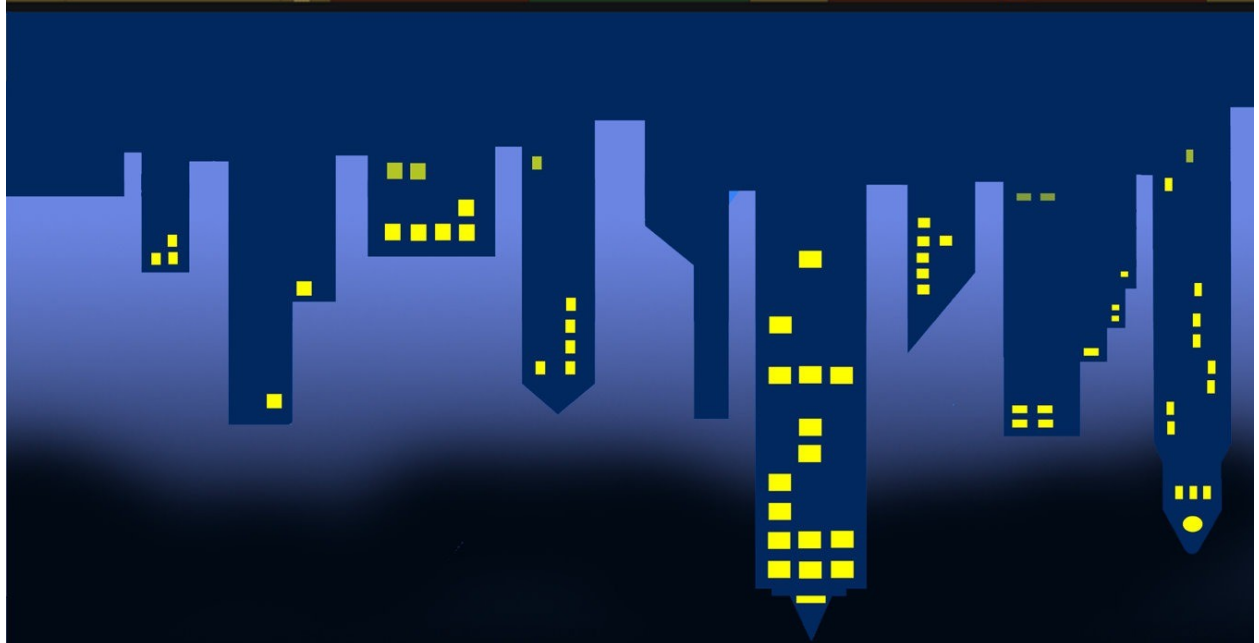


BREAKING *Jaie*



S. Renée Bess

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by

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Dedication

For my loving partner, Vivian. What a gift you were for your students. What a gift you are for me.

For every LGBTQ student that I was privileged to teach. I hope that you felt wrapped in a blanket of safety and pride whenever you stepped into my classroom.

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Chapter One

THERE I WAS again, on my way to the Café Pronto, chasing my coffee demon. It seemed as if I was always thirsty for a good cup of designer caffeine and always hungry for a million other things in life, like the meal I left unfinished, the house I didn't live in, the friend I missed talking to, the special woman I'd failed to welcome into my life. Sometimes, I felt that hunger roiling in my gut, like a bad painful thing. Other times, I appreciated the longing. It seemed that every time I grasped what I'd been reaching for, I let it go. Reaching became more important than getting and holding on. In my close-to-the-bone honest moments, I was forced to admit that letting go wasn't always the best thing to do, especially when I was reaching for "someone."

The aroma of the roasted coffee beans fueled my thirst as I shoe-horned my car into a tight parking space around the corner from my destination. The Café Pronto, lodged between a somber looking greeting card shop and a frantically bright homage-to-neon toy store, was in the middle of a block of Tudor-styled brick, mortar, and oak-beamed buildings. A traffic circle, brimming with flowers, formed a turnabout at one end of the street, and a signal light delineated the other end. This isle of commercial life, not far from Allerton University, had an air of constant activity, moderately paced and controlled, but busy nonetheless.

As this unusually warm April Saturday afternoon morphed into evening, I had only two things on my mind: drinking a large cup of mocha cappuccino and writing the rough draft of my essay for the Adamson Prize application. Spending a weekend evening alone was not something I did very often. However, I needed to attend to this application business now.

It was so important that I didn't even call Rasheeda to see if she wanted to join me here for coffee. A friend since our high school days, Rasheeda could read my highs and lows as if I were a thermometer and I knew my way around her moods like a race car driver on the last lap of the

Indy 500. Rah' and I have been hanging together a lot these days, now that she and her lover, Sandi, are on the outs.

The barrista, jaws inflated by a puff of worry as he scanned the growing crowd of caffeine lovers, handed me my order. My jumbo cup of coffee and I eased our way past the snaking line of customers and out to the Café Pronto's front patio, where I spotted an empty table large enough to hold my laptop and all of my papers. The application wasn't due for another three weeks, but I wanted to submit mine way before the deadline. I intended to make a strong and lasting impression on the panel of professors who were going to select the winner.

And I intended to be that winner. There was no doubt about that. I was smart enough to win the grant. More importantly, I was clever enough to get it. If there was one thing I'd learned in these twenty-eight years of mine, it was that you had to be clever or damn cute or both to get anywhere. Your IQ wasn't even a factor a lot of the time. It was who you knew, who you could screw, and what you knew about that person.

I had done all of my homework for this competition because I wanted to win it. No, I needed to win it in order to finish my dissertation and continue my comfortable lifestyle without the fitful starts and stops that having a job would cause. I could get a teaching position at the university in a heartbeat. That would mean teaching two freshman remedial writing classes, and I had neither the time nor the patience for that.

Grad teaching assistants are paid shitty salaries.

They have to teach the most boring introductory crap to the youngest students. In my case, I figured I'd get stuck with presenting the mechanics of writing to kids who'd rather be playing video games and listening to music on their iPods.

In addition to all of that, I'd had my fill of the teaching profession a couple of years ago when I had a job in a city high school. It wasn't the workload that I minded. It was the angry, miserable attitudes that reminded me of so many people whom I'd known all of my life, like my mother and some of my former friends. I kept tangling with folks who didn't see that there was a connection between persistent ignorance and the boot of poverty that continued grinding away on their necks. Education had been my way out, not theirs, no matter how much I wanted to show them the light. So I fast-tracked it out of teaching before I developed dependent roots wrapped around the salary and health care benefits.

So far, I'd been able to stay afloat financially with the money I'd saved from that job. Earning a doctorate had been my goal for a long time. So I knew enough to squirrel away as much spare cash as I could. And there was always my part of the unlawful death suit settlement awarded to my mom and me a few years after my brother's death. I would be forever grateful to that legal aid attorney who, recognizing that my mom would drink and drug all the money away, saw to it that we split the settlement fifty-fifty.

I knew that money wouldn't last forever, so I had to win the grant to pay my rent and keep food in my fridge and decent rags on my back while I did my research and my writing. The prize

would let me take my time finishing my dissertation and keep living well, also, without the pain of having to sit on the teacher's side of the desk for a while.

There was no way that I could be like my old acquaintance, Seneca Wilson. I hadn't seen her in ages and I wasn't about to look for her. I had read a flattering article about the sister in an education journal. The piece was all about how she'd zoomed up the career ladder from classroom teacher to school administrator to brilliant consultant and education reformer. Good for her! She found her path. Or at least she encountered enough people who believed in her brand of bullshit. Seneca could have been anyone's number one role model for marrying ambition to deceitful determination.

I savored a sip of my drink and turned on my computer, stealing a moment to look around the crowded patio area. The sidewalk didn't hold a lot of tables, and every single spot was filled by couples or small groups of friends sending laughter into the crowd, or intimating barely concealed desire to their table mate. I was used to seeing solitary coffee imbibers here, typing on their keyboards while their drinks got cold. Not this evening, though. Nobody was here alone. No one but me.

It was still early, too early for the cruisers and profilers to be out walking or driving by. That was fine with me. I didn't need to be distracted this particular evening. And God knows some of the women in this university area were bona fide distractions, sure enough! They were all colors, all sizes, all different personalities. Just looking at them as they walked by was enough to make my heart beat faster, and my mind try to find the right words to get their attention.

I took another mouthful of my espresso, chocolate, and cream beverage, enjoying the taste of the warm sweetness as it coursed over my tongue. At the same time, I entertained my nostrils by inhaling the spicy fragrance of lemongrass spiked with coriander that wafted from the Thai restaurant directly across the street from where I sat. For a moment, I questioned if I should have gone there for some soup and coffee, instead of the cappuccino here. The Asian restaurant might have been less crowded, quieter. It might have been easier for me to get some of my work done over there. But then I remembered that Thai coffee is way too sweet for me. And I wouldn't have been able to sit outside clocking the few distractions that did try to tempt me. I settled in to do some writing when my cell phone rang its way into my train of thought.

"Speak." I believed in an economy of words.

A voice sweeter than pralines and laced ever so slightly with a Spanish accent answered my command to talk. "Hey. Does that coffee taste good?"

"Not as good as you do, if you're who I think you are."

"Well, I could be."

I began to look around for the body that belonged to that voice. "Where are you?"

"Across the street with some friends at the Bangkok Lotus Restaurant. I'm sitting by the window, looking at you and wondering what it would be like to lick that coffee from your lips."

This phone call was from Isola Valdez, a major distraction. I'd been trying to date her for over a month now, but she kept telling me that she was seriously involved with someone else. Believe me, there have been plenty of times in the past when I haven't let that stop me from trying to get with a woman I want. Over time, though, I've learned to rein in my desires and wait until a woman wants me. So, weeks ago when Isola explained why we couldn't go out, I abided by her wishes and I pulled back, wishing silently that I'd been the one to get next to her first.

"Why don't you finish your meal and then come over here to share my cappuccino?" If she was going to be bold enough to tell me she'd like to lick my mouth, I was going to be bold enough to invite her to do it.

"I have finished my meal. My friends and I were thinking about what we could do for dessert."

I closed the Adamson Prize application booklet. As important as it was, it would have to wait. "I don't mean to ignore your friends, but I know who you could do for dessert."

"Who I could do?"

"Did I say that? I meant to say what you could do for dessert." I paused for just a second. "Hey, Isola, I thought you were seeing someone pretty much exclusively. At least that's the impression you gave me."

It was apparent that I was going to forego writing my essay tonight. I wanted to know how far this distraction could go.

"My situation has changed."

What was once a red light was now green. "So what about walking your fine self across the street to have some coffee with me?"

"Yeah, I could do that. Or I could get in my car and go home. I know I can get some coffee and dessert there."

I was enjoying this little verbal duel. "I can understand why you might want to go home. In fact, I could get into my car also." I waited a second to hear her reaction. None came through the phone. "Are you still there, Isola?"

"I'm looking right at you as I'm leaving the restaurant. Do you remember where I live?" "Your address is etched in my memory. I'll find you." "See you in a few." Isola breathed a good-bye into her telephone.

"You can count on it."

I capped my drink, collected my papers and closed my computer. Fairly sprinting to my car, I tried to remember the first time that I'd seen Isola on campus. I knew that I had run into her in the English Department Office enough times for me to be sure that I wanted to get to know her. When she invited me and some other doc students in the department to a party, I had arrived at her place with bells on. I just figured that there were plenty of trips to that apartment in my future. That's how sure I was that she was interested in me.

That night, when I finally got her alone in a corner of her living room and invited her to go out to dinner or for a drink with me, she licked her lower lip, pouted and said, "Sorry, I can't right now. Bad timing. I'm involved with someone, and it's one of those significant relationships."

I was too late, shit out of luck. I felt as embarrassed as hell, and I backed off right away.

This evening though, there was no mistaking her serious flirtation with me. Maybe my timing had improved. Not wanting to appear too eager, I drove slowly to her off-campus apartment, which was located in a densely populated neighborhood filled with working-class people and university students. Then, I waited a full five minutes after I parked my car as close to her building as the crowded streets permitted. She must have assumed it was me at the entranceway, because without asking who was there, she rang the buzzer that unlocked the door to the lobby. Holding onto my half-empty cup of cold cappuccino, I walked down the narrow, carpeted hallway toward Isola's apartment and knocked twice.

"Isola? It's me."

She opened the door, letting the sounds of ConFunk-Shun's "Love's Train," an oldie but goody, escape from her CD player and rush into the hallway. The song's guitar strings snared me, pulling me over the threshold.

Isola smiled seductively. "Hey, it's good to see you at close range. Would you like to come in?"

'Hell yes' is what I wanted to say to her Eva Mendes-like self. But I was smoother than that. "For a little while."

Sometimes I've seen Isola wear her thick hair pulled back and twisted in a long braid. Tonight she wore it flowing wildly, contradicting her cool and calm demeanor. Her sensuous burgundy red mouth invited me to get lost in its magnetic draw.

I gave her a straight girl's hug, very little real body contact, but enough to smell the floral muskiness of her perfume. I stepped back and took a long look at her while she took her hazel eyes on a tour of my frame, stopping for a second to focus on my mouth.

"I see that you still have that coffee. Want me to heat it up for you?"

That was more than I could stand. "You just did, baby."

I removed the top of the cup and purposely touched the liquid to my bottom lip, just enough to let a drop flow down to my chin. Right on cue, Isola stepped closer to me, put her hand at the back of my head and licked the dripping liquid from my face. She took the cup from me and put it on a nearby table.

I lowered my mouth so that I could capture her tongue and savor it. Like a perfectly orchestrated song, we continued to kiss deeply and to get more and more lost in each other.

Isola had her back against the closed door. I grasped both of her hands and raised her arms above her head as I moved my lips from her mouth to her throat and then to the space right above her breasts. She began to moan softly. I released her hands and placed mine on the sides of her breasts, all the time kissing her, biting her gently through her shirt. I passed over the waistband of her slacks and dared to run my hand along the closed zipper and then the seam of her pants. She pronounced my name and said that we should go to her bedroom. Very slowly and gradually, I brought my hands back up to her face, kissed her wonderful lips again and looked deeply into those smoldering eyes that telegraphed their hunger for only one thing.

Still promising passion with my touch, I moved closer to her ear and whispered, "I'm sorry, baby. I can't right now. Bad timing."

I retrieved my coffee cup from the table and maneuvered her away from the door, so I could step past her and leave the apartment. I'm pretty sure that I heard her anger-filled Spanish voice in my wake, calling me everything except my real name.

My name, by the way, is Jaie Baxter. Why spell my name with an "e" tacked on to the end of it, when it's pronounced as if it were J-a-y? My mother has the answer to that question and to other ones that I've been asking her on and off during the past twenty-eight years.

I'm a Ph.D. candidate at Allerton University. When I'm not researching the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, I'm busy with my writing. I've been dealing with words all my life, creating a little poetry and a lot of fiction. I intend to make writing my career after I earn my degree. And one day I'm going to write a memorable novel about the life and loves of a Black lesbian character. I have the smarts, the talent, and all the background information that I need.

Now, however, I'm concentrating on winning the Adamson Prize. And I know that I'll win it, because I know who's going to make the important decisions. All I have to do is get to know her a little better. That won't be difficult. Hell, I've done much harder things in my life than that.

Chapter Two

BEFORE SLIPPING SOUNDLESSLY into the swimming pool, Terez Overton gathered the unruly sections of her hair into one unified fistful, corralling the renegade strands within the confines of a rubber band. She entered the water and felt its coldness wash over the warmth of her golden tan skin and then recede, leaving goose bumps in its wake. By the time Terez swam half a lap, the water was her lover, welcoming her strokes and caressing her body tenderly. The young black woman loved the way the water let her exercise effortlessly, the way it supported her completely and unconditionally.

