



Wanted:
A Christmas Wish

Aliyah Burke

McKenna Jeffries

Jaige Crenshaw

Satin Notes

Wanted: A Christmas Wish

Wanted: A Christmas Wish

All Rights Reserved

Wanted: A Christmas Wish Copyright © 2007 Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw

Cover Art by MMJ of MMJ Designs © Copyright December 2007

A Satin Notes Free Novel

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, places and events are from the author's imagination and should not be confused with fact. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, events or places is coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the authors, Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw.



Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries and Taige Crenshaw

Wanted: A Christmas Wish

A Trescott Cove Novel

*Exclusive to Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries List, and
Crenshaw Café Members*

Aliyah Burke
McKenna Jeffries
Taige Crenshaw

Wanted: A Christmas Wish

Dedication

To our fans who have supported us. We give you this free read in appreciation for all your support. Have a happy, safe and joyous holiday season.

Aliyah, McKenna and Taige

Chapter One

The store was decorated for Christmas and soft strands of holiday music played throughout. Along with the owner there were four other people in the small collectible shop called *Jem's Collectibles*.

The woman in charge stood behind the counter as she carefully wrapped and packaged a small ceramic figurine for her customer. As she put in some packing peanuts around the bubble wrapped statute she smiled. "Here we go, Ms. Vicki, I think this ought to do it."

"Thank you so much. I love your shop, it brings back all kinds of memories from my childhood and some of the things I had growing up." she reached across the counter and patted the woman's hand. "I am so glad you opened up here, Jem."

Jem Maxwell blushed as she taped the box shut. "I'm glad to be here."

And she was. She had a small shop but it was more than enough for her. Business was good; she was far enough away from similar stores that there wasn't too much serious competition. The other stores owners on Baltic Place, the Main Street of Trescott Cove, had welcomed her when she opened almost eight month's ago. Plus there was the fact that if she didn't have the item they were looking for and knew she couldn't get it, she would recommend another business. So they were fairly friendly to one another.

The elderly lady winked at her. "Now, come come, tell me when that fine young man of yours is going to make it official."

Jem shook her head. Ms. Vicki Snow was in her upper eighty's but acted as if she were in her thirty's. "We are taking things slow."

Vicki scoffed. "Much slower and I'll be old before you're walkin' down the aisle." She put her receipt in her purse. "What's the hold up? Do I need to beat some sense into him? Doesn't he know what he has with you?"

"Ms. Vicki, please." Jem tried waving off her words. "He doesn't need to be beat, I'm very happy with where our relationship is right now."

The old woman rolled her eyes. "I think that boy is daft. He should have put a ring on your finger a *long* time ago."

"I agree," a deep voice entered the conversation. "I should have."

Jem felt the familiar race in her blood as strong arms slid around her waist. Chad stood behind her. His clean woodsy scent enveloped her. His lips brushed her cheek as he whispered, "Hello gorgeous."

"Hey, Chad."

Jem saw the sparkle of approval in Ms. Vicki's knowing eyes as she grabbed her package and waved before heading out the door. It closed on her, "Don't make me get old before you get married."

The rumble of Chad's laughter rolled through her. "What a woman."

Jem turned in his arms and wanted to melt. He still made her weak in the knees. His two-button vested Navy multi-striped suit had been tailor-made just for him. It hung on his body like a lover.

She released a low whistle. "Wow, look at you."

He blushed. "You are the only woman who makes me blush." His jade eyes smoldering with a deeper meaning.

"I kinda like that," she teased. "How was the meeting?"

Chad had attended a meeting with his father. For the first time, he had begun to take an interest in the family business. Jem was happy he was, but deep down she was worried.

Worried that once he got back into that world, women like Brittany may pull him back into their fold. She was totally in love with him, and didn't want to lose him. She knew she was withholding part of herself from him, but she wanted to protect herself.

"The meeting went well. It was boring though." He lowered his mouth to hers; seemingly unaware they were in her place of business and that there were still customers.

"Boring?" She couldn't think straight with him this close. "I thought you were looking forward to working beside your father and working on your relationship."

One corner of his sensual mouth quirked up. "I suppose I am. It's rocky but we are getting there. But yes, it was boring. I passed the time by thinking of you."

She quivered. "Really?"

"Yes," he whispered. "I spent the entire time imaging you laid out on that boardroom table."

Her belly clenched. "Hush, I'm working."

"Don't you want to know what I was doing to you on that table?" He teased.

Yes! "No. Chad, stop it. There are people in here."

She felt his sigh as he released her. "I'm sorry baby. You make me forget myself." His lips brushed hers lightly.

Jem patted his arm and smiled slightly as he shifted his pants. "Apparently." Her eyes traveled down to rest on the obvious bulge in his pants.

"Tease," he muttered as he walked over to a box that was on the counter and peered inside.

Jem watched him as he looked in the box. He was so handsome it hurt. As she stood there, part of her wondered why he hadn't said anything else about the whole ring issue after Ms. Vicki left.

Uncertainty was planted and took seed.

His face was covered by the stubble that she was used to seeing on him. It only added to the allure he portrayed without fail.

He screamed wealth and power. The fact that for the moment he could be considered hers was mind-blowing. This was a man who was considered to be one hell of a catch and would have no problem getting any woman he wanted.

And he was with her.

For the time being, her mind taunted.

Damn it, what the hell was going on? Jem realized she had to stop listening to her sister. Even after all this time with Chad, her soured sister had a nasty way of affecting her thoughts.

A woman headed up to the counter and Jem shoved those uneasy niggling's of doubt to the back of her mind. Forcing a smile to her face she stepped up and proceeded to assist the customer.

* * * * *

Chad stepped away from the box and watched Jem work. She wore a pair of dark slacks, an eggplant colored sweater, and hiking boots on her feet.

Her hair was still the same asymmetrical style it was when he met her. He loved how smooth and silky it felt moving across his skin.

Staring at her, Chad realized that there was sadness in her expression. He could tell her smile and cheerfulness was not natural. There was a tightness around the corners of her eyes.

As she rung up the customer, he got a box for her and began to wrap the figurine. Jem's voice as she chatted with the patron flowed over him and brought him a sense of peace.

All he really wanted to do was go home with Jem, hold her and make love to her. This day had been extremely stressful for him, this renewed relationship with his father was an uneasy one.

But he knew he needed to do something with his life. The family business had always interested him but before he had no desire to be associated with his family. So he had pretended not to care at all.

But now with Jem in his life, he felt strong enough to deal with them. He knew that he could always talk with her about the things going on and she wouldn't ever judge him. She was his saving grace.

The ring on the inside of his suit seemed to be burning a hole in his chest. He had listened avidly as Ms. Vicki told Jem she felt there should be a ring on her finger by now. The slight hesitation in her response had thrown him.

Part of him longed to ask her right then and there, but figured she would think it was just a joke. He had to do it right, find the perfect time.

He knew Jem loved him, but something seemed different now. Ever since he began working with his father it seemed there was a growing chasm between them and he didn't like it. Not one bit.

Chad had moved out, very reluctantly, at her request after the whole newspaper scandal. An issue he was still trying to figure out how it got leaked to the press. The reporter, Phil Buckman, was unavailable for the time being.

I will find out the truth when you return, you bastard. You had no right to write that crap. It caused so much pain and hurt.

His fists clenched as he relived the anguish that had filled Jem's beautiful face as the cameras went off in her eyes. Such rage had welled up in him.

"Chad?" Jem's voice broke into his memory.

He blinked a few times and focused on her face. She watched him with one brow raised. "Yes?"

"Are you okay? You look a bit distant."

He smiled. "I'm fine, sweetheart," one hand reached out and caressed her face, "just fine."

She couldn't hide the doubt in her eyes from him, but still she nodded. "Okay."

"What do you want to do tonight?"

"I actually have a lot of work to do here getting ready for the sale I'm having next week. So I'll be here a while after closing."

Chad felt her withdrawing from him. It tore at his gut. *I'm not giving up that easy darlin'.* "Okay. I have to get going, I wanted to stop by and see you before I went home. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Sure." Her eyes were already back on the remaining customers in the store.

He walked up behind her and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Love you, Jem."

His heart clenched at her lack of response. Chad headed out through the back, saddened by this most recent encounter.

Sitting in his black Mercedes, Chad ran a hand through his short hair. He was frustrated. If only he could put his finger on what the problem was between them was.

The snow fell as he drove back to his parents' house, blanketing Trescott Cove in a purity that only enhanced the beauty of the town. The familiar streets of where he had grown up rolled by. He remembered when he was younger Trescott Cove never had snow. It wasn't until he was about ten that it had started to snow. At first it was weird for a Cove to snow yet they had gotten used to it. The town officials used it as another thing to promote Trescott Cove as unique. Almost an hour later he turned onto his parent's property.

He was living in the guest house on his parent's property. Not that money was an issue, but he was safe from reporters there. If only he could say the same for Jem, but she had refused, adamantly, to move in with him.

Chad knew that move endeared her to his mother, who had been a bit suspicious of her in the beginning. Now, she spoke very highly of Jem and had a hand in assisting Jem getting her store off the ground and running. His mother had also referred many of her friends to the store.

At first, Chad had been very worried the day his mother showed up at Jem's and demanded she spend some private time with her. His desire to protect Jem had rushed to the surface but his mother had been relentless.

The entire time the two women had been away, he had paced. Upon their return he had been inordinately pleased there was no apparent bloodshed and a truce seemed to be in place between them. To this day, neither woman would tell him what had transpired that day.

His father, however, was the one waiting for him as he approached his current home. Chad sighed as he climbed out and headed to the steps.

"Father," he said politely.

"Son. So, what'd you think of the meeting?" The two men walked inside out of winter's elements.

"Honestly, I was a bit bored." Chad tossed his overcoat on a chair.

"Me too. However, meetings are necessary to please the board members. But it was a success." His father hung his coat up and glanced at him.

"Was there something you needed?" Chad asked bluntly.

"I was just wondering how things were going with you and Jem. That's all."

That is such crap. "Really? Things are fine, actually I'm only here to change and then I'm going to have dinner with her," Chad announced.

"I see." Robert Chadwick ran a hand over his lower jaw. "Your mother and I were hoping you'd spend dinner with us and the rest of the family tonight."

"Why didn't you say anything earlier then?" Chad questioned as he proceeded to his bedroom.

"Your mother just let me know. I tried to call but you didn't answer."

Chad didn't respond. His phone hadn't rung. All the way home he'd hoped that Jem would call him, but she never did. "Sorry, I can't, not tonight."

"But your brothers are here." The protest rang.

"Will they be here tomorrow?" Chad stared at his father as he held a sweatshirt in his hand.

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'll see them at breakfast." There was no way he was going to give up spending the evening with Jem to be with his obnoxious brothers.

"She'll be disappointed."

"Stop trying to make me feel guilty, I'm not going to dinner." He pulled on a pair of jeans and reached for some shoes.

His father sighed dramatically. "I'll tell her. Have...have a good night, son."

"Night," Chad said with a short wave. His attention focused on what he would get for dinner to bring to Jem.

* * * * *

"That bitch will die before she gets a ring from him." a low snarl crossed the booth, reaching the other party. "I've worked too hard to let some no name, low class, darkie whore marry him."

Silence fell as the waiter returned with their bill. After they were alone again, the rant began anew.

"What are you going to do?"

"Help Edward realize that she isn't the right person for him. Make him understand that her kind shouldn't be mingled with our kind." Her words brimmed with disgust.

"He seems pretty taken with her." the man offered.

"He's a man. He'd be taken with anyone willing to spread their legs for him. Not to mention make him feel like she doesn't care about his money." The words were full of venom.

"What does this have to do with me?"

"Everything. You're damn a reporter. Find out everything about her. I want to know who knocked her up and where that brat is now."

"That could take a while."

"Just get it done. And fast!" A white hand slid an envelope across the table to the man. "Don't let me down."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he drawled sarcastically. The item was pocketed without a look. "I'll let you know what I find."

"You do that."

With a mock salute, Phillip Buckman slid out of the booth and left the restaurant without a look back at the hate filled woman he had dined with.

* * * * *

Jem was exhausted. She rolled her shoulders and tried to find a more comfortable position. There was about another hour of work left before she could go home. The store was locked up for the night and she was alone.

