into thousands of pieces. His steps faltered. If it weren't for Jewell's arm around him, Benjamin wasn't sure he would've remained standing. He turned and leaned back against the wall, Jewell moving with him. Her hands held his side and Benjamin wrapped his arms around her.

Jewell's lips formed his name and moisture glistened in her bright eyes.

He looked to the ceiling. Hot tears burned his eyes and threatened to fall. How tight could he hold Jewell before she pushed away? Benjamin clung to the sanity she gave him, the only sanity he had left. Her arms moved around his neck and he bent to bury his face in her hair. Viciously, he swallowed the lump that choked him. Somehow, when he felt the most out of control and overrun, holding Jewell in his arms gave him a raft in the chaos. Never in his thirty-three years did he believe one person could be so much to him. Didn't ever think he needed someone this much. But now that he had her, he wondered what he would do without her.

Her hands stroked his face, and Benjamin straightened to look down at her. The verdant green of Jewell's eyes sparkled with unshed tears. Jewell ran her thumb across his cheek to dry moisture he didn't realize was there.

"I can't believe she's gone," he signed. He didn't want to risk being heard by anyone but Jewell. *"I don't believe it yet. I can't. If I do, I'll go crazy. Crazy."*

She stroked his face and chest and held his hands still. Jewell kissed his knuckles and palms and fingertips. She stood on her toes to kiss his cheek.

"You won't go crazy," she told him. *"I won't let you. I'll hang on to you and I won't let go. If you just let me."*

Benjamin took a deep breath into shaking lungs. He fought the chaos inside and held her cheek against his chest. The fragrant scent of her hair drifted up to him and he kissed the softness. With a quick touch of his lips to hers, Benjamin pushed off the wall and took her hand. For now his strength was renewed.

They reached the parlor door, which was shut, and Benjamin hesitated with his hand resting on the brass latch. With a quick look into Jewell's eyes, he pushed it down and the door opened.

The next several minutes were a blur, partially because everyone tried to speak to him at once. Aunts, cousins and a variety of other relatives he had not seen in years immediately surrounded them. A quick glance over everyone's head told him neither of his parents were in the room. Benjamin raised his hands in a silent request for everyone to be still.

He looked to Jewell. What he had to do grated on every nerve and fought every resolve Benjamin held since being sent to boarding school at five years old. Benjamin hated doing it, hated admitting it, but he needed help. Needed her help. There were too many faces and too many questions. Too many people who didn't know how to let him understand, and too many people ignorant to why he couldn't. Ignorant because who he was had been suppressed and denied since his birth.

Jewell stood waiting. Near enough that he could touch her, but far enough away to not suffocate. Benjamin held her gaze for a split moment before raising his hands.

"I need your help."

She smiled, a slow and warm smile that immediately calmed Benjamin's frazzled nerves. Not completely, but enough to clear his mind. Jewell nodded, and stepped closer to face him.

Benjamin turned to his Aunt Frances, sister to his sonofabitch father. "Where are my parents?"

"Your father and Dr. Khalil just took your mother upstairs to her bedroom. Dr. Khalil prescribed some tranquilizers and sleeping pills. She was hysterical near out of her mind," Jewell signed for him his aunt's words.

Benjamin nodded. Jewell pointed to his Aunt Margaret, another Roth sister, to indicate she now spoke.

"It's been horrible, Ben. We all have been here since yesterday afternoon, and she hasn't calmed down since it happened."

Benjamin straightened and looked to Aunt Margaret. Heat rushed over his entire body and an immediate fury fired his blood in a split second.

"Friday afternoon?"

"Yes. Your father called from the hospital, but by then it was already over. We all came straight here."

"Why wasn't I contacted sooner?"

"We thought you were. We just assumed. But Mr. McDaniel, George that is, told us he didn't think you had been."

Benjamin could barely see Jewell's hands anymore. Anger blurred his vision. That sonofabitch! Victoria had been dead hours before anyone had bothered to call him. Even then, it was a member of the staff and not even family. It never occurred to Benjamin the message from Stephen hadn't come directly from his parents. A vicious rage seized him.

Jonathan Roth picked that inopportune moment to come back into the parlor. Benjamin saw his father come in out of the corner of his eye and turned sharply on him.

Two deep strides closed the space between father and son. Benjamin clenched his fists at his side to keep from raising them in violence. He ground his jaw together. Jonathan Roth seemed surprised to see him, and Benjamin realized the man probably had no intention of calling him at all. His father probably didn't know anyone had.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Benjamin said, projecting his voice until his throat hurt. "I should have been called as soon as—soon as—"

As soon as what? As soon as she was taken to the hospital? As soon as she was dead? Damn! He didn't even know what happened yet, only that Victoria was gone and David did it.

"I just lost my daughter!"

"She was my sister." Benjamin felt a catch in his throat. "She was my sister!" Damn it! His eyes burned. He clenched and released his fists to try and maintain his slipping control.

The other people in the room intervened, moving between the two men to put space between them. Jewell's hand pressed against his chest. Benjamin spun on the balls of his feet and stormed through the mass of people, the heels of his hands pressed against his eyes. When Benjamin reached the far wall he looked back over his shoulder. Everyone moved and talked in a frenzy.

Jewell moved towards him, and his father lifted his hand to point at Benjamin. Jon Roth's ugly face twisted in a nasty grimace as he said something Benjamin could not read. Benjamin was surprised when Jewell turned on his father and brought her hand up abruptly. Her brow furrowed as she said something back. Jonathan's face registered shock and his agape jaw snapped shut.

She reached him and her calming hands touched his back and arm. Benjamin stared out the window into the dark night. He fought down the emotion raging through him. His loss of control was infuriating. It was a weakness he hated and couldn't allow.

Jewell touched his cheek and gently urged him to look at her. Her eyes were distraught and she seemed to take in the details of his face.

"Benjamin," she said.

No matter how many times he watched those lips speak his name, it always had the same powerful effect. Jewell instantly had his full and undivided attention. She took her hands off him to sign and he immediately felt the loss.

"Let's just go get some sleep. You need rest."

He didn't look in his father's direction and did his best to avoid the condescending eyes of his family. Benjamin took Jewell's hand and quickly left the parlor. Without pausing, he grabbed their luggage and led Jewell up the giant staircase to the second floor. At the top, he turned left and took her to the furthest corner of the family living space. His old bedroom was at the other end of the house, but he didn't want to go there. Too many memories.

They reached the last few doors of guest rooms. Benjamin opened the last one and led Jewell inside. A large brass canopy bed sat against the opposite wall with an assortment of furniture scattered throughout the room. He turned on a small lamp beside the bed and it shed a soft light over everything.

"The bathroom is through that door there," he said, pointing to the partially open door. *"One of the housekeepers can get you whatever you need."* He took Jewell's bag and set it on the bed. *"Try to get some sleep."*

Jewell touched his arm. *"You sound like you're not going to be here."*

"I'm taking the room across the hall. No one else will come down this far. These are the smaller, less used rooms."

Jewell shook her head and took his hand in a firm grip. "No, Benjamin. Don't."

"Don't what?"

Jewell slipped between him and the edge of the bed. She laid her hands on his arms and looked up at him. The softness of her eyes warmed him and he wanted to wrap her in his arms to forget the entire night. How could something that started so great end up so horrifically? Just hours ago they were on the verge of making love. A huge step in a relationship to which he hadn't dared yet put a definition. It occurred to him neither one of them had made such an attempt. Other than Jewell's lecture that if she didn't mean something to him, why did he get jealous.

"Don't sleep in the other room. Stay with me."

He tried to read her eyes, but what Benjamin saw confused him. Was it concern or pity? Since when did he want either one? Certainly not pity. In his entire life he neither sought nor received affection or consolation from another person, with the exclusion of his sister. When did he become so weak and needy?

Benjamin stepped back and stalked across the room to the French doors that opened onto a balcony outside. He raked his fingers roughly through his hair and turned back to face her.

"Don't coddle me, Jewell. I've never been coddled and I don't intend to let it happen now."

She crossed her arms over her body and took a step towards him. The slight shake of her head tossed her hair gently around her shoulders. "Benjamin, I know you. I know that isn't what you want. Coddling and caring are two different things. I care. Very much. I don't want to be alone tonight any more than you do."

He stared at her and wondered what this beautiful woman was doing here with him. What made her give a damn about him? Could two people be any more opposite? Jewell moved to him and took his hands. The dim light from the lamp lit her hair like a halo. Benjamin thought she looked like an angel. Despite his steel resolve and numb emotions, Jewell touched him in a way he never expected. Beyond sex. Beyond lust. She touched his body, but at the same time, she touched something much deeper.

“Sleep here. With me. I won’t be able to rest at all if you don’t.”

A variety of delectable thoughts and images hit Benjamin’s mind, all of which he knew he would not and could not entertain in a manner that would do them justice. But some flirting might do him some good. He grinned slowly. *“Do you think you’d rest if I stayed?”*

Jewell smiled softly and wagged a gently scolding finger against his chest. “Yes, I do. We are both very tired and I think that once our heads hit those pillows, we are going to be out until morning.”

Benjamin nodded and conceded with a smile. He knew she was right. Sleep already pulled at his eyelids and weighed down his limbs. A deep sigh filled his lungs and pushed Benjamin’s shoulders down with its release.

“Stay with me, Benjamin,” she said again.

Jewell tugged at his hand and urged him to sit on the edge of the bed. Benjamin didn’t have the strength to argue. He didn’t realize until that moment just how tired he was. Even as he watched Jewell pop off her shoes and shrug off her jeans, the stirring of his blood wasn’t enough to make him move.

She stood before him, dressed only in her shirt, and helped him take off his own clothes. Minutes later they both pulled back the duvet and slid into the cool sheets of the bed. Jewell

turned on her side and curled her body against him, her bottom settling into Benjamin's lap. He pulled her against him and reveled in the amazing pleasure of holding Jewell in his arms.

Benjamin let his body relax into the bed and brushed her hair aside to kiss the back of her neck. Sleep moved quickly through his limbs.

"Good night, Jewell," he said into the darkness.

~ * ~

A soft knock at the door slowly stirred Jewell from sleep a few short hours later. Somewhere on the outskirts of her conscious mind, the low but steady rapping worked its way into her senses. Jewell pushed back her hair and lifted her head from the pillow.

The pleasant weight across her waist didn't register until she moved to sit up. Benjamin's arm draped over her hips and his body pressed against hers in sleep. Jewell edged her way from beneath his hold, trying not to wake him, and slipped from the covers. She hated leaving the warmth and sensation of Benjamin's sleeping body beside her.

As she edged away, his fingers curled and hung onto the edge of her tee shirt. A smile edged up her lips and Jewell slowly freed her shirt from his sleeping grasp. He moaned softly and shifted. The knocking continued and, with a groan, she extracted herself completely from the bed.

Jewell slipped on her jeans and buttoned them as she reached the door. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and opened it.

"Yes?" she said as she cracked open the door.

An older gentleman stood in the hall, his gray hair mussed and dark bags beneath his eyes. He looked as tired as Jewell felt.

"Miss Kincaid?" he asked, his voice sounding weathered.

"Yes?" she said, stifling a yawn.

“I’m sorry to wake you so early, Miss Kincaid,” said the elderly man. “My name is George McDaniel. I’m looking for Benjamin. I tried his old room, but he wasn’t there. One of the other members of household staff said she thought this was your room, and I hoped you might know where he is.”

Jewell stood straighter when he told her his name. “McDaniel? Are you David’s grandfather?”

He nodded, and Jewell saw the sudden glisten in his eyes as they brimmed with moisture.

She opened the door. “Please, come in.”

“I’m sure both you and Benjamin were told that David killed Victoria. It’s just not true. I can’t believe it.”

Jewell could hear the quiver in Mr. McDaniel’s voice, and knew it was hard for him to even speak about what had happened. She let him into the room and shut the door behind him.

Benjamin stirred again in the bed and reached across the mattress to where she had been. “Jewell?” he mumbled in a sleepy voice.

She walked back to the bed so he could see her. When Jewell stepped into view, Benjamin smiled and reached out to her. Never had she imagined anything so sexy as Benjamin, naked from the waist up and looking slightly rumpled from sleep, beckoning her to join him again beneath the covers. Jewell took his hand and he tried to pull her back into bed.

“What’re you doing out of bed?”

Jewell smiled back and glanced towards where George McDaniel stood. He looked away, not meeting her eyes, and Jewell realized what he must assume. He came here thinking she might know where Benjamin was, and there he lay in her bed. She didn’t know whether she should be ashamed or pleased with her lack of embarrassment in the discovery.

Reluctantly, she released his hand. *“George McDaniel is here, Benjamin. He needs to speak with you.”*

Benjamin sat up and looked around the canopy of the bed to see him. He nodded and the shadows returned to his face. Obviously, for a few minutes he had been able to forget why they were there. George’s presence brought it back. Slowly, he forced himself from the bed and pulled on his slacks as he stood.

“Come sit down.”

George sat in an upholstered chair adjacent to the bed. Benjamin raked his wavy hair with his fingers and rubbed his palm over his face. His glance fell on her briefly and one eyebrow arched. She nodded slightly, letting him know she was fine.

Jewell stood off to the side. She felt this was something of which she wasn’t quite part. Even though she knew Victoria, and was devastated herself by the young woman’s death, Jewell still wasn’t quite part of it all. Self-conscious, she slipped away and went into the bathroom, grabbing her case as she went.

With the door closed behind her, Jewell hesitantly looked in the mirror. The fatigue was clear as day on her face. She glanced at her wristwatch. It was six o’clock in the morning. Good Lord! They slept maybe three hours, if that much. Wanting to give Benjamin his space, yet wanting to be close if he needed her, Jewell quickly opened her bag and made herself presentable. She changed into a pair of wool blend slacks and a sweater and worked her chaotic curls into a neat, more appropriate French braid. A cool washcloth and a touch of make-up took some of the fatigue from her face. After slipping on a pair of shoes, Jewell opened the door and went back into the bedroom.

George had moved the chair closer to the side of the bed. The two men sat close together, their stances angled into the

small circle formed by the chairs and bed. Even as she came around the end of the bed, Jewell saw dampness on George's cheek. For the moment, none of them spoke. Benjamin sat forward with his right elbow braced on his thigh and his brow in the palm of his hand.

Jewell swallowed back emotion and moved to Benjamin's side. She touched his shoulder gently. Not looking up, he took her hand and pulled her down to sit beside him. The grip on her hand was almost painful, but she didn't pull away. She looked to George.

"Mr. McDaniel?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know who else to turn to."

"George has asked me to post bail for David and help him find a lawyer."

Shock forced Jewell to look from Benjamin to Mr. McDaniel. David's grandfather wiped a line of moisture from his wrinkled cheek.

"David did not kill Victoria. Please, Benjamin, please. Go and talk to him. He'll tell you what happened. Benjamin, you know David loved your sister more than his own life."

Benjamin watched George speak, and the more George explained the tighter the grip on her hand grew. Jewell covered their joined hands with her other.

George continued. "David swore to me, before they took him away, that your father had threatened him with the gun and Victoria lunged between them to stop him. He pulled the trigger, and the bullet meant for David killed Victoria."

A cold shudder moved down Jewell's spine.

Benjamin stood abruptly. "What evidence did they have to arrest David other than my father's word? There had to be something else."

George shook his head. “Nothing more than your father’s word. There is a hearing tomorrow for bail.”

Benjamin moved to the window and leaned his arm into the frame. His thumb pressed against the bridge of his nose and he closed his eyes. The muscle along his jaw clenched and a vein along his neck bulged. Tension pulled his body tighter than a bowstring, and Jewell was afraid he would soon snap from the strain.

George stood and touched Jewell’s shoulder. “I’ll be here when he needs me. Tell him that for me.”

Jewell nodded and he left. She was lost, didn’t know what to do or what to say. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she watched the man she loved fight a battle deep in his soul.

Eleven

“You’re where?”

“Hartford, Connecticut.”

“What are you doing in Hartford?” Garnett asked. His voice carried his surprise through the phone line as it raised several octaves.

Jewell rested her elbow on the bedside table and covered her eyes with her hand. She was so tired. Her head pounded and her eyelids were lined with lead. It would be so easy to just shift from the chair to the bed and snuggle down into the softness.

“Something pretty terrible happened, Garnett. Benjamin’s sister, Victoria, is dead.”

“What? What happened?”

“She was shot, supposedly by the man she was engaged to. It happened yesterday morning. We got the call late yesterday and arrived here early this morning. I’m going to stay here until after the funeral. I need to be here with Benjamin.”

Garnett mumbled a curse under his breath. She barely heard through the earpiece. Jewell knew it wasn't an explicative spawned from anger, but more from shock and empathy.

"Okay. I'll tell Mom and Dad. Do you think Ruby will be okay at the apartment alone?"

Jewell nodded against her hand in subconscious answer. Her eyelids slipped down and weights pull at her limbs. "She'll be fine. It'll only be for two or three days." She heard the shower turn off in the bathroom. "Things are horrible here, Garnett. Keep us in your prayers."

"Watch yourself. I haven't forgotten what you told me."

"I will. I love you. Give everyone my love."

She hung up the brass accented princess phone and stifled a yawn behind her hand. Jewell didn't know what she needed more, breakfast or sleep. Her stomach grumbled loudly and painfully in argument for top position.

It all still seemed unreal to her. Twelve hours ago she and Benjamin enjoyed a delicious and romantic dinner together. They went back to her apartment and... a dizzying current at the memory of their near-intimacy seized her.

Jewell sat up and forced her eyes open. With an exhausted moan, she looked around the posh bedroom. Benjamin told her these bedrooms were never used because they were smaller and not as lavish as the others. Smaller? Less luxurious? Good Lord! This one room was nearly as big as Jewell's entire apartment. The bathroom alone was bigger than her bedroom.

The house was more extravagant than Jewell ever imagined any house being. It wasn't a house. It was a mansion. Everywhere she looked was silver and crystal and gold accents. The floors were marble or hardwood and the windows were covered with rich brocade or velvet draperies. Jewell couldn't

imagine living in a place like this all the time. It was opulent and beautiful, but also sterile and cold. She would much rather have a small, warm home where the people in it were more important than the materials that constructed it.

Jewell looked to the bed. The covers were still rumpled from their few short hours of sleep. A warm glow flowed over Jewell's body. The memory of waking up with his arms around her and holding her close, wrapped around her like a warm blanket.

"What are you smiling about?" Benjamin asked. He sat down on the edge of the bed to face her.

Jewell smiled wider and leaned back in her chair. "*Some pleasant memories.*"

Benjamin looked away and rubbed a small towel over his damp hair. She studied the multiple facets of his expression. On the surface Benjamin had a smile on his face and seemed calm and composed. But Jewell saw something behind his eyes. They lacked their usual lively spark, replaced by a smoldering fire. The rich brown color seemed muted and dulled by events of the last few hours.

He raked his fingers over his scalp and sighed. Jewell reached out to take his hand. After a small, and all too short, squeeze he let go. A twinge of disappointment raced up her spine.

"*Are you hungry? If nothing has changed, my parents eat breakfast in their bedrooms so we should be okay to go downstairs and eat.*"

Jewell nodded and they stood.

"*I want to talk to you about something while we eat,*" Benjamin signed as they walked.

The house was quiet, almost too quiet. Not a single sound, except for the soft click of her shoes on the stairs, echoed through the tomb-like halls. Jewell followed Benjamin down the steps and to the back of the house. A room built of glass and steel opened up off a double set of French doors. Through the transparent walls Jewell looked out onto a vast lawn. It was elaborately decorated with large hedges, flowering bushes and Grecian style pottery. In all actuality, Jewell thought the landscaping bordered on pretentious.

“Sit down here. I’ll see what I can find in the kitchen. Do you want anything in particular? Eggs? Bacon?”

Jewell shook her head. *“Anything you find. Don’t make anything.”*

Benjamin disappeared through the doors again, leaving Jewell alone in the huge room. She sat down at a small, round table and fought the desire to put her head down on the beveled glass top and close her eyes. The sound of the door opening again brought Jewell’s attention around toward it. A man came in and seemed surprised to see her sitting there. He looked to be in his late fifties with thinning hair that might have once been blonde, now speckled with gray. Jewell immediately recognized a family resemblance between this man and Benjamin. The brown of their eyes were the same, and this man had the same strong facial features.

“Oh, I’m sorry to disturb you,” he said and turned to leave again.

“No, please. Come in. You’re not disturbing me.”

He smiled and came further into the room. There was a pipe in his right hand and he lifted it, silently asking if she minded.

“Go ahead. My father smokes a pipe. I love the smell,” Jewell told him with a nod.

Once the tobacco was lit, the comforting aroma of applewood and tobacco filled the room. He sat down in a chair nearby and puffed on the wooden pipe. The scent was the first comforting thing Jewell found, except for Benjamin, since coming into this mausoleum house.

“Did I see you come in with Benjamin?” he asked.

Jewell nodded. “Yes. I’m Jewell Kincaid.”

He stood and leaned forward enough to shake her hand before sitting again. “Ben Prescott.” Jewell arched her brow. “Yes, the original. I’m Ben’s godfather. Most just call me Prescott.”

Jewell cocked her head slightly and looked again into Prescott’s face. “Oh, I thought you were perhaps an uncle. There seemed to be a family resemblance.”

This new Benjamin smiled, though it seemed tentative. “I’ll take that as a compliment, seeing what a fine looking young man my godson is.”