The early spring weather in this part of Pennsylvania could be warm one day and cool and damp the next, similar to the fickle weather on Cape Cod, where Terez had lived and worked for a few years before her arrival in Allerton this past winter. It was today's summer threatening warmth that sent her to the university's Pierce Athletic Complex to swim and clear her head after days and nights filled with single-minded research and essay writing. The young woman sought the physical release that only the water could promise.

Terez reached one end of the pool before reversing her body's momentum in one easy fluid motion. She turned and pushed off with her feet, gliding like a hot knife through butter toward the opposite end of the swim tank. Automatically she synchronized her legs' slicing movement with her arms, reaching forward then pulling back. She was aware of the water jets streaming past her ears, barely creasing the sides of her face. Once Terez found a steady comfortable rhythm, her body took over, creating a beautiful turbulence.

Her thoughts floated freely, wandering to the tasks ahead of her; to her chores at her apartment, to the incomplete grant application napping on her desk, to her family and how far away from home she was here in this Pennsylvania college town just outside of Philadelphia. She thought about her father, what he had said to her when she told him about her plans.

"So...going South, are you?"

"Not exactly, Dad. Pennsylvania is north of the Mason-Dixon Line."

"Just barely, honey."

"Well, I could have gone to Atlanta to work for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution instead of to the Philadelphia area for grad school."

"Okay, okay. I'll count my blessings. And you are my number one blessing."

"Thanks, Dad."

Terez smiled, her mouth alternately submerging under water and then breaking the surface, as she thought that today's gentle warm breeze, while comforting, didn't hold a candle to the caring support her dad offered her when she let him. These days, Terez held her dad in a state of cautious concern. She worried about his health and his loneliness. Her brothers, Ronnie and Lionel, lived close to him. But Terez doubted that either of them was sensitive enough to know when their dad needed a phone call or a short visit or an offer to go out for a meal.

"Oh, excuse me!" A woman, head covered by a red bathing cap, stopped mid-stroke to speak to Terez. "I didn't think I was that close to you."

"Don't worry about it. I might have drifted into your lane. Sorry." Terez bobbed around to see exactly how close she was to the lane marker.

"No problem." The other swimmer smiled and tilted her head slightly toward Terez. "You're Terez Overton, right?"

"Yes." Terez hoped she'd been able to conceal not knowing the other woman's name.

"You don't remember me, do you? I'm Jennifer Renfrew, from the Admissions Office. I interviewed you last year when you applied to Allerton."

Terez treaded water and nodded. "Oh, of course. I remember now. How are you?" She struggled to piece together the mosaic of a vaguely uncomfortable memory involving this woman who floated in front of her. Try as she might, she couldn't match her uneasy feelings to anything concrete. She pushed the water in front of her, moving more toward her lane and prepared to resume swimming laps.

The red-capped woman propelled herself closer to Terez. "I'm fine, thanks. How are you getting along here?"

"Pretty well. Very busy. Sorry again that I collided with you. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"Don't worry about it. We all get preoccupied from time to time. No harm done."

"You're right. Well...nice seeing you again." Terez picked up her stroke and tried to remember why she felt so odd about seeing Jennifer Renfrew again.

After another few laps she maneuvered her way to the end of the lane and hoisted herself out of the pool and into her towel. Eager to rinse the odor of chlorine from her body, she padded, water streaming down her well-formed legs, in the direction of the dressing room and the showers.

She opened the heavy gray door that led to the locker area and instinctively looked down at the tan and gray speckled floor tile. The last thing that she wanted to do was to make eye contact with any of the half-dressed women in the changing room. Terez knew how stupid the stereotypes about gays and lesbians in locker rooms were, and she wasn't willing to risk a single look of suspicion or fear from anyone, not even from the most ignorant people.

Terez went directly to her locker to pick up her gym bag with her clothes and her shower supplies. Finding a vacant stall at the end of the row, she adjusted the water temperature and stepped under the cascading torrent. She could hear muted voices gathering volume as two other women approached the bathing area.

"Well, I can't say that she ever tried to hit on me, and I've been in her company several times."

"That's because you're not butch enough to appeal to her, babe. Face it, you're not her type."

"And just how do you know all of this? She sure doesn't seem like she's gay."

"Oh, I don't know...maybe because during the few short weeks that I worked in her office, when I was interning, she kept telling me how good I looked in my clothes, what a good worker I was, yadda, yadda, yadda. Then one day she asked me to work late to help her finish a project. The entire time other people were there, she left her office door open. The minute everyone else left, she closed her office door and offered me a glass of wine."

"That's still a far cry from her hitting on you."

"Oh, that came next. She hit on me all right, after a half glass of wine. And believe me, I took advantage and hit right on back."

"What happened?"

"Hey, I'm a gentlewoman. I don't kiss and tell. Let's just say that I know where Ms. Renfrew's birthmark is. And, trust me, it's not where you can see it, not even when she's wearing a bathing suit."

"Damn, Nikki! I thought I heard that she once went with one of the English Department profs, a black woman."

"Yeah. I heard that, too. And someone told me that her last girlfriend was a city cop who got shot to death. She was as white as I am. So it looks like she goes for light and dark meat."

"You are so bad." The two female voices faded into banalities, swirling down the shower drains along with their shampoo and body gel.

Terez shut off the faucet in her stall as a memory flooded her consciousness. A year ago, without any provocation, Jennifer Renfrew had laced Terez's admissions interview with bold innuendo and mild flirtation. The Assistant Dean of Admissions suggested that Terez's interest in Allerton University may have been based on her knowledge about its gay tolerant atmosphere and the preponderance of lesbian students enrolled in both the undergrad and graduate programs.

Terez remembered being speechless and feeling trapped. She had wondered if Dean Renfrew's ability to figure out that she was gay had anything to do with her acceptance at Allerton. She hoped not, because she preferred getting into grad school on her academic merits and undergrad record alone. At the very least, Terez figured that Jennifer Renfrew barely skirted the propriety border by broaching the subject of sexuality with her. She wondered if the Assistant Dean always teased the possibility of sexual harassment accusations every time that she conducted an admissions interview with a female candidate.

Terez dried her body, shaking the excess water from her hair, along with the unpleasant memory of her experience with Jennifer Renfrew. Completely dressed and ready to meet the world, she hooked her arm through the handle of her gym bag and made her way toward the dressing room's exit. Once out in the cavernous open space of the athletic center, she walked past the expanse of floor to ceiling windows that separated her from an immense exercise studio. A sparse number of people of various ages, their backs facing her, were in the room working out on the different pieces of equipment. Orderly rows of the latest in fitness machinery stood at attention, waiting to be conscripted into active duty. Three giant television screens aimed CNN, ABC, and ESPN at the few ambitious souls who were working out.

Terez, a long time news junkie, paused long enough to read the crawl at the bottom of the CNN monitor. She squinted, trying to keep up with all the words as they streamed by in the distance. Satisfied that she'd read the gist of the headlines, she let her eyes drift lower until they paused on the form of a female exerciser jogging in place on a treadmill. The woman's navy blue running shorts wore a damp crescent that began at her waistband and continued downward toward her hips. Her shirt boasted a wet streak in the crease between her shoulder blades. Terez could see that the back of the woman's copper-brown neck was a track leading beads of sweat from her hairline down to the collar of her shirt. The outline of the runner's sports bra was a dry island separating the upper part of her wet shirt from the lower section. The woman's legs and lower thighs were muscular and strong, alternately tensing and relaxing. Their damp glistening power promised a few more miles yet.

Terez stared at the woman for a few seconds longer. *Nice form, she thought. I've seen her before here and there on campus, always at a distance. Nice body. Handsome face. Maybe a professor. Too old to be an undergrad. Or at least a typical undergrad.*

Terez thought about the steam-covered conversation she'd just overheard a few minutes before. *The kind of woman that Jennifer Renfrew would probably hit on.*

Then, her thoughts journeyed inward. *The kind of woman I might enjoy talking or listening to.*

Chapter Three

JENNIFER RENFREW SHOOK her head and sighed. There, in the midst of her spacious office, atop her French Provincial cherry desk, sat the ever growing stack of Adamson Prize application portfolios that were banded together and labeled with her name and title, Assistant Dean of Graduate Admissions. Jennifer wondered how Charlene Gray had ever succeeded in talking her into judging the creative nonfiction essays for the grant. How was she to know who deserved to win the prize? After all, she was neither a writer nor a writing instructor. Jennifer supposed that she'd let Charlene convince her to be on the assessment panel because the writing competition was named in honor of her deceased partner, Patricia Adamson.

Pat hadn't been a writer, either. Far from it, she was a detective in the Philadelphia Police Department. After a spirit-breaking stint in the Special Victim's Unit, she had requested an assignment in an anti-violence project in a city public high school. Jennifer still remembered feeling confident that Pat would be safer in that school than she had been on the street investigating sexual assaults. Like most of the sheltered, naïve public, she had allowed herself to believe that a high school couldn't be all that dangerous. After all, there was a team of Allerton University professors teaching writing to some of the tenth graders in that school. And the university, in the forefront of a current trend, had established an advanced college experience program for the most gifted and talented students in the school.

How ironic that Pat, Philadelphia's second female police officer to die in the line of duty, was shot and killed with her own service revolver while on her way to stop a fight between two pupils in a third floor hallway.

For months after Pat's death, Jennifer hadn't been able to drive anywhere near Jefferson High School whenever she was in the city. While she continued to work in the Undergraduate Admissions Office, she divorced herself from any applications that arrived from Jefferson. She knew that she'd want to jettison those forms right into the shredder, and she didn't want to be cruel and unfair, even though some unnamed faceless student had delivered the most unfair cruelty to her. Even now, ten years after Pat's murder, Jennifer had to listen repeatedly to her friends' counsel before being convinced that she was doing the right thing in judging these essays. Selecting a talented grad student with a gift for writing and to reward that person with a large monetary prize and the prestige that went along with the grant, was a fitting way to honor Pat's memory.

Jennifer moved the stack of applications to the center of her cluttered desk, recalling that the Jefferson High writing project team members had begun the Adamson Prize contest eight years ago. Originally, the winner had to be a former Jefferson student who was enrolled in Allerton's Graduate School of Arts and Letters. Then, as fewer and fewer students from Jefferson applied for admission to either the undergraduate or graduate program, the university expanded the grant's eligibility parameters. Knowing that she wouldn't have to deal with many essays written by former Jefferson students persuaded Jennifer to say 'yes' when Charlene asked her for the umpteenth time to participate in the judging.

The fact that Charlene Gray was very charming in an academic butch kind of way helped also, although Jennifer considered herself pretty much immune to all except a chosen few women's charms, be they butch or femme. Even then, it wasn't her immunity that failed her. It was her persistent need to have physical contact with a woman. Recently, the Assistant Dean had begun allowing herself to respond to a young woman whose perseverance could not be ignored.

Jennifer reached for the first application at the top of the pile. *Might as well get started*, she thought to herself.

She read the applicant's essay and filled out the rating sheet, being careful to record the identification number that was written on the cover. She was about to pick up the second application when her phone rang.

"Jennifer Renfrew, Assistant Dean of Admissions."

"Hey, Jennifer. How are you today?"

"I'm fine." She recognized the speaker's voice right away.

"Yeah, you are, you know."

Jennifer felt her face grow warm. She'd always considered herself too worldly wise to be flattered by this kind of repartee. Jaie Baxter's flattery, however, had gotten her attention on more than one occasion. "Thank you. And how are you?"

"I'm all right. Just wondering if I could see you sometime soon, maybe tonight. We could go out for a drink."

"I don't know, Jaie. I've got a lot of work to do, a lot of reading." Jennifer looked at the hill of paperwork in front of her. As much as she would enjoy seeing Jaie, she knew that she needed to whittle down that pile of writing sooner rather than later.

"Well, how about lunch three days from now, on Thursday?"

"That sounds nice. Want to meet somewhere?" Some part of Jennifer was happy that Jaie was so determined to go out with her.

"Do you like The Copper Kettle?"

Jennifer pictured the off-campus restaurant with its intimate booths and subdued lighting. It would be a perfect place to have lunch with this Ms. Baxter.

"Sure. I can be there at twelve-thirty."

"Okay. It's a date. See you then."

Jennifer hung up the phone and then went to the outer office. She made a beeline for the large table in the corner that held all sorts of snacks and beverage ingredients. As she poured hot water into her cup and grabbed a new tea bag, she realized that the phone call had both aroused and bothered her.

Aroused her, because Jaie Baxter was simply one of the sexiest young women she'd ever seen. Jennifer drew a mental image of Jaie's full five-feet eight-inches of subtly aggressive mannerisms, her dark, short, curly hair, and her amber eyes that were perpetually illuminated by a magnificent smile. Jaie had a way of moving that fascinated Jennifer. It was slightly athletic, fluid, and confident. Her skin was the same color as the full-bodied tea tinged with cream that Jennifer was about to sip.

As pleased as she was to receive Jaie's call, Jennifer felt disquieted by it also, because she was left with too many unanswered questions. Why, with all of the available young gay women on campus, had Jaie sought her out? Why, all of a sudden and out of the blue, had Jaie launched a campaign to get to know her? When Jennifer asked Jaie these two questions, the grad student explained that she'd been watching Jennifer from afar for some time and that it only seemed like a sudden move on her part. It really wasn't. Jennifer's vanity accepted Jaie's explanations.

One other issue that plagued Jennifer was the ethics of dating a student, albeit a twenty-eight-year-old Ph.D. candidate. True, Jennifer was not a teacher at the university. She was an official. And the rational part of her suspected that dating a student, no matter how old she might be, wasn't the right thing to do. Jennifer knew that she couldn't count on her well-cared-for appearance to hide their age difference. Even though she spent hours each week conditioning her body by swimming laps at the Pierce Center pool, the fact that she was much older than Jaie was obvious to anyone who looked at the two of them together.

When Jaie Baxter first started visiting the Admissions Office, Jennifer was sure that she was there to see their clerical assistant, a pretty young work study student who wore only enough clothing to maintain employment and cause the older folks in the office to wonder exactly where some of her tattoos ended. Then, Jennifer noticed that Jaie always had a pretext, most of the time legitimate and believable, to see and speak to her. By her fifth sojourn to the Admissions Office, Jaie made it clear that she wanted more than advice about the graduate programs for a "friend." She knocked lightly on Jennifer's door, excused herself, chatted about things in general for a few minutes, and then boldly asked the Assistant Dean if she'd like to go out some time. If not, could she at least have her home phone number? Surprised and knocked off balance by Jaie's bravura, Jennifer had written her number on a slip of paper and handed it to the handsome student. Jaie hadn't hesitated to call Jennifer at home and at her office several times since then.

The phone rang anew, abruptly interrupting Jennifer's mental wandering. "Jennifer Renfrew, Assistant Dean of Admissions."

"Jen? It's Charlene. How's it going?"

"Oh, hi, Charlene. I'm fine, but it's going slowly, I'm afraid." Jennifer added this last phrase reluctantly. Now that she'd taken on the responsibility of judging the submission essays, she didn't want to disappoint Charlene.

"Don't worry about that, honey. You have plenty of time. How many essays have you evaluated so far?"

Jennifer sighed. "Only one."

"Oh, boy." Charlene couldn't suppress a groan. "I was going to come pick up the ones that you've finished and pass them on to the next reader."

"I'm sorry, Charlene. I had some work backed up here that I needed to clean up first, and it's put me behind schedule." Jennifer tapped the top of the pile of paperwork in front of her. "Are you sure you really want me to do this?"