"This is what I get for having my own business." A huge grin plastered itself across her face at those words. "I *have* my own business."

Even now, all these month's later excitement filled Jem at having her own store. With renewed energy she focused back on the task at hand. Making sure her books were all in order. For the first two quarters her store was open she tried to do her taxes

herself but soon knew she would need help. She had spoken to a few other shop owners and most put off doing quarterly taxes until the very end and they suffered for it, she had no intention of letting that happen to her.

Beside her Jem had a notebook that she occasionally jotted down a question that she was going to ask her sister. Camilla was a CPA. Jem knew it would be a double-edged sword asking Cami for help, but being it was her first year, she was willing to take a chance.

Cami had agreed to stop by her place this evening and she wanted to make sure she made it back in time. Patience was not exactly high on Cami's list.

"Hungry, baby?" A low voice jolted her out of her zone.

She jumped her heart in her throat. "Chad?"

"Expecting someone else?"

Turning to face him, she smiled at the furrow between his seductive green eyes. "No. I wasn't expecting anyone actually. What are you doing here?" She was surprised even though she had given him a key.

He held out a bag and her stomach growled as the smell of gumbo reached her. "Thought you might be hungry."

Jem blinked. This had to be the sweetest man in the world. "How'd you know?" She absorbed the sight of him, she'd missed him after he left earlier.

He had changed into a more causal look, blue jeans and a sweatshirt, yet the effect on her was still the same. Immediate and powerful.

"Okay, I'd hoped you would be." He pulled a chair up next to her, brushed a kiss on her lips, and sat down beside her. "Got time to eat?"

She nodded, almost too choked up to say anything. How lucky could a woman get? "Thank you." her warring emotions threw her, some times she was so sure everything was right between them and then the next...she wasn't.

He placed her food before her. "I have to talk to you about something, Jem."

Chapter Two

Her heart picked up speed. Was he going to break up with her? Had he found someone else? "About?" Her voice cracked and she knew he had heard it as well.

"Us." The one word was low.

Jem struggled to slow her pounding heart. She knew she was overreacting but for some reason panic welled up inside her. "What...what about us?"

She uncovered the steaming gumbo and waited for an answer. When he remained silent, she faced him. He stared at her, saying nothing. "Chad? What about us?"

He reached toward her with one hand. Gently, it moved down her cheek, the callused skin delivering more shivers to her already nervous body. He blinked once, very slow, and a small smile filled his face.

"You know I love you, right?" He caressed her bottom lip with his thumb.

The amount of tenderness in his eyes shocked her. The startling jade color shone as if tears were suspended within it.

"Jem?"

"Yes, Chad. I know."

With her affirmation, he dropped to his knees and turned her and her chair toward him. His other hand cupped her face as he held her steady for a kiss.

His lips set off an explosion deep within her soul. Her skin prickled as he made slow, sweet love to her mouth. The masculine scent intermixed with freshly fallen snow that he wore imbedded itself into her.

Her breasts tingled and her belly clenched with desire and need. For him. No one else. Just Chad. She whimpered into his mouth.

She felt herself being pulled up from the chair, yet his mouth never left hers. Their tongues danced with one another and her pussy grew wetter by the second.

"Jem," he groaned.

Her head dropped back to let him nibble on her sensitive skin. "Please," she begged. Her body was on fire.

Chad lowered his hands to the button on her pants and pushed them down. His fingers teased the edge of her thong before slipping under them and into her heated core.

"Chad!" she mewled as her muscles tightened around him. More, she wanted more. She wanted him deep within her body, taking her to planes only he could. Jem needed him where doubt wasn't welcome, where all that mattered was the two of them being joined as one.

With a low growl, he ripped off her panties and dropped them to the floor. Jem shuddered as he spun her around so she faced her desk and bent her forward.

Her jeans were down around her booted feet and she spread her legs as far as she could. It didn't take long and she felt his erection prodding at her entrance.

Chad drove home in one thrust. A rumble of pleasure escaped his mouth. His hands moved up under her shirt and bra so he could palm her breasts. He tugged on her pebbled nipples as his hips plunged his thick cock deep within her.

Her screams of pleasure mixed with his. Papers were scattered off the desk and onto the floor, but neither cared. All that was important was they were together.

Jem grabbed the edges of her desk as an orgasm rushed upon her. Chad drilled into her harder and harder as she convulsed around him, until he came with a raw shout, exploding within her.

She collapsed on the desk as her limbs trembled. Chad lowered his body on top of hers and murmured, "Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah," she moaned. The tightness added by how close her legs were together only enhanced her experience.

He moved his hands down to her waist and teased the skin. "I love you, Jem. Never forget that, no matter what. Okay?"

"Okay," she muttered, still full of the euphoric glow being with him gave her. Bit by bit her breathing slowed back to a more normal state.

The moment he pulled out of her and stepped away, she felt emptier somehow. And it wasn't solely a physical reaction, she missed his touch immediately.

The room was filled with their breathing as they righted their clothing. Jam blushed as she picked up her torn panties off the floor.

Her eyes took in the disaster the small office had become. It was a miracle the gumbo hadn't ended up on the floor as well. As it was, one of the containers perched precariously on the edge.

Chad reached around her and moved it to a safer area. His lips trailed along the sweaty skin of her neck. He nipped her before laving the spot with his tongue.

She shuddered all over again. For a brief moment she pressed her body back into his and lost herself over to his touch. Until her eyes landed on the wall clock. "Stop it. I have to get this cleaned up and hurry home."

"What's the rush? We haven't eaten dinner yet." His hands dropped away from her.

Jem could hear a bit of confusion and desperation in his voice, but she ignored it. Dropping to the floor she began gathering the strewn papers. Regardless of how special he had made her feel she had things to accomplish before the evening was out.

It may sound harsh and cruel, but this was her business. Her dream. "I'm sorry, Chad," she said as gently as she could. "I have to meet Cami at my house. She's going to help me with my taxes."

He knelt beside her and gripped her chin in his strong fingers, forcing an eye connection. "I didn't come here for a quick fuck, Jem. I wanted to have dinner with you and spend some time together. I've missed you."

"I missed you too, but I have to do this. This is my business here." *And you did get your fuck.*

"I know, I know. I just wanted to spend some more time with you. I feel like we are growing apart."

Scooping up the remainder of the papers she stood and clumsily shoved on her jacket. The man had no idea how right he was because she felt it too. "Look, I really have to go, so thanks for...um...dinner and we'll talk about this soon. Okay?"

Chad barely managed to grab his own coat as she shepherded him toward the back door where she set the alarm and locked it behind her.

She waved as she jogged to her car. *I'm sorry, Chad. I wish I could stay and talk, but Cami isn't good at waiting.* She drove away in the snowy night leaving him by his car, standing alone as large flakes fell dusting his figure.

Half an hour later, Jem pulled into her driveway and continued to her garage. She hit the button. The garage door raised and the lights flashed on. She winced as she saw Cami's car was already there waiting in her two car garage. Parking her car next to Cami's she grabbed her papers and got out.

I hope Cami hasn't been here long.

Jem glanced at her drive. "I'll have to shovel when Cami leaves."

She sighed and rolled her neck. Tiredness weighed on her. It had been a long day. She hit the button on her keychain. The garage door slid down soundlessly. She turned and walked to the door leading into the kitchen. Opening the door she hit another button and the lights in the garage went off. She took a breath and stepped in the kitchen. In a glance she took in the papers strewn on the table, the half filled cup of tea sitting in front of Cami and Cami herself with a pencil sticking from behind her ear.

Damn she's been here awhile. Jem bit her lip.

Cami glanced up. She looked her up and down from head to foot her dark brown eyes not missing a thing. Cami arched an eyebrow.

She's doing you a favor. Jem reminded herself.

Stifling a sigh she put a smile on her face. "Hey Cami. I see you found the papers I left you."

Walking to the table she put down the papers she had next to the calculator. Cami watched her not saying a word. Jem went over by her side to see what she was working on.

"Uh huh. Don't come near me smelling like sex." Cami put up a hand stopping her.

Jem winced and fought not to blush.

"Yeah, you've been rolling around with Octopus Boy." Cami smirked.

"What have I told you about calling Chad that?"

"It fits. It's not my fault he can't keep his hands off you. Grabbing all over you and always touching you" Cami moved her hand in a grabbing motion.

"Cami."

"What. It's the truth. You coming in here all late. And reeking of sex only proves my point." Cami's smirk widened.

"You're just jealous." Jem rolled her eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. I've been here working on your books as a favor. A *favor* and what have you been doing. Fucking the octopus. A little thanks would go a long way or at least an I'm sorry," Cami snapped.

"You don't have to do me any favor's Cami. I'll find someone else." Jem put her arms under her breast and tapped her foot.

Cami cursed harshly then rubbed her fingers over her eyes.

"Christ, I'm sorry Jem. I didn't mean to snap at you."

Jem's mouth dropped open. Cami never apologized. She looked at Cami closer. There were lines of stress and tiredness on her face.

"Cami, what's wrong?" Jem stepped closer to her concerning filling her.

"Nothing." Cami shook her head. Jem opened her mouth.

"Leave it Jem." Cami's tone was sharp.

Jem nodded.

Cami sighed. "I'll be okay. Now let's get to work on your taxes." Jem nodded and pulled a chair closer to her.

"You are not sitting here next to me smelling like sex. Go take a damn shower." Cami gave her a look.

Jem stood and glared at her. "Why do you always act like such a bitch?"

Surprise then pain flashed across Cami's face. Feeling bad Jem reached out for her. Cami leaned back evading her touch.

She smiled a nasty grin. "What can I say, it's an art form."

Cami looked away and picked up her pencil and got back to work. Jem watched her undecided what she should do.

"Go take a shower I don't have all night. Even bitches have a life." Cami's tone was bitter.

Jem left. She went up the stairs. The look of hurt on Cami's face played in her mind as she went down the hall to her room. Quickly she stripped, went into the bathroom and took a shower. Fifteen minutes later she came back down the stairs. She paused in the kitchen doorway. Cami stood looking out the bay windows facing the street. Her shoulders were slumped and her hand was pressed against the glass. Suddenly Cami stiffened.

"Are you going to stand there all night? Let's get to work." Cami turned, a cool look on her face a slight sneer on her lips.

Ignoring her comment Jem went over to her. Cami look was challenging. Jem walked right up to her and hugged her. Cami jerked and she held her. Cami shuddered then relaxed.

"I'm sorry Cami." Jem held her close, her throat clogged with tears.

After a few moments Cami withdrew and looked at her.

"No need to apologize. I know what people see when they look at me" Cami smiled a wry grin. "I work hard to be seen as the ball breaking bitch. I enjoy it." She chuckled.

"I'm not people, Cami. I'm your sister."

"I know. And I know that you love my ornery ass anyway." Cami touched her arm.

"Yes I do. Warts and all." Jem laughed.

"Hey, I work hard to hide those warts." Cami shook her hips and strutted across the room laughing.

Jem shook her head and followed her back to the table. She sat next to Cami and grabbed her hand.

"I do love you, you know."

Cami stared at her then snorted. "What you think I'm going to get all teary eyed and shit because you said I love you." Cami made kissing noises.

"I wouldn't be so delusional." Jem rolled her eyes and sighed a long drawn out sound.

Jem sat back.

"Love you too babes." Cami leaned over and kissed her on the cheek then picked up her pencil.

Surprised at Cami's uncharacteristic show of affection Jem stared at her. Cami wrote then punched a few numbers in her calculator.

"Are you going to sit there all night trying to look cute or what?" Cami gripped.

Jem poked her in the side.

"Hey, watch the merchandise," Cami said and poked her back.

Jem chuckled and Cami joined her. After a few moments Cami sobered then motioned to the papers.

"Let's get this done."

Jem picked up the papers she had brought home and they got to work.

* * * * *

Chad stared until her taillights were no longer visible. He replayed her actions and attitude over and over in his head as he got in his car and turned it on. Quickly he put it in gear then headed for home.

Almost an hour later he turned onto the road that led to his parent's home. Passing the main house he saw the lights were lit. The floor to ceiling windows displayed the Christmas tree in the main room. He made a right then left and pulled into his driveway. Shutting off the car he got out and shivered at the cold. He walked

rapidly to his door noting the snow in his path. His thoughts were on the distance between him and Jem.