Jewell chuckled. She took an instant liking to this man. There was warmth in his eyes she hadn’t seen in anyone else here. Except for Benjamin, her Benjamin. What a nice thought. *Her Benjamin*. Mr. Prescott reclined and released an aromatic puff of smoke into the air.

“How did you and my godson meet?” Prescott asked.

“I work for him.”

One eyebrow arched when he looked at her. “Excuse my surprise, Miss Kincaid, but what I saw last night didn’t seem like an employer-employee relationship. The two of you appeared to be close.”

Jewell felt heat rush to her cheeks and she looked down at her folded hands. “Well, it is more than that. He’s a friend. I care very much for him.”

Familiar brown eyes looked at her from beneath gray speckled brows. A smile creased the wrinkles at their corners. "Good. Benjamin needs someone to care for him."

A comfortable silence settled between them as Benjamin's godfather enjoyed his pipe. The fragrance calmed Jewell and she felt her eyelids grow heavy. Morning sunlight came in through the glass ceiling and bathed her in natural warmth. It seeped into her bones and increased the heavy sensation of lethargy. A long, deep sigh filled Jewell's chest and drained her limbs with its release. Prescott spoke and brought her back to attention.

"You sign very well. Where did you learn?"

Jewell forced herself to sit up straighter and open her eyes. "At home. My mother is deaf."

He nodded. "Benjamin is very successful in what he does."

Jewell struggled to find a connection in his line of conversation. "Yes, he is."

The man examined his pipe and his forehead furrowed in thought. "He did it all on his own. From day one. Never got an ounce of support from Jon. I'm ashamed of all the years I stood by and let it happen." He looked at her and Jewell saw sadness in his eyes. "I didn't want to, but I didn't have much say or influence in the matter. It's about time someone came along to give Benjamin what he needs."

Jewell sighed and sat forward. "Can I ask you something, Mr. Prescott?"

"Of course."

"You aren't the first person in Benjamin's family who has told me he needs love and support and just plain *someone*. I've been told things about his childhood, not from him, that makes me want to cry. Why is it if everyone knows he needs this,

Benjamin had to wait until he was thirty-three years old and hired me as his executive assistant before he got it? I don't mean to sound judgmental, but I don't understand."

He nodded. "You're a very perceptive young woman, Jewell. I think if you were to choose one word to describe this family, that word would be denial. Deny the pain and it won't hurt. Deny the problem and it'll go away. Better yet, someone else will come along and fix it for you."

The door opened again and Benjamin came into the room. "I found some bagels, muffins, fruit and juice. Do you want some coffee? I brought that, too." He set an overflowing tray of food down on the table.

Jewell looked up and smiled. "Thank you. I was just having a nice talk with your godfather."

Benjamin turned and saw Mr. Prescott for the first time. He nodded in greeting. "Ben. How is Abigail? Last I heard from her, she was about to graduate from Emerson College. I only saw her briefly this morning when we arrived, but we didn't speak."

Ben Prescott nodded. "She's upset over Victoria, of course. We all are. But other than that, she's well. I'll tell her you asked about her."

"Tell her to call me the next time she's in Boston. We'll have dinner and catch up. She was a good kid."

"I'll tell her. Abigail always looked up to you. Kind of like a brother."

Jewell looked into Prescott's face. She thought she heard a slight waver in his voice when he spoke of Abigail. Just from the drift of the conversation, Jewell assumed Abigail might be Prescott's daughter, and probably several years younger than Benjamin.

Benjamin nodded. The small talk ended and an uncomfortable silence settled into the room. In Benjamin's face there was little expression, but the other man's features struggled to hide a wealth of emotion. Prescott's lips pressed together and he finally looked away. That was the extent of the conversation between the two men and Benjamin sat down across from her. Within moments the older man stood and left the room. Jewell watched him go, then turned her attention back to Benjamin.

"Everything looks delicious. I'm starving."

Benjamin set a steaming cup of coffee in front of her along with a gigantic blueberry muffin. Jewell took a small cup of melons and strawberries from the tray. After taking several bites of each, she realized Benjamin wasn't eating. Self-conscious, Jewell set her fork down.

"You aren't eating?"

Benjamin lifted his cup of coffee. "This is enough for me. I'm not hungry."

Jewell pushed aside the remains of the muffin. *"You said you wanted to talk to me about something."*

Benjamin held her gaze and his eyes seemed to grow darker in intensity. A small 'v' formed above the bridge of his nose. He reached across the table and took her hand. His thumb rubbed in a gentle caress across Jewell's skin. But Benjamin didn't speak, didn't sign. It was a strange silence. The silence of anticipation. Jewell felt a quivering tension flutter in her stomach.

"Benjamin, what's wrong?"

He stood abruptly and brought her to her feet. Before Jewell could react or wonder what he was doing, Benjamin pulled her into a firm embrace. His lips covered hers as his fingers tilted

her head back to deepen the kiss. Without a moment's thought to resist him, Jewell returned fully every ounce he gave. The kiss surprised her, but the tumbling butterflies in her core rewarded her shock.

Their lips parted, but Benjamin didn't loosen his hold. Jewell tilted her head to look up into his face. A smile tugged up at the corner of her mouth.

"Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?" she asked with a chuckle in her voice.

One corner of his lips curved up and his eyes fixed on her mouth. "Close enough. Thank you for coming here with me."

"You're welcome, but you don't need to thank me. I never thought of doing anything else."

Benjamin kissed her again quickly before freeing Jewell from his hold. "You look tired."

As if spurred by his statement, Jewell stifled a yawn behind her fingers. "I guess so. I'm the type that needs a good solid eight hours or I don't function well at all."

Benjamin's fingers touched her cheek. "I have some people I want to see and some things I need to look into. No need for you to come. Why don't you go back upstairs and lie down?"

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Go on back up and get some rest. I want you bright and chipper this afternoon."

"Oh? Why?"

His smile was wide, but lacked its usual depth. Even when they first met, and Jewell hadn't gotten through his abrasive exterior yet, she saw more animation and personality behind his eyes than she did now. The walls that Benjamin had built in the few short hours since his sister's death were now high and thick. Jewell wondered what it would take to get them down.

“George just let me know Jameson, Prescott’s son, is coming here this afternoon. He actually attended the same boarding school as I did, but some years ahead of me. That’s how my parents found the place. We always got along fairly well. I’d like you to meet him and his wife.”

Jewell nodded. “I’d like to meet more of your family. All right. I’ll go take a small nap. Where can I find you later?”

He kissed her again. “*I’ll find you.*”

~ * ~

David sat across from Benjamin without speaking. His fingers laced behind his neck, his forehead resting on the green metal table in the tiny interrogation room. The air smelled of stale cigarette smoke and body odor. Benjamin wrinkled his nose at the stench and drummed his fingertips on the cold steel. He saw David’s shoulders rise and fall.

“Talk to me, David,” Benjamin said.

David slowly raised his head, his bloodshot gaze meeting Benjamin’s. His upper lip was pulled tight over his teeth, but his chin quivered as tears ran unabated down his cheeks. His hands curled and opened in tight fists.

“Why are you here, Ben?” he asked. “Do you want me to confess? To say I killed her? Your father’s lawyer has already been here, and I wouldn’t admit it to him. Why should I to you?”

Benjamin shook his head. “I’m here because George asked me to come. He wants you to tell me what happened.”

David slammed his fist on the table, the shock vibrating through Benjamin’s hands, and he jumped to his feet. “I didn’t kill her. God, she was my life!”

Benjamin fought fiercely against the hard, unforgiving lump in his throat. There was no way he would let the raw

ferociousness of his emotions get to him here. Not now. Not until he knew David's version of the truth.

"David, you know me well enough to know that I would not be here on my father's behalf. I need to know what happened."

David shoved his fingers through his hair before sitting down again. Perspiration glistened on his forehead and he wrung his hands together, as if trying to remove a smudge or stain.

"Victoria called me on Friday. Told me she'd decided to leave your father's house for good. She wanted to be with me, no matter what, and prayed your father would eventually accept it. She told me to come to the house and pick her up.

"But when I got there, your father was in a rage. I heard him screaming from his den, then I heard Victoria's voice. I ran in and they were arguing. He had her arm and she was fighting to get away from him. I jumped in."

"Had he been drinking?" Benjamin asked.

David nodded. "I would say yes. There was a broken bottle of scotch on the rug, so the room reeked of it. But his speech was slurred and his eyes were bloodshot."

"What was he saying?"

"That he wouldn't let her leave. Wouldn't let her destroy her life by marrying me."

Benjamin ran his palm over his face. He could almost see the scene play out in his mind. It all sounded so typical of Jon Roth. Memories of his adolescence and teen years flashed in his mind.

"I stepped in—fought him to release her. He let go and we started to leave. Then Jon yelled out and I heard the click of a gun."

David pressed his eyes closed, tears pressing out. His face twisted with anguish. Benjamin's chest squeezed tight and it was hard to take in a deep breath. His throat burned.

"Did you fight him with the gun? Is that how it went off?"

David slowly shook his head. The pained expression that twisted his face made it hard for Benjamin to read his lips. He had to ask David to say it again. The man who could have been his brother-in-law wiped his hand over his face, attempting to dry his cheeks. He took a deep breath and shoved his fingers through his hair.

"I shoved Victoria behind me and told her to get out. Jon was waving the gun around. I don't remember most of what he said, but I tried to reason with him. The gun went off once and hit the wall behind our heads.

"Jon was crazy," he continued to explain, his head moving slowly side to side and his eyes distant. "I had seen him angry before. Like the day he found out about us. But I never imagined anything like this."

David took a moment to sip at the cup of coffee Benjamin had brought him. It had to be only lukewarm at best, and was from the stained pot in the officer's bull pen, so Benjamin imagined it was bitter and tasted like something akin to tar. The grimace on David's face confirmed it.

"My father can be a violent man. But David—"

"Violent doesn't begin to describe him," David insisted, raising his hand to stop Benjamin mid-sentence. "I tried to get Victoria out of the room. I was pushing her toward the door. That was when Jon said he'd see me dead before he allowed her to be with me.

"He was pointing the gun right at us. Then he fired."

David stopped, covering his face with his hands.

“David,” Benjamin snapped, bringing him back from the dark place he obviously went to.

“Victoria pushed me to get me out of the way. The bullet—the bullet hit her instead.”

Benjamin only caught bits and pieces of the rest of the story. Unshed tears blurred his vision. David was so distraught he often looked away and Benjamin couldn’t see his lips. What he caught was horrible. Victoria fell to the floor, the bullet tearing its way through her chest. David said she was dead before he could reach her. He held her, her blood seeping into his clothing and the rug beneath them. All the while, Jon Roth stood nearby, seemingly frozen in place. People came in, but David didn’t know who. Didn’t care. He just held Victoria until the police pried her body from his arms. Then the police took him into custody.

Benjamin swallowed against the lump that filled his throat. He almost wished for a cup of the bitter coffee.

How could he go back to that house? Face his father. Now that he knew the truth. He had no doubt this was the truth. Everything David described sounded like actions Jon Roth would be fully capable of doing. But how could he face the man without wanting to squeeze the life from his murderous heart? How could he look into the face of the man who fathered him, and not see a demon? A greater beast than he had ever known?

Somehow, he would find a way. Until he could prove his father as the murdering bastard he was.

Twelve

“Good morning! Thank you for calling Bulwark Mutual Funds, office of Benjamin Roth and Jewell Kincaid. Justine speaking. How may I help you?”

Jewell chuckled softly into the phone mouthpiece. “Do you take a breath when you say that?” she teased.

“Jewell? Where are you? This is bizarre. Mr. Roth hasn’t come in yet this morning either,” their assistant gushed.

“That’s why I’m calling. We won’t be in until Thursday at the absolute earliest. I need you to cancel all meetings we’ve got set up between now and Friday and reschedule until next week. Anything we’re supposed to attend, please pass the word on we won’t be there.”

“We? Why? Jewell, what’s going on?” Then Jewell heard Justine gasp sharply. “Are you with Mr. Roth?”

Jewell rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Justine, don’t get nuts on me. I need you—”

“Oh, my God,” Justine blurted, accentuating each word. “Where are you? The Caribbean? Paris? I knew something was going on between you two. I just knew it!”

“Justine,” Jewell said loud enough to get through the other woman’s ravings. She heard a small hiccup sound as Justine reined in her enthusiasm. “Are you done?”

“Sorry. What should I give as a reason?”

Jewell looked to her left and right down the wainscoted and fabric-paneled hall to see if anyone might be within earshot. She saw no need to aggravate things with Benjamin’s family any more than she had to right now. This was the morning of day three in Willow Wood Manor and things were as tense as when they arrived, if not more so.

She sighed heavily. “Mr. Roth’s sister passed away on Friday. The wake services are tomorrow and the funeral service is Wednesday, if all happens as planned. The family is still waiting for the autopsy to be completed, then Victoria’s body will be released for burial.”

Justine groaned. “Oh, how terrible.”

Jewell blinked back the tears that burned her eyes. She cleared her throat. “Yes, it is. All you need to say is there was a death in the family. Mr. Roth will return when his family obligations are done.”

“That’s Mr. Roth. What about you?”

Jewell sighed and swallowed against the lump in her throat. Her nerves were raw and her stomach had been in knots for three days. The worst part was the growing distance between her and Benjamin. The first night here, if the three hours they slept counted, he stayed with her. She slept in Benjamin’s arms the entire night and woke warm and content beside him.

The second night, Benjamin was physically in the room with her, but Jewell knew his mind was somewhere completely different. He didn’t lie in bed with her, but sat in a chair and stared into space. Jewell asked him to join her, told him he needed the rest, but most of her signs went unanswered. When she woke up the next morning, the chair was empty and his side of the bed had gone undisturbed.

Last night he never came to the room. At three in the morning Jewell went looking for him and found Benjamin

asleep on a downstairs couch. She knelt beside him and watched him sleep for several minutes. Even in rest, his brow furrowed in deep lines and his eyelids shifted impatiently. Jewell didn't wake him. He needed rest, and if he got it best away from her then so be it.

The little things Jewell observed bothered her most. Benjamin's aversion to meeting her gaze and his avoidance of physical contact, no matter how slight or inconsequential, didn't go unnoticed. He kept his hands buried deep in his pockets most of the time, and made sure to stay at least an arms length from her when they were near each other. The constant expression of frustration and annoyance weighed heavily on her heart.

"Jewell?" Justine probed, snapping Jewell back from her silent musings.

She chuckled wryly. "Tell them we ran off and got married." Jewell heard no response, and assumed Justine was at a loss against her uncharacteristic attitude. "I'm sorry, Justine. I don't know. Improvise."

"Okay, Jewell. I'll take care of it."

Jewell hung up the phone and rested her head against the wall. She felt so out of place here. So foreign, backward and uncultured. Many times in the last two days certain things Victoria told her came back to her as she witnessed the dynamics of Benjamin's family. His godfather was right about the denial aspect. Denial and avoidance.

"Did you marry my son?" asked a small, slightly slurred female voice somewhere nearby.

It startled Jewell in the tomblike silence of the upstairs hall. She stood and looked around, but didn't see the source of the question. With slow, cautious steps Jewell moved down the wide hall. A quick glance through the first open door on her right confirmed it was empty. The voice hadn't come from

there. The sitting room was empty. The next door down was closed, but the door across the hall was open.

Benjamin's mother sat on an elaborate Victorian settee near a gigantic window draped in mauve velvet panels. Jewell almost didn't see her; Barbara sat so still and motionless. Her eyes were distant and she looked pale, her hands and cheeks seemed transparent. A shallow stare met Jewell as she stepped inside. Silence stood between them like a wall.

Finally, Jewell stepped forward and crouched down near Mrs. Roth's knee. She tried not to remember the way this small woman had stood to the side and watched her husband verbally and physically abuse their son. Barbara Roth had just lost one of her children. Anyone in her position deserved a sympathetic turn.

"Can I get anything for you, Mrs. Roth?" Jewell asked.

Barbara slowly turned her shallow gaze from the doorway where Jewell had stood to where she was now. She stared at Jewell for several seconds before a mild sign of recognition turned up her lips. It was obvious the woman was heavily drugged. The dark hazel of her eyes were muted and glassy, and her attention focused too long on unimportant pieces of furniture or empty spaces across the room.

"You're Benjamin's wife?"

Jewell shook her head and tried not to smile. "No, we're not married. I was just trying to think of something to say to someone on the phone." Right now, it sounded like a very lame excuse.

"You didn't marry him?"

"No."

"But you're here with him?"

"Yes."

Jewell felt self-conscious beneath the quiet woman's long and shallow gaze. The corner of Barbara's mouth edged up in a small smile and her eyes brightened slightly.

"I remember you. I saw you at my son's house once."

Jewell didn't know how to answer without dredging up unpleasant memories, or confusing Mrs. Roth any more than she was right now. She leaned back on her heels and looked around the room for a glass of water, or perhaps something else she could offer the woman.

Mrs. Roth nodded slowly and her brow wrinkled in deep thought. She seemed to have difficulty keeping up with the most basic of conversations. "Are you that wonderful girl who works with Benjamin?"

Wonderful? It surprised Jewell to hear Benjamin's mother describe her as wonderful. This was the first time they'd ever actually spoke. The woman had barely opened her mouth that night at Benjamin's house, and nothing she'd said had been directed at Jewell.

"I work with Benjamin, yes."

The older woman nodded. "Victoria told me all about you. She likes you very much. Said you're good for Benjamin. Are you going to marry him?"

Jewell attempted to change the subject. "Do you need anything, Mrs. Roth? A cold drink? Something to eat?"

The simple question was enough to distract her from the original subject. "No, thank you."

With a nod, Jewell stood again and headed for the door. She would take the opportunity to leave the woman alone. Jewell was nearly out when Benjamin's mother spoke again.

"Benjamin is a good boy. I'm so proud of him. His father always wanted to do so much for him, but Jon's pride wouldn't let him."

“What are you doing in here?” an angry male voice boomed from the doorway.

Jewell jumped and turned to see the ominous form of Benjamin’s father filling the open space. His fists were planted firmly at his waist and an ugly scowl twisted his features. Her breath caught in her throat and her pulse quickened for several seconds before Jewell calmed herself.

“Hello, Jon,” his wife said with falsetto cheer.

“My wife is not to be disturbed.” Mr. Roth’s stern voice ground out through his clenched teeth.

“I—I’m sorry,” Jewell mumbled and moved quickly past him into the hall.

She collided immediately with a solid force. Arms circled her and kept her from falling. Jewell looked up into Benjamin’s surprised face and his hold momentarily tightened around her. He dropped his arms away as soon as she had her balance.

“What’s got you running so fast?” he signed.

Jewell looked over her shoulder in an impulsive reaction. Benjamin followed her gaze and his face hardened when he saw his father. His rock-solid stare came back to her and his hands roughly gripped her upper arms, almost painfully so.

“What did he say to you?”

She shook her head, hoping her lack of explanation would let the situation die without incident. Mr. Roth reached past Jewell to grab Benjamin’s arm. His action shoved Jewell forward into Benjamin’s chest again. Her chin bumped his shoulder and she bit her lip, the coppery taste of blood assaulting her tongue. Jewell felt like a ball in an arcade game. When her hands touched Benjamin’s torso in an attempt to stay upright, he flinched away. The knee-jerk action grabbed and squeezed Jewell’s heart in a painful thrust.

Benjamin immediately yanked his arm away from his father's grip. His father pointed his finger in Benjamin's face, only an inch from his nose.

"Keep your little whore away from your mother. She isn't to be upset."

"She didn't upset me, Jon. The girl is very—"

"Be quiet, Barbara," Jon shouted as he turned back abruptly to the doorway.

Jewell flinched at the harshness and loudness of Jon Roth's voice. Benjamin stepped around Jewell and pushed her slightly behind him. Jon turned to them again and was met by Benjamin's fist. He stumbled back and hit the wall. Before Mr. Roth could recover and possibly retaliate, Jewell pushed back on Benjamin's chest and urged him to move away down the hall. She glanced back to see Mr. Roth touch the bloodied corner of his lips with his knuckle.

She couldn't look at Benjamin until they reached her bedroom. He pulled her along at a near run, projecting her forward when they reached the room. Jewell went through the door first and Benjamin slammed it shut behind him. The sound made Jewell jump. The raw ends of her nerves sparked and her stomach tumbled. Where did her intentions to be helpful go wrong? What happened? Her thoughts raced and Jewell fought tears of panic as she moved to the window.

A gentle wind stirred the tree branches outside. The bright oranges and reds and lush green lawn belied the chaos within the house walls. She drew a deep, long breath in through her nose and released it with a huff.

Benjamin came to her side and pulled her around to face him. His face was angry and deep furrows marked his brow. Darkened eyes skimmed her face and Jewell tried to look away before tears ran down her cheek.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what I did."

The stress of the last few days, and the restraint she forced on herself, was suddenly too much for Jewell's frazzled nerves to handle. She didn't understand how this family worked or what the rules of the game were. This opulent house and cruel family dynamic was so far removed from her own understanding; she knew it would take a lifetime to even begin to comprehend it all. But right now, it was too much. The violence, the anger and the resentment that all seemed without instigation by those receiving the brunt of the backlash, finally hit her with the force of a punch in the gut.

Benjamin grabbed her arms near the shoulder and forced her to meet his gaze with a quick jerk. She caught her breath and looked into his sharp face.

"Calm down," he ordered.

Jewell took a breath and nodded her head. "I'm okay now."