Charlene could hear the strain and self-blame in her friend's voice. "All of us on the committee are sure that we want you to do this, Jennifer. That's why we're double-weighting your evaluation scores." Charlene paused, feeling like she needed to give some encouragement to her colleague. "Take your time. If we have to delay the final decision, we can do that."

"No, that won't be necessary. I'll get moving on this." Jennifer cleared her throat nervously before continuing. "In fact, I'll have you know that I turned down a date tonight so that I could read more essays."

"Well, well. I'm sorry that you had to do that. But I am glad to hear that you're seeing someone." Charlene spoke with sincerity. She felt relieved to learn that finally, Jennifer had granted herself permission to date. "Anyone I know?"

"Probably not. She's someone that I met here in the office." Jennifer smiled to herself, preferring to tell as little information as possible about Jaie. "I will say that I'm enjoying all of the attention and that she's very attractive."

"That sounds like a good start, Jen. I know that it's been hard for you to find someone special." After an awkward pause, Charlene continued. "Listen. Why don't I come by tomorrow morning and pick up whatever you've had a chance to read by then? And I'll bring some new submissions with me, if that's okay."

"Sure! Keep them coming." Reassured by Jennifer's buoyant tone, Charlene ended their conversation. "See you tomorrow."

"Okay. 'Bye." Jennifer hung up the phone and then stretched her long arms above her head. She slid the next essay from the top of the pile to a space right in front of her, glanced at the cover sheet and knew instantly that she'd rather spend this time planning which outfit to wear for Thursday's lunch date with Jaie Baxter.

Chapter Four

LEANING IN CLOSE to her computer screen, Terez flicked on the desk lamp and nodded her approval as she proofread what she had just typed in the fields of the grant application. She then switched to the Internet to check her e-mail. Four new messages clicked their arrival in the few minutes she'd spent typing her name, address, telephone number, and educational background

data on the application. A quick glance at the sender and subject lines was all that it took for Terez to decide which e-mail to open first.

The request from the English Department was short and to the point. Would she be interested in teaching two sections of freshman English during the fall semester? Terez smiled broadly at the computer screen.

"Oh, yes. I'm there." She spoke to absolutely no one in her apartment, as she composed her short response and clicked the "send" button. "Just let me know when I can pick up the course guide and the syllabus."

Terez reached down to turn on the printer as she read the next message, a memo from the Registrar's Office confirming the title and number of the course that she had registered to take during the summer semester. She scooped up the paper the second the printer spit it out, held it to the side to make sure that the ink was dry and placed it in an appropriate envelope in the file cabinet next to her desk. Frowning slightly, she remembered hearing a rumor that the course, *Research Design*, was difficult. She gritted her teeth just thinking about all of the statistics-related material that awaited her.

The third e-mail was a personal one from a new acquaintance, Sherry Yancey. Reading its content and shaking her head almost imperceptibly, Terez couldn't ignore the run-on sentence and the typos. She did credit Sherry for expressing herself in a straightforward, if not simplistic way. Terez smiled skeptically at the praise that Sherry heaped upon her. Then, her half-hearted smile changed to an expression of uneasiness when she remembered the loneliness that had compelled her to give her e-mail address to this woman: her sense of isolation, after four and a half months at Allerton University, where she was acquainted with only a few other graduate students, some professors and her advisor. It had become the kind of aloneness that led her to react to a stranger's offer of companionship with her emotions and not with her intellect. The second that Terez acknowledged Sherry's smile with one of her own, she knew that she had fallen into that trap that is often baited with the boredom of spending too much time in solitude.

An e-mail later, Terez had to ask herself if she really thought that she could form a romantic bond with a thirty-year-old woman who used phrases like, "You were bangin' in those slacks" or "I don't mean to sweat you, but how about going out with me sometime soon?"

As she wrote her brief reply, "Thanks for your message. Yes, we'll have to get together soon," Terez silently vowed that she would put being alone in its proper perspective before she paid another visit to the Café Pronto. There was no need to pay such a high and lasting price to drink a cup of coffee with an outgoing newcomer, no matter how flavorful the brew was.

In replaying their Saturday morning café conversation, Terez had an "aha moment." Sherry Yancey had tapped successfully into one of Terez's needs, her desire to be thought of as "one of the homegirls," instead of who she really was: an upper-middle-class, Boston prep school, Seven Sister college-educated black woman, brought up in comfortable and secure surroundings.

This wasn't the first time that Terez's desire for sorority resulted in her opening herself up to romantic overtures from someone with whom she was out of sync. Terez knew that she could enjoy an occasional date with Sherry. However, in all fairness to both of them, a few dates would be the extent of their relationship. So Terez would manage her bond with the young woman the same way that she always managed such friendships--by gradually increasing the distance between them before Sherry realized how different they were and before either of them could be hurt by those differences. Terez had learned to do this with the skill of a proficient anesthesiologist, without pain or guilt. She knew that her upper-middle-class background was neither a crime nor her fault. It was what it was. And she'd left the discomfort of failing to find common ground with every lesbian soul sister who flirted with her where it belonged, far behind her.

With one e-mail left to read, Terez stood up, stretched her five-foot-five compactly built frame and went into the next room to turn the burner on under the kettle. She paced in front of the stove, waiting for the water to boil. Her modest one bedroom apartment was small, and the kitchen was much too narrow to contain her eagerness to read the latest epistle from her father. After her mother passed away three years ago, her dad started writing to Terez often, sometimes two or more times a week. His messages were usually short and informative, wondering how she was and letting her know that he was okay living by himself in the house that had once been the haven for five people.

Whenever Terez read his e-mails, she pictured her dad, Hiram Overton, sitting at his huge oak desk in the third floor study of their Victorian house in the Ashmont section of Boston. She imagined the retired corporate attorney stroking his gray mustache as he looked out of the window and pondered the city's skyline in the distance. She could hear his long slender fingers hitting the keyboard relentlessly as he wrote his questions about her courses, and about her progress with her dissertation proposal.

Terez heard those same lean fingers slow their pace and tap the keys haltingly, in search of some way to ask her about her personal life. He wanted to know what was going on, without her telling him too many details. Terez and her father had reached a kind of peaceful coexistence as far as her sexuality was concerned. She had assured him on more than one occasion that her being a lesbian did not preclude his becoming a grandfather, that she was as good a judge of character as he, and she wasn't about to make any foolish choices.

She sent her breath across the top of the mug of tea and took a few tentative sips, enough to be able to carry the cup back to her desk in the small den without spilling any of the liquid. Still connected to the Internet, she clicked on the icon to retrieve her father's missive.

It was one of his medium-length communiqués. He hoped that her apartment was air conditioned and if not, to please buy one or two window units, he would send her a check for them. He had decided to hire someone to mow the lawn this spring and summer, trim the shrubs and do the mulching, especially since he planned on spending much of the warmer seasons at their place on Cape Cod. He would be glad to get away because the widowed neighbor, Mrs. Marshall, was getting on his nerves, always coming by with muffins or cookies and dropping hints about some play or concert she'd love to go to if only she had someone to accompany her. And was Terez

serious about going to Denmark to do her research about the South American writer? Was she going to travel alone? Would it be safe? He'd help out financially if she needed it. And as always, he loved her very much. Oh and one more thing. Be careful with strangers. There were a lot of crazy people out there.

Terez printed the message and propped it against the base of her desk lamp. That way, she would remember to respond to each of his comments. Before she could begin writing to him, she saw that a fifth message had arrived, something from the English Department titled "Urgent." She moved the cursor over to "open" and read a reminder that all applications for the Patricia Adamson Prize were due in two weeks. The due date was firm. As much as she needed to get to work on the piece of writing she'd planned on doing for the application, she decided to take all the time that was necessary to write a response to her dad.

Chapter Five

COME ON, JAIE. You've wasted enough time. Okay, it's true. I have wasted too much time. I have to nail the rough copy of this essay before this day ends, and I'm here in the right place to do it, in the university chapel. It's so quiet and peaceful in here. The old wooden pews may be hard, but they exude familiarity. The messages that are etched on their backs remind me of the graffiti that was scratched into the worn out wooden tables of my childhood library in North Philly.

There's enough sunlight streaming in through this large window, so seeing my notebook isn't a problem. And at this time of the year, the light will be good for at least a couple more hours. Most importantly, it is completely still. There are no distractions. Maybe a couple of folks coming in to sit and meditate. They won't disturb me. There's no chance that Isola Valdez will call and say she's watching me from across the street. Hell no! Not after the way I left her the other night. She's probably trashed my phone number. Just to make sure, I'll turn off my cell. Now what's that question I have to answer?

"What factors, people, or circumstances in your personal history have motivated you to pursue a career in writing?"

Where in the world should I begin? With my brother Kashif? No, definitely not. My writing professors here at Allerton? No. I have to go back further than that. Maybe some of the teachers at Jefferson High. Maybe my ninth grade English teacher at Academic Prep. You could say that some of those folks motivated me in reverse, made me want to write my ass off because they couldn't or wouldn't protect my brain from atrophy. If I'm going down this road, then I should probably begin at the beginning, with the one person who most motivated me to use writing to get my mind, body, and skills out of the house and out of the hell-hole neighborhood where I grew up-- my mother, Yvonne Baxter. That's exactly where I'll begin.

I REACHED DOWN and smoothed out the letter. I could see my name on the second line, in the sentence that started with the word "Congratulations." I'd been waiting for that piece of paper for three weeks, and when I got home from school that day, there it was, on the floor right under the front door mail slot. My hands, suddenly slick with sweat, tore off one side of the envelope, and I hissed out a quick prayer as I unfolded the one page communication. I'd been accepted at Academic Prep High School for Girls!

"I said no way in hell you're goin' there! You're goin' to Jefferson High, just like every other kid in this neighborhood." The veins in my mother's thick nutmeg-brown neck stood out. She punctuated each word by jutting her chin forward. "You're not special! You're no better than anyone else!"

"That's not fair. My grades are good and so are my test scores. That's why I got accepted at Prep." I watched my mother's tight, mean burnished brown hands close into fists. I'd seen her hands do that so many times before, weaving and bobbing through the arguments she'd had with my father. And she'd won every last one of those fights, except the last one, when he just got fed up with his losing and her drinking.

He left her and my brother and me after that one. I guess he knew he couldn't defeat the drinker in her. His worn-out love couldn't hold a candle to the influence of my grandfather's DNA. There was no way he could ever sweet talk her away from the genes for meanness and addiction that she'd inherited from her father. The fists that I was looking at today started furling a long time ago, before Kashif and I were born, before my mother ever met my father.

I knew there was a good possibility that I'd lose today's fight with my mom and end up doing what she wanted, going to Jefferson, my neighborhood high school. But I was good for another round, ready to try another tactic. "I don't know why you're holding me back. I want to make something out of myself. The kids who go to Jefferson are losers and you know it."

"They're not all losers! And at least the Jefferson girls ain't dykes!" Her eyes flashed, scorching my next riposte. There, she'd said it. Said the one thing that she knew would keep me out of Academic Prep and force me to go to Jefferson High.

"The girls at Prep aren't dykes!" I could feel a storm of tears gathering. I didn't know if I was going to cry because I wanted to go to Prep, and my mother wouldn't let me, or because I was scared that I was beginning to lose my long-fought battle to hide the secret of my sexuality from her.

"There's plenty of dykes in that school. Your little friend Dana's mother told me. And she would know, 'cause she used to work on the custodial staff up there. She saw a lot of things people don't even know about. She warned me 'bout all those gay girls when Dana told her that you was applying to Prep."

I put the news about Dana on my back burner. I'd have to deal with her later, or at least remember not to tell her shit about my business in the future.

My mom put her hands on her solid wide hips. I recognized this victory posture. Undeterred, I had one final offensive to launch.

"Most of the teachers at Jefferson don't teach. They just draw their paychecks. They give you passing grades for just sitting in class. Or sometimes you can be absent a hundred times, and they still pass you. Kashif told me that. And he knows what he's talking about."

I stood on alert as my mom weighed the value of this information from her son, Kashif, for a split second. "I don't give a good goddam what Kashif said! You're not going to that school. Your ass is going to Jefferson High! Or, you can just skip high school all together, get a job, and help me keep food on the table. That's it! I'm not talkin' 'bout it no more."

I resisted the urge to suck in my teeth and used whatever energy I had left to pocket my acceptance letter, leave the kitchen battleground, and go outside to take a long walk. Ten blocks later, I found myself going into the local branch of the public library, my refuge from home. I sat down at my favorite table near the fiction section; the table whose edges were no longer defined angles, but rounded planks worn smooth from a lot of rusty elbows resting on them day after day and year after year.

I took another look at my acceptance letter, caressing the words that spoke of my potential and promised me a future. I examined the tear-off response section at the bottom and the school's address on the return envelope. Giving birth to an idea, quite deliberately I put a check next to the "Yes. I shall enroll in next September's ninth grade class." After a moment of carefully executing several practice drafts on the top part of the letter, I signed my mother's name on the appropriate line at the bottom of the return form. For good measure, beside her signature I wrote, "I'm so proud of my daughter."

I checked the time on the face of the old weathered clock on the wall above the Librarian's desk and saw that I'd been gone from the house and the argument for a good hour. So I got up and left the library, stopped in the Post Office where I bought a stamp, stuck it on the envelope and dropped the mail into the "outgoing" slot. I was going to attend Academic Prep High School, if it took every ounce of my smarts to get me there.

When I got back home, the tone of my mom's voice put me on notice the second the closing screen door pushed me into the living room. The argument was over, but she still had the fight going on. I guess she needed to flaunt what was left of her ever-eroding power.

She'd lost any say over my brother, Kashif, a long time ago. He was on his own, always running around with his petty-crime committing friends. The only time he came home these days was to get money or a change of clothes or to support me against some decision that our mom had made. She was always saying that she couldn't figure out why I admired Kashif so much. He wasn't anyone to admire. My head knew that. But my heart, where the little sister part of me lived, needed Kashif and admired him just because he was my older brother. Once, when she

was on my case about Kashif's not being a good role model for me, I reminded her that she'd lost my dad in the folds of an argument and that Kashif was gradually disappearing from her, too. She slapped me and my reminder into the next week.

"Where the hell you been, Jaie?"

"I went out to look for a part-time job." I wasn't above a lie now and then, if it would keep me out of a fight with her.

"Likely story, as lazy as you are. You'd rather lay around reading some book or writing in your little diary than go out and get a job. You need working papers, anyway. And I might not sign them."

That figured. She was so wrapped up in hating the way her life was turning out that she couldn't think logically anymore. Did she want me to get a job to help put food on the table and cigarettes in her mouth, or what?

The truth was, I had looked at the help wanted signs in a few store windows that I passed between the house and the library. I knew that I'd need some money to pay for my bus tokens and some new rags to wear to my new school. If I needed working papers for a job and my mom wouldn't sign? Well, I'd sign her name on that form, too.

NOW, I JUST need to figure out how to frame all of these memories positively, so that the judges won't think that I'm a negative person. More thinking is in order.

"Scuse me, but do you know what time it is?"

I looked up and focused on a thin, bearded guy dressed rather poorly. Without taking my eyes away from his face, I brought my left wrist into view and glanced quickly at my watch. "Yeah. It's ten after five."

"Thanks very much."

I watched him move on slowly toward the front of the chapel, where eventually he lowered himself into a pew. He looked like he was laden with some invisible weight slung over his shoulders. If I didn't know better, I'd swear that he was a spirit living in the middle of my memories. That he knew, just as I did, what I was about to remember next. The sunlight cutting through the chapel windows was still strong enough to let me see my handwritten notes. And the soft as cotton stillness in the chamber pulled me back to my life a decade and a half ago.