What is happening to us? We used to be so close. I don't want to lose her. Chad stopped and looked up at the snowy night sky.

"Please don't let me lose her." His voice echoed in the cold night sky.

Closing his eyes he felt the snow fall on his face. With a sigh he went into his house. He took off his boots and coat throwing them over the chair by the door then continued down the hall to the living room. He went to the window and looked out at the vast snowy landscape. Swiftly he turned and went back down the hall. Chad shrugged into his coat and put on his shoes and went back out the door. He heard a rumble and looked up.

"Just the man I needed to see." Chad smiled and went to meet the plow coming towards him.

* * * * *

Jem raised her hand to her head. "Ow." She withdrew her hand as it was smacked by the comb.

"Don't touch it." Cami growled.

"Cami, come on I want to see what you did."

"You always were a whiner. Even as a kid when I did your hair you wanted to see it before it was done."

"*Cami*, please." Jem whined then laughed.

"You think you're funny." Cami chuckled then continued. "This is the last one." Cami was silent.

Jem twitched wanting to see.

"There done. Here." Cami handed her a mirror.

Jem snatched it out of her hand and looked at herself. Her A-symmetrical hair was parted in various sections and twisted up into little braids all around her head. Jem twisted her head from side to side. Cami pushed her away. She sat up and Cami moved away from her.

"What's this called again?"

"Bantu Twists." Cami answered.

"Okay." Jem looked at her hair. She touched her hair.

"So do you like it?"

"Yeah, I do." Jem looked up and didn't see Cami. "Hey where did you go?"

"What? I can't hear you over the noise going on outside." Cami screamed.

She came back in the room. "When did your neighbors get a snow plow?"

"I don't know but it is loud. I hope they're done soon. It's been going on for a little bit." Jem responded.

She glanced at what Cami was carrying. "What are you doing with the camera?"

"I want a picture of you looking cute," Cami replied.

She raised the camera; Jem posed blowing her a kiss. Cami chuckled and snapped the picture.

"Set it to take a few pictures and come on over here," Jem said.

Cami put it on the table and set it. She came and sat next to Jem.

"Let's do the Diva." She looked at Jem and grinned.

"Let's do it." Jem smiled.

The camera clicked. Jem pouted and Cami put her hand on her forehead. They posed. Hamming it up for the camera.

"That's it." Cami laughed.

They fell against each other.

"We haven't done this in a long time," Jem said.

"Yeah I know. Just the two of us hanging out," Cami replied.

"I've missed you"

"You've been busy." Cami gave her a look.

Guilt flashed through Jem.

"No need to feel guilty. We've both let things between us get out of hand. Let's promise to not do that anymore."

"Okay," Jem agreed.

"Even if I act like a bitch." Cami chuckled her under the chin then stood going to the camera. "At least the racket has stopped."

She picked up the camera and went to the huge bay window. She pulled back the curtain and looked out.

"Damn, he's sprung."

Curious Jem went over to her. "Who are you looking at?"

Cami turned still holding the camera. "Come with me."

Cami grabbed her hand and pulled her to the front door. Jem followed confused. Cami let go her hand then threw open the door. She leaned against the doorway.

"Girl, I don't know what you did to that man but I need some lessons."

Unsure what she meant Jem stepped closer to the open door. Her heart started to race as she saw Chad step off the plow.

"Chad." Jem whispered.

Chapter Three

Surprised she realized the front of her house was plowed. She glanced down the street and saw that it was all plowed.

"Well Octopus Boy is good for something."

"Cami."

Jem glared at her sister. Cami shrugged totally unrepentant. Jem gave her a look of warning and turned to look at Chad. Her breath caught as she watched him walk up the stairs to them. His grace and power captivated him. As he got closer the look in his jade green eyes made her pulse race and her pussy dampen for him. Chad smiled. He had a sensual quirk of lips that made her want to lick along his lips and stroke her tongue over his.

"Damn Jem, breathe." Cami's whisper in her ear made her jump.

Chad reached them.

"Camilla."

"Oc-"

Jem elbowed her in the side.

"Edward." Cami grunted.

Chad turned to look at her and took her hands. Jem shivered at the touch of his hands enfolding hers.

"1382 Charles Place."

The sound of Cami's voice drew her attention. Confused she stared at Cami. Cami turned and walked back into the house.

"What?" Chad asked.

"My address since you are in such a plowing mood." Cami glanced over her shoulder, her eyebrow raised.

"Cami." Jem hissed.

"What, it's not like it's on the other side of Trescott. It's three streets over and two lanes down." Cami laughed continuing down the hall.

Jem turned back to him. "I'm so –"

His finger on her lip stilled what she would have said.

"Shhh... Cami will be Cami." Chad smiled gently.

The heated look in her eyes made her body vibrate with longing. Jem cleared her throat.

"Come insi-"

"*With Cami?*"

"It's okay she'll behave." Jem smiled sheepishly.

"No, she won't!" Cami yelled from in the house.

"Cami stop eavesdropping!" Jem hollered back.

"Let him in out of the cold. I'll try to act, hell I can't lie. Get the fool out of the cold," Cami replied.

Jem sighed. Chad eyes twinkled with laughter. Jem chuckled and he joined her. He placed his forehead on hers and his arms around her.

"I didn't come by to be invited in."

Jem glanced behind him. Chad shifted to the side. She looked at her cleaned street then back at him.

"You're the sweetest man."

Chad rolled his eyes. "Please, I know you were tired baby but your crazy self would be outside shoveling anyway. It's nothing."

"Yes it is something. You thought of it." Jem cupped his cheek.

Chad blushed. She traced her hand over his flushed cheek.

"I like that you blush for me," Jem teased.

"When you look at me I blush. It's embarrassing." Chad pouted.

"No it isn't. It make me goggy inside." Jem laughed.

He rolled his eyes again. "Yeah, yeah." He reached up and touched her hair.

"What have you done to your hair?"

"Cami twisted it. Do you like it?"

Her stomach clenched as he studied her.

"It's cute." He stroked one of her Bantu Twists then put his lips next to her ear.
"It's nice but I love the feel of your hair sliding against my skin. "

Her knees went weak at his decadent whisper. Chad chuckled a sensuous sound. His one callused hand touched her bare stomach and the other against her bare back. Jem shivered.

"You're cold you should go inside. I love you, Jem." Chad voice was intense. Jem hesitated as all her doubts filled her. His eyes darkened and a hurt look flashed in his eyes. His hands started to drop.

"I love you, b-"
"Shhh... I love you is all that matters." He put a finger on her lip stilling her words.

Jem shook with the intensity of his voice. Chad's hand stroked her stomach causing goosebumps to raise.

"Go inside, baby but first give me something to keep me warm." Chad's jade green gaze locked on hers.

Jem placed her hand over his heart and the other over his shoulder. She raised her lips to his. Chad closed the distance until their lips were a hairsbreadth apart.

"I love you, Jem."
"I love you, Chad." Emotion clogged her throat.

He placed his lips on her. His kiss ravenous and hungry. Jem locked her arms around him. Chad hugged her close. His tongue stroking over hers. His taste rolled over her tongue coating it in liquid fire. Murmuring, she sank into his arms.

I'm home. Chad feels like home. Jem returned his kiss with equal fever.

They look perfect together. Cami raised the camera and snapped another picture. Through the view finder she watched the passion they shared. The moon was behind them while snow fell gently. The branches from the fern trees Jem had on porch framed them. Chad lowered Jem and cupped her cheek. The light glinted off the tears on both their cheeks. Cami lowered the camera her own eyes smarting with tears.

Oh God, he really loves her. And she loves him. Jem how could you be so stupid.

A hollow feeling filled her. Until that moment she hadn't thought what they had was real. Putting her hand over her mouth she stumbled backwards into the wall. Tears blinded her as she watched them. She bit her lip to stifle a cry of rage. Blindly she turned and went down the hall into the living room. She put the camera on the table then went to the window. Pulling back the curtain she stood in front of the bay window. Hugging herself she rocked.

"Please don't let him hurt her." She clenched her fist and stared up at the sky.

The silence settled around her. Absently she watched as Chad strode down the walk and got back on the plow. He waved, got in and drove away.

"Cami." Jem said behind her.

Cami watched her reflection and saw the pain on her face. She cleared it then turned to Jem with a smile.

"Octopus didn't have to leave."

"He didn't come to stay." Jem sighed and went to the chair and sat.

She stared off into space. Cami walked over to the couch and sat. She flipped on the TV. She turned until she found what she wanted to see. She glanced at Jem. Jem had a smile on her lips and a dreamy expression on her face. Cami grabbed a pillow next to her.

"Oh, Octopus, kiss me." She kissed the pillow rotating her head wildly. "*Oh, Jem. Oh Octi. Oh Jem. Oh Octi. Take me you stud. Ouch.*" Cami jumped up.

"Stop making fun of me." Jem smacked her with a pillow again.

"You want to play huh." Cami eyes narrowed then she cracked her knuckles.

Jem's eyes widened then narrowed. "Bring it on." She put out her hand and beckoned.

Cami growled then charged her pillow swinging. Jem grunted then whacked her on the head with the pillow. Cami jumped back laughing. Jem closed in and hit her again. Cami swung blocking her.

Please don't let her get hurt. Cami watched Jem's laughing face.

Jem swung again in quick succession. Cami swung in retaliation. Laughing the pillow fight was on in earnest.

* * * * *

Opening his front door Chad threw his keys on the entry table. Without turning on the lights he went up the stairs then down the hall to his room. Stripping he went to the bath to shower. Standing under the warm spray he thought of Jem's hesitation and 'but' after she said she loved him.

You're a coward. You should have let her finish.

He rubbed his hand over his heart. He had stopped her from continuing because he didn't know if he could handle what she would have said. He had to talk to her. Had to get this figured out. Had to make sure he didn't lose her. Quickly stepping out of the shower he toweled off and walked naked to his bed. Sitting on the side of the bed he opened the nightstand and took out the jewelry box. He ran his finger over the discrete signature and W emblem on the box. Chad opened the box and took out the ring from its champagne colored satin bed and held it in the palm of his hand.

He ran his finger over the intricate design carved on the platinum band. The two-carat round diamond in the middle glinted in the moonlight coming in from the window. On each side of the stone sat a heart-shaped diamond of a half-carat each. He had the ring specially made. When he had approached Dakota Willis with his request she had said no. She usually didn't take commission pieces. It wasn't until after he had described what he had wanted the ring to portray - the love he had for Jem - that she reluctantly agreed. Dakota was intrigued by what he said. He had told her what stones he wanted and the basic setting.

Two weeks ago when he had picked up the ring he was blown away with what she had created. Dakota had taken his idea to another level with her design and the Egyptian hieroglyphic she had inscribed on the platinum band. He knew he had been right with his choice of stones. The ring would look perfect on Jem's lovely hand.

Why haven't you asked her yet? Sighing he put the ring back in the case and set it on the nightstand.

He got into bed and looked out at the snowing night.

I'm afraid she will tell me no. Why did she hesitate when she said she loved me?

Long into the night he tried to come up with an answer. Jem was the last thing on his mind as sleep overtook him and she invaded his dreams. Her scent floated all around him and when he woke in the morning, Jaleza Maxwell was still in first place in his head.

Her big brown eyes seemed to follow him as he went through his morning routine. She was even there as he ate breakfast with his family.

"We missed you last night, Edward," Robert Jr., the eldest son, said. "Mother was upset you weren't in attendance."

"Well, I had a date. And don't call me Edward. I go by Chad." He reached for the syrup and poured it on his pancakes. Chad looked down the table to his mother. She was steadfastly avoiding his gaze.

"Family is important, you know." His brother glared at him.

"So is being with the woman you love," Chad snapped. "I'm not a baby, so just let it go." He made short work of his breakfast, not really paying attention to the rest of the remarks flying around the table.

Not until his other brother, William, said, "I am going to have to stop by the shop and meet this woman."

Chad dropped his fork on his now empty plate. "You stay the hell away from her!" he growled, warningly.

His insides clenched. His brothers weren't necessarily the nicest people in the world. In their mind, women were usually after the Chadwick name and money associated with it and they also had opinions on who was worthy of said things. They both had the ability to be brutal and cruel with their words.