He released her arms, and Jewell immediately felt the loss of his touch. Her body swayed towards him, the magnetic pull of his body tugging her off balance. Jewell steadied herself and crossed her arms over her stomach. Physical contact between them had lessened to a bare existence in the last two days. She hungered for even the briefest comfort, whether a touch of his hand or a kiss of his lips on her hair. Passionate glances and desperate embraces weren't appropriate, or even really wanted, at a time like this. But a reassuring moment in each other's arms would mean the world to her right now. Benjamin took one step back and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Tell me what happened."

Jewell leaned her back against the frame of the window behind her. She flipped her hair back behind her shoulder and sighed.

"I was using the phone in the hall to call Justine and tell her we won't be in until the end of the week. When I hung up, I

heard your mother say something from one of the rooms. I just went in to speak with her for a minute or two. She seemed tired, and to be honest, overly medicated. When I went to leave, your father was in the door. He was furious I was there, and told me I wasn't to bother her, so I tried to leave."

His frown was deep and overpowered his face. Benjamin started to turn away, but Jewell reached out and grabbed his arm. She gently urged his hand from his pocket and laced her fingers with his. He stared down at their joined hands for several moments before looking up.

"I'm sorry, Benjamin," she said in apology for all the pain, memories and whatever she might have done to fuel the fire.

He pulled his hand free of hers and turned to walk away. Jewell quickly stepped forward and got in front of him. She planted her palms against his chest to stop him. His eyes rounded with surprise. Before Benjamin could pull away again, Jewell closed the small space between them and curled her fingers into his shirt. A deep, long breath filled his chest and one warm palm covered the back of her hand.

"Benjamin, please stay here and talk to me."

He shook his head. "Not now, Jewell."

"You're pulling away from me."

Benjamin stared down at her. Jewell saw a slight softening of the worry lines around his eyes, and his frown straightened. It wasn't a smile, but no longer a scowl. He laid his palm against her cheek and Jewell turned into its warmth. She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and looked up at him. Jewell held her breath as he leaned forward. His lips pressed against her opposite cheek, then both hand and lips left and he moved away.

Jewell watched his retreating back. Benjamin paused at the door and leaned his hand into the jamb. Her lungs burned as Jewell held her breath and waited for him to come back. But he

didn't. After several moments, Benjamin dropped his hand and disappeared from sight down the hall.

Her vision blurred with hot moisture. Jewell lifted two fingers to her lips, kissed them, and turned her hand out to him as he disappeared. A deep shudder shook her body.

"Just know I love you, Benjamin Roth."

~ * ~

Benjamin sat in the humid warmth of the solarium and watched the sun slowly fall behind the horizon of treetops. He closed his eyes against the momentary intensification of light just before it vanished completely. A deep breath through his nostrils filled his head with the earthy aroma of soil and fertilizer from the potted plants along the wall. Dusk settled over the landscaped yard as he took another sip of his sweetened ice tea. After the headache he woke up with, Benjamin decided to steer away from liquor this evening.

Despite his avoidance of any firewater, his head pounded. Were this house a pressure cooker, the lid would've blown off and taken a chunk out of the moon by now. Benjamin felt like two people—or one being torn down the middle. Each inner person was equal in their resolve to rend him to pieces.

One part wanted this to be over to end the relentless pressure, pain and anticipation. The other part never wanted Wednesday to come because that would be the end. He would have to finally accept Victoria was gone.

The part of him who wanted to avoid the unavoidable was the part that pushed Jewell away this morning. She forced him to recognize and acknowledge things about himself he never realized or cared about previously. Jewell taught him he needed someone to be here with him, whether he wanted to need her or not. He didn't like needing her. In fact, Benjamin hated it. If he pushed away hard enough, he'd eventually not need the

comfort she willingly gave. At least, that was what the cowardly side of his inner self tried to believe.

The other part of him wanted to hang on to her with desperation. He wanted to draw strength from her. She could give him strength enough to get through the next few days, and strength enough to get through all the days to come. The part of his heart she brought to life knew all this, and wanted to accept it for what it was and what it could be. But the part of his heart that had run his life since the first time he understood rejection didn't want to give in.

It would be different once they were back in Boston. He would be back on his own turf. Back where they both could relax and pick things up where they left off.

Benjamin shook his head. Who was he kidding? Nothing would be the same again. His sister was gone, most likely killed by their own father. And just where was it they were going to pick up from? He didn't know where that was because they never talked about it. It was a topic avoided with stealth and cunning on his part.

Someone tapped the small table where Benjamin's hand rested and he looked up. His godfather stood beside the chair with a pipe in his hand. A slow smile spread Ben Prescott's lips and he nodded.

"Good evening, Benjamin."

"If you say so," he said with a shrug and took another sip of his drink.

The elder man sat down in a chair adjacent to Benjamin's so they faced each other. Prescott struck a wooden match and puffed on his pipe until fragrant smoke billowed from its open end. With a flick of his wrist, he extinguished the match and dropped it on the tile-topped table.

"Your girlfriend is quite a catch," his godfather said as he put the pipe down far enough for Benjamin to see his face.

“She’s very sweet, absolutely beautiful, and cares for you quite a bit. Can’t ask for more than that.”

Benjamin examined Ben Prescott’s face. He looked sincere enough, but with the people in this house there could always be an ulterior motive. As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Benjamin cursed it. His internal cynic reared up and fed on the negative energy in this house. Prescott had always been straightforward with Benjamin and didn’t seem to play the kinds of games for which the Roth’s were famous. Until shown otherwise, Benjamin decided to accept Prescott’s comments at face value.

“She is beautiful,” Benjamin responded.

Prescott nodded and leaned back to bring his leg up. He rested his ankle on the opposite knee and puffed lazily on the pipe.

“I came by this afternoon to see how Barbara was doing. It’s hard to tell what’s going on in her head through whatever pills that quack doctor is feeding her. She said, as best she could through the medication, Ms. Kincaid stepped in to talk to her this morning.”

“I heard,” Benjamin said.

“According to your mother, you and your lady friend are getting married. Or maybe she said you already were. I’m not sure now. But it had something to do with you, Ms. Kincaid and marriage.”

Benjamin set his glass down and stared hard at his godfather. He swallowed the liquid still in his mouth. “Where would she get an idea like that?”

Ben shrugged. “Wishful thinking, maybe? Perhaps a premonition?”

Benjamin shook his head. “The only thing my parents wish for me is that I leave, as soon as possible.”

The other man's face grew stern and he leaned forward to point his pipe in Ben's direction. "It wasn't always like that, Benjamin. When you were born you were the most precious thing in the world to them."

"Until they found out I was deaf."

"That's not what happened." Benjamin could see the strength of Prescott's exclamation in his face. Then the man's shoulders slumped and he sat back. "It wasn't like that."

"Then what was it? All I've ever heard from Jon is the disgrace I am to this family. I have been since the day I was born. I've been buried, hidden, denied and ignored. If it wasn't because of my deafness, then what was it?"

The only answer was a shake of the other man's head as he dropped his chin towards his chest. He didn't expound on his beliefs and turned away to look out the solarium windows. Benjamin took a deep breath against the empty hole between his lungs. It varied in size hour to hour. Right now it was livable, even after the brief conversation with his godfather. Tomorrow would be different, though. The wake was tomorrow. It would be harder.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Prescott," he said and stood up.

Benjamin walked slowly from the solarium with his thumbs hooked through his two front belt loops. George met him in the front hall, a distressed look on his face. He waved Benjamin over to him with a fervent hand.

"Benjamin, I've been looking for you for half an hour."

"I was in the solarium. What's wrong, George?"

"It's Jewell."

"What about her?" The hair on the back of Benjamin's neck bristled and his insides clenched in immediate dread. "Did something else happen with her and Jon?"

George shook his head. "I called a cab for her twenty-five minutes ago. I think she's going into the city to catch a bus back to Boston."

"What? Where is Jewell now?"

"She just came down with her bag," George clarified.

"Shit," Benjamin cursed and sprinted to the front door.

Jewell sat near the bottom of the front stairs. Her knees were drawn up to her chest and the autumn breeze shifted her loose hair around her shoulders. Benjamin slowed his stride to walk to the end of the landing and took a deep breath before he took the first step. From his position behind her, he saw her wipe her fingers across her cheek.

Benjamin knew her reason for leaving. He had made a royal ass of himself. Again. Could he blame her? Absolutely not.

She turned and looked up at him just before he reached her. Her smile was small and hesitant, but there nonetheless. Jewell took one hand from her coat pocket to give him a small wave and mouthed 'hi'. Benjamin sat down on the cold marble step beside her. He tried to read her face, to judge her level of anger, but saw none in her soft expression. Her appearance wasn't one of sadness or melancholy, but more like defeat. The loss of spark in her usually bright eyes made Benjamin feel about an inch tall.

"Were you going to leave without telling me?" he signed.

Jewell shook her head. *"I left you a note. Just to let you know I'd see you when you got back to Boston."*

Benjamin took in the details of her beautiful face. Jewell's cheeks were milky white with the slightest shade of pink from the November wind, like strawberries and cream. A smattering of freckles bridged her nose. As always when he looked into her eyes, the dazzling depth of them amazed him. The color itself was alive, despite the diminished glint. Almost as alive as

the burnished copper of her hair. He took in a deep, tired breath.

"Why are you leaving?"

Jewell seemed to focus on the movements of his hands more than what was necessary to understand his question. He caught a slight quiver of her chin before she looked away. His gut sank like a lead weight.

"I came here to be a help. Something tells me I'm more of a hindrance."

"Why would you think that?"

She waved her hands in frustration. *"I don't know what to do for you. Or what to say."*

"I don't expect you to do or say anything."

She tucked her chin into her chest and covered her eyes with her hands for a moment before looking at him again. *"I've caused more friction between you and your parents. Just look at this morning."*

Benjamin adamantly shook his head. *"No. No. This morning had nothing to do with you. It's my fault. I should have realized the animosity against me would carry over to you. You could be Mother Theresa and he wouldn't respect you anymore than he does, just because you're with me. For that I apologize."*

A yellow car pulled up the drive and Benjamin read the name Hartford Cab Company on the side of the sedan as it stopped. Jewell stood up and reached for her suitcase. Benjamin jumped to his feet and stopped her hand before she picked it up.

"Don't leave."

Jewell's chin lifted slowly to meet his stare, and he saw moisture glisten in her eyes. "Benjamin, I didn't do this for theatrical effect or to get your attention. In fact, I think you need as little drama in your life as possible right now. I had wanted to be gone by the time you found out. From the moment

we heard the news, I've wanted to do whatever I thought was best for you. Right now, this is what I think is best."

She took the last couple of steps to reach the cab and opened the back door. The old Benjamin would have let her climb in and ride away. The choice was hers to make, and he wouldn't have thought twice about letting her decide. But he was a different Benjamin now. Different because of her and now he couldn't let her leave.

He jumped to stand upright and took the one step needed to get between her and the cab. Her mesmerizing green eyes rounded in shock.

"Don't leave," he said again.

She set her suitcase on the floor in the back of the cab before facing him. *"Benjamin, deep down I don't think you want me here. We'll have time later. When you get back to Boston."*

He shook his head and cupped her face in his hands. "Jewell, Sweetheart, it isn't a matter of wanting you here or not. If you don't want to stay, I won't make you. I can't. But you are the only sanity I've got right now."

She pulled her lower lip through white teeth and met his gaze. "I don't think so, Benjamin. I'm just something else you've got to deal with. You need to focus and get through what you need to get through." She touched his cheek and stood on her toes to kiss the corner of his mouth. "I'll be waiting for you. I promise."

Jewell pulled away and slid into the back seat of the cab. She wiped a tear from her cheek before she looked up at him again. Benjamin's insides were in knots and his pulse pounded in his temples. What was he doing! Why was he letting her leave? She blew him a kiss from her fingertips.

"Good bye," he read on her lips.

She spoke to the cab driver and pulled the door shut. Benjamin stepped back as the car slowly pulled away. Jewell said something through the window he didn't catch. Something suddenly burst in his chest and he made the decision. With a quick sprint, Benjamin caught up with the cab and banged on the trunk to get the drivers attention. The car stopped.

Benjamin pulled open Jewell's door and crouched down to see her face. Tears streaked her tender cheeks and her lips parted in the unasked question.

"I need you," he told her, hoping he could somehow express with the simple statement just how much he didn't want her to go. *"Jewell, I need you."*

She held his gaze for an eternity and several new tears rolled through her moisture-spiked lashes. An almost indiscernible quiver shook her chin and she brushed back a wave of hair from his temple. The touch of her fingertips warmed his cheek. Benjamin held her palm against his lips and kissed the soft flesh.

"Please," he asked.

Jewell smiled and nodded. A soothing rush spread through Benjamin's chest and he smiled back. She turned to the driver and apologized for making him come out for nothing. The middle-aged man smiled earnestly at them and said it was no problem at all. Benjamin took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and gave it to the man for his trouble. Then he stood and offered his hand to Jewell to help her from the car.

When the cab was gone, and they stood alone at the foot of the front steps, Benjamin turned to her and pulled Jewell in a hard embrace. He pressed his face into her fragrant hair and felt the softness of her skin against his cheek. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and he cursed the fall jacket she wore and cursed his reluctance for the last two days to hold her like this.

Benjamin tightened his hold and felt a surge of energy in his blood as Jewell fed him with her touch.

Jewell pulled back and looked up at him, her jewel-tone eyes bright. She touched his face and neck with her fingers. "You're cold. Let's go inside."

Benjamin shook his head. "Why do you worry so much about me?" he asked.

She smiled and slipped her hand into the bend of his arm. "Because you need me."

~ * ~

Jewell sat on the bed with the day's Wall Street Journal spread out on the duvet. She glanced over a variety of stock quotes and market closings with marginal interest. Her true interest was the sound of the shower running in the bathroom. Without question or reservation, Benjamin came up to the bedroom with her after dinner. As he showered and shaved, she waited with intense anticipation.

Her heart had been in the heavens since Benjamin had pulled her from the cab and told her he needed her. Knowing him the way she did, Jewell knew it hadn't been an easy thing for him to say. For him to admit he needed her meant more than just a ploy to get her to stay. His confession was real, and true, and from the heart. When Jewell saw the look in his eyes there was no way she could deny him.

The bathroom door opened and she looked up. Jewell's heart leaped to her throat and a hot flush ran over her entire body. Benjamin stood in the doorway with a bath sheet wrapped around his narrow waist and a hand towel around his shoulders. He rubbed the smaller vigorously over his damp hair.

Jewell tried to remember why they were there, and the solemnity of the whole thing, but the sculpted beauty of Benjamin's torso was undeniable. Moisture glistened in

droplets on his arms and chest. He turned his back to her and bent over to retrieve something from his suitcase. The way the damp towel clung to his backside made Jewell's stomach flip and she groaned loudly. She ran her hand over her face and forced herself to look away. With a sharp rustle, Jewell folded the newspaper and stood to toss it in a nearby chair.

Benjamin turned and ran his fingers through the damp waves of his hair. That intoxicating, seductively slow grin of his made Jewell's knees weak and it was all she could do to smile back. Suddenly, the short pajamas and cotton robe she wore seemed highly inadequate and totally revealing. They were not intended for seduction, but with the heat and electricity that rushed over her skin, a turtleneck sweater and thermal ski pants wouldn't feel sufficient. She crossed her arms over her body and walked back to the bed.

"Are you okay?" Benjamin signed with arched brows and a smirk on his face.

Jewell nodded and put one knee up on the mattress to sit down again near the pillows. *"I'm fine. Did your shower help with your headache?"*

"It did, actually. I think I just needed to come up here and away from everything else." His brown eyes held her gaze and his lips pursed ever so slightly. *"I needed to come be with you."*

Jewell lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant gesture. *"I've been here for three days."*

He sighed and picked up a pair of silk boxer shorts in navy blue paisley from the bed. *"I know... now."*

Jewell gasped as he dropped the towel and pulled on the boxers. The nonchalant expression on his face was a sharp contrast to the unsettling shock that coursed in Jewell's veins. The mattress was high enough that she didn't actually catch a glimpse of Benjamin in his fully naked state, but enough was

revealed to set off butterflies in Jewell's stomach and turn her blood to liquid heat. The enticing angle where his thigh met his hip teased her with what hid only scant inches away. Benjamin's sexy pose reminded Jewell of scenes in movies when the director hovered on the edge of propriety by barely hiding the most enticing body parts behind strategically placed plants and limbs. She swallowed against the giggle in her throat and grin on her lips.

The elastic waistband snapped against his skin and he tossed the towel through the open door of the bathroom. Benjamin took the edge of the duvet and pulled it back to slip beneath the covers. Her heart raced and her arms felt like rubber bands, but Jewell stood and untied the belt of her robe. She kept her back to him in hopes the heat in her cheeks would subside before she needed to turn around to face him. Jewell tossed her robe on the same chair with the Journal. When she turned back, Benjamin leaned on one elbow and stretched out on his side. The duvet didn't quite reach his waist. A sweet shudder moved through Jewell's lungs.

"Anything in the Journal I need to know?" he asked.

How could a man with no understanding of adjectives like husky and throaty make his voice sound so sexy? Even when asking a far-from-sexy question? Jewell shook her head and built up enough nerve to move beneath the covers. She reclined back on the pillow and Benjamin moved closer so he looked down at her.

"The Market closed up about fourteen points. Bulwark is up a dollar twenty-five a share. Greenspan is threatening to lower the interest rates again. Nothing too earth shattering."

Benjamin leaned closer and touched the base of her throat through the open collar of her pajama top. Despite the restraint she tried to maintain, Jewell closed her eyes and a low moan shuddered up from her chest. Having hungered for the simplest

touch for two days, this sensual contact amplified her senses two-fold. His fingertips ran the edge of the shirt to the valley between her breasts, then back up to her collarbone. With tremendous effort, Jewell opened her eyes and looked up at him.

Benjamin's eyes were dark with arousal. Jewell couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Her body ached to the core. Having come so close once to making love to him, it didn't take long for her to want it again. Her mind screamed for sanity, warning her this was neither the time nor place. But for now, she could not deny his touch.

"Jewell, thank you for putting up with me," he said and continued to gently caress her skin.

She nodded, the only answer she could give. In a purely reactive response, Jewell drew up one knee and turned more in his direction. More than anything, she wanted to wrap her arms around his body and pull him down to her.

Benjamin shifted and moved his entire body closer to hers. She felt the crisp hairs on his thighs brush her legs and ran her ankle up the side of his calf. His lips covered hers in a slow, drugging kiss that left her short of breath and hungry for more. The heat of his mouth led a path down her throat to her shoulder and along the base of her collarbone. Jewell's hands moved to his side and she felt the muscles of his back flex and relax beneath her palms.

Benjamin released the buttons of her top and his hands slid beneath the cotton to caress her ribs and the sensitive underside of her breast. Jewell gasped as his thumb skimmed across her nipple. Her fingernails pressed into his back and she felt him brace himself against it.

Despite every need and desire that coursed through her bloodstream in a starving rampage, Jewell pushed against his

shoulders. Benjamin lessened his weight on her and looked down into her eyes. A humorous grin spread his lips.

“Don’t tell me the phone is ringing again.”

Jewell smiled and tried to laugh, despite her raging heart. “No, Benjamin.”

“Then what?”

Hot tears burned her eyes. She rode an emotional roller coaster. Joy and desperation rocked her body. Benjamin’s eyes softened and his smile lessened. He kissed the damp corner of each eye and dried away the escaped tears with his thumb.

“What’s wrong, Jewell?”

She touched his cheek and pressed her hand to his chest, over his radically beating heart. His skin twitched beneath her touch.

“I want this, Benjamin,” she whispered, thankful he didn’t need to hear the volume of her voice to understand her. The words were barely audible.

“So do I.”

Jewell met his gaze. “Can you understand I don’t want it to be here? Maybe if we’d made love before now, maybe it would be different. But not our first night together.”

Benjamin’s smile told her everything she needed to know. He took her hand and lifted it to his lips for a long kiss to her knuckles.

“I understand.”

He kissed her temple, stroked back her hair from her brow, and settled down into the bed beside her. Jewell settled against his chest and let the beating of his heart soothe her fiery senses. His hands stroked her back in a hypnotic rhythm that lulled her to sleep.

~ * ~

“We commit our sister, Victoria Juliet Roth, back to the ground from whence she came. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.”

May God welcome her into His arms and open the gates of Heaven for our beloved daughter, sister and friend. Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...”

The minister stood at the end of the cavernous hole that would be Victoria’s grave. Green grass-like tarps draped the earth and were held in place by vases of flowers and strategically set bricks. A white, open-air tent covered the twenty square foot space around the large gathering of people. Reverend Gagnon continued with his prayer and Benjamin did his best to stay focused on what the man said.

It was nearly impossible to read the Reverend’s lips through the haze that shrouded his vision. Benjamin knew it was useless to try and hold the tears in. Here, as they lowered his beloved Vicki into the cold and hostile ground, was the only place his tears belonged.

Unable, or unwilling, to focus on the monotonous and scripted prayer, Benjamin looked beyond the large crowd of black-clad family members and assorted friends, to the world beyond the confines of the tent. Rain poured down from the sky and ran in channeled rivers off the edge of the tent. A cold wind whipped through and slapped at Benjamin’s damp face.

How appropriate that it would rain today. It was fitting that Heaven should weep.

Jewell squeezed his gloved hand. He didn’t need to look down to know she cried as well. They both felt the loss today. She perhaps not in the same intensity as he, but Jewell felt it all the same. Benjamin brought his focus back to the Reverend. The black clad man continued his liturgy for a young woman he barely knew. Family members held white handkerchiefs to their faces, but Benjamin didn’t see the immeasurable pain in their eyes like the one tearing his heart from his chest.