THE SUMMER BETWEEN the eighth and ninth grades rolled along as fast as my speed racer bike, the one that was stolen from our front porch a month after my brother gave it to me. Of course, that bike was probably hot when Kashif got it. So, it went full circle.

In July, I got my hands on the ninth grade reading list from Prep and borrowed all the required books from the library, a couple at a time. Some weeks I made two trips back and forth between there and home.

Every afternoon, the second I heard the screen door latch squeak and the whisper of envelopes flutter to the floor, I made sure I was the first one to reach the entryway to scoop up the mail. Sure enough, one day early in August something arrived from Academic Prep. The school sent me their orientation schedule along with their rules and regulations. Thankfully, they didn't need a parent's signature on anything else, although I was ready and prepared to forge my mom's name. Nothing was going to get in the way of my going to that school. Nothing. Not even the awful thing that happened one sweltering afternoon, right after I'd finished reading one of the books for Prep ninth graders.

All the way back from the library that day, I kept thinking about that book, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*. I just had to talk to Kashif about it. When I thought about my brother, I realized that I hadn't seen or spoken to him in the past two weeks. He wasn't coming around much at all, because every time he did, he'd have these screaming matches with my mom. I missed him, but there was such hell to pay when he did appear. Sometimes the pain of not seeing him was less than the aggravation that his presence caused.

I had just closed the screen door and gone into the house when I thought I heard Kashif's voice stop abruptly at the end of my name. His one uttered syllable dangled at the end of a loud, sharp explosion.

When I remembered it all later, I realized that the deepest part of me knew what I was going to see when I went back out the door to the porch. Maybe that's why my feet felt as if they'd never start taking me there, as though they were stuck in all of the halfchewed and spit out bubble gum in the world.

When I pushed that door open, I saw Kashif lying on his back, stretched out on the sidewalk right in front of our house. There was a hole in his throat and blood was gushing out of it like soda from a bottle after you've shaken it with the cap still on. A black female cop walked toward him slowly, both of her hands wrapped around the butt of the revolver she was pointing right at my brother's head.

"Leave him alone! You already shot him!" I screamed at her while I ran to Kashif, unaware that it was his lifeless body I was approaching, not the protective brother with whom I'd never had enough time.

"Stand away!" The cop sounded like a machine, a robot with no humanity in her voice.

"No! He's my brother!"

"Your brother stole that green car down the street. The one that hit the old man you see lying in the road."

"You didn't have to shoot him! He was just trying to get home."

For the first time, the cop's eyes left my brother's corpse and came to land on my face. "He turned toward me, and I thought I saw a gun in his hand."

"You didn't have to kill him!" My tears were starting to keep company with the anger in my voice.

One by one, our neighbors oozed out of their houses. Someone must have gotten my mom from her card game at the other end of the block. All I could see was her "lucky red" slacks running in the street toward the cop and me. She stopped a few feet away from us.

"Oh, no! Not my baby! Not my Kashif! Kashif? What have you got yourself into now?"

I took a few steps toward my mom. My feet worked, but I had trouble getting my mouth to make any noise. Finally I mumbled, "He's dead, Mom. That cop shot him."

My mom wailed like I'd never heard her before. "Why? Why'd you shoot my son?"

"Ma'am, he stole a car and ran over a man down the street. I chased him. He turned toward me, and I thought I saw a gun in his hand."

"He didn't have no gun. He didn't own no gun!"

Even as my mom said that, I knew it wasn't true. Kashif had had a gun for years. He showed it to me when I was in the fifth grade. He'd bought it from a friend of his, proud that they were slick enough to sand off the serial number.

My mom looked down at her son. "Oh, my baby. They didn't need to kill you."

Then, fury took over. Her mournful sob turned into a menacing growl. If it weren't for the other cops who had arrived, my mom would have killed the one who shot Kashif. She lunged at her, went right for her throat. I swear that I would have seen a second killing that day, right on the sidewalk outside our door, if they hadn't grabbed her. Maybe, if my mom had strangled that cop that afternoon, she'd be in prison now, locked up with all the anger and sadness that, instead, sent her straight into the arms of alcohol and drugs.

I never knew what became of that cop. I do remember her name, Johnetta Jones. Somebody told us that she had a son younger than me. I used to hope that he'd mess up, get involved in drugs or murder and have to do hard time. Then Officer Jones would feel the wind and the rain and the booze blow through the hole left in her heart, just like my mom felt whenever she thought about Kashif.

That summer between the eighth and ninth grades, between my walking to school everyday and then learning to take the bus and the subway, I found out that not all prisons have walls. And some of the wall-less prisons can break your spirit, if you let them. The trick is not to let that happen.

Chapter Six

"WHAT DO YOU think, Dr. Gray? Do I have an interesting topic?"

Terez Overton took a deep breath after completing the brief yet full explanation of her dissertation plans. She watched her advisor closely, looking for any signs of disapproval from the auburn-haired woman.

"Well, I have to admit that I'd never before thought of comparing Toni Morrison to Jorge Luis Borges."

Charlene Gray tapped her pencil on the edge of her desk. She looked intently at the young woman sitting across from her. Damn, she thought. Why do these smart grad students keep getting prettier and prettier? Then, she thought about Diana, the last beautiful grad student whose charms, intelligence and looks she couldn't resist. Charlene ended up having a commitment ceremony with her in their best friends' backyard. And since she was still in that committed relationship, Charlene decided to remain focused on the discussion of this student's doctoral dissertation and not on the student's beauty.

"What made you decide to pursue this idea?"

Terez narrowed her dark expressive eyes. "I was an English major and Spanish Literature minor. So I had to read a lot of contemporary South American fiction. Borges is best known for his magic realism."

"Yes, I'm aware of that." Charlene pushed her chair back from the desk and crossed and uncrossed her legs. A high energy person, she was rarely still for more than a moment. "Where does Morrison fit in?"

"Did you ever read *Sula*?"

"A long time ago."

Terez nodded, eager to continue. "That's where Morrison fits in. There's so much of the surreal in her novel. It's very South American. If I have the time to research and study both writers' entire bodies of work, I know that I'll find tons of similarities."

Charlene was hooked. "Have you begun your proposal?"

"I'm working on the outline now."

"Okay." Charlene nodded slowly. "You can fly with it."

The English professor watched a broad smile cross Terez's face. Man, she thought, this girl can light up a room with that smile. I wonder if she's with anyone. She heard her pal Corey's voice say: *"You can wonder all you want, Charlene. You're in a committed relationship, so be noble and forget about it. Your days of flirting with your grad students are in the past."*

Terez pumped her fists in the air. "Thank you!"

Charlene sat up straight in her chair. "Now, on to another subject. Have you submitted your application for the Adamson Prize? You write so well that I'm certain you have a good chance of winning."

"Yes, I turned it in yesterday. But I've heard that it's very competitive and that quite a few of the grad students are applying. Is that correct?" Terez raised one of her perfectly shaped dark eyebrows.

"It's true. There's a crowded field this year. But I think you've got a real shot at it."

"Well, thanks for your vote of confidence."

Charlene winked at Terez. "You've earned my confidence with your hard work and your scholarship, Terez."

Terez seemed oblivious to her advisor's wink. "Thanks again, Dr. Gray. Well, I've got to get going. I appreciate your approving my topic, and I'll keep my fingers crossed about the Adamson grant."

"Good luck with both of those projects. Keep me posted about your proposal, and let me know if you have any questions."

"Will do. I'll talk to you soon."

Both women stood and shook hands. As Terez withdrew hers and prepared to walk to the door, her ears became aware of a woman's deep jewel-toned voice just yards away from her in the reception area of the office suite.

"Have you received many of these so far?"

"A few." The secretary, a miser with words, wasn't giving up much information.

Terez left her advisor's office. Like all of the others in the small complex, it formed a spoke that led to the center of the English Department's hub where the secretary-receptionist stood behind a large table. Terez watched the secretary offer a pen to the young woman with the sensuous voice. She was fairly certain that she was the same young woman whom she'd seen on the campus from time to time and once in the exercise room at the Athletic Center—the same person whose profile and figure she'd found intriguing.

"Okay, Ms. Baxter. If you could just sign and date this form. It serves as a receipt that you've submitted an application and that I've received it."

"Sure. That's a good idea."

Terez watched as this Ms. Baxter took the pen from the secretary and signed the paper that had been pushed in front of her. She recognized the form and knew it was the same paper she had signed yesterday when she'd turned in her application. The Bostonian found it strangely interesting to witness this act. Watching one of her competitors made her feel a little like a spy or a voyeur.

"Thank you." The secretary took a lightning quick look at the document and then tore off the top page. "This is carbonized, so you have your own copy, Ms. Baxter."

"Oh, that's great. Thanks."

Terez looked away as Jaie, suddenly aware that there was a third person in the room, focused her gaze. Jaie's quick smile seemed to include Terez as well as the secretary. Holding up her crossed fingers, she winked at both of the women.

"Wish me luck, ladies!"

Terez bit her bottom lip nervously and returned Jaie's bright smile with a more subdued one. "Surely."

"Good luck to both of you." Inclining her head toward Terez, the secretary continued. "This young woman turned in her application yesterday, if I remember correctly."

"Uh, yes, I did." Somewhat disappointed that her "closet" espionage game was over, Terez reluctantly admitted her participation in the Adamson Prize competition.

Jaie's eyes swept over Terez, appraising her quickly but thoroughly, realizing that she'd never seen this woman at the university before. She was sure she would have remembered her. "Well, in that case, may the best woman win."

Terez offered a benign smile of agreement. "And to the winner go the spoils." She made a move to leave the office. But Jaie wasn't willing to let Terez exit before she'd had a chance to judge what kind of competition this newly met rival might be bringing to the game.

"We could keep trading old hackneyed expressions. You know, like what's good for the goose is good for the gander?" Jaie threw out a challenge.

Terez leveled her stare at her challenger. She couldn't tell if Jaie was trying to be amusing or if her question had an edge to it. She decided to meet Jaie's comment with a genuine and guileless response.

"Or, how about trading introductions?" She extended her hand. "I'm Terez Overton."

"Hello, Terez Overton. I'm Jaie Baxter."

Holding onto Terez's hand a few seconds longer than necessary, Jaie telegraphed an immediate interest in Terez, or at least a desire to gauge her competitor's verbal dueling skills. "Are you a grad student in the English Department?"

"Yes, I am." Terez stood her ground, not at all intimidated by Jaie's aggressive stance.

"I wonder why we don't know each other. If we'd met before, I'm sure that I would have remembered you." Brazenly, Jaie gave no thought to the secretary who was listening to every word they spoke. "Did you go to the department's reception in September?"

"No. I arrived in January, so I missed that event." Terez answered Jaie's question with a neutral smile on her face.

"That explains it. And obviously our paths have never crossed here on campus." After a lapse of a few seconds, Jaie tossed out an invitation. "Maybe we could go out for coffee some time?"

Terez was familiar with Jaie's worn-out pick-up line, having heard and used it herself on a few occasions. She recognized also, what the lingering handshake meant, and she thought that if the quality of this woman's writing were as tired as her attempts to flirt were, then Dr. Gray had been correct. Terez did have a good shot at winning the Adamson Prize, unless there were other entrants with a lot more talent than this Jaie Baxter offered.

Nevertheless, challenged by the comely woman's demeanor and attracted to her assertiveness, Terez decided on the spot that a cup of coffee with this sister grad student might be a good idea. "Sure. That would be nice."

When she ventured to take a closer look, Terez noticed that Jaie was quite attractive. There was something about her honey-colored eyes and almost perfectly symmetrical features that drew Terez to her.

"Could we trade e-mail addresses?" Jaie asked with the self-confidence of someone who knew that she wouldn't be turned down.

"Sure."

Tearing off the top sheet from a notepad on the secretary-receptionist's desk, Jaie wrote her cyber address in large bold characters and then folded and neatly tore the paper in two, handing the empty piece to her new acquaintance. She watched carefully as Terez inclined her head of wavy hair, pursed her lips in concentration and quickly inscribed her information.

Both women pocketed their slips of paper and promised to be in touch. As Jaie opened the office door and invited Terez's exit, she inhaled the floral fragrance that the woman wore.

Terez stepped out of the office in front of Jaie, leaving a smile in her wake and thinking about her encounter with this person who, until today, had been only a profile in the distance or a presence on the treadmill. She figured that she had to be a lesbian. There was no doubt about it. Jaie made no effort to conceal the look of curious interest dancing in her eyes as she spoke to Terez and shook her hand. It was a look that Terez welcomed, a look that spoke of their being on equal footing.

This Jaie Baxter, with her startlingly frank gaze and lightning-quick conversation, was not another Sherry Yancey. Terez suspected that there was more to Jaie than the aggressive date-making behavior that lay on her surface. And she knew that she'd be thinking about her until they saw each other again.

Chapter Seven

"HELLO. YOU'RE RIGHT on time!" I greeted my Thursday afternoon lunch date, Jennifer Renfrew, at the entrance of the Copper Kettle Restaurant.

"It looks like you've arrived promptly, too, Jaie." Jennifer was beaming, giving me a not so very surreptitious once over. "I'm glad that you picked this place. It's far enough from the campus that we won't be bumping into faculty members."

"Would it bother you if we did?" I probably had a look of distrust in my eyes because Jennifer stammered for a second, like she wished she could take back her words.

"No. No, not really. It wouldn't be a problem at all."

The hostess led us through the crowded main area of the restaurant, past tables filled with animated chatterers. A few seconds more and we arrived at a secluded table in a less populated section of the eatery. I wondered if she knew that we were potential lovers and not just business associates or casual friends.

I studied the menu, realizing that I wasn't very hungry. I could sense Jennifer studying me.

"Order anything you'd like, Jaie. I know that you invited me to lunch, but I'd like this to be my treat. It's my way of apologizing for being so busy lately."

I put down my menu. "That's not necessary, Jennifer."

"I know it's not necessary, but it's something I want to do, if you'll let me."

I looked directly into Jennifer's eyes, disarming the Assistant Dean totally. "Okay, you win. The Caesar salad and an iced tea look good to me."

"Is that all? You can't be dieting. Not with your trim body."

I patted my stomach and thought of all the times that my friend Rasheeda and I had vowed to use the university's swimming facilities to tone and condition our bodies. We hadn't done that, but I tried to work out at the Pierce Center whenever I could. "Actually, I did pick up a few pounds last winter, and I haven't lost them yet. Doing research and writing keep me sitting on my butt."

"Well, you can't see those extra pounds. You look like you're in good shape." Jennifer took advantage of our conversation and scanned what she could see of my body.

"I have to be careful, though, and watch what I put in my mouth." I didn't mean to send such a suggestive message. But Jennifer played right back.

"We all have to pay attention to what we eat, don't we?"

Overhearing our flirtation, but failing to recognize it for what it was, the waiter took our orders and promised us quick service.

"Jaie, could you excuse me for a minute? I'm going to visit the restroom." Jennifer held up both of her hands. "I didn't have time to wash my hands before I left the office." She pushed herself away from the table.

"Take your time."

If our waiter had paid more attention, he would have seen me take a deep breath and sigh as Jennifer walked away. I could feel a certain tension leave my shoulders. My practiced smile disappeared, allowing my facial muscles to relax. Slowly sipping from the tall glass of iced tea that was placed in front of me, I glanced at the few restaurant patrons who were dining in our section.

Most of them had that "let's get lunch done and be back at the office within an hour" demeanor. They alternated quick bites of food with unconscious looks at their watches. I spotted a couple of tables of female diners. None of those women bore the posture of intimacy that lovers would display. None of them looked at each other with the intensity that I knew I'd have to soon feign during this lunch date. I inhaled deeply, gathering my forces for the next few hours that I would

spend with Jennifer Renfrew, Assistant Dean of Admissions and prominent evaluator of the Adam-son Prize applications.