He was met by silence. Everyone stared up the table at him. "I'm not joking. This is my life and I don't want you sticking your noses where they don't belong."

Robert Jr. raised a brow. "Mom's met her. Why can't the rest of us?"

Chad narrowed his eyes in response. "I don't trust you." he met each of them stare for stare. "I don't want you to say something stupid or hurtful to her."

He pushed back from the table. "I'll see you at work, Father. Stay away from her," he ordered one more time before he left the room.

As he drove to work Chad called Jem repeatedly. She never answered, so he left message after message for her. As he walked inside, he tried one last time. Still nothing. His assistant told him he had a visitor, and no it wasn't Jem.

His heart was heavy as he entered his new office. Once he was there, his day only got worse. It was none other than Brittany who waited for him.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

She unfurled her lean body from the chair and moved toward him. "Can't we get past what happened, Edward? I told you I was sorry. I let my temper get the best of me." One pale hand reached toward his chest.

He grabbed her wrist and stopped her before she made contact. "Don't touch me. And no, we can't get past it. There is nothing left of what we had, Brittany. You need to accept that."

"Our families had such high hopes for us."

"Is there a point to this visit? Because I have work to do." He sat at his desk, placed his fingertips together and stared dispassionately at her.

"Look at us, Edward. We used to be wonderful together. Don't you want to give us another chance?" she sat down on the edge of his desk, her short skirt rising up high on her thighs.

"What was there is gone. Now if you don't mind, you can see yourself out." Unbuttoning his suit jacket he leaned forward and picked up a file that his secretary had left for him.

"Edward," Brittany whined.

Smothering a groan, he pushed the intercom and said, "Sari, can you come in here, Ms. Gates was just leaving."

"Right away Sir." Sari entered the room in seconds. She stood by the door and held it while looking pointedly at Brittany.

"Bitch," Brittany muttered in a low voice. Still, she got up and left.

Sari closed the door on whatever farewell, Brittany Caroline Gates may have been ready to say. Chad grinned. Sari was amazing. She was a no nonsense kind of woman. He got along great with her.

Soon, Chad was focused on looking over more proposals that the board had come up with for the company. Time passed until he got beeped by Sari.

* * * * *

Jem looked up as the door opened. Business was taking a slow lull and so for the moment she was straightening up shelves. The door chime made a subtle musical sound. She glanced up. The two men who walked in were white, handsome, and imposing in their business suits. Their wool overcoats were speckled with snow. One had black hair and the other a lighter brown.

"Morning gentlemen, can I help you with anything?" She headed toward them.

"We're looking for the owner," the black-haired one said.

"That would be me." Jem moved behind the counter. "What can I do for you?"

The men looked at each other in surprise before they faced her again. "We're looking for something for our mother," the other one blurted. "Any ideas?"

Jem glanced between the two of them. Were they serious? "Well, what does she like? Is there a certain type of collectible she favors? Crystal? Ceramic? Porcelain?"

"She likes flowers," the darker haired one stated.

I wonder if these two know their mother at all. "Okay. There are some crystal and glass flower items right over here," Jem told them as she headed over there. "Different types as you can see."

Each of them reached for a different item. One held a glass-cut rose bloom in his hand. And the other had a bouquet of flowers etched inside of a crystal square.

"I'll be up by the counter if you need anything else." She left them alone.

Their behavior was odd as if something other than shopping for mom was on their minds. The door played the sound again as it opened. Seeing who came in Jem grinned.

"Hey, Jenisha." Jem said as the woman came to the counter.

"What's up, Jem?" Jenisha Vincent grinned.

"Not a thing. Your order is here. I'll go get it." Jem went to the counter behind her.

She picked up the huge box. It was light. She placed it next to the register then went back for the other box. Jem grunted as she took the heavy box and placed it on the trolley on the floor. She rolled it back to the register then opened the gate and pushed it through and put it next to Jenisha.

"Thank you so much. I like to start early to perfect the Silken Surprise arrangement for Valentine's Day. How did you get them so fast? My usual supplier said he couldn't get them for me anymore." Jenisha leaned over and opened the box.

She took out the item and held it up to the light. The crystal rose shone with the light. The rose was very detailed and the edges of the petals were burnt orange.

"It is in On the Vine's colors." Jenisha looked at her huge smile on her face.

"I know you said you wanted red but when I saw these I thought you would prefer them. I hope that was okay." Jem bit her lip.

"Girl, it is. Thanks. I love that's in On the Vine's colors." Jenisha put the rose back in the box carefully, then stood and hugged her.

"I'm glad you like it." Jem chuckled and hugged her back.

Jenisha stepped back and turned to the other box. She opened it. Jem watched another grin curve Jenisha's lips as she stared at the beautiful red silk box tied with a white satin ribbon and bow.

"It's perfect. I don't know why my regular supplier claimed he couldn't find it."

Jem grunted. Jenisha put the box back and looked at her.

"What?"

"Your regular supplier was bilking you Nisha." Jem said.

"What do you mean?" Jenisha eyes narrowed.

"He overcharged you. Oh yeah that reminds me." Jem went behind the counter and opened the register.

She took out the check she had and handed it to Jenisha. Jenisha took it and looked then blinked.

"What is this?"

"A refund. You gave me too much money."

"What? I gave you what I usually paid for these things I need to make the On the Vine Signature arrangement for Valentine's Day."

"I know but your old supplier was overcharging you. He doubled the amount he paid." Jem shook her head.

"The asshole." Jenisha gritted her teeth. "Sorry, I've been using him for years. When he suddenly couldn't get me what I needed anymore I didn't want to change the arrangement I made. Now to find this out. Thanks, Jem. I'm glad you opened your store across from mine." Jenisha gripped her hand. "Hell, I'm glad we became friends. When I bellyached about not having the things I needed and you volunteered to check it out for me I never expected you to find them. Thanks for looking out."

"No problem. "

"Where did you find the stuff anyway?"

Jem grinned "You would never guess."

"Where?" Jenisha look was curious.

"In Savoy Valley."

"What? In the town next door to us." Jenisha said in disbelief.

"Yep." Jem nodded the continued. "I searched online and tracked down the artist who makes the boxes and the crystal roses."

"Really. I would love to meet her."

"She is a he. Yeah a man made them. Cahill is his name and he promised to come by sometime and meet you all. I was lucky to find him too. The hills in Savoy are tricky to navigate. When I told him what I wanted and what happened with your old supplier. Cahill was upset that you were overcharged and told you couldn't have anymore. He

said something about his creations bringing love to the world. And he would supply you each year with whatever you need to make your wonderful flower arrangements. When I saw how each crystal rose was different somehow I saw why you wanted them. And he showed me how each silk box was slightly different. You were right to want them for your arrangements." Jem grinned. "And meeting him also benefited me. He's letting me sell some of his pieces here."

"That's great. Have I ever met him." Jenisha frowned.

"If you had you would remember believe me." Jem fanned herself and looked at her then grinned. "Then again with a man like Ulrich Willis you probably don't see anyone else. How is he by the way?"

"He's fine. In more ways than one." Jenisha winked.

"Tell him I said hi. Also has he convinced Dakota to let me carry some of her pieces yet?"

"Uh, huh. Kota doesn't like the attention especially since she lives in Trescott." Jenisha rolled her eyes. "She'd be a hermit if it wasn't for her sibling's dragging her out from her workshop."

Jem sighed at the usual answer. "Crap. I'm going to convince her to let me."

"Good luck." Jenisha chuckled then lifted the box off the counter putting it on top of the other on the trolley. "Are the miniature roses in the box?"

"Whoops, nope they are in the back. Give me a sec." Jem quickly went to the back and got the medium sized box.

She went back up front. Absently she glanced around. Startled she saw the two men were staring at her. They turned away quickly. Frowning she went Jenisha.

"Here you go."

Jenisha took out the miniature sculpted and exquisitely crafted crystal rose and held it up by the fine gold chain. There was a bed of red in the base of rose.

"Did Cahill tell you how he got the red heart in the bottom of this?" Jenisha asked

"No, and believe me I asked. He said it was magic." Jem laughed.

Jenisha joined her. Jem got a weird feeling. She looked back at the men. They glanced away.

"Do you know those men? They keep staring at you." Jenisha whispered.

"No, but they are creeping me out." Jem replied.

"I'll just browse until they leave." Jenisha glanced at them.

"No that's okay. I'll be fine." Jem shook her head.

"I'm not leaving." Jenisha got a stubborn look on her face.

"Fine, go look and spend some more money."

"I'll try." Jenisha laughed and wandered away.

Jem watched her briefly subtly keeping an eye on the men as they whispered vehemently back and forth between one another. There was something familiar about them. Shaking her head, Jem turned her attention to checking her stock on boxes and packing items.

"Excuse me."

Jem looked up and saw the more serious looking one standing before her. "Yes sir, have you made a decision?"

"I'll take this one." He placed the etched crystal on the counter.

"Very well. Would you like it gift wrapped?"

"Please?"

Jem gave him the total as she swiftly wrapped it and placed it inside a holiday gift box. "This will keep it safe if you are shipping it also. I double wrapped it and added some extra padding."

"Thank you," he said as he handed her cash.

She smiled as she made his change. "My pleasure, thanks for stopping in." Jem placed the box in a bag after giving him his change and receipt.

His smile was a bit softer but he watched her inquisitively as she rang up and boxed his brother's purchase. His stare was a bit unnerving.

"Have a great day, gentlemen and a wonderful holiday season." She handed the other purchase across the counter.

"Goodbye, Ms. Maxwell," the one who had stared at her said. "Nice to meet you." then they left.

A chill ran over her. How'd they know her last name? They had wanted the owner, but never once did they ask for her by name.

She followed them with her eyes as they headed across the parking lot and climbed into a gray Mercedes. The tone of similarity still rang through her, but she couldn't place it.

"Jem."

She jumped at the sound of her name. Jem glanced at Jenisha.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" Jenisha asked concern on her face.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks for staying."

"No problem, see you tonight." Jenisha responded.

"Wha-"

The music played cutting her off.

"There you are," a deep bassy voice said.

"Ulrich." Jenisha's face lit up and she turned.

Jem grinned at the breathless quality of Jenisha's voice.

You sound the same way with Chad. Her inner voice said.

He strode toward them his confident strides closing the distance. Jem took in the tall dark and scrumptiousness that was Ulrich Willis. His broad forehead, full eyebrows were complimented thick killer lashes that surrounded eyes of a startling blue. Against his café-au-lait skin his eyes stood out. He walked up to Jenisha and pulled her into his

arms turning her into his body. Ulrich kissed Jenisha and she melted into him. There was familiarity in their embrace that screamed couple.

Why are you resisting having that with Chad? Let him in. Embrace his love. Jem thoughts mocked her insecurities.

Jenisha's honey colored hand touched the side of his face. Jem felt like a voyeur watching them kiss yet was powerless to move. She knew they had only been together about the same time she and Chad had been. Yet they seemed more in tune with each other. She remembered Jenisha telling her she and Ulrich had said I love you to each other before their first kiss or date. Ulrich had been going into her shop On the Vine for over year and on Valentine's earlier that year he had wooed her with various gifts. When Jenisha had told her he had seduced her in fourteen hours of gifts from the heart Jem had been blown away with his romantic gesture.

Chad sweeps you off your feet with his gestures so why are you pushing him away? She had no answer to why.

Ulrich released Jenisha and with his arm around her waist he turned to her. His sexy yet gentle blue eyes seemed to see everything.

"Sorry, Jem I didn't mean to be rude. I've missed Jenisha." Ulrich grinned a boyish grin.

"Grope away." Jenisha grinned.

Ulrich laughed a rich sound. Jenisha joined him, her hand rested on his chest over his heart. Ulrich took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Are you ready to leave that Chad fellow and run away with me?"

"I'd leave him in a heartbeat." Jem laughed at his usual banter. "But I'm afraid of Nisha hurting me. I'm sensitive."

"You bet I would," Jenisha growled playfully.

"Aw, fighting over me." Ulrich squeezed her waist.

"You wish." Jenisha pursed her lips.

"Hey a guy could dream." Ulrich chuckled. "Tell Chad don't forget we're meeting at my house tonight. Come on sweetie let me help you get these things back to On the Vine before I have to go back to work."