Jon Roth stood stoic and motionless to the right of the Reverend. Neither sorrow nor pain nor anger nor any other emotion registered on his face. Sonofabitch! Barbara Roth stared blankly into the rain beyond the tent edges. She looked so medicated she probably didn't even realize what was going on.

His father stepped forward, and with a small spade, tossed some black earth onto the top of Victoria's oak coffin. In turn, each member of the family stepped forward and did the same.

Benjamin couldn't do it. He couldn't be part of this final step. It was too much. Just too much. Slowly, the huddle of people dispersed and opened their umbrellas to walk back to their waiting cars. When nearly everyone was gone, Benjamin stepped to the edge of the hole. He tugged the glove off his hand with his teeth and laid his cold palm against the even colder wood.

In final farewell, Benjamin curled his two center fingers beneath his palm and held his hand there in the single sign that expressed the immense love and loss that beat at his heart. The first sign he had ever taught his baby sister. *I love you*. When he removed his hand, the contrast between his body heat and the condensation on the coffin left an impression behind forever.

Thirteen

The offensive buzz of Jewell's alarm clock shot her from the fringe of her unproductive sleep. She flung her arm and hit the clock with deadly aim. All went silent. Jewell pushed her hair out of her eyes and tossed back the quilt, taking her annoyance out on the hapless covering.

Last night was one of the worst nights of sleep she'd ever had in her entire life, just barely beating out the night before that. The last week had been without any type of real rest. Her nights were spent tossing and turning, seeking whatever it was that would gift her with refreshing sleep. It was never a good sign to wake up with a headache when drinking the night before wasn't involved. It wasn't natural. Jewell sat up and drew her knees to her chest where she could rest her elbows.

She knew the reason sound sleep escaped her. After only three nights of sharing a bed, Jewell was addicted to the glorious safety and tranquility that came from sleeping in Benjamin's arms. Thank God it was Friday. She could sleep in tomorrow morning. Maybe manage to catch up. With that encouraging thought in mind, Jewell forced herself from the hollow warmth of her bed and stumbled down the hall to the kitchen. Within minutes, the reviving aroma of hazelnut coffee filled the small apartment. As she stepped out of the bathroom,

her wet hair bundled in a towel, she inhaled deeply of the heavenly scent.

Ruby's door opened and Jewell called a morning greeting to her sister. The response was a grumpy grumble as the bathroom door closed with a hard thud. Jewell smiled. Despite the lack of sleep, and the feeling of something missing in her bed, a good mood stirred.

The blackness of Victoria's death and funeral had hung over her for nearly two weeks. Both in her heart and in Benjamin's eyes. She sensed there was still something he held back from her, but no amount of asking had convinced him to share the burden that still haunted him. He wasn't physically or emotionally distant, like he had briefly been at Willow Wood, but every once in awhile she caught him deep in thought.

But right now, this morning, she felt the gloom start to dissipate. She took it as a good sign. Perhaps the lightening of her heart meant Benjamin would come back from the dark place he had been in, and come back soon.

The idea of seeing Benjamin spurred Jewell into motion. She didn't hold the same dislike for going to work that most people harbored. Going to work meant seeing Benjamin. With that thought in mind, Jewell picked up her coffee and headed back to her room to stare at the contents of her closet.

By the time she reached Bulwark, Jewell's bad mood was completely gone and she hummed as she pushed through the giant glass doors. She greeted everyone she met in the lobby, the elevator, and on the walk to her office. Cheerfully, she set Justine's cup of coffee on her desk. Justine looked up and smiled.

"Someone took a happy pill this morning. Why are we so jovial?" she asked.

“And why not? It’s a beautiful fall day, it’s Friday, and—and—and well, who needs more reasons than that?” Jewell answered with a shrug of her shoulders and a tilt of her head.

Justine shook her head and sipped from the cup of coffee. “Whatever you say, Jewell.”

The door to Benjamin’s office opened and he stuck his head out. “Justine, has Ms. Kincaid come in yet?”

Justine nodded and pointed, unable to speak around the hot liquid in her mouth. Benjamin turned and met Jewell’s gaze. A sweet, warm rush flowed into Jewell’s limbs like hot buttered rum. She knew she grinned like a fool, but was unable to control the reaction. His own lips spread in the signature grin that set Jewell’s nerves to sparking.

“Good morning, Ms. Kincaid. I’m glad you’re here. I need your assistance with something.” She nodded and stepped towards his door. “Justine, hold any calls for the next hour.”

Justine mumbled something under her breath as they went through the door. Jewell cast a glance over her shoulder to see Justine grinning from ear to ear.

“Behave yourself,” Jewell said in a theatrical whisper.

Justine flattened her palm against her chest and feigned shock. “Me? I can behave perfectly well. It’s you I’m worried about.”

Jewell chuckled and shook her head as she entered Benjamin’s office. Although they never openly spoke of it, Justine had long ago figured out the true extent of Benjamin and Jewell’s relationship.

She slipped her light coat off as he shut the door. The discernible click of the lock brought her attention back around, and Benjamin met her with a wicked grin. A small giggle escaped her throat before he pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth in a deliciously decadent morning kiss. Stifling her laughter with his mouth, Benjamin lifted her feet

off the floor with his arms wrapped around her torso, and quickly carried her to the leather sofa.

They fell as a joined unit onto the soft cushions. His kiss was slow and hot, and as his tongue filled her mouth, Jewell wanted to be anywhere but where they were. Benjamin sipped at her lips and throat until Jewell's breath was bated and shallow and her heart pounded furiously against her ribs. His hand moved up her thigh, slipping her skirt further upward as he went.

Jewell shifted beneath his weight so she could see his face and he could see her hands. "*I thought you said you needed my assistance with something?*"

He went back to her throat without pause. "I do," Benjamin said against her skin. His baritone voice vibrated against the sensitive flesh. Jewell's eyelids fluttered and she fought to breathe. "I've got this terrible ache and I need your assistance in relieving it." He shifted again and his hips settled seductively against hers.

Jewell's nerves sparked with electricity. Every hair, every cell, every inch of her body was immediately attuned to each move and each touch. But just as dozens of times before, they both knew the couch in his office was not the place. He kissed her more and touched her where he could, but slowly the fire settled to glowing embers.

Benjamin gave her cheek one final touch with his lips and brushed back a curl from her forehead. He shifted his weight to lie beside her on the couch, his body wedged between Jewell and the back cushions. Jewell smiled as he rested his head on her left breast and draped his arm across her waist. Were they not fully clothed and lying on his couch, rather than naked, sated and in bed; one might believe they just made love and now basked in the afterglow.

"Come away with me this weekend," he signed, abbreviating each motion with one hand instead of two. "We could go up to Franconia Notch or Bar Harbor. Another fund manager told me about this B&B on the coast where you can see the ocean hitting the rocks. He said it was beautiful."

Jewell smiled and touched his cheek with her fingertip before signing back. *"I never pictured you to be the B&B type."*

"I'm whatever gets you in my bed," he responded with a wink and lopsided grin.

She sighed. *"I would love to, but I can't."*

Benjamin moved over her so his eyes stared intensely down at her. Jewell's breath caught in her throat from the heat they emanated. *"Why?"* he asked.

"I promised to take Pearl off my mother's hands. Mom spends the weekend before Thanksgiving doing all her baking and stuff. I've got to go up first thing in the morning to get Pearl."

Benjamin nodded slowly. *"Okay. What are we going to do to entertain her for two days?"*

"We?" She moved her hand between them.

"Sure. The only time I've ever seen Pearl is in the hospital. She wasn't talking to me, and I'm not so sure she liked me, so I want to make a better impression on her." Jewell smiled at his sarcasm. *"I'll drive up to Manchester with you and pick her up. We could go to the Museum of Science, shopping down at Faneuil Hall, and maybe rent a movie. Has she seen that new Disney movie yet? The one they just released?"*

"You keep track of what Disney movies are out on video?"

"I have as of late."

Jewell smiled wider. *"That's so sweet. It sounds wonderful."*

"One condition."

"Oh? What condition is that?"

His eyes were so intense, Jewell felt her skin burn beneath their stare. Benjamin kissed her again, his tongue slipping beyond her teeth and creating such a flurry in her abdomen she needed to curl her fingers into his shirt to keep herself from flying apart.

“Stay with me tonight,” he said against her lips.

He pulled back and her eyes fluttered open. Jewell stared into his face. Her throat went dry and a sweet shiver coursed up her spine. She couldn’t speak, could barely breathe, and dared not release her hold on his shirt. All she could do was nod. Benjamin moved to cover her lips in a long, toe-curling kiss. It was going to be another long day.

~ * ~

Ruby pulled Jewell’s car up to the curb outside Benjamin’s townhouse. “Wow,” she mumbled as she engaged the parking break. “Nice digs.”

Jewell reached into the back seat to retrieve her bag. “Tell Mama we’ll be there in the morning to get Pearl, okay?”

“Sure thing, sis. Tell your boyfriend I like his place. I’d love to see the inside sometime.”

Jewell smiled and winked at her sister. She climbed out of the car and leaned in through the open passenger window. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Ruby pulled away as Jewell climbed the front steps. Before she had a chance to ring the bell, the door flew open and Benjamin stood with a wide grin on his face. She stepped into the doorway, looking up into his beautiful brown eyes, and he covered her cheeks with his palms, his fingers pressing into the side of her throat.

“I thought you’d never get here,” he said huskily before covering her mouth with his own.

The sexually charged kiss pulled a deep moan from Jewell's chest and she leaned into him. When her lungs burned from lack of oxygen, he pulled away. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Hello to you, too," she whispered.

Benjamin chuckled and led Jewell by the hand down the front hall into the kitchen. He tossed her coat and bag on a bench along the way. "*Are you hungry? I thought we might order in some Chinese.*"

"*That sounds fine,*" she answered.

They reached the kitchen and Benjamin got down his phone book from the top of the refrigerator. "*I figured I'd let you call it in. By the time I get a TTY operator, then the restaurant and relay everything, I've nearly starved to death.*" His shoulders shook in a quiet chuckle.

She smiled wider and shook her head. "*Funny.*"

Benjamin lost interest in the yellow pages, entranced by the glint in her jade eyes and the bounce of her rubescent waves. Jewell met his gaze, a sweet smile working its way into his soul. Yet coupled with the sweetness was an underlying sexuality. Her fair cheeks were rosy from the cold outside. Or was it the heat the two of them created in here? His skin burned with the flames fueled by their attraction.

Over the last two weeks she had begun to wear her hair down, looser, and less styled. Tonight nothing held any of it back. Luscious waves of auburn hair flowed from her brow and cascaded around her shoulders in a tempestuously sexual way. Illuminate green eyes looked confidently back at him. She drew her lower lip between her teeth.

He let his gaze move over her from head to toe. She wore a silk blouse of pale pink that seemed to whisper across her skin when she moved. The color changed in depth and warmth as it shifted over the roundness of her breasts, catching the light to enhance every curve. In contrast to the softness of the silk, she

wore faded blue jeans that hugged her hips and tapered at her ankles. Benjamin preferred jeans that hugged a woman in all the right places.

His eyes moved back up her feminine form and his body warmed at the sight of two hard, peaked nipples pressed against her blouse. Jewell watched him intensely. Benjamin tossed the phonebook onto the counter and stepped toward her.

“Forget the food,” he mumbled before pulling her to him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck and Jewell met him with equal need and fervor to his own. Their lips met in a fury, tongues entwined in a passion play that ignited them both. Benjamin’s hands braced her sides and lifted her onto the edge of the counter behind her. Jewell’s legs wrapped around his waist to pull him closer.

Without allowing his mouth to leave the sweet taste of her skin, Benjamin unbuttoned her blouse. Beneath its silky texture, he found equally silky softness and realized she wore no bra beneath the thin material. He smiled. His lips moved over Jewell’s throat and felt a moan reverberate against his mouth. With the blouse open, Benjamin slipped it off her shoulders and it pooled around her hips.

Jewell held his face in her palms, looking down at Benjamin as he caressed his fingertips across the crests of her breasts. She felt them come alive beneath his touch. His eyes turned up to hold her stare as he leaned forward and drew one nipple into the heat of his mouth. Her back arched and she laced her fingers into his hair as she watched him.

Through the dizzying sensation, Jewell managed to find the edge of his shirt and pulled it up his back to expose the hard muscles beneath it. Benjamin stepped back only long enough to finish pulling the shirt over his head. It mussed his hair slightly, which only made him sexier to Jewell. The shirt fell forgotten to the floor.

Jewell pulled Benjamin back against her and reveled in the heat of his skin pressed against her breasts. Her head felt light, her breasts heavy, and her nerves never more alive. Benjamin's strong fingers pressed into her hips and pulled her even closer. The need to reciprocate overtook Jewell and she sought out the hard tendons of his shoulders to nip and kiss at them. His grip tightened.

Benjamin looked up and nearly choked on his own pounding heart. Copper tresses flowed around her face and danced across her breasts. Emerald eyes sparked with obvious arousal.

"I want you, Jewell," he said, fighting the thickness in his throat and unwilling to take his hands from her beautiful body. He only hoped his voice was strong enough for her to hear him. "I want to make love to you. Don't make me wait any longer."

Jewell's lips parted. She held his chin in her hand and leaned forward to kiss him. Passion, need, desire, want, and hunger were all in that one kiss. She ran her hands over his shoulders and back and relished in the ripple of his muscles beneath her touch.

Gently, Benjamin urged her to wrap her legs around him. His gaze locked with hers as he lifted her off the counter.

"Hold on," he instructed.

Jewell gasped, afraid she would be heavy, but he seemed to hold her without effort. The slow, erotic grin she loved so much spread across his lips. Each naked from the waist up, Benjamin carried her out of the kitchen and up a flight of stairs to his bedroom.

"Nothing is stopping us this time," he told her as he kicked open his bedroom door.

Jewell could only smile and silently beg for him to make it to the bed as soon as possible. With great care, he laid her back

on the duvet, his eyes roving over her body. Benjamin's slow perusal was as intense as a touch on her skin.

"You're beautiful," Benjamin told her with awe in his voice. His lips touched the valley between her breasts and moved down the plane of her stomach. "I've never imagined a woman so perfectly formed."

Jewell laced her fingers into his hair and arched her back to meet his kiss as he moved lower. She closed her eyes and gloried in the swirling sensations surrounding her, but found she enjoyed watching him love her, and opened them again. Benjamin released the button of her jeans and slowly pulled down the zipper. The release of each tooth sent waves of reverberating pleasure through Jewell's body.

Benjamin kissed and tasted the sweetness of Jewell's skin as he slipped her jeans down off her hips to reveal the black, scant panties beneath them. Every moment, every sensation, added to the buzz in his blood.

When she lay on the bed, completely naked and unashamed for his delicate inspection, Benjamin stood and released the buckle on his belt. Jewell watched in rapt interest as he unzipped and removed the final barrier of clothing between them. Fully naked, Benjamin stood at the edge of the bed. His gorgeously sculpted chest and visibly aroused body forced Jewell's heart to pound furiously against her ribs. Her breath came in hard, jagged bursts.

His smoldering gaze was almost more than Jewell could bear. She thought if someone were to throw ice-cold water on her exposed skin, it would do nothing to cool her but would instantly evaporate in luscious steam. Benjamin held her stare as he opened a drawer beside his bed and removed a foil packet. Their eyes held as he opened it and put on the condom.

She held her arms out to him in an invitation he could not deny if his life depended on it.

He slid his body up hers as he joined her again on the bed. Every place their skin touched was a firebrand. Jewell clung to him in a desperate need to see this through. A hunger like nothing she had ever known or imagined ravaged her body. She embraced him with every part of her being; arms, legs, hands. Benjamin's hands caressed her thighs and breasts and his lips burned an animated path over her entire body.

She felt his hard erection hover at the edge of entering her body, teasing and exciting her with each momentary touch and gentle probe. Every cell screamed for him. Every breath caught in her throat in anticipation.

Benjamin tried to control his overpowering need to be enveloped completely by Jewell. He didn't want to be a sex-hungry jerk that didn't take her into consideration. But the chaos raging within him was undeniable and uncontrollable. With Herculean effort, he pushed himself up to look down into Jewell's flushed face. Her aroused breasts beckoned to be nuzzled and kissed.

She smiled slowly at him. "Don't you dare stop now."

Benjamin slipped his hands along her hip to gently cup her luscious rear end. He lifted her slight weight a fraction of an inch off the mattress and held her gaze before pushing himself into her hot core.

Jewell's body arched in pleasure and Benjamin's fingers pressed into her hips. He couldn't breathe. The incredibly overwhelming bliss of Jewell's body was more than he ever imagined.

Unwilling to let things end there, Jewell wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for an earth-shattering kiss before the heat died. In answer to her prayers, he returned the kiss and slowly moved inside her. His chest brushed her distended breasts with each stroke and movement. Taut muscles flexed and bulged beneath her hands as he made love to her.

She had to hang on to him to keep herself from flying to the ceiling. A spring coiled inside her and pulled in from her limbs until she felt weak and energized at the same moment. A cold flush rushed over her body and she fought to breathe.

Benjamin's mind was aware only of Jewell surrounding him as she pulled him to complete release. He moved without thought, but reveling in each stroke. Heaven lay in his arms.

Jewell used her legs to flip him to his side, then to his back. Benjamin groaned at the glorious picture she presented over him. Gorgeous breasts begged for kneading and suckling. Her flat, smooth stomach begged to be kissed. Her mussed hair flowed around her shoulders, and as Jewell leaned forward, the ends brushed his chest. Her strong, curvaceous thighs sat on each side of his hips. Benjamin ran his hands up her legs to the junction of her hips, his thumbs brushing her downy curls. With her palms pressed against his lower stomach, she ran her hands up his torso to his chest and shoulders. She kissed his lips and looked into his face.

"Show me, Benjamin."

He gripped her hips and guided her in a slow rhythm. The sweet agony of holding back his primal need to rush ahead and give in brought tiny beads of sweat to Benjamin's brow. He couldn't breathe as the tension built in his torso and pulled a rumbling groan through his chest. Jewell gripped his arms and followed his lead until her head fell back and he felt the tremors seize her body. It was too much for him to take, and his own body reacted in equal fervor.

Depleted and sated, Jewell fell to the mattress beside him. He moved with her and pulled her against his chest as they both fought to breathe.

Fourteen

Benjamin and Jewell came together at the hood of his car and joined hands. Jewell leaned into his side and smiled up at him. Her green eyes sparkled, and just looking into her face held multiple new dimensions of happiness for Benjamin. Hers was no longer the face of a peer, a friend, or a sexual partner. Those lively gems, and Jewell's creamy skin, were the features of a woman who was now an indispensable part of his life.

He stroked her cheek with his fingertip. A feeling of exhilaration had lingered with Benjamin since he woke up that morning, and Jewell's beautiful face only heightened it.

"I warn you. Chaos reins in the Kincaid household."

"Somehow that sounds strangely appealing."

Jewell's smile widened, and the delicious hollow at the base of her throat bounced with laughter. She linked her fingers through his and they walked together to the door of the large farmhouse.

The substantial home was painted pale yellow with cream trim and a deep farmer's porch encompassed three sides, with a closed ceiling and large pillars supporting the roof. Along the outside of the porch were the brown skeletons of many shrubs and bushes, now bare with the approach of winter. Making a quick estimation, Benjamin guessed the house to be at least a

century old. The home had obviously been well maintained, but retained its old-fashioned appeal. Shutters framed each window, and the detail committed to the wood cornices and eaves was a testament to the builders. Benjamin sensed warmth, family, and an invitation to enter; the type of things he never felt in the mausoleum in Hartford.

They ascended the four wooden steps to the interior of the porch. Beside the door sat two wicker chairs with a wrought iron table between them. Further down the porch, a two-person swing hung from chains anchored in the beams above it. A pink and black soccer ball hid partially beneath one of the chairs. The wood was littered with brown, crisp leaves from the surrounding trees, and a jack-o-lantern left over from Halloween sat on the other side of the door.

The interior door was open and Benjamin looked through the screen into the foyer beyond it. The appetizing aroma of vanilla, nutmeg and cinnamon drifted to them through the mesh and Benjamin inhaled deeply.

Jewell pulled open the wood-frame door and cupped her palm around her mouth to call out as they entered the house, and within seconds Jewell's father came down the hall to meet them. Mr. Kincaid was a big man, with broad shoulders and thick, white hair. An old-fashioned cardigan sweater with leather buttons did little to disguise the substantial size of Jewell's father. Cecil raised his hand in greeting, and pulled Jewell into a devouring hug. After kissing her temple, he extended his hand to Benjamin for a hearty shake.

"Nice to see you again, Benjamin," he signed. "It wasn't under the best of circumstances the last time. We didn't have much of a chance to talk."

"It's nice to be here, sir."

Jewell's father waved his hand. *"Please, call me Cecil. We aren't much for formality in this house."*

“*Where is Mom?*” Jewell asked.

Cecil Kincaid indicated the room at the end of the hall he had just exited. “*In the kitchen. She’s making the pumpkin for the pie. I’ve been instructed to go out to the apple tree and see what I can bring her for apple brownies.*”

Jewell took Benjamin’s hand and led him towards the source of the aromas making his mouth water and his stomach grumble. “*My mother doesn’t speak or read lips. I don’t know if you realized that when you two spoke at the hospital.*”

Benjamin nodded and followed her down the hall that was wallpapered with an old-fashioned scene print of covered bridge sketches on a pale tan background. He felt like he had stepped back in time. The furnishings were antiques, and the interior itself stayed true to original style wherever it could. Even the light switches on the wall were push-button rather than toggle. Substantial crown molding hugged the ceiling, and thick baseboards sat along the wall. Half a dozen generations had occupied this house. Benjamin could almost sense the decades of life. It was pleasant, so in contrast to what he understood.