I completed my survey of the room as Jennifer returned to the table. She was steadily gazing at me as she sat down. I could feel my posture stiffening. That little spot at the base of my spine that sends little pricks of pain to me whenever I'm tense about something started talking to me loudly.

I beamed my rehearsed smile. "So Jennifer, what's keeping you so busy and inaccessible recently? It's hard to get a chance to spend any time with you."

"Oh, aside from my usual work load, I've taken on an additional job. I'm reading all the essays on the Adamson Grant applications."

"That must be time consuming."

Jennifer nodded. "It is. But, I'd like to hear more about your trying to spend time with me, Jaie."

"Well, it hasn't been easy. I think that I've asked you out three times before I got lucky today."

Blinking slowly, Jennifer leaned in closer to me. "I'm glad that you didn't give up. I'll try to make today worth your while."

We continued our flirty conversation throughout Jennifer's plate-cleaning lunch and my half-eaten salad. Jennifer didn't seem to notice that she was paying for an unfinished meal. If she did, she didn't seem to mind. As we got ready to get up and leave the Copper Kettle, I looked earnestly at her.

"Do you have to go back to your office now, or do you think we could extend this date?" I stood next to our table, as close to her as propriety would permit.

"What do you have in mind?"

"We could go for a drive, or to my place."

I watched Jennifer mull over her options. "Where do you live?"

"In the Cambridge Terrace section, about fifteen minutes from here."

"Why don't we drive to my apartment? It's closer."

I could hear the urgency in Jennifer's voice, and I was startled by it. Surprised but not the least bit excited, I made a suggestion. "Okay, why don't I follow you?"

We walked quickly through the post-lunch-hour restaurant, which was considerably less crowded than it had been an hour ago. As we passed by a mirror in the restaurant's lobby, I saw the look

of determination in Jennifer's eyes. With one hand she grabbed her car keys from her jacket pocket and with the other she touched my forearm, guiding me out to the parking lot. She pointed at her car.

"I'm parked right over there. Where are you?" I inclined my head toward my car. "Two rows down, to the left." "I'll pull around in front of you. We'll be at my place before you know it."

"Okay." I nodded, aware of a slightly uncomfortable sensation, no more than a blip on my radar screen, that skipped across my mind. As I followed her car, I wondered why I was feeling this way.

Jennifer lived in an older but well-maintained apartment building not too far from the Allerton University campus. She waited for me in the foyer and then fairly pulled me into the lobby, the elevator and finally into her home.

"Why don't you sit down?"

The spacious living room, with its bright lemon-colored walls, offered me the choice of sitting on a large sofa, the kind that can swallow even the tallest person, or on one of two arm chairs that faced the sofa. Hesitating for some unknown reason, I finally chose one of the single chairs.

"Would you like anything to drink?"

"No, thanks." I declined the offer despite a sudden dryness in my throat. Taking in my new surroundings, I said the obvious. "You have a nice apartment."

"Thanks." Jennifer settled into the sofa. "Would you like to see the other rooms?"

My slow acclimation to Jennifer's private arena was no match for the Assistant Dean's speedy desire to show me all the parts of her apartment.

"Maybe later. Right now, I'm enjoying talking with you in here, if that's all right."

"Sure, that's fine."

I was grateful that Jennifer agreed. I looked around, casting my eyes toward the hallway at one end of the living room and imagining what my friend Rasheeda would say about my reluctance to walk down that corridor and find myself in Jennifer's bedroom. She'd say I was losing my edge by turning down a sure thing, and I would agree with her. Here was this attractive and available woman, giving me every indication she was interested in having a sexual episode with me, and I was feeling lukewarm, closer to turning it down than doing any thing else.

"So tell me Jaie, why did you choose Allerton for grad school?"

"I've been familiar with the place ever since high school. We had an Early College Experience program that was coordinated with Clarkeson and Allerton."

"Where did you go to high school?"

"I went to Jefferson, in Philly."

Jennifer's face became pale and her downcast eyes turned a peculiar dark color.

"Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?" I watched every move the Assistant Dean made.

"No, no you didn't. For some reason I thought that maybe you were from out of state or that you'd gone to a private school, or maybe to Academic Prep for Girls." Jennifer succeeded in regaining her composure.

"Actually, I did go to Prep, but only for one year. I screwed up and got myself transferred to Jefferson."

"Oh. Were you in the Allerton-Jefferson writing class with Dr. Lomax or Kinshasa Jordan?"

"No, I wasn't. I knew about the program, but I didn't meet the two of them until I began my graduate courses. They're both great teachers."

"Yes, they are. They're excellent writers, too."

In a split second, Jennifer looked like she was deciding whether to go down this conversational trail, or to divert us to a different one. She left the sofa and sat down on a pillow on the floor very close to me. She began caressing my leg.

I looked down at her, wanting to redirect her hand, but not making the effort to do that, not yet. "Why did you look so sad a moment ago?"

"Oh, did I?" Jennifer thought fast. "I was doing the math while you were talking about your time at Jefferson High, and it occurred to me that there are a lot of years between us."

"You know what they say, age is just a number. Besides, I've always had the spirit of an older person."

Jennifer stopped massaging my leg. She looked my way, seeming to balance her attraction to me with the reality of our age difference. Clearly, she decided to let her brain take over where her libido had been a minute ago. "I don't know about this, Jaie. I've always thought older women dating much younger ones look foolish."

"Maybe you shouldn't be so much into appearances and do what feels good instead."

"Well, right now, talking with you certainly feels good." Jennifer suddenly got up from the floor and walked toward the kitchen. "I'm going to brew some coffee. Would you like a cup?"

"Sure. Thanks." I let myself breathe more easily and I stood and walked over to a bookcase where I examined the titles. "You have a lot of African-American authored books. I'm impressed."

"Why not?" Jennifer called from the other room. "You'll notice I have Corey Lomax's titles as well as Kinshasa Jordan's. And each one is autographed."

I opened Lomax's earliest published anthology of short fiction and saw that Jennifer was mentioned in the dedication. The two sentences written on the inside cover implied that at one time Jennifer and Corey had been more than simply friends. An inaudible whistle passed through my lips as I pictured Corey Lomax, one of my favorite role models, partnered with Jennifer Renfrew. Clearly, race was not an issue for Jennifer. If she and Corey had been lovers at one time, involvement in another interracial affair would be no big deal for her. It wouldn't be taboo.

"Do you take cream or sugar in your coffee, Jaie?"

"A little bit of cream, thanks." I accepted the hot beverage and sat back down.

"So, tell me more about yourself." Jennifer took her place back on the sofa, a safe distance from me, although I wasn't sure who needed safety at this point.

I told Jennifer everything I wanted her to know about me. Two cups of coffee later, I stood up and announced I needed to leave to get back to a project I was working on. I was careful not to mention how busy I'd been lately, completing my application for the Adamson Prize. And I was even more careful to tell Jennifer the same key pieces of my life's story that filled my grant application essay. As we walked toward the door, I paused to look at some photographs that were displayed on a console table in the small entryway.

"They're mostly friends. My family is very small and they don't like posing for pictures." Jennifer explained.

An overwhelming sense of familiarity drew me to one photo in particular. I picked up the portrait of a handsome uniformed woman.

Jennifer explained, "That's Pat Adamson. We were involved with each other when she was killed at Jefferson High School." The Dean's pain shrouded voice dropped an octave.

"I know. I remember her." I nodded, more at the photograph than at Jennifer. "Is that why you looked so sad when I mentioned I went to Jefferson?"

"Yes." Jennifer searched my face. "Were you a student there when it happened?"

"Yes. It happened when I was a senior." I carefully returned the framed picture to its place on the table before looking once again at Jennifer.

"So we both have bad memories connected to that school." Jennifer seemed sincerely sorry for what must have been a marred final year of high school for me.

"Yeah, I guess so." I continued, pensively. "But, sometimes when you're a teenager, you don't see your connection with mortality. You think that you and everybody you know will live forever."

"Did you make the connection?"

"Oh, yeah, in a big way. Remember, I saw my brother die, so mortality was very real to me." I paused, figuring something out for the first time. "Is your relationship with Pat Adamson the reason you're doing all that work with the grant applications?"

"Yes." Jennifer seemed to come up for air. "But let's not end our little date today on such a somber note."

I smiled at her. "That's okay with me."

"Do you think we'll see each other again?" I could tell Jennifer hoped she didn't look or sound desperate.

I tried to bolster her self confidence with a reassuring smile. "I haven't scared you off with my youth?"

"No. I think I can keep up with you. How about if I give you a call?"

We shared a quick embrace, one which I gave platonically, but one which Jennifer received with the whisper of a promise for our future.

As I left the apartment building and headed to my car, I became aware of feeling lighter, as if I had shed the pounds of some unpleasant duty, without being fully conscious of how unpleasant the deed would have been. I knew I could have had a sexual encounter with Jennifer if one had been needed to accomplish my goal. I was sure of it, confident I would have summoned some vestige of passion if it had been necessary.

I was less sure though, about why not having sex with the Assistant Dean of Admissions that afternoon brought me such relief. Why was I so glad our lunch date hadn't ended with us in bed? And why did I feel as if I were poised upon the brink of something different in my life?

I let my thoughts meander to the vision of Jennifer with Corey Lomax and then to the reality of Jennifer coupled with Patricia Adamson. Patricia Adamson. I skirmished with the tactile memory of holding the dead police officer's portrait in my hands. It was one thing for me to covet the monetary award named after Adamson. Seeing the officer's picture again after all these years and learning about her connection to Jennifer Renfrew was altogether something else. I was glad I didn't wear my emotions on my face and that Jennifer couldn't tell what I was thinking or feeling as I held onto that picture.

There were, after all, only three newspaper photos burned into my memory: the picture of my dead brother's body, the image of the cop who killed him and the depiction of Patricia Adamson in her uniform, shot to death in the hallway of Jefferson High School during my final year there. All of these thoughts kept me company as I drove home from Jennifer's apartment. Despite the relief I felt about today's turn of events, I kept thinking about Pat Adamson.

Chapter Eight

WRITING THAT ESSAY for the grant application kick-started a torrent of memories that even I, the Jaie Baxter who prided herself on being able to shut off the recollection fountain, couldn't stop. As soon as I turned on the spigot and the crap started to flow, I realized I couldn't just twist the valve and stanch the gushing images. I couldn't keep all of the bad moments buried, all of the ones that usually trickled underground, undetected.

Maybe one of the positive things springing out of all the reflections was being able to put some of the shit from my past into its proper perspective. Getting to the point where I could write the application essay had been like talking to a shrink for free. Of course, any fool knows nothing in life is truly free. At least I was starting to clear out some of the fog that got in the way of my feelings. Like the Kyra Belton episode for example.

KYRA HAPPENED TO me early in the ninth grade at Academic Prep. She was slender, a shade darker than I and an inch or so taller. She wore her long, straightened hair parted down the middle, giving her sort of a Native American look. From day one, when we found each other sharing many of the same classes, Kyra and I eased into a comfortable friendship. She traveled to school from a section of West Philly near the city-suburb borderline, miles from my stomping grounds and some distance away from my family's earning power.

"So how long does it take you to come from North Philly? It's dark now in the morning. Aren't you scared waiting for the bus and riding the subway?" Kyra always seemed to be curious about me. We knew we had a lot in common. We had an unspoken agreement about our differences, also.

"No, I'm not scared. And it's dark where you live, too, girl." I loved having any opportunity I could get to show off my bravado.

"Yeah, I know it's dark, but there's not as much crime where I live, Jaie."

"Don't get all stuck up. I know where you live. Half of North Philly is movin' into your neighborhood." I nudged her forearm with the back of my hand. "So if you're not scared now, you will be soon."

"I just might be scared if we get surrounded by tackheads. And, if we do, we'll probably move." Kyra playfully targeted my arm and punched me back.

As that first semester's weeks at Prep went by, I began to discover that I might not have the skills I needed to keep a lid on my growing attraction to Kyra. The possibility that I might slip up and somehow send her the vibe that I was interested in her scared me. Even though we were on the same wave length about everything else that surrounded us, she never sent me any kind of romantic message.

Every day for two and a half months, I listened for clues about Kyra's love interests. Neither of us mentioned boys' names when we talked about our out of school lives. The only male Kyra ever spoke about during our nightly marathon phone calls was her father, a city firefighter.

After a while and when I felt it was safe, I talked to Kyra about my brother. I appreciated her sympathetic listening and welcoming shoulder. One afternoon, as we approached the station where we parted during our southbound subway ride, I lost it. I'd been missing Kashif a whole lot and just talking about him over the din of the train wheels screeching over the rails proved to be too much for me. Before I could stop myself, I broke down and started crying.

"It's not as if I used to see him everyday. But I always knew he was around and if I needed him, I could get word to his buddies, and he'd show in a New York minute."

"You went through a lot, Jaie. Just seeing him die must have been horrible." Kyra touched my shoulder, warming my skin right through the covering of my lightweight jacket.

"I don't usually cry like this." My head did a one-eighty as I blinked away my tears and tried to appear rebellious. "I didn't even cry at Kashif's funeral. My mom did, but I didn't."

Kyra kept her warm hand on my shoulder. "Your mom must be hurting, too."

"Yeah. When she's not drinkin' and doin' other things."

"Well, at least you must make her happy. Look at you! You made meritorious on your first report card at Academic Prep!" Kyra was making an attempt to move me off the sad square.

"She doesn't know about that. She never asked to see my report card, so I didn't show it to her."

"What?" Kyra seemed surprised. "You can believe that if I'd made the big "M," I would have busted down my front door waving that piece of cardboard in my parents' faces."

"That's cause your parents want you to be here. My mom doesn't even know I go to Prep." Now she was examining me in disbelief. "What do you mean?" "When I got accepted, she said I

couldn't go to Prep. She said I had to go to Jefferson." Kyra pulled back from me. "That rat hole? I don't understand." "Oh, I understand. She wants to hold me back. She's afraid I'll know more than she does."

Kyra shook her head and I kept talking, eager to tell her more before the lights of my subway stop came into view.

"Anyway, she thinks I go to Jefferson everyday. If she sees my report card, she'll find out the truth. So I'm not showing it to her."

"Won't she ask you for it? My parents always know when it's time for it to come out."

"Not my Mom. She's got other stuff on her mind."

Kyra stood back and tilted her head, evaluating what I'd just shared with her. "You are one bold sister, Jaie Baxter. The way you're getting around your mom and coming all this way to Prep, when going to Jefferson would be so much easier for you." She paused and grinned at me. "Girl, I admire you!"

Kyra hugged me and then kissed me on the cheek. That's when my imagination went into overdrive. I realized she gave me that hug and kiss in the spirit of sisterhood. But the contact had been so powerful. It sent me spinning into another sphere, into an orbit from which the return would be brutal and life changing. Kyra had no idea what she started that afternoon when she put her lips on my cheek.

It all started with that kiss, which led to another. I must have been out of touch with reality the day when I gave in to my feelings. It all happened so fast.

Kyra jumped away from me, her look of pure surprise turning to one of disgust and anger. "What are you doing?"

I had kissed her gently on her mouth, as we paused in the dark deserted stairwell on our way down to the cafeteria. She looked so ready for my kiss. Her lips, on their way to some joke's punch line, were in the midst of forming a smile. What felt in one moment like the purest, most sincere gesture of young love, quickly disintegrated, transforming itself into some monstrous act of unwelcome lust.

"I'm sorry, Kyra. I didn't mean to upset you. I, I think I love you."

"You love me? What are you talking about, Jaie? Are you queer or something?"