"How are things in the sheriff department?" Jem inquired

"When I was elected as sheriff a few month's ago I never expected it to be so much paperwork involved in the job." Ulrich grimaced.

"Welcome back to the workforce." Jenisha laughed.

"I should have stayed retired." Ulrich replied.

"Nah, you were too young to retire anyway." Jenisha countered.

"True but the paperwork is killer." Ulrich gripped.

"Didn't you miss being in law enforcement? I know Trescott isn't as exciting as the New York Police Department?" Jem was curious.

"I missed being home in Trescott Cove more." Ulrich face blanked and his expression became distant. "I'll take these to On the Vine."

Quickly he went behind the trolley and wheeled it to the door. He left without another word. Jem mouth dropped open. She had never seen Ulrich so cold. She glanced at Jenisha. There was concern on Jenisha's face.

"I'm sorry, Nisha. I don't know what I said. I didn't"

"No, Jem. It's not you. He shuts down whenever New York comes up. I don't know what happened there." Jenisha looked pensive. "It's okay. He'll probably feel awful and apologize for leaving like that." Jenisha waved it away. "I better go see if he's alright. See you later."

Jenisha walked to the door and went outside. Jem watched her go. She thought of the smiling man Ulrich usually was and wondered what had happened in New York. Jem wondered if she asked Chad would he know. He and Ulrich were close.

Yeah call him. And don't forget to tell Chad why you're so afraid of letting him. Ignoring her inner voice Jem went to the open box she had been unpacking.

Coward.

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries and Taige Crenshaw

She picked up a figurine and placed it on the shelf running above the back counter. Blocking out the thoughts she stocked the shelves.

Chapter Four

"Jem!" a shout reverberated in the store.

Poking her head out from the back, Jem groaned as her sister moved toward her.

"Hi, Cami."

"I took your phone home last night, sorry." She handed it over.

"I'd wondered where it went," Jem said as she flipped it open.

15 Missed Calls the display read. All from Chad.

"Your boy need something?" Cami asked as she looked over the calls that were missed.

"Don't know." Jem closed her phone. "Thanks for dropping it off."

"Well, I have to tell you. I didn't think you had it in you to stay with him. I know I didn't make it easy on you. But...I actually like him."

Jem was blown away by that announcement. Camilla liked him? Chad? Her mouth moved but nothing came out.

"A fact that I will deny if you actually tell him that," Cami added.

"Thanks, Cami. For saying that." Jem smiled.

"We are sisters, despite our apparent differences in taste." One perfectly plucked eyebrow rose along with Cami's statement.

Jem didn't reply knowing better than to respond to the last comment.

Cami grinned then continued. "Are we on for tonight? Everyone is looking forward to it."

Realization dawned. A small mental groan filled Jem. Tonight was another meeting of the harpies. Now she knew what Jenisha was referring to.

"Just so you know that I don't have the time to fix the food. Y'all have to bring your own, or go without." Jem warned.

"I've got that covered." Cami straightened her immaculate suit. "I have to get back to my office. I'll see you this evening."

A small smile was all Jem got as her sister spun around and left, leaving behind only her floral perfume.

Cami stopped at the door leading to the back and looked over her shoulder. "I still would have like octopus boy even if he hadn't done what he did."

"What?" Confused Jem wrinkled her nose.

"Plowed my street." Cami chuckled and winked. "Girl, I need me some lessons. The Octi is sprung."

Cami went through the doors her laughter trailing behind her.

"Bye, Cami," Jem muttered to no one.

She was once again alone in the store. Jem shook her head. It was just like Chad to do something so sweet. He and Cami barely tolerated each other yet he cleaned her street to make sure she was safe.

He knows how much you love her. He loves you, Jem. Let him in.

Grabbing another box from the back, Jem made her way up to the front. Sitting on the stool, she picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Hello, sexy." A deep voice answered on the first ring.

A tremor rocketed through her. Chad could melt an icecap with the heat of his timbre. "I see you called."

"I did. A few times. Why didn't you answer?"

"Cami had my phone. She just dropped it off." Jem allowed the warmth of his tone flow over her as she closed her eyes and imagined Chad sitting behind her, holding her.

"I miss you."

"I miss you too, Chad. I'm sorry about running out last night." she opened her eyes and stared outside at the falling snow.

Absently she noticed Ulrich striding out of On the Vine. He turned and hugged Jenisha.

"Are you free tonight?"

Chad's question drew her attention away from them. She plucked at the counter with a finger.

Cami and her friends popped up before her. "No, sorry. Harpy meeting tonight. Oh and Ulrich said you all are meeting at his place."

A low growl of disapproval reached her. "I don't know why you let them meet there. Your sister is just trying to keep us apart."

"She is doing no such thing. And besides you have your male bonding night anyway." Jem protested.

A sharp unamused bark of laughter crossed the line. "We don't bash on women all night. Yes Cami is. You just don't want to see it. Every time you go to one of those meetings, your attitude changes. You begin to believe the dribble they waste time yapping about."

Regardless of whether or not that was true, Jem wasn't going to sit by and let him slander her sister. No one had that right, but her. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't tell me that. I know exactly what I'm saying. You sit there with them as they stuff their faces and listen to them complain about men. Did it ever occur to you that *they* may be the reason they are manless? And not the man's fault?"

"Not all of us are blessed enough to have a perfect woman picked out for us by our mother's!" she shouted. "There are times that men are just that, pain's in the ass. And this... *this* would be one of them. In case you didn't realize it, you are a man."

Jem slammed the phone down. Her chest heaved as she tried to make sense of what just happened. The warmth his voice had brought to her vanished as her reality just sank in.

Was he right? She had been doubting things more and more. Her fingers drifted over the phone, willing it to ring. It didn't.

"Jem."

She jumped at the voice. Jem glanced up and stumbled to her feet. Awed she stared at the massive bouquet of Calla Lilies and Orchids. It obscured the person delivering them. He put it down and stepped from behind the flowers.

"I'm sorry I left so rudely earlier." Ulrich grinned sheepishly.

Jem heart softened. She went to him and touched his hand.

"No, I'm s-"

"No, don't apologize. It's me. This is just a token." Ulrich grinned roguishly.

"Think of it as an I'm sorry and thank you for keeping my boy Chad happy. I've never seen him so happy and in ape shit in love. You're good for him." Ulrich leaned over the counter and kissed her on the cheek.

Ulrich waved and left. Jem watched him go and ached to talk to Chad.

Call him, her heart cried out.

Why should you call? Let him call, he's the one who insulted your sister, her brain retorted.

Jem was torn. The appearance of more customers made up her mind for her. The rest of the day she was busy and didn't call him back. She never received one from him either.

* * * * *

Chad sat in the last meeting of the day, but his mind stayed on Jem. He wished he'd had time to call her back and apologize. He hadn't meant for his words to come out like that. He knew she was protective of her sister. But dammit, he was sick of having to deal with their relationship being pushed back because of those damn meetings.

It was like starting over from square one after Jem attended one. And it had gotten worse since he began working with his father. She always had an excuse not to go with him to any of the black tie affairs they had. It was almost as if she were trying to get him to ask another woman.

So far, he'd just gone stag. He ignored his family's attempts to get him to escort another woman. He didn't want anyone but Jem on his arm. And if she wasn't ready then he would wait. Unfortunately that meant women were hitting on him considering he was alone.

His father kicked him under the boardroom table. Blinking, Chad pulled himself out of his thoughts and focused on the meeting. They were discussing how much

medication they were willing to ship to a third world country and which place it was going to go.

Important, sure. But, Chad wanted Jem.

"Excuse me," Chad interrupted.

"Yes?" His father looked expectantly at him.

"Why not focus some of the aid on countries not in the headlines, but that still are in desperate need? The ones in the news are getting some, and others are blatantly ignored." Chad leaned forward. "We want to help, so why not help? I mean really help, not just do something for a tax write-off, but do it because it is the humane thing to do."

"Meaning what, Chad?" Robert asked his son.

"I mean, give more than \$100,000. Why not give half a mil."

All the members stared at him like he was insane. Chad snorted. "I don't believe this. You spend close to that on those stupid parties you throw throughout the year, and you don't bat an eye. But for this...you act horrified."

Turning to his father he added, "I'm sorry father. I can't do this. You know," he waved a hand around the room, "you *all* know damn well that you can do without such hefty personal bonuses. Most of you have more money than you will spend in a lifetime. These people are fighting for their *lives*, and we are worried about how many millions we have."

Chad walked to the door and left without saying another word, he shut himself out on his father saying something. He didn't stop, he had to get out. Had to go somewhere. Had to find that which made sense to him. Chad got in his car and drove oblivious to where he was going. Suddenly he looked up and realized he was in the mountain that lay on the border between Trescott Cove and Savoy Valley. He glanced at the clock and realized he had been driving for hours. Pulling over he got out of the car and went around to the hood. He leaned against the hood and started out at the snowy landscape.

I need her. Turning he got back in his car with the intention of going to the one thing that made sense to him. And that was Jem.

* * * * *

Jem shifted on the chair trying to get comfortable. Her thoughts were on Chad.
Where is he? He didn't even come by to close up with me or check on me as he usually does.

Did you finally succeed in pushing him away? A voice mocked.

Her heart clenched at the thought.

Maybe he is right. I need to uninvite Cami and her friends from coming to my house.

Jem focused back on the conversation in front of her.

"So when are the harpies getting here?" Demi Richards drawled.

"Demi." Jenisha hissed.

"What? It's what they are. Jem you know I love you but your sister and her friends. Man." Demi's chocolate eyes twinkled.

"Yeah, Jem. If it wasn't for you I wouldn't come to hang out. Your sister and her friends are a bit much." Jenisha grinned.

"Hell, say it right they are a bitter complaining bunch of she-devils." Vivica's Andrews agreed straightening her glasses.

Vivica's bespeckled hazel eyes were sympathetic. Jem glanced at the women who worked at On the Vine she had invited to these get together. When she had opened Jem's Collectibles, Jenisha the owner of On the Vine, Demi – the co – manager - and Vivica – the other co – manager - had come by to welcome her to Baltic Place. Baltic Place was the main street area of Trescott Cove where both sides of the wide street housed various businesses. Eventually she invited them after she had become friendly with them.

"Hey, that's my sister," Jem said.

Jenisha looked at Demi and Vivica then back at her.

"We're sorry," Jenisha said.

"The look on your face was priceless. Please girl. I know my Cami can be a bit much." Jem laughed.

There was a look of relief on their faces.

"It's not Cami so much. Heck, I even like Zora and Kenya. It's the other three that are. All I can say is *wow*. They need a sweet pill," Demi said.

"*Demi*," Jenisha hissed.

"What, you know you wanted to say it. Don't get all huffy because I said it first."

"Yeah I wanted to say it first." Jenisha laughed.

"See, see," Demi said.

Jem laughed at their antics. The doorbell rang interrupting them. They watched each other then sighed.

"Harpy Time," Jem said.

Jenisha, Vivica and Demi cracked up laughing. Chuckling Jem got up to get the door. She threw open the door.

"Bout time C-" Jem stopped surprised then continued. "Sandy, Lilli, and Mone what are you doing here?"

Jem's girlfriend's looked at each other then at her.

"We're afraid of Cami." They answered together.

"What does Cami have to do with it?"

"She rolled up at my house and told me I was coming here tonight," Sandy replied.

"Me too," Liliana agreed.

"She barely gave me time to get ready," Simone gripped.

Jem stared at them bemused.

"Get the hell into the house." Cami growled from behind them.

"That's it. Look, heifer. I only came out of curiosity. Don't make me knock you on the ass." Sandy turned and gritted out.

"*Sandra Melinda Thomas get inside the house*," Jem pointed.

"Christ, Jem. Why you got to call my entire name like that?" Sandy turned to her.

Jem said nothing just pointed. Sandy glared at Cami then sashayed forward. Jem moved out of the way as she and her friends passed her by. She glanced back at Cami.

"Hey this isn't getting any lighter." A melodious voice said cheerfully.

Cami stepped to the side. Zora walked forward. Jem looked at her dark purple shirt and slacks that matched her micro braids and thought she was wrong. The woman winked.

"Come on Kenya. Let's get this inside before it gets cold. It's really coming down out here."

Another melodious voice said making Jem realize she was wrong. She had the wrong sister. Jem watched as Kenya in the purple clothing and hair went inside. Her twin Zora whose micro braids was blue stepped forward.