Benjamin looked back to Jewell. For a moment he felt embarrassed that she caught him in his musings. She tugged gently on his hand again and urged him toward the kitchen door. He found himself lost in her green eyes and beautiful face. For several hours now he’d tried to define the crazy, tumultuous commotion dancing around his chest, but had no words. Just sensations. Lightness. Warmth. Tingling. Joy. Peace. All he knew was that he liked it and he wanted it to continue. Figuring out what it all meant would come later. Right now, the important thing was finding some hot apple pie and being in as close proximity to Jewell as he could manage without being lewd.

They entered the kitchen to find Jewell's mother and little sister where they stood at the counter. Pearl was busy forming raw crust into a deep stoneware pie plate. Opal Kincaid stirred a large bowl of pumpkin puree. Pearl looked up from her task and a wide smile lit up her fair face.

"Jewell," she cried and jumped down from the stool she stood on. She ran to her sister and threw her arms around Jewell's waist.

Opal turned at Pearl's motion and smiled. Everyone in this house smiled. The notion made Benjamin smile wider. Jewell said chaos ruled here, but that wasn't what Benjamin saw. He saw life, in its most pleasant form, and a family living it. Jewell's mother wiped her hands on a towel before hugging her daughter. The slight woman only reached mid-chest to Jewell.

"Hello, Benjamin. Cecil and I were very happy to hear you would be coming out today with Jewell." Opal told him as she turned away from her daughters.

Benjamin took the small woman's hand and kissed the knuckles, having to bend slightly to be able to reach her. She was such a dainty woman. He didn't recall ever seeing such a whimsical lady.

"I'm happy to be here. I wanted to see that Pearl was doing better."

Opal held his hand and patted it with the other. She stepped back and wiped her hands again before continuing to sign. Her eyes softened as she looked up at him.

"We were so sorry to hear about your sister. Jewell spoke highly of her. I wish we'd had the opportunity to meet her."

His throat thickened immediately, and he swallowed against the dryness. Victoria's death left a raw, gaping hole in his heart. Sometimes he could bury it enough that it wasn't foremost in his mind, but the mere mention of her brought it out again. Benjamin steeled himself. He didn't want to think about it

today. Today would be a good day. Just like yesterday. Like last night.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kincaid. I appreciate that, and I know Victoria would have liked you very, very much. Jewell was a friend to her, and I see where she gets her big heart."

"Please call me Opal. Come and sit for a while before the three of you take off."

Benjamin glanced at Jewell for the answer. She shrugged and nodded, her head slightly askance. *"Whatever you'd like to do."*

They went to the table, hand in hand, and sat down. Pearl jumped back on her stool and continued with her crust dough. Cecil came back in with a dozen apples held in the bottom half of his cardigan sweater. He touched his wife's arm as he passed her and she pointed to the table. Both Benjamin and Jewell scurried to keep the freshly picked fruit from rolling to the floor as her father unceremoniously dumped them out. Opal set a glass bowl and small paring knife down in front of Benjamin.

"Have you ever peeled apples before, Benjamin?"

"No ma'am. Can't say I have."

She patted his shoulder and smiled. *"Be careful not to cut yourself."*

Jewell tapped on the table. *"Mom, I thought we were supposed to be taking Pearl off your hands."*

Her mother smiled wider and shrugged her shoulders. *"That was before you said you were bringing Benjamin. Now you're just cheap labor. Garnett will be here later and we'll put him to work, too. Besides, Benjamin has to work for his meal."* She turned away and went back to her pie filling.

Jewell squeezed his hand. *"I think you were just invited to Thanksgiving dinner."*

~ * ~

“So, Roth, how is your Executive Assistant working out for you?” Travis Traynor asked as he matched Benjamin’s step down the hallway.

Several comments came immediately to mind, but Benjamin suppressed his inner amusement behind a wide smile. “Just great, Travis. I’m glad I convinced you to let me have her.”

“Good. I’m glad she’s working out. I had a nagging feeling when I interviewed her she had too much background to be administration. We just didn’t know you needed a new woman.”

More illicit thoughts he had to keep to himself. “Neither did I. But when Carol Hannigan announced her intentions to retire, the opportunity presented itself.”

“Well, she must be good because you certainly seem more relaxed. Ms. Kincaid knows how to do her job.”

Benjamin did his best to hide his lurid grin. *Oh, if you only knew Travis. If you only knew.* He just shrugged and nodded and let the comment lie between them without expounding on it and possibly losing his composure all together.

“That whole mess with Kevin Burke was unfortunate. I certainly hope Ms. Kincaid doesn’t think his actions are the norm here at Bulwark. Is she handling everything okay?”

“The support Ms. Kincaid had behind her, from Bulwark and yourself, did a great deal to bolster her confidence after the incident. I’m positive she’s put it behind her.”

“Well, it took a lot of courage for her to stand up to him, and to report the confrontation. I’m glad to see that kind of spunk.”

They continued down the hall together to the door of Benjamin’s office. Once there, Mr. Traynor extended his hand in a hearty shake.

“We were all very sorry to hear about your sister.”

Benjamin nodded. “I wanted to thank you for the flowers you sent to the funeral. They were thoughtful.”

Traynor nodded. "It was the least we could do. You should've taken more time. We could have made it around here without you for a few more days."

"I appreciate that, Travis. But coming back was good for me. We're coming into the end of the year. Things get crazy for us the last quarter with tax reporting and earnings calculations."

Travis laughed and patted Benjamin's shoulder before he walked away. Benjamin turned on his heels and smiled down at Justine. Unlike the first several months she worked for him, she greeted him with a smile back instead of a panicked expression.

"Has Ms. Kincaid returned from her meeting yet?"

Justine shook her head and tapped the end of her pencil against her cheek. Benjamin recognized the devious twinkle in the young woman's eyes and wondered what put it there.

"No. I heard the meeting is running long. Might be another hour. Do you want me to let her know you're looking for her when she gets back?"

"Nope. I'm sure she'll stop by my office."

He turned, but a motion of Justine's hand brought his attention back.

"There is a gentleman waiting to see you in your office, Mr. Roth. He said he was your godfather and needed to wait for you to get back."

Benjamin arched his eyebrow. "Thank you," he said before opening the door.

~ * ~

"*Do you want a drink?*" Jewell asked as she let Benjamin into the apartment shortly after seven that evening. By the look on his face, she thought he needed it.

Benjamin nodded his head and draped his coat on a chair in the living room. Jewell watched him drop heavily into the cushions of the couch and set his ankle on his knee. His fingers flicked across his lips and he stared at some indiscernible point

on the floor. With a sharp tug, he loosened his tie and yanked it out of his shirt collar.

He had been gone when she returned to the office after her meeting. Justine filled her in with sparse details only; Ben Prescott had been there, and after he left Benjamin took off. He never returned. By the looks of it, he had a hell of a day.

Jewell came out of the kitchen and joined him, a chilled glass of wine in each hand. She sat beside him and slipped into the circle of his arm against his side. He drank nearly the entire glass before setting it on the coffee table. Jewell waited patiently for him to explain. When the lack of clarification continued on for several more minutes, Jewell pressed her hand against his chest and drummed her fingers to draw his attention. Benjamin turned a slow gaze her way.

"Are you going to tell me what happened today?" she asked.

He stared at her for several long moments, his brown eyes skimming over her face. Benjamin's fingertips brushed her cheek and smoothed over her mouth. She enjoyed his gentle touch and parted her lips slightly. Jewell looked up into his face, and her stomach tumbled with a sweet, aroused sensation. Since the night they had made love, she'd experienced an awareness of a connection with him far beyond anything she'd ever imagined possible. Her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt.

Benjamin shook his head, and Jewell struggled to remember the original question. "Not tonight. Don't worry about it."

"Are you sure?"

His head snapped around to meet her eyes. A storm stirred behind them. "I'll tell you when I'm ready to tell you."

His was not a mood to be trifled with this evening. The fire in his gaze caught her off guard, and Jewell's jaw fell open as she struggled for an appropriate answer. Before she could

speaking, the smoldering challenge in his eyes died and he looked away. Benjamin sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry," he said in a deep baritone. "I didn't mean that. Bad day."

Jewell touched his temple and smoothed back a light caramel-hued wave of hair. Several strands fell down over her fingers and she pushed her nails further into the luxurious softness. When she thought of men's hair, she never thought 'soft' or 'silky'. Women spent hundreds of dollars to pamper, coddle and moisturize their hair and give it that 'touchable' feel. He probably didn't even know the name of the shampoo he used. The thought made Jewell smile.

"We all have bad days. Let's just forget about it."

He shook his head and pressed one of her hands between both his, rubbing both the palm and back in a slow caress. "I keep forgetting there is someone who actually cares."

She curled her fingers around his hand. "And I do care. Very much."

Benjamin lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips, a wry smile on his lips. "I'm learning." He sighed deeply before continuing. "Prescott came to the office today to tell me my father was arrested last night."

"Oh," Jewell said softly.

"He's furious. I guess he found out at the booking that I bailed David out and hired his lawyer."

"Is he still in jail?"

Benjamin's nod was slow and tired, and he lifted one hand to rub the back of his neck. Jewell shifted to take over the massage, kneading her fingers into the tight muscles of his shoulder. A moan rumbled in his chest as she worked her thumbs along his spine.

"Bail won't be set until Friday because of the holiday. So, he's got at least a good thirty-six hours to stew in his juices."

She took her hands away from the massage just long enough to sign. *"Where did you go after he left?"*

He twirled his finger in the air. *"Here and there. I drove mostly. Trying to think."*

Jewell shifted again on the couch to kneel beside him, resting her elbow on the back and her cheek against her fist. "Well, you're here now."

Benjamin nodded, his eyelids lowering over his dark brown eyes, and pressed his lips against hers. His fingertips applied a slight pressure to urge her closer to him. A sweet commotion immediately flooded her veins and Jewell rested her head in the bend of his elbow as he kissed her deeply and soundly.

"Get a room, huh?" Ruby called from the hallway.

Jewell pulled back and scowled at her younger sister. Benjamin turned to look towards the hall. His arm tightened around her and pulled her closer to his side. For his benefit, Jewell signed Ruby's comment. He smiled.

"Hello, Ruby," he said. There was no indication of awkwardness in his face or voice at 'being caught' by the younger girl.

She waved her hand and smacked her gum. "Hey Benny. How's it hangin'?"

"Ruby," Jewell said with shock. "Good Lord, have some manners."

"Whatever. Mom told me you're coming to the house for dinner tomorrow." She indicated the statement was for Benjamin with a forward jut of her dainty chin.

Benjamin nodded. "I can't wait. If your mother's cooking tastes as good as it smelled on Saturday, I'm going to eat myself into a coma."

"Speaking of which, do you want to help me make Watergate Salad?" Jewell asked him.

Amusement twinkled in his eyes. He chuckled softly. *“What is Watergate Salad and how hard is it to make?”*

“You’ll find out what it is, and if you can open a can of pineapple and stir marshmallows into cool whip you can make it.”

One eyebrow arched inquisitively. *“Cool whip, pineapple and marshmallows. Sounds interesting.”*

“Don’t forget the pistachio pudding, maraschino cherries and walnuts,” she signed and ticked off with her fingers.

He shook his head. “I can’t wait.”

Jewell stood up and held her hand out to him. Ruby mumbled something about going out with some friends and would be back before midnight. She also said something about leaving them alone so they could make out all they wanted. With relief that Benjamin couldn’t hear Ruby’s comments, Jewell told her sister to wear a warm jacket and let her go.

“Yes, Mother,” Ruby said with a warm smile as she headed for the door. Jewell grinned and blew her little sister a kiss before she disappeared.

Benjamin followed her into the kitchen and Jewell tossed a bag of mini marshmallows at him as she bounced up on the counter. From her perch, she took a large glass bowl from a cabinet and set it beside her. Without getting down, she retrieved the other ingredients. Under her instruction, Benjamin dumped and poured the individual items into the bowl.

Jewell found it surprisingly amusing to watch him make such a mundane and ‘middle-class’ desert as Watergate Salad. There he stood, in his Giorgio Armani suit pants and Calvin Klein dress shirt, plopping non-dairy whipped topping into a mixing bowl. Never had a man looked so sexy. Benjamin Prescott Roth was the white-collar version of small apartment domestication.

She snatched a cherry from the jar before he had a chance to empty it into the bowl. Benjamin tapped her hand in mock punishment. He scooped the pale green mixture on his finger and smeared it on the end of her nose.

"Don't be fresh," she demanded and snagged a dish towel to clean her face.

Jewell fully enjoyed her position of power. With her ankles crossed and her feet swinging in the air, she pointed to the drawer where she kept the plastic wrap. Obediently, Benjamin tore off a sheet and smoothed it over the bowl. She laughed when it took three attempts to get the clingy cover in place properly. Obviously, Benjamin and plastic cling wrap were not well acquainted. He opened the refrigerator and set the salad on an empty shelf.

"You just made Watergate Salad. Aren't you proud of yourself?"

Benjamin smiled widely and genuinely. He snapped the dishtowel out of her hand. In retaliation, Jewell grabbed his tie and pulled him to her. He didn't argue, but instead took slow and deliberate steps until his hips bumped her knees. With a sexy leer, he nudged her ankles apart and slipped his body against hers to be cradled by her hips. His hands slipped up her thighs and pushed at the hem of her skirt as he kissed her. The tone went from flirtatious to intense in a single moment. A groan escaped her throat and Jewell pressed her hands against his shoulders.

He pulled back and his brown eyes met her gaze. *"It seems things started like this before. Do you have a fetish for kitchens I need to know about?"*

Jewell touched his lips and caressed the rough stubble of his chin with her thumb. A slow smile tugged at one corner of her lips.

“Do I have a fetish? Oh, most definitely. Not for kitchens, though. For you.”

He took hold of her hands and pressed his lips against the pulse at her wrists. His brown eyes held her in their heated gaze as his touch moved firmly over her body to her breasts.

Benjamin stepped back and offered her his hand as she jumped down off the counter. She kept her hold as she led him out of the kitchen and down the hall. He worked at the buttons of his shirt and she slipped off her high heels as they walked.

Fifteen

Distant, yet loud, pounding pulled Jewell from her deep sleep. She thought first it might be thunder. As her senses came to the front, one by one, she realized the rude cadence was too fast and insistent for thunder. Jewell tried to turn over and sit up, glancing around Benjamin's bedroom, still feeling disoriented at waking in a different place. Benjamin's strong arm tightened around her waist and pulled her against his chest, and she smiled.

Sleep settled back down over her, as sure as the warm blanket Benjamin pulled closer to them. He kissed her shoulder, and his thumb plucked across the spaghetti strap of her peignoir. She drifted again into his comfort as Benjamin settled his chest against her back and spooned his body with hers. Jewell sighed and hummed her content.

The next thump shot her up off the mattress. For a moment, her heart pounded faster and a cold wave rushed over Jewell's heated skin. Benjamin came awake and sat up beside her. She fumbled to find the switch for the wall lights at each side of the

headboard. He didn't wait for her to find the switch before he pulled on her arm for her attention. The faint moonlight coming through the window was enough to light his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, a bleary haze in his eyes.

"Someone is pounding on your door."

Benjamin swung around in a fluid motion and pulled on his jeans before he stood. Barefoot, with the top button of his jeans still undone, he headed for the bedroom door. Jewell looked furtively around the room and grabbed his flannel robe from a chair near the bathroom door. By the time Jewell slipped it on and made it to the top of the stairs, Benjamin was already in the downstairs hall.

Jewell padded in bare feet down the carpeted stairs to the tiled hall. The ceramic was cold against her soles. Who could be pounding on Benjamin's door at three o'clock in the morning on a Friday night? She rounded the corner to the front hall and nearly skidded to a stop.

Benjamin and his father faced off through the open door. Jewell clutched together the front of her robe and pressed her other hand against the wall. She took in a quick, sharp breath.

Jon Roth turned his head slowly to bring his stony gaze down on her. A cold chill sank into her bones, and Jewell's eyes burned as she found herself unable to blink or look away. At least two days worth of stubble peppered Mr. Roth's cheeks, and his dark hair spiked out in disarray about his head, some falling forward over his brow. The stench of stale alcohol wafted in on the evening air and assaulted Jewell's nostrils. The stories Victoria had shared with her, about the violent combination of Jon Roth and alcohol, churned Jewell's stomach with a sense of foreboding.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Benjamin snapped.

"I'm here to kick your bastard ass," Jon Roth boomed.

Benjamin's jaw was set and the muscle across his cheek bounced. "I'd like to see you try."

He tried to shut the door, but his father's palm slapped against the thick wood. Jon's other hand came up with one extended finger, which he wagged in Benjamin's face. It was quickly slapped away. The hostility was tangible and hung in the air like a veil.

"You bastard. You ungrateful son of a bitch. Who the hell do you think you are to believe that murdering punk over me?"

Jewell couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

"I believed him because I knew he couldn't kill Victoria. He loved her. I *know* what you are capable of."

Jon Roth shoved hard against the door and pushed his way into the hall. Benjamin stepped back and put himself physically between his father and Jewell.

"You owe me! I put you where you are today! You haven't the right to screw with me!"

Shock and disgust registered immediately on Benjamin's face. Jewell's breath caught in her throat. She wanted to step in and stop this, but the testosterone-charged air acted like a force field and kept her from moving.

"You had nothing to do with it. And one thing has nothing to do with the other. You killed her!"

Jewell nearly choked. She saw Jon Roth's smoldering eyes dart in her direction when she involuntarily gasped.

"I didn't kill her! She was my daughter! My life!"

"Everything I wasn't."

"Damn straight."

Benjamin's body tensed. Jewell felt it beneath her light touch. Her heart ached and she wanted to scream out for him to stop.

"Why the hell should I do anything for you?"

"I educated you."

"What? You want to take credit for sending me to a good school? You did it to get rid of me."

Jewell tried to breathe against the ache in the center of her chest. Her focus switched from Benjamin's incensed face to his father's furious expression.

"You all but told the police you think I'm guilty."

The argument bounced back and forth like a ball bearing in a pinball machine. One moment it was about Benjamin's childhood, the next Victoria's murder.

"You are guilty. And if they ask, I'll tell them so."

Jon's fist impacted with Benjamin's jaw with a smack that ricocheted through the hall. He stumbled back and took Jewell with him as they both collided with the wall behind them. Her head hit the plaster and the room momentarily spun. Benjamin was back standing instantly, his fists clenched at his side and a fine stream of blood flowing from the corner of his lips. His head snapped around and their eyes locked. Jewell nodded in his silent question, her hand pressed against the forming lump. She was fine.

"You won't say a damn thing, or so help me, I'll kill you with my own goddamn hands!"

"Stop this," Jewell screamed. She heard her own voice, but didn't know from where it came. "Stop and leave now or I'm calling the police."

"Shut up, you little bitch."

Benjamin lunged and shoved Jon Roth back, directly into the chest of Ben Prescott as he came through the door. Jewell watched in horror as Jon turned and swung at Prescott, but was immediately knocked back with a two-handed shove. He tripped over the leg of a bench and landed on his ass. As Prescott stepped into the house, Jewell saw Barbara Roth come through the door.

“What the hell?” Benjamin cursed, standing at a ready for battle stance, his fists pulled up near his side.

“Don’t do this, Jon,” Prescott said in a surprisingly calm voice.

Jon struggled to his feet, his semi-drunken state making him clumsy. “Get away from me, you back stabbing sonofabitch. Take your whore with you,” he shouted, pointing at Barbara Roth.

Benjamin lunged and shoved Jon back against the wall, his forearm pressed to the man’s throat.

“Shut your filthy mouth,”

“What? Don’t like the truth?”

“Jon, please,” Barbara called from the door.

Jewell knew Benjamin wasn’t hearing most of the yelling between his father and the new arrivals. She wasn’t sure it would make any difference if he did. None of it made any sense to her, and she heard every word.

“I’ve had it. I’m sick and tired of paying the price for your mistakes. I have been for thirty goddamn years, and I won’t do it anymore,” Jon yelled.

“Please. This isn’t the way,” Barbara called again.

Jon locked glares with Benjamin, his mouth twisting into a sinister snarl. “You want to know why I shipped you off to that school? Why I couldn’t stand the sight of you?”

“Please,” Jewell whispered, tears blurring her vision. She didn’t know what she begged for, but she prayed someone would hear her and make it stop.

“I know why. You couldn’t stand the thought of having an imperfect son. I wasn’t worth your time.”

“Wrong,” Jon shouted, his eyes rounded wide with what seemed to be untapped fury. “I couldn’t stand you. I couldn’t stand the sight of you because you reminded me every single goddamn day of what your mother did to me. While I was building a life for us, she was screwing my business partner.”

Jewell watched as Benjamin’s shoulders slumped and his arm slipped from Jon’s throat.

“You’re not my son, you little bastard.”

“Oh, God,” Jewell whispered and covered her mouth with her hand.

Benjamin stepped back and walked backwards across the foyer. She could see his eyes dart from Jon Roth to Ben Prescott to his mother. No wonder there was such a resemblance between Benjamin and his godfather. They were father and son. Tears streamed down Jewell’s cheeks and her lungs hurt to breathe.