My cheeks were on fire. I was embarrassed, hurt, and confused. But I wasn't stupid. I knew copping to being gay was not an option for me. Not then. "No! I'm not queer!"

Kyra went down two more steps, increasing the distance between us. She looked at me like I had just thrown up all over my clothes and barely missed hitting her.

"Then why'd you do that?" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Why did you kiss me like that, on the lips?"

"I don't know. I, I guess I was feeling close to you, that's all." I hoped she'd accept that explanation. Even as I stammered it, I knew she wouldn't.

'You don't think I'm queer, too, do you?"

"No, of course not. I'm sorry, Kyra. It won't happen again."

"You're damn right it won't happen again." Kyra glared at me. She had reached the bottom of the stairs, near the door leading to the cafeteria's entrance. "Look, you need to leave me alone. I can't be having this. What if someone finds out? What are they going to say about me?"

"Kyra, I'm sorry. No one's going to find out. We were alone. It's a secret." Now I was almost pleading with her.

'You're right no one's going to find out. Because no one's ever going to see us together again. From now on I don't know you, Jaie." With that, Kyra bombarded her way through the door, loudly slamming it shut against me and our friendship.

It wasn't long before the "secret" about our kiss was broadcast throughout the school. By advisory period the next morning, I had girls looking at me with faces that telegraphed every emotion from pity to loathing. Some of my classmates huddled with their friends and laughed loudly enough for me to hear. Others shook their heads when I walked by, clicking their tongues at me. A few girls, girls I didn't know but who obviously knew me, brazenly stared, as if I were a dot of bacteria smeared on a microscope's slide, all ready to be cultured and by all means quarantined.

I learned very quickly to put those girls' stares and their derisive giggles behind me. I wanted neither their friendship nor their approval. The only thing I needed at that school was an education, a free pass to a future far from the poverty-imposed internment my neighborhood environment and family circumstances had reserved for me. I could get along just fine without their frilly bonds and exclusive cliques. It was all the other shit, though, that eventually got to me and wore me down.

I had two lockers at Academic Prep, my street locker where I left my jacket and some of my books and my gym locker, where I parked my regular clothes during gym class. Kyra had both of my lock combinations and I had hers. I'm not accusing her of any of this, but some jerk got into my street locker and stuffed my jacket pockets with smelly, rotting leaves that had fallen from the ginkgo trees on the campus. Then, the person wrote "DYKE" on the locker door. When I opened the locker at dismissal time my jacket reeked. The vomit-like stench pushed me back a few steps. Have you ever looked at something you know is yours and there's something so different and irregular about it, that you simply can't believe it belongs to you? That was the case with my jacket. It looked familiar, but it smelled so bad that it couldn't really be mine.

A few days after that, some idiot wrote "GAY DYKE" on my gym locker. In a condescending moment, I knew I could feel sorry for an idiot who didn't even realize she was being redundant. What I couldn't handle though, was finding the used sanitary napkin and tampon lying in there smelling like a dead body, along with a drawing of a cartoon suggesting what I like to do with girls.

Before I knew it, I started hanging out with a group of girls who didn't really want to be at Academic Prep. I just sort of gravitated toward them. Their goal was to get kicked out of the school, the sooner the better. My original goal had been to ace everything, to stay "Meritorious," or even reach the lofty rank of "Distinguished." I wondered how I got along so well with these outlaws when our goals were so different. I didn't stop to realize I was spending so much time cutting classes with them and going to a nearby donut shop, I was achieving their goal real fast and forgetting about mine completely. My objectives flew right out of the window on the wings of a chocolate-iced cruller.

One morning, not long after I started attending my classes at The Donut Hole, my mother got a phone call from Mrs. Kingsolver, my counselor at Prep. Obviously, my mother didn't hear the name of the school the counselor was calling from. But, covering her ass, Kingsolver followed her phone call with an official letter sent by certified mail. The Academic Prep High School for Girls was summarily dropping me from roll and transferring me to my neighborhood school, Thomas Jefferson, effective the next September.

"Jaie, what the hell does this letter mean? Have those jack-asses up at that snooty Academic Prep just now realized you don't go there?" She was so anxious for anyone connected with Prep to be wrong that she was convinced this was their big mistake. "The stupid ass fools! They don't even know you already go to Jefferson! See, it's like I told you last spring. They don't care enough about a young black girl to even keep tabs on whether she goes to their school or not!"

I hesitated to interrupt her moment of self-absorbed triumph, but I had to tell her the truth.

"They didn't make a mistake, Mom. I have been going there. I flunked out."

I hated telling her I'd failed. Absolutely hated it, as I've never hated telling anything to anyone before or since

Her face turned deep red, then purple. Her voice grew low and threatening. "You mean all this time I've been thinkin' you go to Jefferson, and you've really been goin' to that uppity school with all those dykes?"

"Yes." What more could I say? If she didn't want the best for me last May when I was accepted at Prep, then why would she want anything good for me now?

She picked up the letter and read it a second time. "So, it says you have to go to summer school for Algebra 1 and in September you'll be at Jefferson. Is that right?"

"Yes." Keep it short and sweet. There's no arguing or explaining now.

"Good!" She smiled briefly. "Your ass will be busy in the mornings with that make-up class, and you'll get a piece of a job for the afternoons or evenings. Earn some money to help out around here. And in September, you'll be where you belong, at Jefferson High School, where all the other little niggers from around here go."

IT WAS GOOD for me to remember these things, good for me to realize where I was then and where I am now, a long distance from my Academic Prep days with Kyra Belton and my three years at Jefferson High. And even farther away from my mind-numbing neighborhood and my stifling mother. I hadn't arrived at my destination yet, but it was beginning to come into soft focus. I continued to have a hunger for the things I didn't have, the accomplishments I hadn't achieved, the woman I hadn't begun to love. But just knowing I was on my way took the edge off the hunger.

Chapter Nine

I GOT OVER my first inclination to be cool about Terez Overton about a minute after the ink dried on that little slip of paper where she'd written her e-mail address. Well, not literally a minute, but it seemed like it. After all, I had no clue who else was applying for the Adamson grant. Maybe she was aware of our competition. Perhaps her advisor had given her a leg up by telling her. And if she hadn't, at least I could get to know a little bit about Ms. Overton, the competitor I was mindful of.

One fact was immutably true. This Terez was a beautiful golden-hued woman. She didn't need to know, however, that I thought she was attractive. I could be calm and unruffled when I had to be, although I suspected everything about Terez could make my resolve to be placid and disinterested around her a difficult thing to achieve. In the few minutes we spent together in the English Department Office, I couldn't stop myself from noticing her dramatically sculpted cheekbones and her flawlessly shaped mouth. I found myself wondering what it might be like to...

In the e-mail I sent to her later that same afternoon, I asked if she wanted go out for coffee on Friday. She must have been very busy, because she didn't answer my message until late Thursday night, hours after my lunch date with Jennifer Renfrew. The idea that Terez might already be hooked up with someone never crossed my conceited mind. And why would someone as fine as she not have someone special in her life?

When she finally responded, she wrote that she had a commitment until two o'clock on Friday, so we could meet outside the English Department building a little past the hour. The idea worked for me, although parking on campus can be a certifiable headache at that time of day. As it

turned out, I was so behind in my research I needed to spend several hours working at the library before our "date," if you want to call it a "date." I certainly wanted to call it that.

Even though I arrived at the university early, I was still a victim of parking dementia. That's what I called driving around and around the campus so many times searching for a parking spot, that eventually, you can't remember which friggin' building you need to go to. The closest I could get to the English Department was about three blocks away. And that put me five blocks away from the library.

I did as much of my work as I could, when I wasn't looking at my watch. I intended to give myself enough time to stroll, not run to our meeting place. I shelved the last book of the day, went to the bathroom to wash my hands and check my appearance and set out for our meeting place.

One block short of my destination, I looked ahead and found I was walking a dozen or so paces behind Terez. Carrying a leather satchel of books and notebooks, that woman moved so gracefully, her head held high. When she got right in front of the building's entrance, she paused and turned around. I'd love to think she could sense how close I was to her, but that's a romantic thought running contrary to my basic nature. I'm rooted in reality, not in some fairy tale idyllic nonsense.

"Hi, Jaie!" Terez smiled warmly and waved. "It's nice to see you again."

Quite frankly, I couldn't remember when I'd felt so happy to see someone, especially someone who was still very much a stranger. That wasn't being romantic, either, just pleased to see a very pretty woman who seemed pleased to see me, too.

"Hi! Looks as if you had to park a distance away and walk here, also." What kind of greeting was that?

Where was the 'smooth' me? "I had to park blocks away, almost in the next county."

Terez laughed at my exaggeration. "Parking is a challenge around here, isn't it?"

"You could say that."

She didn't seem to think I was a tongue-tied fool.

Terez pointed at a green and tan Subaru. "My car is right there at the end of the Oval. Why don't I drive?"

"Okay." How she had snagged a prime parking spot, I didn't know. She must have slept here overnight. "I like that model Sube. And the colors." More car chatter. What was going on with me today? We walked side by side down the sloping path toward her parking spot.

"Thanks. I bought it used from a friend of mine."

As we got closer to her car, I could see it was sporting a recent wash and wax. I thought about the ever-dulling finish on my rapidly aging Eclipse. "It looks good. More like 'previously owned' than 'used.' There is a difference, you know. And it looks like you take good care of it."

"I plan to keep this car for a long time, so I'd better take good care of it."

I wanted to add that she looks like she takes good care of herself, also. She did her loden green twill pants a favor just by wearing them. We got into her car and Terez began to drive. I looked at her as closely as I could without being rude, trying to commit to memory what I'd noticed about her yesterday when we first met in the English Department Office.

Terez was, quite simply, one of the best looking women I'd ever seen. In fact, she was so attractive that, if you stared at her for a while, she could hurt your feelings. Her profile was striking, from the top of her head all the way to her slacks-covered thighs. She wore her mass of dark curly tendrils brushed back from her face and tied together loosely in a ponytail.

Her creamy complexion provided the perfect contrast for her dark, luminous eyes. Terez's mouth was exquisitely and totally African-American. Her full lips broke into a smile easily, tempting me to imagine how they would feel touching mine, how they would taste. I couldn't stop myself from thinking if her writing were as captivating as her face and body, my chances of winning the Adamson Prize were going down the tubes. For a quick moment, I considered that if I had to trade winning the grant for a chance to know Terez better, maybe the prize wasn't as important to me as I thought it was.

Terez tapped the steering wheel with her fingertips. "Where am I driving us?"

"How about the Café Pronto? It shouldn't be crowded this time of day. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, I do." Terez tilted her head and glanced at me. "I've been there a couple of times."

I watched her smile enigmatically, as if she were remembering something slightly amusing.

"I know how to get us there."

Because the café was only five minutes from the university, I questioned the wisdom of picking that place instead of going to a coffee bar farther away, perhaps even one in downtown Philadelphia. But the Pronto had been my bright idea, not Terez's. The short drive there had the potential to end this date much too quickly. Maybe I could stretch it out by ordering a second cup of coffee. Otherwise, how would I have enough time to find out where she's from, what she likes to do, if she's with anyone? It would help if I knew if she were gay, also. Swooning over a straight woman is something I've learned to avoid. It's senseless and a waste of time, no matter how beautiful her cheekbones might be.

When we arrived at the café, we were the only two customers in the place. Terez gestured toward a small table. "How about over there by the window?"

"That's good." I thought about the last time I was here, seated on the patio. "It's too damp and cloudy today to sit outside."

I looked out the window and across the street, recalling the late afternoon when Isola Valdez spotted me from her seat at the Thai restaurant. Needless to say, ever since that episode, Isola has had no time for my ass. She'd shot me daggers the last two times we ran across each other on campus. If looks could kill, I'd be a dead woman right about now. I probably shouldn't have walked out on Isola that afternoon. Being slick does not always pay, and paybacks are not always slick.

Terez and I ordered our drinks and took them back to the table. I looked at her through the gauzy curtain of the steam swirling up and out of my cup. This was not a good time for me to remember Isola's sexy little line about licking coffee flavored foam from my face, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking about it each time Terez's mocha-colored lips made contact with her starkly white coffee mug. What would it be like to softly kiss and explore her mouth? Did I mention the calm and clear pools of dark brown light that are Terez's eyes? Probably not. I've been too busy trying not to drown in them every time she looks at me.

"So tell me about yourself, Jaie."

"Sure. I'm a Philly girl. Went to Clarkeson for my undergrad degree in English Lit. Stayed at Clarkeson for a Master's degree. Taught for a couple of unremarkable years. Now, I'm in a doc program here at Allerton. How about you?"

Terez looked at me, smiled slightly and shook her head from side to side. "Those eight to ten years whizzed by very quickly. Why do I think I just got the abridged version of Jaie Baxter?"

"Well, maybe if we go out for coffee again, I'll give you the unabridged version." Although I smiled as I responded to her remark, I hoped my eyes were sending her a serious request for a second date.

"That's a pretty clever way to set up a second meeting." Terez spoke matter-of-factly, not committing herself to seeing me again.

"I'm a clever person." That was a reflex, spoken without my thinking about it. Terez was killing me with her smile and a shy expression in her lushly lash-lined eyes. I couldn't have found a better answer for her if one had jumped up and bitten me. I resurrected my buddy Rasheeda's advice to not fall for a pretty face, and I decided on the spot I wasn't going to begin heeding her counsel now. I wasn't deaf, though. I did hear Terez use the word "meeting" to describe our coffee date.

I sat forward and said in a mock serious tone, "Terez, if this is a meeting, should one of us be taking the minutes?"

I meant for her to laugh, but my question had the opposite effect. She looked me straight in the eyes, her smile dissipating.

"I did say 'meeting,' didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Well, I didn't want to label this a date."

"Why is that?"

Terez brushed back a rebellious swirl of hair that was teasingly close to her right eye. "Jaie, I'm pretty sure you're flirting with me and that might mean you're gay. Are you assuming I am, also?"

Whoa! She stopped me in my tracks. I hadn't expected her to ask me that question nor to be so direct. Our conversation was traveling faster than I'd planned. And frankly, I was not terribly eager to hear Terez was a straight woman. I was more enthusiastic about enjoying this little coffee get-together, or meeting, or whatever it was. If Terez were to tell me she was 'strictly dicky,' this tête-à-tête would be over before it got started. So I answered her the best way I could, honestly. "I don't assume anything about anybody."

"I can see you're clever and wise--at such a young age, too." Her smile returned, lighting up her beautiful face. I felt as if I were back on safer ground, and happy Terez had abandoned her serious tone.

"Since you haven't disclosed any critical information about yourself, Terez, it seems I don't have the monopoly on clever. What about it, Ms. Overton? What's your story?"

Terez breathed deeply and then began her answer. "I grew up in Boston and that's where my family is. My mom is deceased, but my dad and my two brothers still live there. I went to Smith for my undergrad degree, U. Mass at Amherst for my Masters, and now I'm here at Allerton working on my doctorate. I thought I wanted to major in print journalism, and then somewhere along the line, I switched to the literature and writing track."

"So you went straight through from your under-grad degree to your Master's and now to your doctorate?" I couldn't tell Terez's exact age, and I was trying to figure it out.

"No, not exactly. I used my journalism training to work for a small town newspaper out on Cape Cod for two years. And I freelanced for a Boston area magazine at the same time."

I thought briefly about the advantages of earning a steady income while doing what I loved most, writing, and I couldn't believe anyone would give that up. "You didn't want to stick with that plan?"

"It was exciting at first, but then it became a daily grind. The newspaper wanted me to follow a formula, so I couldn't be creative, not even with the vocabulary. After a while, I saw the handwriting on the wall, and I didn't like what it said."