"Hey, Jem. Hope you're hungry. Cami cooked up a storm. Here Cami give me that, " Zora said.

Cami put the covered dish she held on top of the one Zora carried. Zora went inside.

"You cooked." Jem stared at Cami her mouth open.

"Shut your mouth. Yeah I cooked. Now let's go inside." Cami stepped forward.

"Wait a minute. You cooked and my girls are here." Jem blocked her way then looked behind her. "Where are the ha-" Jem stopped.

"*The harpies.*" Cami gave her a look. "Come on say it. I know that's what you all call us."

"Sorry, Cami."

"Please, you're right anyway," Cami replied.

"Okay that's it, you pod person. What have you done with my sister?" Jem stepped back and stared at her.

"Shut the hell up," Cami growled.

"I'm just saying why are you acting so nice." Jem put up her hands.

Cami started choking.

"Cami, oh my God are you okay." Jem rushed forward to help her.

"Don't you ever say such a thing again. Me nice?" Cami pushed her hands away. "You're crazy."

"Okay not so nice person. Where are the other three?" Jem rolled her eyes.

"They have been uninvited," Cami replied.

"Cami, you weren't rude to them were you?" Jem asked.

Cami gave her another look.

"Okay you were. Cami, they are you friends."

"Friends, they weren't my friends. I only work with them. They got on my nerves.

At least me, Zora and Kenya grew up together."

"Then why did you bring them here." Jem frowned.

"I couldn't think of a 'nice,'" she made the quote marks with her fingers, "way to tell them not to come. Tonight I just decided I couldn't take another night of their griping. So I told them to stay the hell home."

Jem stifled a laugh. Cami's eyes narrowed.

"If you laugh I will belt you," Cami warned.

"Come on let's go in before they eat all the food,," Jem said.

She hooked arms with Cami pulling her inside. Jem closed the door behind her and they went down the hall to the laughter. Cami loosened her hand from her then stepped forward. She raised her hand. The voices faded.

"I declare Harpy night disbanded." Cami looked at the faces around her. "What you think I didn't know what you called it? Anyway the others will not be coming anymore. There is only space for one man hatter here and that's me. Now let the revelry commence." Cami strolled over and sat on the couch next to Demi.

Demi wiped her eye with a finger. Cami glanced at her.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Girl, that was so beautiful." Demi laughed.

"You're crazy." Cami snorted.

"I know," Demi replied without hesitation.

"I like that." Cami laughed and butted shoulder with her playfully.

"Back at ya." Demi replied.

"Now let's bash some men." Cami rubbed her hands together gleefully.

The room groaned.

"Come on. I know some of you have men. Supposedly good ones but there must be something about them that bugs you. So eat and share."

"Ulrich, umm..." Jenisha started then stopped.

"Now don't leave us hanging." Cami beckoned.

The others egged Jenisha on. Jem walked over to a chair and sat. As the others talked, laughed and ate her mind was on Chad.

Why hasn't he called.

* * * * *

The weather was hideous as Chad made his way down the winding roads. As he wove his way towards town, Chad tried calling Jem. It went straight to voice mail and he frowned. Surely she wasn't avoiding him.

He drove to her house, indifferent to the knowledge she would have company. The need to be with her was all he understood.

Chad found a spot a bit down from her brownstone and got out. Shivering in the weather, he hastened himself to her steps. As he neared them, he slowed.

On the top step, Jem stood with a man.

Chapter Five

Jem and the man looked cozy and a rumble of anger rolled from Chad's throat. One gloved hand clenched into a fist. The winds whipped away the words shared between them, but the body language spoke of familiarity.

While he watched, her body shook. When the man gathered her into his arms, and she never hesitated, his heart shattered. Chad knew she didn't trust men, he had met her friend Ned but as far as he knew, the rest of her friends were women.

He stopped himself from moving forward. He wasn't going to question her. Trust, that was what it was all about. *Why couldn't she come to me with her problem?*

Chad turned around and moved dejectedly back to his car. His father called him as he climbed into the cold interior of his vehicle. One word answers were given as he headed for his parents house, for dinner.

His brothers asked him to accompany them to *Onyx*. He agreed although he wasn't all that inclined to go. Perhaps it would do him some good to get out, maybe take his mind off the pain of seeing, Jem in another man's arms.

Chad drank throughout the night. He danced with many and remembered none of them. Everything was a blur as his brothers dropped him off at his bed in the guest house. He fell asleep, fully dressed and face down in his pillows.

* * * * *

Jem was awake long into the night. Her unexpected visitor had thrown her. Thoughts rolled around her mind. The most important was who the hell wanted to toss this in her face.

She sat on her double bed and stared out into the dark. The streetlamps highlighted the thick, heavy snowflakes as they fell. "Looks like we'll be having a white Christmas after all if this keeps up."

Jem sighed and climbed out of bed. Wrapping her fleece robe around her, she shoved her feet into her fuzzy slippers and headed downstairs. In the kitchen as she heated water for hot cocoa, she thought about her visitor again.

Frederick Jackson.

Goosebumps broke out on her skin. He at one time had been the man to take away all of her sense and convinced her to sleep with him. That one thing had gotten her pregnant and he had vanished. Run off like a thief in the dark of night.

She had kept her pregnancy a secret as long as she could, but once her family figured it out, the ridicule began. Only when she had lost her temper and yelled at Cami did she ever tell anyone that she had lost the baby. A little girl.

A lone tear began the trek down her face. She curled her fingers around the mug of cocoa. Her free hand rested on her belly. "I even had a name picked out for her." soon her face was streaked with moisture.

Jem padded into the living room and curled up on her window seat. She covered her legs with a quilt and rested her head against the wood. The soothing smell of her hot chocolate gave her some comfort as she watched more and more snow blanket her street.

* * * * *

Her heart had stopped before kicking into high gear when she realized who was standing on the other side of her door. Instead of inviting him in, she had grabbed her coat and stood with him out on her step.

Frederick had seemed uncomfortable. After apologizing for leaving her so abruptly, he had asked her about her pregnancy. It boiled down to the fact he had never known about her being with child.

Jem questioned his reasoning for coming back, out of the blue and looking her up. Shame filled his face as he told her some man had paid him. He had wanted Frederick to approach her in public and ask where their child was, but he just couldn't do it.

"Why didn't you?" she'd asked.

"I was going to, it was an obscene amount of money, but when he told me I had to do it when you were with a certain guy, I realized something was off." Frederick had pulled her trembling body into his. "I wasn't about to walk back into your life and ruin it. I know that's what I did the day I left. I'm leaving town, but I wanted to tell you, in case something else comes up with this guy. Have a wonderful Christmas, Jaleza."

With a gentle kiss to her cheek, he'd left her standing there and walked out of her life for a second time.

* * * * *

Jem felt a wave of nausea move over her. Who had she made so angry they would want to do this to her? It didn't make any sense to her, not at all.

Sipping her drink, she tried to discern what all of it could mean. She encountered a heavy feeling of fear. Someone wanted her to suffer.

"I think I should have added some bourbon to my drink." She wiped her hand across her cheeks, drying them.

There was one other thought floating around in her head. Protect Chad. He had just begun a new relationship with his family and she didn't want to be the cause of any embarrassment, nor pain for any of them.

Stuffing some pillows behind her, she got a bit more comfortable and tucked the heavy blanket around her. Finishing the rest of her drink, Jem shut her eyes and let the warmth flow through her.

She woke a few hours later, Chad's name on her lips. Resisting the urge to bolt up from her comfortable position, Jem instead snuggled down deeper, the outside world was still dark and she was in no rush to wake up.

Her bed didn't seem like the place to be. She was perfectly content where she was. It didn't take long for the falling snow to lull her exhausted body back to sleep.

The next time she woke, Jem experienced such panic. Her home was filled with a loud scream. It took her a few moments to realize the noise was hers. With a gasp, she clamped her mouth shut.

Her heart was beating so hard, it hurt. Sweat dripped down her brow and her breathing was ragged. Fire. She had dreamed about fire.

Chad had been trapped in the inferno and it was all her fault.

Jem half-ran half-stumbled upstairs and collapsed on her bed. The acrid smell of ash was so strong to her; it was as if she could taste it. Her entire body shook with severe tremors. She headed for the bathroom and splashed water on her face.

Cold. She felt so cold.

Reaching in the shower she turned on the spray as hot as she could handle. Even later as she greeted her first customer of the day, Jem had not yet rid her body of the icy feeling which seemed to cloak her.

Her fear only seemed to increase as her day continued. She was jumpy and suspicious. Dread began to overwhelm her. Her palms became sweaty and her hands shook as she wrapped up people's purchases. A hand touched her shoulder.

"Ahhh." Jem screamed.

"*Jem, what is wrong with you?*" Cami yelled.

Trembling, Jem turned to face her. She saw the open door behind her and knew Cami had come in the back.

"Nothing, I didn't hear you." Jem tried desperately to calm down.

"Why do you look so bad?"

"Nothing. Did you need something?"

"No, I was in the area on business and dropped in to see you. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah I am fine."

"Well I can't stay. I have another appointment." Cami glanced at her watch. "I've got to go. I had fun last night."

"Yeah me too." Jem squeezed her hand.

Cami squeezed back then turned to leave.

"You should lock your back door, Jem." Cami said.

"I never lock it. No one bothers me." Jem waved away her concern.

"Okay. Talk with you later."

Jem walked to the back room and watched Cami leave. Cami opened the back door and waved before closing it. For a moment she thought of locking it but pushed it aside. She turned back to the store and noted no one was there.

Jem put her hand over her eyes rubbing them. She craved to hear Chad's voice, but knew that he was at work. She was not about to be one of those women who bothered their boyfriend at their place of business. Jem didn't feel it was right, and she wouldn't wish to be on the phone all day, she had things to do at work. So did Chad.

She wasn't clingy. And despite her apprehension, wasn't about to begin being like that. She had stood on her own for a long time.

* * * * *

The smell of coffee woke him. His mouth moved, trying to dislodge the cotton that had taken up residence in his mouth.

"Come on, wake up."

Chad groaned and covered his head. "Stop shouting," he begged.

An ungrateful shove caught him in the backside. "Get up!"

What the fuck?

He rolled over and squinted up at the person who just topped his list of killing. His father. "What do you want?" he snapped. Then he closed his eyes against the glare. It was too early and too blasted bright.

"I've been working on some things before we meet with the board again. So quit whining. If you can't handle your drink then you need to stop doing it." His father placed a steaming mug of coffee next to the bed. "Hurry up."

Confused at what his father was saying Chad stared at him.

"Move it." His father said.

Cautious of his aching head, Chad did as ordered. He drank the black coffee and got ready. There was silence in the car as his father drove.

Little did he know that his day was about get worse. When he finally made it to his office, Sari had the daily paper waiting for him on his desk. She had glared at him an act in itself that made him wonder. Sari normally was his champion, protecting him.

The image the paper was opened to explained it all. It was a picture of him and two scantily dressed, silicone implanted women. One woman on each leg and their lips pressed against his cheek.

"Oh my God!" Chad almost missed his chair as he sat down. He blinked furiously in an attempt to get the picture to vanish, or at least have him disappear from it. Didn't happen.

The caption below the picture read: *Edward Chadwick seems back to his usual self as he enjoys two of the Hunnies at this local "Gentleman's Club."*

He began to see red. There was an article below but all he noticed was the name of the writer. Phil Buckman. Chad shoved back from the oak desk and headed for the door, wanting to find Jem and explain this. Then he would go after Phil Buckman.

His father was waiting for him on the other side of the door. Even as he opened his mouth to explain his need to leave, Robert waved off his explanation. "I'm sorry son, we have meetings all day. You started this ball rolling; you have to be in on it."

Chad tried calling Jem on his way to the boardroom, but her cell kicked him straight to voice mail. "I love you, Jem. I'll call you after my meetings. I love you," he said.

His father opened the boardroom and walked in. Chad followed and stopped surprised the full board including his brothers were present. His dad motioned him over to sit. His father must have seen the intent to leave on his face.

"Sit, Edward." His voice brooked no argument.

Although he wanted to leave Chad was curious what this was all about. He walked over and sat. His father placed a file in front of him then spoke.