Barbara Roth stepped forward, her own face glistening with moisture. A small sob escaped as she crossed the space to her son. She reached out a hand, but Benjamin stepped back before she could touch him.

“Benjamin, please. Let me explain. Let us explain,” she said, motioning back towards Prescott.

“No,” he said through clenched teeth. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Flashing blue lights outside the townhouse caught everyone’s attention. Everything was a flurry for the next

several minutes. Four Boston police officers came through the front door and in minutes Jon Roth was handcuffed and escorted to a waiting car. An officer explained to Benjamin that a neighbor had called when they heard the shouting and saw the two men fighting through the open door. All Benjamin did was nod.

As the officers questioned his mother and Prescott about the events of the last half hour, Benjamin took hold of her arm and led her to the kitchen, his grip on her arm hard. Once there, he pulled her near a light and turned her so he could see her face. His fingers pressed gently against her scalp and felt the bump.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Jewell nodded and gingerly touched the corner of his mouth. He flinched away, grimacing. “Let me get some ice for that,” she said.

“No,” he snapped and Jewell stopped. A face that was harsh and tense one second, softened slightly. “No, I’m fine.”

Jewell didn’t know what to say or do. Hesitantly, though she wasn’t sure why, she looked up at him. The corners of his mouth were turned down slightly, and one tight muscle jumped along his jaw line. Benjamin’s stare shifted over her face. She took a deep, shaky breath and laid her palm over his heart. It still pounded ferociously with adrenaline. His hand touched her waist, and they moved together. Her arms circled his body and Jewell pressed her cheek against his chest. Neither said anything more. In his arms, holding him, Jewell felt some of the rigidity slip from his body.

“Benjamin?” Prescott’s voice came from the doorway.

Reluctantly, Jewell pulled back and pointed in Prescott’s direction. Benjamin turned, and she felt his arms tighten a fraction around her. He still held her close against his side.

Behind Prescott stood Barbara Roth, a pained and sorrowful look on her face.

“You need to leave,” Benjamin ordered.

“Benjamin, just listen to us.” Prescott asked.

Jewell was pulled tighter against Benjamin’s side. His hold was so intense, Jewell found it hard to breathe. She wished Barbara and Prescott would leave to give him time to digest everything. *How much more did he have to go through? What else could he be expected to accept?*

Benjamin’s ribcage expanded beneath her hands as he took a deep breath. His head dropped forward and he nodded slowly.

“Fine. Follow me to the dining room.”

His fingers laced through Jewell’s and they led the way to the dining room. She and Benjamin took chairs on one side of the glass top table, and his parents sat on the other. Jewell had a hard time wrapping her mind around the idea that these two were his true parents. How hard was it for Benjamin?

Jewell reached beneath the table and laid her hand on his thigh, his attention turning to her. *“I think I should go. Let the three of you talk,”* she signed.

Benjamin shook his head. *“No. Stay right here.”*

“Benjamin, I don’t think I belong.”

His hand covered hers. “Stay.”

“If my son wants you here, Jewell, so do I,” Barbara Roth said in a small voice, drawing Jewell’s attention.

She looked from Barbara to Prescott and finally Benjamin. His dark eyes were all she needed to see. Jewell nodded and turned her hand to squeeze his.

“Ok. I’ll stay.”

Benjamin brought his hands up to clasp them together on the tabletop. “So, it’s true. You are my father.”

Prescott nodded and looked to the woman at his side. He took her hand and Barbara tried to smile. "Yes. And you have no idea how much we've wanted to tell you."

Benjamin pushed his fingers through mussed hair. "You had no right," he said in a low, half-muted voice. He lifted his head and Jewell nearly flinched at the angry twist to his lips. "To keep this from me."

"We know that now," Prescott tried to say, but Benjamin's words overrode everything else.

Benjamin pointed a finger at them. "You let him hate me. Let him beat the crap out of me. Let him hide me away and tell me how worthless I was, knowing the whole time he wasn't even my father."

"Benjamin, you don't know how many times I wanted to step in," Prescott said.

"Not enough to stop it." Benjamin's voice was cold and flat.

Jewell's heart ached in her chest. She pulled his flannel robe tighter around her body and kept her gaze on Benjamin's face. The storm brewing behind his eyes was almost frightening.

"Did you know from the beginning?" Benjamin asked.

Barbara shook her head. "I suppose part of me suspected when I was pregnant with you. But Prescott and I had only been together once, and we both decided that could never happen again."

"Jon was ecstatic when he was told you were a son, Benjamin. I've never seen a man so proud," Prescott explained, his voice tight and tired.

"When did he find out the truth?"

Barbara took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "Shortly after the doctor's told us you were deaf. You were almost three years old."

"I told you, Benjamin, Jon's hostility with you had nothing to do with your deafness," Prescott added.

Benjamin's eyes squinted together as he glared at his father, the man that had always been his godfather and namesake. "I guess you knew better than anyone."

"He was more than ready to help you in any way he could. He wanted to learn sign language and started to look into doctors who could help you speak. We even began seeing specialists, hoping that if we could discover the reason you were deaf, there might have been a way to reverse it."

Benjamin sat up straighter, his expression reflecting sudden recognition. "Genetic. You told me the deafness was genetic, but they never knew from where."

Prescott shook his head. "It's a recessive gene. It was the luck of the draw that both your mother and I had the gene in our make-up. It's not present anywhere on Jon's side."

"Boy, it just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?" Benjamin said tersely. "Not only did you father a bastard son, hide your paternity, let your son live through years of abuse, but you're responsible for my deafness." He stared across the table. The tension was so high Jewell was suffocated by it. "Thanks, *Dad*."

~ * ~

Benjamin leaned into the marble vanity in the master bathroom, letting the faucet run in the sink until steam curled upward from it. He took a washcloth from the sideboard and soaked it in the hot water. The liquid burned his fingers as he wrung the terrycloth out, and Benjamin took a deep breath through the moist heat as he pressed it to his face.

He dropped the cloth on the countertop and pushed his fingers through his now-damp hair. Reluctantly, he raised his eyes and looked at his reflection in the mirror.

Who was he?

Benjamin always believed he was his own man. Because of the way his father—the way Jon Roth—pushed him, it made him the person he grew to be. He was the hated son of Jon Roth.

Now who was he?

He wanted to remember the fact that he was no blood relation to the bastard that killed Victoria. Benjamin had worried that whatever sick dementia drove his father to such a rage that he could take the life of his own daughter somehow dwelled in him. Someday that insanity might snap in his own mind and push him into hurting someone he loved.

So, now he knew.

But what did that mean? Some part of him was a result of his childhood. His upbringing. Yet other parts of him were a result of his parents. The genetic soup that created him. Benjamin knew very little about Prescott. The man was supposed to be just his godfather. His namesake. Not a man who'd spent one night with his mother.

In one night he went from being the outcast son to an unwanted bastard. Which was worse?

With a deep breath and heaviness in his chest, Benjamin wiped a dry towel over his face and turned to walk into the bedroom. Jewell sat at the foot of the bed, still wrapped in his flannel robe, with her arms crossed over her chest. She looked to him when he opened the bathroom door. A small smile bowed her lips.

She hadn't said much since they sat down in the dining room. Benjamin worried what kind of effect all this shit and garbage had on her. Never had he imagined he would pull her into such a sick and twisted drama that first time he'd kissed her in his office. Of course, he never believed then that they would come this far. That she would spend her nights in his arms and look at him with eyes that held a universe of thought and emotion in one glance.

Jewell stood as he approached the bed. He reached out his hand and she took it with both of hers. She stepped against him, pressing their joined hands between them, and her breath brushed across his chest.

"How are you?" she asked.

Benjamin brushed a wave of auburn hair behind her ear. "I wish I could answer that question."

"Is there anything I can do?" Jewell leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to his chest.

Heat spread out from the spot, quickly warming his body and limbs. Benjamin pulled in a long, deep breath through his nostrils. He pulled his hand from hers and found the knot of the robe's belt. With a tug, he worked the tie loose, holding her gaze as he did. Jewell's delicate hands touched his sides and slid along his bare skin as he worked open the front of the robe. Beneath it was a long silk negligee that flowed over her curves and dips like heavy cream.

"Yes, there is something," he said, feeling his throat restrict as his need for her exploded in his chest.

She stood unmoving as he pushed the flannel off her shoulders, her green eyes still looking up at him through auburn-tinted lashes. He ran his fingertips along her throat and arms, catching the spaghetti strap and pulling it off her

shoulder. As he moved along her breasts, Benjamin felt her breath catch and her eyelids fluttered.

“Make me feel real, Jewell.”

Her hands came up and she laced her fingers into his hair. She didn’t speak, but pulled him down for a hot and sweet kiss that sucked the air from his lungs. The need to somehow affirm himself, whatever way he could, flooded him. If Jewell could still make love to him, if she could be with him, that had to mean he was worth having. Because Jewell chose him, he was worth choosing.

He pulled her against him in an intense embrace. Benjamin was a man incensed. Her touch fed him. The taste of her, as he pulled the skin of her throat between his teeth, increased his hunger. Her hands skimmed along his waist and his breath caught when she released the button of his jeans.

Benjamin lifted her off the floor and took the two steps needed to reach the bed. He laid her back on the mattress, her hair fanning out around her head like a flame. Her emerald eyes still held his stare, unwavering.

He hovered over her, shucking his jean as quickly as possible. Jewell beckoned him with her eyes and with her hands. Benjamin pushed the hem of her nightgown up her calves and thighs, exposing her soft skin an inch at a time until the silk bunched at her waist.

“Benjamin,” she started to say, but he devoured the words from her lips.

“Don’t speak,” he said against her mouth.

He reached to the side of the bed and turned off the light, plunging them into total darkness. Tonight, he wanted to only feel.

Her hands shifted over his back and brushed his ribs. Long fingernails dug gently into his backside, forcing a groan through his chest, and he pushed himself inside her. As he moved, she moved with him, driving him farther and faster than he thought he could go.

He was real. He was real.

~ * ~

"You know, mornings would be much easier if all your things were here, instead of blocks away," Benjamin signed as Jewell took a bite of her wheat toast with honey.

She smiled and set the bread down. *"Yes, they would. But unless you can somehow move my building, there isn't much I can do about it."*

Benjamin smiled and perched on the stool beside her. *"I can't move your building, but why not move where you live?"*

Jewell tipped her head slightly as she stared at him. Slowly, she lifted her finger and sucked a bit of honey from its tip. The puzzled look on her face made him smile.

"What are you saying? Exactly?" she said.

He took her hand and pulled it towards him, pulling into his mouth the same fingertip she had sucked on moments earlier. The lingering sweetness was still there, and he ran his tongue across it. Jewell smiled. Benjamin kissed her knuckles and held her hand across the countertop.

"I'm saying I like having you here in the morning. And I would like to drive you to work every day. Bring you home every night. Here."

Rosy color stained Jewell's cheeks and her eyes brightened. *"Are you asking me to move in?"*

He nodded before taking a sip of his coffee. Benjamin tried to appear completely calm, but his insides were jumping in

anticipation. The thought of asking Jewell to move in had haunted him for two days, and today was the first day he'd had enough nerve to do it.

"Won't that raise some eyebrows at Bulwark?"

Benjamin shrugged. "Haven't we raised some already?"

A giggle shook her, and Benjamin smiled at the way her hair bounced on her shoulders and her throat arched when she laughed. He wished he could hear it. Would it sound as sexy as it looked?

"Yes, I guess we have. But this is pretty quick, don't you think?" she asked as she shrugged her shoulders.

"Sorry. My resolve isn't what it used to be."

"Oh? What other resolve have you broken lately?"

He leaned over and kissed her lips. They were sweet with the honey and butter. Benjamin ran the tip of his tongue from corner to corner of her mouth and tasted her. Jewell leaned into him, responding to the slow kiss. It made his stomach clench and his temples pound with wanting her again. Never in his life had he experienced such pure, insatiable hunger for a woman that could be flamed by a single kiss.

Jewell pulled back, but her fingers lingered in a gentle hold on his tie. It was a habit she had, to hold onto and gently pull on his tie when they, well, when they did several things. Most of which involved his desk and the near-removal of certain articles of clothing in a frenzy of physical need. Just the slight action was enough to stir his blood.

"If I don't leave soon, I won't be at work on time."

"You won't get in trouble with the boss," he teased.

Her sweet smile was his reward. "But other people will wonder why. You know everyone watches what everyone else does. We don't need negative rumors out there."

Benjamin nodded in agreement, not happily, but in agreement nonetheless. Jewell slipped off the stool and picked her purse up from the counter. He grabbed her hand and pulled her between his thighs for one more kiss.

"I'll be in the office as soon as I can. I'm just going to change my clothes and grab my briefcase. Oh, and get Justine her coffee."

"I expect an answer when I get there!" he projected as she disappeared around the corner.

Even after she was gone, her feminine scent lingered in the open air of the kitchen. Citrus shampoo, peach musk and melon soap all mingled with her essence to create an arousing combination to his senses. With a smile and a chuckle in his throat, Benjamin picked up the remaining slice of her toast and took a bite.

The overhead light flashed, indicating someone rang the door chime. He knew it wasn't Jewell because she had her own key. Benjamin twisted off the stool and went to the door. Two men dressed in basic navy blue suits stood on his top step.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Mr. Benjamin Roth?"

"Yes."

Each man reached into the inside breast pockets of their jackets and removed leather wallets with police shields. He only glanced at them.

"Mr. Roth, I'm Detective Liam MacDougal with the Hartford police department. This is Detective Richard Cary. We wonder if we might come in and speak with you."

He stared hard at the man speaking. "This is about my father," he stated.

“Yes, sir. We’ve come a long way to speak with you, and I assure you we wouldn’t bother you this early in the morning were it not important.”

Benjamin hesitated for only a moment, wishing the dark thoughts the conversation would create could be avoided. But it would take more than his wishes to make it all go away. He opened the door completely and motioned them into the townhouse.

Sixteen

“Where the hell is he?”

Jewell stared at the computer printout spread across her desk, not really registering any of the data. A paper cup of gourmet coffee sat cold and untouched beside her computer keyboard, and only a quarter of her bagel was gone. She tapped her manicured fingernails on the paper with one hand, and dangled her reading glasses on a fingertip of the other. Her eyes darted to the digital clock on the bottom of her computer monitor. Ten o'clock.

“Where the hell is he,” she mumbled again.

“Where the hell is who?”

Jewell jumped when the deep male voice, laced with a chuckle, carried across her office. She wasn't used to having someone respond to her mumbled musings. Her brother stood in the doorway of her office, his hands in his pockets and a smile on his face.

“Garnett? What are you doing here?” she asked as she stood to walk around the desk. “Is there something wrong?”

He shrugged one shoulder before embracing her. “Nope. I just had some business in Cambridge. Working hard?”

Jewell sighed. “Not really. I can't seem to focus. Come on in and sit down.”

Her older brother crossed the room and sat down at the chair facing her desk. "So, who were you talking about? Benjamin?"

She nodded. "He hasn't come in yet and I'm worried."

"Maybe he's just sick," Garnett suggested as he picked up a piece of her bagel. After one bite he put it down, a grimace on his face. The word fresh could no longer be applied to the food.

Jewell sat back in her chair, her brother's face threatening to make her smile. "No, he was fine this morning."

She immediately realized what she'd admitted to, and heat rushed to her cheeks as she looked at her brother. Jewell pulled her bottom lip through her teeth.

Garnett just smiled and chuckled. "So, that's how things are now?"

Despite her embarrassment, Jewell grinned. Besides, what did she have to be embarrassed about? After all, she was a grown woman. And what she and Benjamin had was nothing of which to be ashamed. In fact, she was proud of it.

"Yes, that's how things are," she said with a small chuckle and nod of her head.

Garnett leaned back in his chair in a relaxed slouch. Without intending to, Jewell looked toward the doorway adjoining her office with his. She thought she heard his door, but realized it was just wishful thinking.

"So, how has he been? Since his sister died."

A long sigh worked its way up from Jewell's chest. She shook her head slowly. "He puts on a good face, but I'm worried about him. Garnett, you wouldn't believe the things he has been going through. I don't understand why he hasn't just snapped. I think I would have long ago."

"Sounds bad."

Jewell huffed. "That's one way to describe it." She hesitated for a moment, wondering how much she should say. Would Benjamin be bothered if she shared things from his life with her

brother? In the end she decided it was Garnett, and she had always been able to tell him anything. And he would keep it in confidence if she asked him to do so. “You know how at first I told you Victoria was killed by her fiancé?”

Garnett nodded. “That’s what you said when you called from Hartford.”

“Well, it wasn’t David.”

“Who was it?”

She cleared her throat before answering. “Jon Roth. Benjamin’s—” Jewell hesitated. “Victoria’s father.”

Garnett’s face told her he noticed the change in wording. He turned his head and gave her a sidelong glance. “Their father killed her?” Shock drove his voice higher.

Jewell nodded. “It was apparently a total accident that Victoria was shot. I’m getting this information in pieces and some third hand, sometimes fourth hand, but Jon was threatening David McDaniel—her fiancé—with a gun, and Victoria stepped in the way.”

Garnett whistled and shifted in his chair. “So, it wasn’t a complete accident. He meant to shoot someone, but hit the wrong person.”

“Basically, yes.”

“That must be hard for Benjamin.”

Jewell stood, forcing herself not to look at the clock again. If she kept watching the time, it would drive her crazy. She walked to the window and looked out on the snowy-gray of winter in Boston. “Unfortunately, it gets worse.”

“Worse?” Garnett rose and came to stand beside her.

Just remembering what happened sent chills up her spine. “Two nights ago, at three o’clock in the morning, Jon Roth showed up at Benjamin’s house. He was arrested for Victoria’s death and had just been released on bail. Mr. Roth went right

from the jail to Benjamin's house. I have never seen anyone that angry in my life."

"Worse than the last time?"

Jewell nodded, her throat suddenly restricting. "So much worse. He was furious because he found out Benjamin bailed David out and paid for his lawyer. Benjamin believed David was innocent and Jon was guilty."

Garnett stopped interjecting comments and Jewell knew him well enough to know he was going to just let her speak. No matter how hard it was.

"I could go into every detail, but I'm not sure I remember it all or if any of it would make sense. Ultimately, Jon Roth isn't even Benjamin's father. His father is Jon's business partner, and the man Benjamin was named after. Prescott. He and Benjamin's mother had a brief affair and Benjamin was the result. His father knew shortly after Benjamin was found to be deaf." She turned and looked at her brother. "His impairment is genetic. I think if Benjamin hadn't been born deaf, his father may have never known. Things would have been different on so many levels."

Garnett nodded, pushing his hands deeper into his pants pockets. He pressed his lips together in a tight line.

"His father—or rather, Jon Roth—has been so terrible to him for so long because of what his mother did. He couldn't stand Benjamin because he knew the truth," Jewell continued to explain. Thinking of it all made her heart hurt. Not just ache. Hurt.

"That's a huge thing to learn out of the blue," Garnett finally said.

With a heavy sigh, Jewell gave in and looked at her watch. Almost ten thirty. "Like I said, I'm surprised he hasn't just snapped."

"But what about you?" Garnett asked, laying his hand on her arm and stepping closer.

Garnett's question surprised her. She looked into his dark face and deep eyes. "What about me? I'm not the one going through this. I'm just doing my best to be there for him."

"That's a big burden to take on, sis."

She did her best to smile convincingly. "I'm stronger than I look, you know."

Garnett squeezed her arm gently. "You're not Wonder Woman, Jewell."

"I know, Garnett," she said in a soft voice. "But I'm fine. I just need to be there for Benjamin as much as I can. He needs something solid and consistent in his life right now. And if he'll let me, I intend to be that strength."

~ * ~

Benjamin took another sip of his lukewarm coffee, its once tantalizing aroma now stale and unappealing, and glanced the grandfather clock in the corner of his dining room. The second hand jerked around the brass face in slow motion. Seven minutes past eleven. His entire morning was gone because of these two detectives and their endless stream of questions.

"We're very sorry to take up so much of your time this morning, Mr. Roth," Detective MacDougal said, closing his small notebook he had been jotting in all morning. "That just about covers everything."

On cue, the lights over their heads blinked. "It would seem I'm a popular man this morning," Benjamin mumbled as he stood and went to the front door.

He ran his fingers roughly through his hair as he crossed the foyer. *Now what*, he wondered. Who he found standing on his steps shocked him more than the arrival of Detectives MacDougal and Cary.

"Garnett?"

“Hey, Ben,” he said with a raised hand in greeting. “I was wondering if I could talk to you.”

Benjamin opened the door to let him in. “Why not?”

He turned to see the two detectives come down the hall. Detective MacDougal extended his hand to Benjamin. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Roth. Once again, we’re sorry to take up so much of your time. If we have any further questions, we’ll be in touch.”

Benjamin nodded and ushered the intrusive men out of his house. He shut the door behind them and led Garnett into the kitchen. His head was really pounding now, and as Garnett took a seat at the counter, Benjamin found a bottle of pain relievers and took water from the refrigerator. After downing the pills, probably more than the recommended dose, he leaned back against the counter edge and faced Garnett. With a flip of the bottle, he motioned toward the hall.

“Those were detectives from Hartford. Had a list of questions a mile long,” Benjamin explained.

Garnett nodded. “*Jewell filled me in on some of what’s gone down in the last couple of weeks.*”

Benjamin took another long drink of water, partially wishing he could get away with drinking something stronger this early in the day. He could use it. No, what he could use was a nice long vacation in Hawaii or maybe Bermuda. With Jewell.

“So, what can I do for you, Garnett? How did you know I would be home?”