I sat back and looked at this gorgeous young woman, thinking Terez was surprisingly forthcoming about her history, considering my own reticence. "What about your freelancing job?"

"Oh, I liked that a lot. In fact, the editor of the Boston magazine gave me a contact here with the senior editor of a Philadelphia area magazine. If my workload at school ever lightens up, I can write an article and submit it. The extra cash would come in handy."

I was aware I enjoyed listening to Terez as well as looking at her. She pulled me in so easily with her comfortable familiarity and she gave off the kind of excitement and enthusiasm about life that could coax me away from my guarded coolness and understatement, if I were to give in to the coaxing.

I wondered how she felt about my life's single goal and major passion. "Do you like to write-- creatively, I mean? Not all this research related academic crap we have to do for our degrees."

"I love to write creatively." Terez leaned forward in her chair.

I echoed her movement, bending toward her. "Why?"

"Why do I love to write?"

"Yes. Why?"

She looked off into the space somewhere above my head before she answered my question. Then she stared calmly into my eyes. "Because I've always had an active imagination. And because I've always wanted to be able to draw or play a musical instrument or make a film. Writing does all those things for me. My word processor is like my paint brush or my saxophone or my camera."

At that moment, I wanted to reach over and take those lovely hands, which could draw or create music or make a film, and hold them in mine. I wanted to feel their warmth and softness. I wanted them to wipe away some of my past, to free me from the memories of some of the people I've known, some of the things I've heard, seen, and done. I wanted to feel new and expectant and hopeful. And I wanted to feel all of those things in Terez's hands. What a strange rush! I had no idea why I wanted all of that in such a short period of time, during a coffee "meeting" with a woman I'd met only days before.

"Why do you like to write, Jaie?" Terez moved back a bit in her chair, assessing me.

"I didn't say that I did."

"I know you do." She winked at me.

"How do you know?"

"You had the biggest smile on your face when I was describing my feelings. Your eyes lit up. And you nodded as if you understood what I was saying before I said it."

All of a sudden I began to lose my footing. Her wink had a smooth landing. I knew, however, that I was walking on unstable sand. I had to be careful, because this woman was watching me closely, and she seemed to know what I was feeling. There was no way I was ready for her to *really* know me. If I were brutally honest with myself, as attracted as I was to Terez at that moment, there was no way my life was ready for her. Period.

Terez pressed on with her interrogation. "You haven't answered my question yet. Why do you love to write?"

I blurted out my response. "Because composing fiction lets me be in control of everything on the page."

Now it was Terez's turn to nod. "Any other reasons?"

"No. I guess I don't have as many connections to my feelings about writing as you do."

Terez smiled knowingly. "That's okay. You've just told me a volume with your one sentence. I bet you're a natural, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" I tilted my head to one side, balancing my challenge with a crooked smile.

"I mean, writing is as natural for you as breathing is. You don't have to work at it."

Glancing down at her golden fingers wrapped around her coffee mug, I thought, '*or as natural as wanting to touch you.*' Instead, I asked, "Are you a therapist or something?"

"No." Then she added, "I've always been a good listener."

I was anxious to avoid any more personal questions, at least for the time being. As much as I wanted to find out the deal on Terez, I wasn't prepared to let her in on my deal. Not yet. "So, what will you do with your winnings if you get the Adamson Prize?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I'll travel to Denmark to do some primary research for my dissertation."

"Who or what is in Denmark?" I'd been in Terez's company for only an hour, and I knew already that Denmark was farther away from me than I wanted her to be.

"The University of Aarhus." Terez sounded so enthusiastic.

"Sorry, I've never heard of it."

"Not too many people have heard of it. It's where the Jorge Luis Borges Center for Studies and Documentation is located."

"So you're researching Borges?"

"Basically, I want to compare Borges with Toni Morrison. I'm not finished with my proposal yet, but I'm pretty sure it will be approved."

"It seems original, so that's a giant step in the right direction."

I thought about the ton of work that lies ahead of me. "I'm presenting my proposal two months from now."

"That's great! What's your topic, Jaie?"

"The cyclical creativity of black American writers during the Twentieth Century." I tried to gauge her reaction. "Does it sound too boring and scholarly?"

"It sounds fascinating. And it's supposed to be scholarly. Could you talk to me about it for a bit?"

Was she kidding? I could talk to her about it for hours. I was flattered by the sincerity of her interest. "Okay, but how about another cup of coffee?"

"Sure, I'd love one."

Our coffee talk went on for another hour and a half as I related my theory about the cycles of Black American creativity. I was so smitten with her curiosity about my topic I was barely aware of the turnover of customers who came into the café and left.

We continued sharing anecdotes about grad school in general and Allerton in particular. Terez was still doing her course work, so I tried to suggest who the better profs were. She was slated to be a teaching assistant in the fall, and she didn't seem to mind at all. I told her that if I were to win the Adam-son grant, it would be 'bye-bye to teaching freshman English. I'd be dedicating all of my time to research and dissertation writing.

Regrettably and certainly before I was ready to end our date, we found ourselves getting back into Terez's car and returning to mine at the edge of the campus. Double parked in a busy zone, we couldn't prolong our good-byes without some impatient fools beeping their car horns at us. I quickly reached through the open passenger side window and over the gearshift to shake Terez's hand.

"Thanks for the lift. I enjoyed myself."

She held her head slightly to one side and smiled gently. Did she have any idea her smile invaded my very being? That I felt enriched by it and just the slightest bit unnerved?

"I had a good time, too, Jaie."

"Maybe we could do this again sometime soon?"

She looked up at me, those dark eyes narrowing for a second and then widening in assent. "Yeah, I think we can."

The last thing I wanted to do was to turn her off with a terribly personal question, but I needed to know something important. "Terez, you were right. You zeroed in on me back at the café. I am a lesbian. And uh, I hope this isn't rude. Your answer doesn't really matter to me one way or the other. Uh, are you gay, also?"

She looked surprised, taken off guard for a second.

"I think my answer does matter to you, Jaie. Otherwise, you wouldn't have asked me. So, I'll answer you with a question of my own. Why do you think I might be a lesbian?" Not giving me a chance to respond, she coyly bit her lower lip and winked at me for the second time that afternoon. "Is it because I'm driving a Subaru?"

Armed with that non-answer and a seductive smile, she turned her attention to the street in front of her and drove away. I walked a few paces to my car, unlocked the door and wondered how many straight women knew that the success of marketing their cars to lesbians probably saved Subaru of America's corporate assets? Not many, I'll guess. I was fairly sure Ms. Overton was as gay as I was, only in a more subtle, low-keyed way. That fact, along with our quest for advanced degrees, might have been the only things we had in common with each other. Listening to her Boston-bred bio made it clear to me we'd spent our childhoods in different worlds.

Chapter Ten

DR. SENECA WILSON closed the door to her home for the final time. The three man crew from the Pride of Georgia Moving Company had loaded the last pieces of her furniture into their van two hours ago and started their trip from Seneca's Atlanta condo to a center city storage facility in Philadelphia. With her luggage already in the trunk of the taxi, Seneca slung her chocolate brown leather carry-on bag over her summer-weight red jacket-covered shoulder and glanced at her watch. She had three hours before her flight left Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

"You got a nice day to fly, Ma'am, warm and clear. No afternoon showers in the forecast." The cab driver nodded to her in his rear view mirror.

Seneca glanced out of the window. She didn't see a single cloud in the deep blue sky. "Yes, it is a nice day, isn't it?"

As the taxi made its way to the airport, Seneca turned around in her seat and watched the Atlanta skyline grow smaller and smaller. She'd loved living here for the past ten years. It was in this city where she'd earned her degrees and come into her own with the speed of a comet, briefly as a

teacher, then a school administrator, and finally as a school system consultant. It was here she'd become comfortable living alone. She had loved furnishing her Highlands condominium, filling it with the art that pleased her eyes, the music that soothed her ears, and the women, one at a time, who brought pleasure to her lean brown body.

Now she was ready to leave, to return to her hometown of Philadelphia, where a new job in an old school system beckoned her. Seneca was a change agent, a status quo shaker. The brash new director of the public schools in Philadelphia was familiar with Seneca's work in the Fulton County area, and she'd called on Seneca to bring her reform agenda home, back to the Northeastern urban district where she'd gone to elementary and high schools.

One by one, Seneca had encouraged a new generation of school administrators in this southern town to abandon their old time worn practices and to adopt new leadership techniques. Those middle management leaders who had lagged behind or had resisted Seneca's plans hadn't kept their jobs for long. It was either Seneca's way, or the doorway.

By no means an unwise woman, Seneca knew the upcoming fourth year of her program represented the pinnacle of her progress. When she had her staff study other evolving urban school systems around the country, they reported a downward spiral of student test scores that started slowly in the fourth year and rapidly increased their downward plunge in the fifth and sixth ones. Most of the reformers packed their bags late in the fourth year. Only a fool stayed with the program for the fifth one. And Seneca Wilson was no fool. So when the opportunity came knocking at the end of year three, she accepted it and decided to make tracks back to Philadelphia where, if national trends prevailed, she could buy herself another three to four years of professional success.

The cabby broke through Seneca's reminiscences.

"Which airline, Ma'am?"

"Delta, please."

"Okay. Here we are. Terminal B. Will this be all right?" He eased the cab into a barely vacant space, jumped out and opened her door on his way to the vehicle's trunk.

"Have a safe trip, Ma'am, and come on back to Atlanta real soon."

"Thank you." Seneca flashed him a quick smile, along with her cab fare and a generous tip. She saw Delta's curbside check-in facility, and she counted on the clerk having seen how generously she'd tipped the cabby. That way the clerk would, no doubt, forget his customary habit of letting the passengers lift their own baggage onto the scale. He would come around to the front of the platform and haul Seneca's luggage up the six inches or so onto the weighing mechanism. Her strategy worked. The airline employee scanned the weight read-out and then nodded.

"May I see your I.D. and your e-ticket please, Ma'am?"

"Sure." Seneca held out her well-manicured hand holding her driver's license and her flight information document.

The middle-aged man, beaming all the while, typed some data on his keyboard, separated the boarding pass from his printer and gave it to her.

"Have a good trip now."

"Thanks. You have a great day." Seneca entered the terminal and followed the crowd to the security checkpoint area.

"Please empty your pockets, remove your shoes and put them in the box next to your carry-on bag." The TSA guard, a solidly built woman who filled out every inch of her trousers and jacket uniform, spoke sternly. She gave Seneca a look that could liquefy iron. Seneca returned the woman's hard stare with one of her own dimple-punctuated smiles, knowing instantly she was dealing with one very butch lesbian and figuring she'd enjoy trying to charm her.

"Certainly, Officer. Anything to make your day easier."

After failing to intimidate Seneca with her first glance, the guard barely looked at her. Seneca, whose imagination was never at rest, considered her next flirtatious move. It was going to take more than a dazzling smile and an "anything to make your day easier" to get a rise from this woman, who obviously took the responsibilities of her job quite seriously.

Seneca imagined the possibility of the aggressive woman patting her down and probing her with her electronic wand. That mental picture brought a sly smile to the educator's lips and automatically, she found herself winking at the guard. "Now you have yourself a good day, Officer."

The uniformed woman softened a little as she took the time to look fully at Seneca's smile and receive the wink. "I sure will, honey. And you have yourself a good trip."

"I'm planning on it." Seneca knew she had the woman's full attention now.

The guard smiled broadly as she took all of Seneca in. "I hope you have a round-trip ticket and you're plannin' to come back and holla at me the next time you're in Atlanta. I'll be right here."

Seneca pursed her lips. "You know I will. You could be a good reason for me to come back."

The security officer sent Seneca a lingering glance. "Then come on back soon."

Seneca retrieved her belongings from the plastic bin and then took her time slipping her shoes back on. She knew two things for sure. First, the TSA officer was looking at her shapely legs and her tempting ass and was probably getting wet. And second, it was high time she got her grown self back to her hometown to take another look at the women in Philly. She had encountered some fine females in Georgia. And she'd had some good times. Now she was ready to immerse

herself in a serious relationship. And she was intent on searching for the one woman who would matter.

Seneca wondered what the black lesbian scene was like these days, what clubs were still open, and what places would be new to her. Having left the city years ago to attend Spelman College, she'd lost touch with most of her friends in her natal city. She last visited her home town five years ago when she attended her high school class reunion, and she had been shocked to see how much older so many of her classmates looked in such a short period of time.

Life in the tough neighborhood where her school was had aged her former friends. That didn't surprise her. Their lives were so different. Seneca had felt unlike most of her peers the whole time she was in high school. At first, she had resisted the stigma that clung to anyone who associated with "the brains" of the school. Then, she changed her tune, finding safety and refuge within that group of students. It seemed as if each one of them was an island, distinctive from each other, but alike in their desire to do better and to get away from their limited world of restricted opportunities.

Instead of being faced with universal scorn whenever she enjoyed a particular book or wanted to stay after school to talk with a teacher about an assignment, Seneca found an emotional haven knowing there were others like herself. She didn't have to live in fear of the mean-spirited taunts that would come her way if she raised her hand a lot in her classes. She didn't have to conceal a returned test or project that wore a huge red "A" on it.

What she did learn to hide, though, was her physical and emotional attraction to girls. She learned to walk that walk stealthily and to look at any girl who appealed to her in any way with what she called her "neutral eyes." She mastered the technique of taking in every part of an attractive female without showing any outward sign of interest, as if her eyes had built-in Venetian blinds.

She practiced this fake disinterest until she was midway through her junior year, when a roster change brought her into a French 3 class with a student named Jaie Baxter. From the moment she first spotted Jaie seated in the front row, the pretense was all over. Seneca forgot all she knew about her "neutral eyes." Blinds wide open, she stared openly and frankly at her new classmate from that first moment until their first physical experience. From then on, the only time Seneca closed her eyes was when they kissed or had sex. What she felt on those occasions had been so strong, so intense, that Seneca's instincts gave her no choice but to close her eyes. She recalled those two years with Jaie as clearly as she knew her own name.

THEY HAPPENED TO each other like a tornado. Seneca sated Jaie's hunger to belong to someone. Not content to see her only in school, Jaie made Seneca a twenty-four/seven obsession.

Seneca was smart, capable of getting anything she wanted with her smile-laced innuendoes and more experienced than Jaie in the girl-on-girl lovemaking department. Seneca could out-talk Jaie, out-think her, out-kiss her, out-fuck her. She wasn't ashamed to admit she came to know

Jaie's body better than Jaie knew it herself. She knew how to do things in bed (usually hers in the middle of the day when they cut a class or two while Seneca's mom was at work) that made them both blush when they replayed the scenes in their heads. Seneca liked having sex with Jaie a lot. And Jaie liked falling in love with Seneca.

Jaie introduced Seneca to her running buddies: Rasheeda, Amin, and Keyanna. All of them gay and out to each other, they called themselves the "Q Network." They had each others' backs. They formed a unit with an uncodified law of loyalty, because being gay or lesbian in an all black school was not easy, especially if it seemed as if you were the only one. They traveled the rough school terrain together, partied together, and in general, looked out for each other. They knew who the gay teachers were. They knew who the other gay kids were, even if those other kids were in the closet. And they weren't all about pulling the hidden ones out of their shelters. Being exposed was hard for some people. Jaie, especially, knew that. She couldn't forget the crap she had experienced at Prep, and she wouldn't wish it on anyone.