"After you stormed out yesterday. We-"

"Look, Dad. I don't need to be-"

"Shut up, and listen."

Chad subsided. His father continued.

"When you left the board and I discussed the point you made. And you're right we haven't been doing enough."

Chad sat up unable to believe what he heard.

"We've come up with a proposal for a division in the company that will deal with various charities. And if you agree we would like you to run it."

Chad stared at his father and excitement welled inside of him.

"Who would I report to?"

"No one. The only thing you have to do is have an accounting once a year to the board where you used the funds. Each year we will allocate you a preset fund amount. You will choose the charities you want it to go too. You will have to either hire staff from within or interview. It will be an independent division." His father glanced away from him. "You may have your first employee. William helped with the information before you. He has asked if you would consider hiring him as your VP."

Chad glanced at his quite and intense brother. William's face was cool. William nodded. Chad thought about it and knew he would be an asset. William was very methodical and missed nothing. Chad returned the gesture. A small smile curved William's lips.

Chad looked back at his father. "Let me see what you have collected."

His father nodded. Chad saw something in his eyes he hadn't seen in a long time. Pride and respect.

"I'll let William tell you about the information we collected."

Chad returned his attention to his brother as he spoke.

Please don't let Jem see the picture before I can get to her. Chad pushed away the thoughts and focused on the meeting.

* * * * *

At the sound of the bell Jem looked up.

"This is becoming a habit, Cami. At least this time you used the front door."

Cami glanced around and flicked the latch on the door. She turned and her face was somber as she walked to the counter. Fear filled Jem.

"What is wrong?"

Cami said nothing coming through the swinging gate to behind the register by her side. Cami put down her briefcase and put a paper in front of her.

"Cami what-"

"Why didn't you tell me earlier why you were so sad? I just saw the paper."

"What paper? I haven't seen the pap-" Jem glanced down and trailed off.

She gasped and took up the paper unable to believe it. The image of Chad with two scantily clad women on his lap burned in her mind. Jem read the words below the picture.

Edward Chadwick seems back to his usual self as he enjoys two of the Hunnies at this local "Gentleman's Club."

Pain blossomed in her chest.

"Chad."

She glanced up at Cami.

"It's all a lie Jem so don't you believe it. That little fucker Phil Buckman wrote it. Don't you believe it."

Jem laughed a hollow sound. "Who would have thought you would be defending Chad."

"Jem, come on you're scaring me." Cami gripped her hand.

"It doesn't matter anyway. I need to let Chad go anyway." Jem gripped hers back.

"What? Jem don't do anything hasty-"

"Frederick Jackson came to see me." Jem cut her off.

Cami cursed viciously.

"What did that fucker want?"

"Someone tried to hire him to confront me about our baby." Jem replied.

"Oh my God, Jem. Why."

"I don't know. I don't know." Jem took a breath then continued. "He didn't but this is what he told me."

Quickly Jem filled her in on what Fredrick had said. After she was finished Cami was silent for a while.

"What are you going to do Jem?" Cami asked.

"Do you have sometime to watch the store for me?"

"Sure, but-"

"I need sometime."

"Okay, Jem."

"I love you. And thanks." Jem went in the back to her office and got her bag and things.

She went back to the front and hugged Cami.

"I appreciate it."

"Are you okay to drive?" Cami asked.

"I'll be fine." Jem went through the swinging gate and to the front door.

"Jem, what is Chad's ex's name again." Cami called.

"Brittany Caroline Gates. Why?" Jem looked back at Cami. She shook her head at the look on her face. "You're wrong Cami. Brittany's more concerned about her nails color than finding my Fredrick."

"It was just a thought." Cami shrugged.

Jem opened the door and went outside. She glanced at the sky and then walked to the lot that held her car.

Cami saw Jem pause and look at the sky. Jem's shoulders slumped and she continued on her way. Cami's fist clenched. The look of pain on Jem's face flashed in front of her. Fury bubbled inside. She breathed out then reached for her bag. Taking out her cell she punched as number.

She tapped her fingernail on the counter as the phone rang. When the person picked up she purred.

"Hey Rafael, sweetie. It's Cami. I need a favor." She listened then threw back her head laughing.

"Sure sweetie. Dinner is on me. Uh huh, I miss you too." She chuckled. "You naughty man. Now I need you to get me everything you have on a woman named Brittany Caroline Gates." She laughed again. "Yes everything. Speak with you soon."

Cami hung up. She glanced at the small standing mirror on the counter and saw the cruel smile curving her lips.

"No one messes with my sister and get's away with it."

* * * * *

After the end of the last meeting, Chad sprinted back to his office. He noted the office was empty. Looking at his watch he winced as he realized it was almost six o'clock. Everyone was cleared out for the day. He strode pass Sari who was at her desk without a word. He had things to do. Sari entered after a sharp knock and handed him a pile of messages. Her dark eyes cut him as she glared one final time and left.

He scanned the notes as one hand began tugging loose his tie. Nothing he couldn't take care of tomorrow. "Sari," he pushed the intercom, "call me a taxi please."

"Yes sir." Her tone still sharp and full of disapproval.

Chad worried his lower lip as he took one last glance over the proposal for sending medical aid overseas. This was going to be a huge venture.

His phone beeped. "I'm on my way down, Sari."

"You have a visitor."

"Sorry, I'm on my way out, Sari. Tell them to make an appointment." He had no intentions of talking to anyone right now. Not here.

"I'm sending them in then I am leaving for the day." Sari announced in her take-no-gruff tone.

Chad swore as his office door began to open. It was a curse that died on his lips as his eyes landed upon the person who stood there.

Chapter Six

Jaleza Ellamae Maxwell.

His Jem. His love.

The woman he looked at and saw his future. Wedding. A mortgage. Kids. Hell, even a pet or two. Whatever she wanted.

He hungrily absorbed the sight before him. Her skirt and sweater couldn't look better if she had been wearing a sequined dress. It didn't matter what she wore, he continually lost his breath around her.

Her face was drawn. He read her tension. Beyond that he picked up on fear. She was scared. Her hands were shoved into her coat pockets.

"Jem," he uttered as he rose and moved toward her. "Is everything okay, baby?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," she responded in a low, despondent voice. One hand closed the door behind her, shutting them in.

Chad didn't stop until he was close enough to touch her. He reached out and stroked her cheek. "What are you talking about?"

"I've seen the paper, Chad." She shrugged out of her coat and in the process moved herself out of his reach.

His world just dropped out from beneath him. He reached for her, unhappy at the lack of expression she had. "Jem let me explain."

* * * * *

Jem had her speech all worked out in her head until the second she came face to face with Chad. The entire thing vanished like a puff of smoke.

The jade green eyes that she loved so much stared across the room at her, filled with such powerful sentiment and she lost all will to argue with him. All that was left was to tell her why she was there and why she was so afraid.

"There's nothing to explain, Chad. Not from you anyway. I have something to tell you."

He took her hand and led her to one of the two chairs before his desk. Chad lowered himself into the one next to her and made sure they faced one another. Her heart melted as he interlaced their fingers, picked up her hands, and placed a kiss on the back of each.

"What is it, baby?"

"I...I...I have to tell you something about my past." Jem swallowed. She had no idea it would be this hard to tell him.

"You know you can tell me anything, Jem."

She fought back tears. "I just figured it would be best if you heard this from me. Apparently someone is out to ruin me and I don't want you caught in the crossfire." Jem squeezed his hand as his jaw clenched.

"I don't know who it is, but someone is digging into my past. They tried to pay the man who had gotten me pregnant to accuse me of doing something with his son." Chad's eyes flashed dangerously. "He came to me instead. But Frederick—that's his name—also told me that they told him to do this when I was with you and in front of other people."

"Jem, I'll find out who's doing this. I swear I will."

She shook her head. "No. There is evil around me and I'm scared, Chad. I'm scared for you." A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. "I think maybe we'd better take some time apart, until I can figure out what this is all about. I don't know who wants to hurt me this bad, but I don't want you involved."

He opened his mouth and she withdrew a hand to place two fingers across his lips. "Please don't argue with me, Chad. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you or your family because some sicko is after me."

"Darlin'," he said in a deep tone. "I'd never forgive myself if I wasn't there to protect you. If someone is threatening you I'll be damned if I'm stepping out of the way." Chad knelt on the floor before her. "I know what that photo looked like, but I don't want anyone but you. I haven't since the day I heard your voice on the phone."

He pulled her head to rest against his as his warm breath fanned her, "If they want you, they have to get through me."

She tried for a smile. Bringing their still-joined hand up to her lips, Jem kissed his. "I was jealous and hurt by that picture, but then I realized it was probably for the best. If whoever wants to hurt me thinks you are not part of my life anymore, then you should be safe. That's all that matters to me."

Jem trailed her hand down his face, memorizing every angle, every sensation the mere touch of his skin brought her. She stood pulling him with her. She pressed her lips to his.

"I love you, Chad."

"I love you, Jem."

The sound of his words resonated through her. Jem cupped his face and licked his lips. Chad pulled her to him. She pushed him and he sat on the couch. She straddled his lap. His hands pushed up her skirt. His erection brushed against her silk clad mound. Chad growled.

I love him so much.

Chad felt the desperation in her kiss. The impatience in her touch. Her hot hands pushed inside of his now open shirt. Chad shifted and felt her tugging on his shirt. He wrenched his lips away.

"Jem we nee-"

"Shhh... I need you Chad. Please."

Jem's whisper was his undoing. He let her have his way. Jem murmured in his mouth then licked down his face. He groaned as her nails raked his chest. He sank his hands into her loose A- Symmetrical hair. He gripped it. Jem gasped and continued to kiss him.

She ground against his shaft. He felt the friction of his clothing against his sensitized member.

"Jem."

"Chad." Her voice vibrated against the pulse in his throat.

Chad shivered. Jem chuckled against his skin. She inhaled rubbing her nose under his jaw. He quivered.

"I need you, Chad. Oh God, I need you so much."

"Have me, Jem. Take me."

She stood in a quick motion and bent unbuckling his belt. Chad lifted his hips. She stripped off his pants and boxers together. His hard cock sprang free bobbing for attention. Jem licked her lips and straightened. She stripped off her sweater and took off her shirt. Chad enjoyed the view of her pale pink bra and matching panties. Jem dipped her head forward her hair obstructing her face. She watched him from behind her hair and shimmied out of her panties and unhooked her bra.

Chad growled as she unveiled her beautiful breasts and lush canal. Jem climbed back onto his lap. Her wet slit dampened his cock. Jem rose up and then impaled herself on his shaft in one motion. Chad head fell back on the couch and a groan reverberated from him. Jem moaned and moved.

In a sensuous up and down glide Jem took him. At each sensation of her silken mound enveloping his hardened member Chad growled. It was as if being bathed in fire.

"Jem, please." He pleaded.

She showed no mercy taking him with a delicious greed. He wrapped his hands around her waist. His hands trailing over her sweat silken skin.

"Chad, I love you."

Chad locked eyes with her and saw the sadness there. It made his breath stall. Jem closed her eyes and bore down on him. She undulated her hips sending him over the edge. The release rolled over him. Jem pussy clenched around his cock as her own release took her. It went on and on.

Jem pressed her lips to his. He tasted her tears as she kissed him. Holding her tears filled his eyes. Her harsh sobs filled his mouth. Gathering her to him Chad held her close.

Jem's sobs slowed and she slumped against him. Turning until they laid against each other on the couch he raised his hand and pushed her hair away from her sleeping face. Her expression was sad and tears still wet her face. He kissed her gently.

"You're not getting rid of me Jem."

He held her and let sleep take him.

* * * * *

Jem woke disoriented. Her heart raced as she stared at Chad's sleeping face. Gently she kissed him. He didn't stir. She noted the tired lines of his face. She knew she was to blame for them. It only reinforced what she had to do.

Gently she disentangled herself from him. He didn't stir as he usually would. It was a sign of how tired he was. Quickly she dressed. She kneeled on the floor besides him.

"I have to go now," she said softly then leaned forward just enough to place their lips together. The kiss was tender and sweet, it said more than any words she could ever say would be able to. "Stay safe, Edward."

Standing Jem rushed from the room. She stepped into the elevator. Her heart cried to go back to him but she had to be strong. Putting her hand in front of her as the door were closing she whispered.

"I love you, my Chad."