Garnett fingered a napkin left behind on the counter. “I went by Bulwark this morning to visit Jewell. She told me you weren’t in yet. I could tell it had her worried.”

A momentary stab of regret made Benjamin frown. “I’ll have to make it up to her.” He shook his head and shrugged once. “I’m not used to having someone worry about me.”

He saw Garnett tap his fingers on the counter, and seemed determined to look everywhere but directly at him. Benjamin crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his stance.

“Okay, Garnett. Spill it.”

A self-deprecating grin worked its way to one corner of Garnett’s mouth. He finally looked up and met Benjamin’s glare. Flipping away the napkin he toyed with, Garnett raised his hands to sign.

“You had to know, coming from the family Jewell does, that you would get the big brother speech from me eventually.”

Benjamin took a deep breath, forcing it out through his nostrils. *“Is this the you-have-my-approval speech, or the you-hurt-my-sister-and-I’ll-hurt-you speech?”*

Garnett’s expression was set as he stared back at Benjamin. He thought he recognized a hint of regret in the man’s dark eyes. He looked away, pressed his lips together as he nodded, then turned back.

“I guess I’ve got my answer.”

“I want you to understand something, Ben. I like you. You seem like a decent man. If you weren’t, Jewell wouldn’t care so much about you.”

“I’m waiting for the ‘but’.”

“But you’re dealing with an astronomical amount of issues in your life right now.”

“And I feel very lucky to have Jewell,” Benjamin interjected.

“She could consider no other alternative, it would be against everything she is not to be there for you in any capacity she can. Jewell loves with everything. She gives everything, asking for nothing back. But no matter how strong she believes herself to be, there is only so much she can carry.”

A slow, smothering weight sank into Benjamin’s chest. He didn’t want to think about it, and certainly didn’t want to admit

it, but he knew in his gut Garnett was right. The haunting thought had plagued him for days, first festering in Connecticut and working into a full-blown ulcerous sore in the last two days. Benjamin pulled his strength from her touch and her presence, but each night, just as they drifted to sleep, the thought that he might be asking too much of her worked its way into the fringes of his mind. He wanted to believe she would tell him if it was too much, but Benjamin knew he was in denial of the truth. Jewell would stand beside him, taking on everything he dished out, without a single complaint.

With one long swallow, Benjamin finished his water and tossed the empty bottle in the sink. "So, this is when you tell me to leave your sister alone. Get out of her life before I hurt her. She deserves better than me. Better than my screwed up family. If I care about her at all, I end it now before it goes any further."

He stared across the kitchen as he spoke, but turned and met Garnett's stare after finishing. The outside corner of Garnett's right eye twitched and he pressed his lips together before raising his hands.

"I don't think it matters what I had to say. It sounds to me like you know the answers already."

~ * ~

Jewell sighed and opened the bottom drawer of her desk. Hidden in a brown bag was the lunch she'd hastily prepared when she stopped at her apartment that morning. Right now the chicken sandwich and fruit salad held absolutely no appeal. She picked up the sack, looked inside, and dropped it back into the drawer with a groan.

Her heart was in turmoil. Part of her wanted to leave for lunch and head back to Cambridge and find out if Benjamin was still at the townhouse. She wanted to know everything was okay, and if it wasn't, how she could help. But a nagging voice

told her to back off. If he wanted her to know what was going on, he would have gotten in touch with her. He had his alphanumeric pager, and if he had to, he could use a TTY service to call into the office. Hunting him down made her look like an obsessive girlfriend.

Jewell stood and moved to the window. The weather outside looked dreary and dirty. The snow that piled up against buildings and around sidewalk vents was a dingy gray color, soiled by cars and the air of the city. Winter in Boston was the least attractive of all seasons.

She thought talking to Garnett this morning would make her feel better; perhaps lift some of the weight on her shoulder. But it didn't. If anything, voicing her concerns forced to think about them more. How was Benjamin dealing with all this? Sometimes she saw the turmoil swirling behind his eyes, and it was at those times he seemed to hold her tighter and need her with an intense ferocity. That was when she gave over to him completely, gave him every ounce of herself. Whatever he needed to get through it. But there were moments it seemed he buried everything so deep inside, Jewell doubted he himself was able to realize it.

She loved him more than she ever thought the human heart was capable of feeling. It filled her and flowed over her. Sometimes it almost drowned her. Her mom had told her someday she would meet the 'one' who completed her. Opal promised her that love, when it was with the right person, would be an overpowering and glorifying feeling. Jewell knew now it was true.

If only she knew, for sure, how Benjamin felt. Sometimes it seemed so clear in his eyes when he looked at her. Or in his hands when he touched her. But neither had said it. Jewell didn't dare. And she felt like she was holding her breath, waiting for him to.

I love you.

It was so easy to say to her siblings, or her parents. Why did it have to be so hard with Benjamin?

With a deep sigh, Jewell turned away from the window. She gasped and jumped back when she saw Benjamin standing at the corner of her desk, watching her intently. Jewell pressed her hand over her heart.

“Benjamin, you frightened me,” she signed as she crossed to him, a smile spreading her lips as relief washed over her like a cool wave. “Where were you all morning?”

He stared hard at her, his eyes never leaving her face as she walked to him. It wasn’t the cold stare of anger, or the tense stare of thought, but something she didn’t know or understand. Suddenly, Jewell was afraid. The worst part was that she didn’t know what she was afraid of.

She stepped against him and touched her palm to his chest. His heart pounded hard and fast beneath her hand. “Benjamin? What is it? What’s wrong?”

He covered her hand with his own and wrapped his arm around her body, pulling her close. As his eyes skimmed over her face, gooseflesh spread out over her arms and body. His fingertips curled and pressed into her spine. She didn’t know why, but tears burned behind her eyes.

“Benjamin, please.”

He snatched the words from her lips with a devouring kiss desperate in its intensity. Jewell had to wrap her hands behind his neck just to hold on. Benjamin’s tongue delved into her mouth and his arms held her so tight it stole her breath. Just as suddenly as the kiss began, he broke away and buried his face into her hair and against the curve of her neck.

Jewell pushed her fingers into his hair and held him, her own heart now pounding at a ferocious pace. What happened? What had him acting this way?

Benjamin mumbled against her throat, and Jewell strained to hear him. When she did, her thundering pulse nearly stopped.

“I love you,” he whispered again and again.

Jewell swallowed, her throat suddenly parched, and reluctantly pulled back, urging him to raise his head with her touch. His smoldering brown eyes met hers, and what she saw was pain. As much pain as when Victoria died.

“Benjamin, please,” she forced out, thankful he didn’t need to hear the weak quiver in her voice. “Tell me what is going on.”

“I love you, Jewell.”

Tears momentarily blurred his face, but she blinked them away. “I love you, too.”

He shook his head, a sad, slow action. “Soon, I think you’ll hate me.”

So many thoughts rushed her mind, Jewell couldn’t begin to decipher them or pull them apart to make sense of any of them. She held his face in her hands, his skin still cold from the winter wind, and met his eyes.

“Benjamin, *nothing* could ever make me hate you.”

His arms dropped and he stepped away to stand behind one of her office chairs. He clutched the back until his knuckles whitened and his head dropped forward, golden brown waves of hair falling forward. Benjamin spoke, his head still down, and Jewell knew it was to avoid any interruptions. If he couldn’t read her lips or see her signs, she couldn’t speak.

“You have changed me,” he said in a strained voice, even the soft quality of his speech sounding hard. “I wasn’t looking to fall in love. Didn’t want to fall in love. Never considered falling in love. But I have, and it happened so easy.”

Tears fell from Jewell’s eyes, but she made no effort to wipe them away. She crossed her arms over her body and waited.

Waited for whatever bomb he was going to drop. There was one, Jewell knew it just as surely as she knew her own name.

He slammed the heel of his hand against the chair's back and Jewell could see a tense muscle jump along his jaw. Jewell took a step toward him but his hand shot up in an indisputable sign for her to stop. She held her breath, waiting.

"I can't ask you to be a part of my life. It is too twisted and too hard."

Jewell shook her head back and forth, slowly. Words formed on her lips as realization sank in. Her stomach flipped. "No," she whispered pointlessly.

"I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know what I am. Everything I ever thought has been thrown in a blender and shredded. How can I expect you to love me, when you don't even know who I am?"

Jewell ignored his silent request to stay away. She moved to him and pushed his shoulder to make him stand and face her. The anguish in his expression was excruciating to her.

"Stop it," she demanded.

"I can't. I've been down in my car for an hour trying to build enough strength to do this."

"Benjamin, this is crazy. This morning you asked me to move in, five minutes ago you told me you love me, and now you're saying you want to end it?"

"I don't want to."

"Then don't." It was all Jewell could do to keep herself from screaming.

Benjamin grasped her face with his hands, his fingers pushing into her hair and his palms hot against her cheeks.

"Jewell, how can you love me when you don't know who I am? Am I Benjamin Prescott Roth or am I Ben Prescott junior?"

"I love you, not your name."

“But isn’t that who I am?”

Jewell pushed back, anger flashing in to mix with the tumult of emotions raging through her. “Who do you love, Benjamin?”

He stared at her, furrows creasing his brow, and he shook his head slowly.

“Are you in love with Francis Louise Shackley?”

The furrows deepened and his eyes squinted. “Who the hell is Francis Louise Shackley?”

“I am.”

“What the hell are you—” he began, but stopped as understanding crossed his expression.

“Yeah,” she shot back. “Tell me again how much a name means. Do you love me—Jewell Kincaid? Or do you love Francis Shackley? Would you love me if you knew me as Francis?”

He nodded slowly. “Of course I would.”

“Then why don’t you believe I can love you?”

Benjamin pressed his fists against his eyes and sank into a chair. “I don’t know. I don’t know,” he mumbled over and over again.

Jewell dropped to her knees and knelt before him, pulling his hands from his face. “Benjamin, don’t worry about me. Don’t worry about my ability to love you. I love you, that is all you need to know. I can handle whatever happens, because I know we are doing it together.”

“You shouldn’t have to handle it.”

“Neither should you. But you are. And so am I.”

“Jewell, I don’t know if I can get beyond the things that happened when I was a kid. They made me who I am—”

She covered his lips with a finger. “Yes, they did. And I love the man you are.”

“But I might have been a better man if they hadn’t.”

Jewell nodded. "You might have, that's true. You might have been a worse man. A man I would have never known. Benjamin, we can't live around what-ifs. What if my mother hadn't been a heroin addict? What if she hadn't given me up? What if I grew up in a home of drugs and abuse? What if Cecil and Opal Kincaid weren't the ones who adopted me? Don't you see? Everything that happens can go another way. Every choice we make affects the rest of our life. Everything, *everything* has brought us here. Brought us together."

He touched her cheek with his fingers. Jewell clutched his fingers to turn into his hand and kiss his palm. Benjamin leaned forward and gently touched his lips to hers. Relief burst in her chest and spread out through her limbs. She closed her eyes and relished the kiss.

Then it was over. Benjamin stood, pulling her to her feet. The loss of his touch and sudden position change made her dizzy. He held her hand for a moment, squeezed her fingers, then released her and walked to the door. He pressed his hand high up on the doorjamb and leaned into his arm. Jewell watched him, waiting for him to turn and gift her with the smile that always made her knees weak.

He did turn, but there was no smile. Benjamin took in a long, slow breath that pushed up his shoulders and expanded his chest.

"I already spoke to Travis. I tried to give my notice, but he refused to accept it. So, I'm taking a leave of absence. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Where are you going?" she whispered, her throat so tight the sound barely escaped.

"I don't know yet. But I'm leaving today."

"Benjamin, please don't do this."

"I have to. I don't know how else to say it."

She took a step toward him, but he stepped back and opened the door. Benjamin held her stare for several seconds, and the tears fell unabated down Jewell's cheeks. He pressed his eyes closed and placed his hand over his heart, his two center fingers curled into his palm to create the inclusive sign of *'I love you'* and turned his hand out to her. Then he was gone, closing the door behind him.

A harsh burst of air ripped into Jewell's lungs and she stumbled back to fall into the chair behind her. She sucked in her breath, trying to stop the dizzy whirl of the room around her as a sob racked her body. Jewell buried her face in her hands and cried.

Seventeen

Benjamin leaned back in his beach chair and stared out over the ocean as the sun slowly came up over the horizon. Orange and pink tendrils of light reflected on the small waves and a salty breeze drifted in off the water.

He had been there, in that chair, since some time after two. Sleep refused to come and eventually he gave up all together. The queen size bed in his hotel room seemed vast and empty. And even in the warmth of the Florida Keys, it was cold. His hands reached out in the night for a body that wasn't there, and his dreams, when he slept enough to have them, left him frustrated and drained.

Benjamin lifted the bottle of brandy from his room's mini bar out of the sand. He took a long swallow and grimaced. The liquor was warm and tasted like piss. Disgusted, he tossed the bottle out across the sand.

His head hurt. More than that, his heart hurt. How many times had he heard the word heartache? It was supposed to be one of those figurative, unreal words used in country songs and sappy poetry. For him, it was as literal as it got. The throbbing ache behind his ribs often became so great it pushed against his lungs and made it hard to breath. The emptiness that ate a hole

in his gut opened wider. It ebbed and flowed like the Atlantic. This morning it was high tide.

He missed Jewell more than he had been prepared to handle. Benjamin wanted to believe his once cold heart would return to its unfeeling state when her emerald eyes weren't there to look at him and her auburn hair didn't brush his hand. But every beat reminded him he was alive, only because it chose to keep him alive. A man could live and be lifeless at the same time.

Benjamin pushed his bare heels into the fine, cool grains and toyed with the buttons of his open beach shirt. They were meaningless actions, doing nothing to distract or occupy his mind. Nothing took his thoughts away from Jewell and what he'd done.

Then why don't you believe I can love you?

Benjamin raked his rumpled hair and scratched his scalp. He should walk back to his room, take a shower and think about getting something for breakfast. He should, but probably wouldn't. Eating required too much effort.

With a deep sigh, Benjamin lifted his chin to look out over the horizon. The only other person on the beach was a woman far enough away that all he could identify was her dress as it billowed in the breeze. She walked slowly through the sand, stumbling occasionally as if each step was a struggle. Not interested in anything else, Benjamin watched her.

A nagging familiarity tugged at him as she moved closer. Something about the color and style of her hair, or maybe her build, poked at his brain like an annoying insect. But it couldn't be her. What in hell was his mother doing here? She moved closer and the nearer she came, the more convinced Benjamin was that it was indeed his mother.

He pulled himself up out of the beach chair as she came over the last swell of sand. She seemed out of breath and bright color stained her cheeks. Of everyone Benjamin had seen at this

vacation and tourism hub, no one ever looked more out of place than Barbara Roth. She wore a billowy yellow sundress, which was so far from her usual style it was almost laughable, but her hair was curled and set in the same cut she'd had since Benjamin could remember. Around her throat was a short strand of pearls. As she reached him, his mother pushed an errant bit of hair off her glistening forehead.

"Hello, Benjamin."

He almost laughed, but held it back. His mother, who barely left Hartford, just trudged over half a mile of beach at five o'clock in the morning to find him, and she says hello as if nothing at all was out of the ordinary.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, cutting through the usual niceties.

Barbara's shoulders shifted and a wry grin lifted one corner of her lipstick painted lips. "Good morning to you, too."

Benjamin wasn't in the mood for early morning banter, but apparently his mother was going to insist. He sighed and planted his hands at his waist, the loose cargo shorts slipping down his hips. "Good morning, Mother. How are you?"

She sighed and ran a hand over her hair. "Oh, fine. Nothing like an early morning walk to get your juices flowing."

A deep laugh started in Benjamin's gut and he tipped his head back to let it loose. Her nonchalance was hilarious. When he looked at her again, his mother stared at him as if he had just gone off the deep end. After several seconds, she sighed and folded her hands in front of her, looking back to the sea.

"This is a very nice place for a vacation."

Benjamin nodded. "I suppose."

"Well, that's what you're here for, isn't it? A vacation? Getting away and clearing your head before going back to real life?"

Barbara Roth stared up at him as she spoke, almost challenging him to correct her. Benjamin stared back for several seconds before looking away.

“How did you know I was here?”

“Jameson told his father. Your father,” she corrected and her brief glance away was the only indication that she might be uncomfortable. “Ben told me.”

Benjamin cursed his decision to call his half-brother after getting Jameson’s email on his palm pilot. He should have known someone would come hunt him down eventually. The question was why.

“Why are you here?”

Barbara clasped her hands together in front of her and looked up at him. “To tell you some things you need to know.”

Benjamin raised his hand. “I’ve heard all I want to hear.”

“And it’s the things you don’t want to hear that usually do you the most good.”

“What could be so damn important that you felt you needed to come all the way down here to tell me?”

“That I love your father.”

Benjamin stared at her. His mind went blank and he could think of nothing to say.

“I met Jon Roth and Ben Prescott the same summer. Right after they both graduated from law school. You might not believe it, but back then I was quite the looker.” The twinkle in her eyes actually made Benjamin smile. “The two of them fought over me quite ferociously. But truth be known, my heart belonged to Ben Prescott from the beginning.”

“This is a very nostalgic story, Mother, but—”

“But you are going to hear the whole thing, Benjamin,” she said with a curt nod of her chin.

His mother brushed past him and sat down in the chair he had previously occupied. Left with no other option, he crossed

his ankles and sat down in the sand, scissoring his legs up to rest his elbows on his knees. She shifted down into the deep chair and looked out over the horizon. Benjamin laughed a single chuckle and shook his head.

“By all means, Mother, continue.”

“I’m not going to go into all the details, because it was so long ago I doubt I remember them all, but Ben and I had a fight. To get back at him, I turned to Jon Roth. I always believed Ben would apologize, and we would go on together. But days turned into weeks and weeks to months and he never came to me. When Jon proposed, I accepted, thinking I had few other options.”

“So you never loved him?”

“Oh, I suppose I did on some level care for him. But my heart always belonged to Ben.”

Benjamin wiggled his toes in the sand. The morning sun warmed the back of his neck. He looked from the granules that dotted the top of his foot into his mother’s face. She had a far off, dreamy smile on her face. Never could he recall seeing such a genuine smile from Barbara Roth. Perhaps there was some truth to the story she told.

“So, according to what you told me a month ago, you and Prescott had a one night stand. Only once.”

The smile diminished slightly. “Yes. I’m ashamed of the timing now. It was the night before he married Gladys, your late godmother. I’m sure you were aware that Jameson was born before they were married. The marriage was one of, I guess you could say, necessity.”

Benjamin raised his eyebrows. This was getting more torrid by the minute, and Barbara Roth was not the woman he’d always imagined her to be. He knew about Jameson, but had never really put much thought into it.

“It was wrong. Wrong because I was married and he was about to be. Wrong because we were both with people we didn’t love, and all we really wanted was to be together. Wrong because we hadn’t admitted the truth before then.”

“But you were only together the one time? You didn’t have an affair?”

Barbara shook her head. “No. It broke both our hearts, but we decided to try and make the best of the lives we had created for ourselves.”

“Gladys Prescott died shortly after Abby was born. Why weren’t you together then? Only one of you was married.”

His mother tilted her head to look at him. Tears glistened in her eyes. “I was a different woman by then. Things were hard. We both know Jon made your life terrible, and I can never ever make up for that. He made life terrible for me, too. To be honest, I was too afraid to leave. I had given up so much, I didn’t feel I had a right to try and get any of it back.”

Benjamin looked away from her and watched a small insect scurry across the sand, trying hard to hide the weight pulling down on his heart. For the first time in his life, he could actually sympathize with his mother. He knew exactly how she felt. Not having the right to ask for what he wanted.

His mother’s gentle touch on his cheek caught him off guard. It had been a long time since she had laid a hand on him, especially in affection. He looked back to her.

“We made many mistakes. More mistakes than I can count, or would even try to. But I want to try and fix as many as I can. I can’t bring your sister back, but I can make sure you are happy.”

Benjamin pulled back from her touch and moved to his feet in one fluid motion. “I doubt that, Mother. I have a feeling happiness just isn’t in the cards for me.”

She stood as well, standing toe to toe with her son. "It is. But you are following in our footsteps and walking away from it. Benjamin, your father and I are going to make a go at the life we should have had forty years ago. I have already filed for divorce from Jon, and although we aren't going to marry right away, that is the plan."

"Every kid's dream. His parents get back together."

"Benjamin, you aren't hearing what I'm saying." Her face was set and she gripped his arm.

"So, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying don't wait forty years for another chance at happiness. You might not get it."

"Who says I have a chance at it now?"

"You do if you would just open your eyes and see what's staring you right in the face," she said as she stomped her foot in the sand.

He didn't want to think of her, but Jewell's beautiful face and sparkling green eyes flashed in his memory. One moment he saw her beside him, smiling and touching him after they made love. The next, she was crying and begging him not to leave. Benjamin pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes to try and banish the images.

His mother pulled down his arms and touched his jaw to make him look at her. "Son, she loves you. At the hardest points of your recent life, she has been beside you. I've seen it. She put herself between you and Jon's rage. She was compassionate to me, despite what I've done. She stood beside you when we buried Victoria. And she was with you the night you found out the truth. If she didn't love you, she wouldn't have stayed past the first bump in the road."

"I know she loves me," Benjamin snapped.

Barbara didn't flinch. "You love her. If you didn't, this wouldn't be eating you up inside."

“Yes, I love her.”