She put her hand over her mouth and fell back against the wall of the elevator. Intense grief spilled from her and she succumbed to the tears.

You're a fool Jem.

No I have to protect him from whoever is trying to hurt me. Please keep him safe.

Chad jerked awake. His first thought was Jem. His next was the realization she was gone. Pain swamped him. Tears clogged his throat then a purpose grew. Getting up he dressed, got his briefcase and strode out the door.

"I'm not letting you go Jaleza Ellamae Maxwell." His voice filled the silence with determination.

The approaching holiday did little to change the moods of both Jem and Chad. She did her best to distance herself from him, treating him like any other customer when he came into the store. Every day he showed up and everyday he purchased something else. He had flowers delivered Daily from On the Vine. Chad had even enlisted the help of Ulrich with the arrangements.

He called her just to tell her he loved her. Jem was so scared for his life, what little sleep she did get was unfulfilling. Her dreams were ransacked with the image of him screaming in raw agony and lots of fire.

It had been a week, a long, hellish week since she had been held by his strong arms. Jem longed to curl up into him and let him protect her. She couldn't. She was the danger, someone was after her.

She knew she looked gaunt, but Jem was too preoccupied by trying to run her business and find out who wished to harm her. And for what possible reason.

Aside from Chad she kept having those two men in the store. They bought trinkets as well and had tried to flirt with her. While she considered herself no longer with Chad, she was not about to bring another person into her messed up life.

She didn't want anyone aside from Chad.

The two men seemed to be after something. Yet another thing to set her on edge.

Childish though it may seem, Jem looked forward to the opportunity to see Chad when he came in. If there was no one in the store he would brush up against her, whisper in her ear, and set her body on high alert. If there was anyone in the store he would stay where he could see her and just watch. Those powerful green eyes of his scorched her with each pass they made over her.

He knew it.

All his messages on the phone were saved and she listened to them before bed. With his voice in her head, she would bring herself pleasure in the dark of her room crying out Chad's name as she came.

Jem looked at the clock. If he was consistent as he had been the other days this week, Chad would be there within an hour. Her eyes flashed outside to the weather and frowned. The snow seemed to be worse if anything. The plows would have a hard time keeping up.

Her body tingled at the thought of Chad near her. With no one in the store, she moved to a shelf in the back and began straightening up the dolls that lined it. The chime of her door prompted her to stop and turn.

"Can I help you with anything?" she asked her patron as they moved toward her.

"I'm looking for something special for a friend. A jade piece." They looked around. "I don't see anything like that out here. Do you have anything like that?"

"Yes, I have it in the back. Wait here let me get a few pieces for you." Jem smiled and nodded.

"Sure, I'll wait here and look around your quaint shop."

"Go ahead." Jem replied and went into the back.

She went to where she kept the pieces. A sound made her turn. Jem stumbled back and knocked into the shelf. Another blow spun her around and she collapsed on her knees. Another knocked her flat.

Chad. Jem thought as everything went black.

Groaning Jem moved. An acrid smell filled her noses. Blearily, she opened her eyes. Blood clouded her vision. She touched her aching head. Cautiously she lifted her head and realized what the smell was. Smoke poured along the walls. Fear filled her. Jem struggled to her knees and grabbed onto the shelf closest to her for leverage.

Getting to her feet she stumbled away from the back door where the fire was. She held onto the wall units lining the wall. Her vision blurred in and out. Coughing, she felt the door leading to the front and opened it and stumbled through. Reaching the gate she went through. The fire was also in the front. She went along the walls holding onto the units. As she held tightly to another unit. It gave and fell against her. Jem fell back. Her head cracked against the concrete.

Sickly waves of pain filled her. She watched as fire rained down around her.

Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries and Taige Crenshaw

Chad, I'm sorry. I love you. Jem thought as everything went black.

Chapter Seven

Chad drove slowly through the snowy streets. His mind on Jem, he didn't care if there were people in the store today or not. The ring he'd carried with him was going to be on her finger. Jem had started calling him Edward to keep him at a distance. It was enough to panic him. He was Chad to her, nothing else.

He had found out that his brothers had been going there daily to talk to Jem. Only at his mother's request had he not beaten them to a pulp. Both William and Robert Jr. told him that they really liked her. Chad had confided in them what she was going through and they promised to stop in the shop and check on her as well.

He did more than like her. Chad loved her more than anything. It had been almost a week exactly since she had left his office. That was too long of a time. His soul needed hers.

He stopped. A crowd filled the long streets of Baltic Place blocking his way. He got out of the car. The people surged forward. Going with the crowd, Chad thought it strange they were outside and pointing.

He pushed his way forward and asked, "What's going on?"

A young man said, "A shop is on fire. Fire trucks are having a hard time getting through."

Chad's heart skipped a few beats. "What shop?"

"Jem's Collectibles."

Terror unlike anything spread through his body. Slipping and sliding in the snow and slush, Chad ran toward the shop. "Jem?" he hollered as he shoved through people. "Jem!"

He could see the flames because of the store's windows. "The owner," he yelled. "Where's the owner?"

"Store's closed man," someone pointed out.

"No, she wouldn't be closed now. She never closes before seven." He grabbed the door and tried to open it. Locked.

Panic blossomed in him. Yanking out his cell, Chad called her mobile as he ran for the back door. When he got her voicemail, he hung up and called the store. Nothing, not even her normal after hours message.

Desperate, Chad tried the backdoor. That too was locked. And hot.

"JEM!!"

He slipped and fell in the snow before he regained his footing. Like a wildman he ran back to the front of the shop. Where the hell were the fire trucks?

"Help me!" he hollered. "I think she's still in there." Stopping before the firebox, Chad grabbed the CO2 bottle.

Before everyone, he threw the bottle through the door, shattering the glass. As smoke billowed out, he kicked out the rest of the glass on the lower portion and climbed in. His arm over his nose and mouth he began searching for the woman he knew in his gut was there.

He barely noticed some others unfurling the fire hose and trying to get it to work. His mind was on his need to find Jem. Chad stayed in the middle trying to avoid colliding with any of the display tables he knew were set up throughout the store. They would slow him down. The flames were spreading along the walls.

Eyes stinging, breathing difficult, Chad stumbled over something on the floor. Squinting he looked down and screamed. "Jem!" She laid there, a pool of blood underneath her head.

He dropped down and felt for a pulse. It was there, weak but there.

Thank you, God. Chad shucked off his heavy wool coat and covered her with it the best he could, trying to protect her lungs.

I have to get her out of here. Out the way I came in. There were flames on three sides of them.

Getting ahead of her, he slid his hands under her armpits and began to pull her toward the door. He got a few inches before her body stopped moving.

Blinking furiously, Chad tried to find out what had snagged her. Pant leg. He worked quickly to free it and then went back to moving them slowly up toward fresh air.

Spots started dancing before his eyes and Chad knew he was about to pass out. He tried hollering for help, but nothing came out.

Chad curled up around Jem and held her close. *I'm so sorry, baby. I should have been able to protect you.* If he was about to die, he was going to do it with the woman he was destined to be with, no matter how long—or short—their life was to be.

As shadows overtook him, Chad would have sworn he heard people yelling for him. *I love you, Jem.*

* * * * *

The beeping woke her. Jem stirred and opened her eyes. A hospital room. *What the hell am I doing in here? And why do I feel like shit?*

A soft snore reached her and Jem turned her head slightly and saw Chad, in a chair beside her, his head resting on the bed. She moved her hand so her fingers could trail through his hair. Then her eyes landed on her sister on the other side of her.

"Cami?" She asked.

"Oh thank God, you're awake. I'll get the doctor."

"What happened?" she questioned, her fingers caressing Chad's skull.

Cami kissed her cheek. "You had an accident. I'll be right back." She left silently.

Jem allowed her eyes to drift back to the man in her room. His eyes were opened and he was watching her. "Hey," she murmured.

"Hey yourself, gorgeous." Chad turned his head and kissed her skin.

"What happened?"

"Your shop was burned. You were inside." He moved closer to her head. "I almost lost you."

Her shop burned? She frowned trying to remember and drew a blank. "Who? How?"

Chad laid a finger across her lips. "Not right now. You focus on getting better." He stared into her eyes. "I have to ask you something, Jem."

"What?"

He kissed her hand but never broke eye contact. "I can't live my life without you. I know you are trying to protect me by pushing me away but I won't stand for it. You are the other half of my soul. I want to marry you."

Jem's heart skipped. She licked her lips as he pulled a box out of his pocket.

"Chad," she protested.

"No, you listen. I don't want to go another day without you. This past week was hell without you. I need you, Jaleza." Chad opened the box and pulled out the ring. Taking her hand he slid it on her finger. "Will you marry me?"

She began to cry as she looked on the diamond ring sitting so beautifully on her hand. Jem knew she would never want another man like she did the one beside her. Knew she had been a fool to push him away. She wanted him and nothing would stop her. She thought of all her foolish doubts and what if's and kicked them all away. She focused on the one truth she should have from the beginning – their love.

"Yes," she whispered, "yes I'll marry you."

Chad reached up and kissed her softly on the lips. Jem noticed her sister standing with the doctor and another man, who looked familiar to her, by the door. For once her sister seemed almost happy as she watched, for there was an actual smile on her face.

"Merry Christmas, Jem. I love you?"

Christmas? It was Christmas? "It's Christmas?"

"Yes baby."

"I didn't...I don't...I...don't have gifts."

"Cami brought you her gift. It's on the wall over there." He motioned.

Jem looked at the wall he pointed to and froze. The picture of them that night on the porch was vivid and heart aching beautiful. Tears filled her eyes. She glanced at Cami.

Cami watched her. Jem mouthed her thanks. Cami smiled and blew her a kiss. Cami stiffened, looked at Chad and made a watching you motion from her eyes. She turned and walked away. The man glanced after her then looked at Jem. He nodded and went after Cami. Jem looked at Chad.

His eyes were passionate as he leaned down and kissed her again. "I have my gift."

"What do you want? I have a gift for you at my house." Jem felt horrible she had ruined people's Christmas.

Chad climbed into bed with her, careful not to jostle her very much.

She tucked herself against him, allowing his strength to flow over her. There was still the mystery of what happened to her, but she wouldn't face it alone. No more would she try to face things on her own. Chad was with her and she was determined to keep it that way.

His lips pressed against her temple as the beating of his heart soothed her soul. "You, Jem, you are my Christmas wish," he vowed in a low silvery voice.

Dear Reader,

We hoped you enjoyed the continuation of Jem and Chad's story in *Wanted: A Christmas Wish*.

As another gift of appreciation to our readers; Aliyah Burke, McKenna Jeffries, and Taige Crenshaw are joining forces to bring you a site for you, our loyal readers.

This new site will launch January 2008. *Satin Notes* is the name and there we will be continuing the stories of the people in the fictional towns of Savoy Valley and Trescott Cove. Each week a new section of a story will be posted giving you a total of six new stories each year, alternating between Trescott Cove and Savoy Valley.

Let us introduce you to Trescott Cove and Savoy Valley.



Welcome to Trescott Cove! Here you will find all the conveniences of a larger city but not lose out on the picturesque quality of a smaller, more rustic setting. Meet people with a story to tell of love and sometimes heartache. Come in, sit down, and get to know the dynamic people that make up our wonderful town...
Trescott Cove.



Welcome to Savoy Valley! Our town has many residents and they are more than meets the eye. We're a close knit community with scenic views and lots of places to explore. Meet unique beings and people with stories to tell. But be careful Savoy has some special residents and only those who are accepting get to know the real Savoy. There is love, adventure and secrets to be revealed. Come visit and get ready for an adventure with the residents that inhabit our town...

Take a journey to Savoy Valley.

* * * * *

Our first story features the feisty Camilla Maxwell and the commanding Robert Chadwick Jr.

Wanted: A Christmas Wish

Thank you again for such wonderful loyalty and support over the years. We hope you love and enjoy the many people in these towns and follow them as they experience their adventures.

Look out for the launch of Satin Notes in January 2008
~ <http://www.satinnotes.com>.

Aliyah, McKenna, and Taige have already contracted books and will also on occasion be writing more novels based in the towns of Trescott Cove and Savoy Valley for publication with various publishers.

~You have our eternal gratitude,
Aliyah, McKenna, and Taige