“Then go home. Go back to her and pray to God it’s not too late to grab hold of what He’s given you.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Why? You don’t have the obstacles between you like Ben and I did. All those obstacles started because we were fools. We played games. Don’t make the same mistake.”

“You are my obstacle. You and this whole screwed up mess,” Benjamin snapped back. He wanted to be angry with someone, and unfortunately his mother was the closest person.

Tears streamed from her eyes, but a small smile touched her lips. She laid her palm against his cheek. “I know. And this is the only way I know to fix it.”

In her eyes, Benjamin saw the truth.

~ * ~

“Jewell, hun, are you sure?” Greg asked as he sank down on the couch beside her.

She shook her head and wiped moisture from her cheeks. With her knees tucked up against her chest, Jewell rocked back and forth. “No, I’m not sure. I don’t know. But maybe.”

Greg touched her hair and pushed his arm behind her shoulders to pull her against his side. Jewell went willingly, pulling strength from her closest friend’s embrace. Her stomach churned and her head swam. She hadn’t eaten anything since a slice of toast that morning, but the thought of forcing something down her throat made everything worse.

“How long have you suspected?”

Jewell shrugged against him. “A week or so. Just before Christmas. I’m ten days late.”

“And you haven’t taken a test before now?”

“No. I thought it could just be nerves. With everything that has happened, I haven’t been sleeping or eating much. That could cause my cycle to be off.”

He pulled her closer and didn't say anything for several minutes. Jewell closed her eyes and curled against his side. Exhaustion hit her in waves, sometimes nearly knocking her out on her feet. But at night, when she stared at her ceiling, sleep wouldn't come. Greg rubbed his palm up and down her arm, soothing her with the contact.

"Are you ready to deal with this?" he asked finally.

"Well, if I am pregnant I'm going to have to deal with it." Tears rushed to her eyes, burning because she had spent much of the afternoon crying. Jewell sucked in a deep, shaky breath. "Oh, Greg. What am I going to do if I am? What are my parents going to say?"

He kissed her forehead. "Hun, you know your parents are going to be there for you. You won't be alone." He paused before continuing. "What are you going to do about Benjamin?"

"What can I do? I have no idea where he is. No idea when, and if, he plans on coming back. And no idea what he'll do when he finds out." She could hear the hysteria in her own voice.

"Shush," he whispered against her hair. "Let's just take things one step at a time. Okay?"

Jewell swallowed back the lump of emotion that restricted her throat. "Greg, I miss him so much."

"I know you do, hun. I know you do."

Unable to control the sob that racked her body, Jewell gave in to the crying jag, holding onto Greg in desperation. As each day went by, she found it harder and harder to maintain the thin veil of control she'd created in the first few days after he left. She wanted to force Benjamin Roth out of her heart, to be angry enough to let him go, but couldn't. No matter how hard she tried. Greg leaned forward to pull a tissue from the floral box on the coffee table.

“Where is Ruby?” he asked as he handed it to her.

Jewell wiped her eyes and blew her nose. “She’s out with friends and won’t be back until morning.”

Jewell felt him nod, his cheek brushing her hair. “I’ll stay as long as you need me to.”

“You don’t have a date for New Years Eve?”

“Nope. Eric went home for the holidays.”

She sat up and reluctantly pulled away from Greg to blow her nose again. Jewell dried her cheeks and tried to smile. “Your boyfriend goes away and you get stuck spending First Night with a blubbering female.”

Greg touched her cheek, drying some moisture with the pad of his thumb. “There’s no other blubbering female I’d rather be with.”

A laugh that sounded more like a sigh passed Jewell’s lips. “I love you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

Jewell pushed back an errant wave of hair and scooted to the edge of the couch. “I guess I should get this over with,” she said as she picked up the pink and purple box on the table.

Greg patted her leg. “I’ll wait right here.”

Nervousness fluttered in her stomach like a thousand butterflies as she stood. For days she had put this off. Jewell didn’t want to think about all the decisions she faced if the test was positive. She told herself over and over again it couldn’t be. The odds were against it. Benjamin had used protection every time they made love. Every time but one. That night Jon Roth pulled them from their dreams and Prescott tore Benjamin’s world apart. He had needed her so desperately. It was in his eyes, his touch, and his kiss. Nothing had mattered but loving him with everything she had.

She gave him everything. Now she had nothing.

No, if she couldn't have Benjamin, perhaps she could have their child.

Jewel shook her head. She couldn't jump ahead that far. First, take the test. It could be negative and there would be nothing more to worry about at that point. No baby. No Benjamin.

A shudder moved through her chest and wrapped around her heart. She realized the thought of not being pregnant was almost as devastating as the thought of being pregnant.

Her hand drifted to her stomach as she walked down the hall. There was no outward sign of a child growing there; then again it had only been four weeks. With trembling hands, Jewell went into her small bathroom and read the instructions of the home pregnancy test.

~ * ~

Benjamin's flight didn't land at Logan Airport until almost ten o'clock at night. By the time he retrieved his luggage and flagged a cab down to take him home, it was almost eleven. He only took enough time at the townhouse, which, without Jewell in it seemed more like a fortress of solitude than a home, to change his clothes and brush his teeth. Briefly, he contemplated shaving but decided he just couldn't afford the time.

He had wasted another three days on the beach, after his mother's revealing and impromptu visit, mulling over his thoughts and his emotions. Benjamin knew before his mother ever left him alone again that he had to go back. But knowing and doing ended up being two very different things.

Once he accepted that returning to Boston was the right thing to do, he was forced to accept how wrong it had been to leave. Admitting his guilt in any situation had never been easy for Benjamin. This was the second time since meeting Jewell that he found himself preparing for an apology. The first time led to a night on her couch followed by a mind-altering kiss the

next morning. He could only pray tonight's apology would have an equally fulfilling result.

It took him those three days to build up enough courage to go home. But once he made the decision, Benjamin wasted no time. He checked out of his hotel, put himself on stand-by with three airlines for the first flight home, and waited.

Now, back in chilly Boston, he wanted nothing more than to see her face and get back on track to the rest of their life.

He parked his car in front of her building and jumped out. His gaze immediately went to the window over his head he knew to be her living room. Christmas lights blinked through the curtain from a tree inside.

A woman walked past him, bundled in her winter coat with a bright red scarf wrapped around her head, and walked up the steps to Jewell's building. He fell in behind her, even held the door for her, as they went inside. The woman was a stroke of good luck. Now he wouldn't have to buzz her apartment and face the possibility of being turned away, without even knowing it. Now, if she refused to see him it would have to be face to face.

Benjamin bounded up the two flights of stairs to the landing outside her apartment. An evergreen wreath hung on the door, circling the brass number, and a ceramic Santa sat on the floor next to her welcome mat. The aroma of the wreath hung heavy in the air and Benjamin drew in a deep breath. A giddy jump pounded his heart against his chest.

He knocked three times on the door and waited. Several moments passed with no answer. Benjamin lifted his fist again, but before he could make contact, the door opened and he was faced with Greg Jacobs. The corner of Greg's eyes squinted and his mouth formed a tight line.

"You've got a lot of nerve showing up here," he said.

“Well, it took all the nerve I had to get me here. I need to speak with Jewell.”

“I don’t know if she wants to speak to you.” The conviction of Greg’s words was apparent on his face.

“Let’s leave it up to her. Greg, I know you’re her best friend. But I’m her lover.”

“You *were* her lover,” Greg emphasized by pointing his finger at Benjamin’s chest.

Benjamin scratched at the two-day stubble on his cheeks. He was anxious to see Jewell, but he wasn’t about to blow it by having a fight with Greg on her threshold. “Greg,” he said, meeting the man’s hard stare. “I love her. I need a chance to make it right.”

Greg shook his head, mumbled something that Benjamin assumed to be a string of curses, and opened the door to let him in. He nodded in thanks and walked down the hall to the living room, glancing into the kitchen as he went. Jewell was nowhere to be seen. When he reached the couch, he turned back to face Greg.

“Where is she?”

“Indisposed,” Greg said with what bordered on a snarl.

Benjamin sighed and ran his fingers over his eyes briefly. Greg turned and looked down the hall, and Benjamin assumed Jewell was on her way. His heart jumped. He felt like a teenager waiting for his prom date. When she stepped into the light cast by the table lamp, heat flashed over Benjamin’s entire body.

Her arms were crossed over her body, and as she spoke to Greg, her auburn hair shifted around her shoulders. Benjamin immediately noticed two things; she had lost weight, enough to make her cheeks seem sunken, and her complexion was ashen. She also looked tired.

Greg touched her arm and motioned toward Benjamin with a jerk of his head. Benjamin saw the surprise on her face, and he would have sworn her face paled further when she turned and met his stare. Her lips parted and she lifted a hand to cover her mouth. Before they were concealed, Benjamin saw his name on her lips.

He held his breath. For four days he had run through his mind a hundred different scenarios for tonight's conversation. Unfortunately, none of the possibilities told him how to start. What did he say to begin the most important conversation of his life? Could the same reason he used to leave be a good enough reason to win her back?

"Do you want me to stay?" Greg asked, turned just enough towards Benjamin that he could read the question on his lips.

Moisture brimmed in Jewell's eyes, and when she looked up at Greg, one single tear ran down her cheek. She shook her head slowly. "No, I'll be fine."

Greg shot a warning glance in Benjamin's direction before picking his coat up off a nearby chair. "Call me later," he said before squeezing her arm and heading out the door.

Benjamin never took his eyes off Jewell as she watched Greg leave. Once the door closed behind him, she dipped her head and turned back to him, slowly lifting her eyes to meet his stare. He swallowed hard, forcing his throat to move through the dryness that parched it. His hands itched to reach out to her, but he didn't want to frighten her with the need that would overwhelm him the moment he touched her.

Her lips parted and her chin moved slightly, as if she struggled herself to find the words to say. Benjamin took a deep breath and brought his curled fist to his chest. He moved slowly, intent on expressing what he felt.

"I'm sorry."

Jewell shook her head slowly and tried to dry her cheeks with her fingers. “No,” she said with a sharp jerk of her hand. “*You can’t show up after a month, after leaving the way you did, and get off that easy.*”

He took a step toward her, saw her body tense, and stopped.

“*I know. I just don’t know where to start. I’m sorry seemed like a logical place.*”

“*Telling you to get out seems logical to me,*” she came back with rough hand movements.

Benjamin’s chest hurt. The one fear that had haunted him since realizing he needed to come back was that she wouldn’t listen. She wouldn’t forgive him. He’d lost her forever. His gut clenched in panic.

“Is that what you really want me to do?” he asked, forcing the words through a throat he worried wouldn’t cooperate.

Her body jerked and a heartbreaking expression distorted her features. “No.”

Benjamin closed the space between them and pulled her into his embrace. She threw her arms around his shoulders as he pulled her close enough to lift her feet off the carpet. Her fingers curled into his hair and Benjamin buried his face against her neck, the scent of her perfume filling his senses. The silk waves of her hair brushed his cheeks and tickled the back of his hands as he held her. Jewell felt incredible.

He felt the sobs wrack her body, and hung on tighter.

“I’m sorry, Jewell,” he said against her skin. “I was a stupid ass.”

She nodded against his shoulder, and Benjamin nearly laughed. At least she agreed with him. He wrapped his fingers into her hair and rubbed his cheek against her throat. Her ribcage expanded beneath his hands with every deep breath. Suddenly, she shoved him back and stalked away, her hands again speaking for her.

"You hurt me."

"I know I did," he started to say, but she continued without pausing.

"You hurt me, Benjamin, deeper than I ever imagined someone could hurt me. I hadn't even dared think about where we were going, but before I could, you decided there was no future. You made all the decisions."

"I realized that too late. I realized a lot of things too late, Jewell."

She paced the length of the living room, from window to hall entry, and continued speaking with her hands. Apparently oblivious to whatever he said.

"You ask me to move in, show up hours late for work, tell me you love me—I don't even know if you meant it or if you just said it because you thought it would lessen the blow—which in fact it only made it worse—and then walk out of my office and my life. Or so I thought."

"I do love you, Jewell," he said as she passed him.

"I waited. I told myself you needed time. A few days to clear your head. But then you didn't come back. You didn't call. You didn't email. Nothing. So I figured this must be it. He's gone."

"I'm not gone. I love you."

She stopped short and clutched a shelf of the bookcase nearby. Her cheeks paled and she pressed her hand to her forehead. Benjamin moved toward her.

"Jewell, come sit down."

"No!" She moved away before he reached her. *"I should be furious with you."*

He was worried about her. She didn't look right at all. The dark shadows beneath her eyes showed a lack of sleep, and the jeans she wore hung too loosely off her hips, gapping at her waist when she crossed her arms.

"I thought maybe you left because I pushed too hard. I asked too much of you. You couldn't have really left because of your family. That was ridiculous. I didn't fall in love with them. I fell in love with you."

"Sweetheart, please listen to me. I love you."

"But then I realized something. I wasn't the one who kissed you the first time. I wasn't the one who asked you to spend the night with me. I wasn't the one who asked you to move in. I loved that you did, but I didn't initiate any of it."

"Marry me, Jewell."

"So it couldn't have been that. Or maybe it could. Maybe you were sorry you had. Do you see what kind of hell I have been in the last four weeks?"

"Marry me, Jewell, and I'll make it all up to you."

Again she stopped short, and Benjamin saw a glistening sheen on her forehead. She pushed a curl back and her cheeks were deathly pale.

"Damn it, Jewell. Sit down," he ordered.

She snapped up her head and met his gaze, her eyes wide. "What? No. I have to go to the bathroom."

Jewell brushed past him and disappeared down the hall, leaving Benjamin confused and frustrated.

~ * ~

Jewell nearly ran down the hall, using the wall to keep her balance. Her head swam and her stomach churned. Whether it was from the shock of seeing him, or the condition she suspected, Jewell couldn't be sure. Probably both.

What a bizarre twist of fate that would bring him back now. The night she'd finally worked up enough nerve to take the pregnancy test.

God, it was wonderful to see him! She nearly lost her mind when he wrapped her in his arms. He smelled so damn good,

and she felt the warmth of his touch through her sweater as if it were skin against skin.

Who the hell did he think he was? He actually thought he could come back here, waltz into her apartment as if nothing happened, and just say he was sorry!

Her thoughts ricocheted through her mind, jumping from one to the next, before she could fully comprehend any one of them. Jewell pressed her eyes closed and took a deep breath. *One step at a time. One step at a time.*

With trembling hands, Jewell opened the bathroom door. The white plastic test sat on the back of her toilet, standing out sharply against the seafoam green of the fixture. She needed to focus. Just get beyond this moment, then move on to the next. Jewell couldn't try and think about everything. It was too much.

She picked up the test. Two pink lines. Two lines. Jewell snatched up the empty box off the side of the sink and read the instructions again. One line means negative. Two lines means positive. *Positive. Positively pregnant.*

They were going to have a baby.

Jewell's laughter echoed in the tiled confines of the bathroom, and tears streamed down her cheeks. She realized they were tears of joy. Not panic. Not terror or desperation. Joy. A baby. They had made a baby.

Oh, God. Benjamin. She had to tell Benjamin.

Without remembering the walk, Jewell found herself standing at the end of the hall. Her lungs burned from holding her breath. She slowly pulled in spruce and cinnamon scented air from the candles burning in the kitchen. Benjamin stood at the Christmas tree, his back to her. He held in his hand a ceramic ornament, and she watched him carefully hang it back up.

For the first time since he arrived, Jewell let herself look at him. His hair was lighter, looking sun kissed, and a tan darkened his skin. Golden flecks covered his cheeks from at least two days of beard growth. He was beautiful. Some men were handsome. Some gorgeous. Benjamin was beautiful.

Trying to build her courage, Jewell focused on the feel of being in his arms again. As if replaying a movie in her mind, bits of the erratic conversation only minutes before came back to her. Jewell gasped.

Benjamin turned slowly from the tree and saw her. Concern immediately furrowed his brow and he stepped toward her. "Jewell, are you all right?"

"Did you mean it?" she asked.

"Did I mean what?"

"What you said before I... what you said before."

The first hints of the smile that always weakened Jewell's knees and warmed her blood tugged at the corner of his lips. He moved closer, close enough to touch, but stopped.

"I said several things. I said I was sorry. I am."

"You said you loved me. Do you?" Jewell said quickly, pushing the words out before she lost her nerve.

Benjamin reached up and touched her cheek. Warmth spread out from his fingertips and Jewell wanted to turn into his palm and kiss it. Instead, she looked up and met his gaze. Deep brown eyes looked back at her. So warm. So hypnotizing.

"Yes, I love you." His voice was rough and soothing at the same time, like warm brandy.

Jewell closed her eyes and slowly released a shaky breath. "Oh, I love you, too," she sighed.

His lips touched hers gently, skimming first then pulling back only to whisper across them again. Jewell opened to him and his tongue slipped past her teeth to ignite a heat she hadn't

felt since he'd left. A moan made its way from her throat and she leaned into him.

His hands held her face and Benjamin stepped back. His thumbs brushed along her lower lip. "Jewell, Sweetheart, I don't know what kind of man I can be for you. I've never loved anyone like this. I don't know if I'll be any good at it. But I want to try. I want to be a good husband, and maybe even a good father someday."

Jewell's heart skipped a beat.

She wet her lips and tried to swallow, clenching her fists against the tumult turning her insides to a quivering mass. "Benjamin?"

He kissed her quickly. "What?"

"Do you want children?"

His gaze moved over her face, meeting her gaze, a sexy smile on his lips. "Having kids of my own scares the shit out of me, Jewell. But you have made me a better man. I would like to believe I'm a good enough man to deserve having children with you."

Something like a cross between a sob and a laugh burst out of Jewell's chest. She curled her fingers into his sweater, desperately trying to hold on to reality. Tears burned their way down her face, and through the blur, Jewell saw Benjamin's face.

"Jewell, what's wrong?" he said urgently, his fingers pressing into her scalp as he held her face in his hands. His dark gaze moved over her face.

She tried to speak. Tried to pull the words from her heart, but they lodged in her throat.

"Jewell."

"I'm pregnant, Benjamin."

The words were out of her mouth before she could contemplate any other way of saying it. A cry wracked her

body. She was terrified to know what would happen next, yet needed to know all the same. His face disappeared behind the haze of tears.

Benjamin pulled her against him, his lips devouring hers in a kiss that left her breathless. It was so powerful it almost hurt in its intensity. He held her head still, deepening the kiss even further. Everything disappeared but Benjamin and his touch.

He broke the kiss only long enough to tuck his arm behind her knees and lift her off the floor. With a small cry, Jewell wrapped her arm behind his neck. Fighting to catch her breath, Jewell could only stare at him in shock. Benjamin carried her down the hall, kicked open the door of her bedroom, and set her down on the rumpled bed she hadn't bother to make that day.

Benjamin knelt beside her and slowly reclined her back onto the pillows. She stared up at him, afraid to speak. Afraid almost to take a breath. Sliding down to lie beside her, Benjamin lowered his head to cover her mouth again. Jewell was quickly lost in the burning intensity of the kiss and grabbed the lapel of his jacket to pull him closer. Her stomach tumbled for wanting him.

His hand skimmed from her throat to her breast to her waist and slipped beneath her sweater. The touch was like a brand against her skin and she arched up to meet it.

Benjamin pushed up on his elbows and looked down at her, his eyes smoldering with an internal heat.

"You are so beautiful," he said, the husky quality of his voice vibrating over Jewell's skin.

"Benjamin—"

His finger pressed against her lips. "Shush. Just wait a minute. I don't want you to say anything until you answer my question."

Leaning on his elbow for support, Benjamin dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a black velvet box. Tears

continued to run from Jewell's eyes, wetting her hair. They came unabated. Tears of fear. Tears of joy. Tears of love. She sucked in a sharp breath as he opened the box with a snap.

The ring was beautiful. A square cut diamond on a platinum band with twin emeralds on each side. "I didn't do a very good job at this the first time," he said, and Jewell heard a slight quiver in his voice. She looked up to see moisture shining bright in his eyes. "Jewell Kincaid, please marry me?"

"You're okay about the baby?" she asked in a squeaky voice.

The smile that spread his lips was the only answer Jewell needed. A single tear fell from his cheek and landed on her lips, the salty taste drawing out her tongue.

"Woman, will you just answer the damn question?"

Jewell reached up to stroke her thumb across his mouth. Her cheeks hurt with the intensity of the smile that pulled at her lips. Unwilling to take her hands from him, and unable to force her own voice to make a sound, Jewell nodded.

"Yes?" he questioned.

She nodded again, and swallowed. "Yes."

Benjamin shifted his weight to his elbows, his body partially angled over her, as he removed the ring from its velvet nest. He took her hand, and looking into her eyes, slipped the ring onto her finger. Jewell drew a shuddered breath as he brought her knuckles to his lips, kissing them.

"I don't believe in long engagements," he said against her fingers, looking at her sideways with a glint in his eyes.

Jewell chuckled and pushed her fingers into his hair, drawing him down to her for a slow, deep kiss.

Meet Gail R. Delaney

Like so many other writers, Gail will tell you she has been writing since she can remember. While some call it insanity, Gail hears the voices and stories in her head and calls it inspiration.

She and her husband, Patrick, have been together thirteen years with two young children: a ‘tween’ daughter (age 12) who gives her father daily heart attacks, and a seven-year-old son. Gail says Patrick is her inspiration, her support and sometimes the only force that can get her in front of the computer with his constant question: “Shouldn’t you be writing?”

When not writing, Gail works at home for a mutual fund company. And when not doing either one, she and her family can probably be found at DisneyWorld—their favorite vacation spot and mutual obsession.

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