Rasheeda, Jaie's best friend, hooked up with a girl from her neighborhood, and they included her in their group during their weekend adventures. Amin, the sole boy in their crew, kept drooling over Keith, a Jefferson High basketballer. Keith was handsome as hell and a real sharp dresser. It didn't take a genius to understand why Amin was so far gone on him. But Rasheeda, Keyanna, and Jaie didn't believe Keith was gay, not when they saw the way he related to the females and the way the females responded to him. There was no way Amin was going to get some of what Keith had to offer. They kept telling Amin to be cool about his crush. Nobody wanted to see him get his heart broken, or his teeth knocked down his throat.

Keyanna was like the pre-Seneca Jaie, a solo flyer. The two of them cruised plenty of girls, the straight ones as well as the gay sisters. But they just wanted to fool around.

Before meeting Seneca, Jaie claimed she didn't know anyone at that school worth her trouble. She liked to think she had absolutely no time and even less money for fooling around with some female. She knew for a fact that none of those fly young things with their expensive jeans, nail jobs, and hair-dos wanted to get hooked up with her, broke as she was. And frankly, she wanted to spend her three years there hitting the books, writing her butt off, and hanging with the Q Network. By the time she negotiated all of that, plus staying out of her mother's way, she had enough to keep herself busy.

SENECA SETTLED INTO her seat on the plane. Still focusing on her memories, she ignored the obligatory safety video flashing across the monitor recessed in the seat in front of her. Instead, she remembered how she made life at Jefferson High a little more complicated for Jaie Baxter. And she recalled how Jaie's mother was always an annoying presence in their lives, especially whenever Jaie's funds were low. Seneca replayed the time in the fall of their junior year when, cursing her neediness, Jaie told her how she'd acquired the latest battle scars from the ongoing war with her mom.

"Why are you all up in my face askin' for money again? The elder Ms. Baxter, seated at the kitchen table, looked at her empty glass as if she couldn't remember how it had gotten that way.

"I need money to register for the S.A.T., Mom."

"Don't even think about takin' that test, Jaie. It's a waste of your time and my money." Her eyes lit up momentarily as she suddenly made the connection between the empty glass, the half empty bottle next to it, and her slight buzz.

"But, I do need to take that test. If I don't, I won't be able to apply to college."

Jaie had explained this to her mother before, several times. But she would explain it again if she had to. Her S.A.T. application was due two days from now. If she could get the money tonight, she'd be able to go to the Post Office tomorrow and have it postmarked on time.

Yvonne Baxter glared at her daughter. "What do you mean apply to college? You're plannin' on doin' that instead of gettin' a full-time job? You think you're too good to work? You're lazy!"

Jaie later told Seneca she knew by her mom's tone, she was this close to her parent's flash point. But her frustration got the better of her judgment. "If I was lazy, I wouldn't want to go to college."

"Yeah, right!" The older woman rationed three gulps worth of the Colt 45 and poured them into her glass. She took a modest swig, deluding herself that small sips could keep her sober so she could win the argument with Jaie. "Who the hell's gonna pay for you to go to college? Not me!"

"I'll get a scholarship. Don't worry about it."

"Oh, I'm not worryin' about it, 'cause you're not goin'."

"I am going, Mom. That stupid Jefferson High School is not going to be the end of my education."

"Then you can go half days to Community, or at night. It's real cheap. Get a job and work the rest of the time." Jaie saw that as usual, her mother had her dead-end future all mapped out for her.

"I want to go to a university and major in English." Jaie knew it was a mistake to give her this ammunition. It was too late to take back the words.

"Major in English? What the hell kinda' job can you get by majorin' in English?"

"I'm going to be a writer. I keep telling you that."

"And I keep tellin' you, you can't earn any money bein' a writer. You're not gonna live here with me all your life, you know."

"Like that's a threat! Thank you, Jesus!"

That was it! Jaie knew she had crossed the line! Yvonne Baxter threw her glass at her child and for a half drunk woman, her aim was pretty good. The tumbler smacked against Jaie's forehead before it crashed to the floor, where beer-drenched shards of glass surrounded her feet.

Undaunted by what she'd done, Yvonne capped her assault with, "Are you satisfied now? That was my last 45, goddamn it!"

That was the one time Seneca recalled crying for Jaie as she listened to her girlfriend's description of the cold beer seeping into her one decent pair of sneakers. Jaie refused to complain. She simply told Seneca how her head had throbbed where the glass collided with it and that all she could think about was how she was going to look and smell the next day at school, when she was supposed to stand up and be honored with the eleventh grade creative writing prize. Jaie figured that maybe, if she used enough detergent, she could wash the smell of beer out of her sneaks. Even if they were still half wet when she had to wear them the next day, they wouldn't reek like she'd spent the night in some bar.

The pulsing knot on her forehead was another story. It wasn't like she could hide it by combing her short natural hairstyle over one side of her face. She'd have to invent some drama to explain the reddish-purple bulge.

Seneca shifted a bit in her Business Class seat, grateful for the advantage of the extra space that, after all, she deserved. She continued to think about Jaie and to wonder where she might be. Perhaps still in Philadelphia, perhaps somewhere else.

During her ten years spent in Atlanta, Seneca held onto the recollection of Jaie's having told all of their friends that from the moment she'd first laid her eyes on Seneca in the French 3 class, she knew she wanted to lay her hands on her. Seneca was proud of having caused Jaie to abandon her playing-without-paying attitude.

Jaie bragged that the only thing she'd known about Seneca was how good she looked. The first opportunity she had, she'd asked Seneca what she was all about. And Seneca had, had an answer for her classmate's fine clear-eyed self.

"I'm all about getting to know you, Jaie."

That's how smooth Seneca was. Jaie thought she was pretty cool, but Seneca out-froze ice. She slipped into their little Q Network before any of them could see her coming.

Chapter Eleven

MY FRIENDS KNOW I'm always right on time. I have a reputation for being on-the-dot punctual. So I couldn't understand why I was knocking on Terez's door ten minutes earlier than I said I would. I could have stayed in my car for a few moments longer instead of standing here wondering if she would label my premature arrival "rude" or "overly eager."

After our first coffee date, we went out two more times. It hadn't taken me long to discover I always enjoyed the first blush of seeing Terez. Those first few seconds of taking her in never failed to give me a burst of pleasure that began in my eyes and voyaged to every other place in my body, sometimes robbing me momentarily of my ability to say anything intelligible. On time or early, I was beginning to crave the "first look at Terez" bolt I knew I'd experience any second now.

"Hi, Jaie."

"Hey, Terez. I hope it's okay I'm a little bit early."

"It's perfectly fine. Come on in." Terez smiled warmly at me.

I let my eyes wander from her smile long enough to look at all of her lovely self. I admired the way her brightly colored silk shirt defined the soft creaminess of her throat. How its texture made me want to touch it and to caress her skin. "You look nice, Terez. Orange is very, uh. It's a good color for you..."

"Thanks. You clean up pretty nicely yourself." Terez appraised my appearance. "I like those blue slacks."

"Not bad for a struggling grad student, huh?" The struggle I alluded to wasn't a financial one. I'd tried on four different outfits before I finally made peace with this navy one. And we were only going into the city for dinner and then to the movies. God only knows how long it would have taken me to deal with my wardrobe crisis if Terez and I had been planning to go to some real formal event.

When we left her apartment and reached my car, Terez hesitated. "I don't mind driving, you know. You were the chauffeur the last time we went out."

I smiled at her, appreciatively. "Hey, I'm not keeping score. Besides, I know where we're going. It might be easier if I drive."

"Okay, but the best way for me to learn a new territory is by driving there myself. Once I've found my way there, I can always get back to it if I want to."

I looked quickly at my date, smiling mischievously at her. "Are you speaking metaphorically?"

"No, Jaie. I'm speaking factually." Terez chuckled, keeping most of the laugh to herself. "Nice try."

"I'm glad you get my subtle sense of humor, girl." Of course, if I had to say that, I was no longer being indirect nor understated.

"Oh, I get your subtleties all right." Terez looked at me and shook her head. "Like I said, nice try."

I took the long route into Philly, through parts of Mt. Airy, down the winding path that was Lincoln Drive and finally along the four-lane road that bordered the Schuylkill River. We passed compact brick rowhouses with neatly mowed lawns and pastel-colored roses abloom. Those neighborhoods led to wider streets with large imposing stone homes: colonials, federals and an occasional Spanish hacienda-style dwelling, many of them accented by ancient yews and separated from their neighboring properties by stately wrought iron gates. The houses' leaded glass windows reflected the traffic flowing toward the two river routes, one east and the other west. Each thoroughfare flanked the brownish-green water and shared the landscape with the joggers and roller-bladers dodging the ruptures in the wide cement walkway that edged Martin Luther King Drive.

Spotting some rowers skimming the surface of the river, I turned slightly to Terez. "There's always somebody out rowing on this river. Do you like going to regattas?"

"Oh, sure. I'm from Boston, remember? How about you?"

"Yeah, when I was a kid, a bunch of us would ride our bikes down here just to look at the college folks. And my brother had a little parking hustle going on. He got one of those long flashlights, the kind the cops have. And he would use it to direct drivers to a parking spot. Lots of times they'd give him a tip, and he'd come home with his pockets full of change and an occasional dollar bill."

Terez seemed to visualize what I was describing. "That was industrious of him."

I nodded and smiled at my memory. "It was, until the parking authority started giving out tickets because Kashif had people leaving their cars in a 'No Parking' area."

"Oh, no! What happened to your brother?"

"By the time the people discovered the tickets on their windshield, Kashif was long gone. He was out of there." I avoided answering the bigger question about what happened to my brother. I wasn't ready to test Terez's waters. Not yet. "So, I guess you knew a few rowers up in Boston, huh?"

"Yes, I did. I almost married one."

"What?" Terez had my full attention.

"The day the printer delivered the wedding invitations, I knew I had to be honest with myself and with my family. I came out to my parents, and I called the whole thing off."

"That was dramatic." I diverted my eyes from the road long enough to glance at Terez's profile. "But good for you for being true to yourself and for not going through with it."

"Yeah. It was hard when it happened, but it was the best thing I could have done."

I nodded in her direction. "How did your fiancé react?"

"The way you might expect. He was appropriately hurt and angry."

"What about your folks?"

"Oh, let's just say they weren't amused. My mom took it the hardest, but she came around eventually. I think she was embarrassed in front of her friends. It was bad enough I disclosed my sexuality, but then I had to cancel the wedding."

"Doesn't one follow the other?"

"Sure. But you know. A wedding is more for the parents and their friends than it is for the bride and groom."

"I've never been there, so I wouldn't know." I wanted to hear more about this episode from Terez's past. "What about your dad? How did he take it?"

I could feel the smile spreading on Terez's face.

"He was great about it. He never made me feel as if I'd failed him. He told me it was probably for the best, and I'd saved him a bucket of money."

"Great comeback." Just hearing how her father had reacted to the news his daughter was gay explained Terez's smile.

"Dad is pretty progressive. He's kind, also."

"I'd like to meet your father some day."

Terez shot me a sideways glance. "We could arrange that."

I cleared my throat and negotiated a deep curve on the River Drive. "So, do you ever see or talk to the guy you almost married?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I saw him in Atlanta two Junes ago at Gay Pride."

I couldn't suppress a wide smile. "Get out."

"Yup. It's true."

"Damn, you just never know, do you? Life is strange."

"That's true, also."

We rounded the Art Museum Circle and headed to Olde City where we got lucky and found a parking spot on the street a few blocks from the restaurant we'd decided on. The walk there gave me more time to listen to Terez talk about growing up in Boston and spending her summers out on Cape Cod. I loved watching her as she talked about her family. And I loved hearing what it was like growing up in the protective nest of the Overtons. Her stories made me thoughtful, and I realized I felt a little apprehensive because our childhoods had been so different. Maybe being in a similar space as adults would be the equalizer.

We'd narrowed our restaurant choices to the few that were gay-owned, gay-friendly, or woman-owned and not far from the movie complex where we were headed after dinner. Rising to the top of our short list was "Pass The Thyme."

The newly opened eatery was located in a block of Philly-typical attached buildings caught in the culture war between the minimalist renovators and the historically accurate ones. It was the new food lab run by one of the city's better-known lesbian chefs. Eating there would let us spend our cash in a politically responsible way. More importantly, selecting from the chef's small plate menu let us feel like foodies perfectly at home with a new trend while we conformed to the restrictions of our grad student budgets. Cheap eats served with flair and panache. Who could ask for anything more?

We made it a point to order different foods and then share bites from each other's meal. Terez convinced me to taste some of her cold cucumber soup and even though I detest yogurt, I couldn't turn down those brown eyes when she offered me a spoonful. She could have offered me her sexy smile along with a lye-on-rye sandwich, and I would have accepted it gratefully. Of course, I didn't let her know that. I was perfectly cool and composed as I picked up my fork to pierce a lemon-drenched prawn, intending to place it on her plate. And I stopped breathing for the two seconds it took for her to intercept my fork, cup my hand with hers and redirect the pink crustacean to her lips.

As much as I wanted to make dinner a drawn out affair, I knew we had a movie we intended to see, so we left our money inside the restaurant bill and hurried down the three blocks separating us from the theater.

I'd been looking forward to going to the movies with Terez, to sitting close to her in a darkened theater, and to feeling the warmth radiate from her body to mine. I'd anticipated listening for her breathing, inhaling her fragrance, imagining her heartbeat could match the pace of mine. I didn't care what movie we were going to see. It didn't matter. Being physically close to her for nearly two hours was what counted.

As it turned out, the film was one of those light-as-lemon-chiffon, girl-marries-boy-and-then-meets-girl-of-her-wet-dreams-and-leaves-boy-in-a-New-York-minute movies, which sent me walking back to the car with a feeling of affirmation about my right to love whomever I fall in

love with. Terez didn't say what, if anything, the movie did for her. I was curious, but then I was curious about a lot of things that had to do with Terez. The more she told me, the more I wanted to know. Where were our dates with each other going? What did she feel about us? One thing was sure. I didn't plan to ask her.

On the drive back to Allerton, we made a game of remembering our route.

"Okay, Terez. Do I turn left at the next traffic light?" I shot her a quiz question.

"Not unless you want to end up in the river!"

"Excellent answer! But I thought you could find your way back only if you drove." I challenged my passenger.

"I lied. I can always find my way back." Her fiery rejoinder challenged me.

"Even if it's the first time you've been somewhere?"

"Especially if it's the first time. And especially if someone else has taken me there. It's one of those independent, self-preservation skills I've acquired."

I looked over to her and tilted my head. "We need to talk about this some more."

"Not really, Ms. Baxter." Terez laughed. "But let's talk about you."

"What about me?"

"Let's see. You know all about my parents and my brothers. What about your mom and dad?"

"We don't have enough time tonight to talk about them." So far, I'd been able to skate around my family's history, and I could tell my luck was just about up. Terez seemed determined to learn at least something about my folks. I didn't blame her. She had shared so much, and I'd told her virtually nothing. At that moment, I chose to think her curiosity about me and my family was a good thing. Maybe it meant she was looking at the possibility of a relationship between us, something deeper than coffee dates and dinners with a movie.

"We must have enough time for you to talk about someone who is important to you. How about your dad?"

"Good choice. That won't take long at all. He and my mom used to argue and fight all the time. One day he got fed up. He walked out. Just left the house with my mom continuing to yell at his back. He never returned." I stole a quick glance at Terez, trying to gauge how she was handling this information.

"Where did he go?"

"We never knew for sure. After a while, my mom started putting his stuff out on top of the rubbish cans the night before trash day, which was Tuesday. She got rid of a little at a time." I drifted away from my monologue for a second. "I had this fantasy that every Monday night he used to come by the house and look for the bedroom lights to be on. You know, just to see if my brother and I were safe up in our rooms. Anyway, when he saw his clothes out there on the trash pile, he'd pick them up."

"Didn't he ever come back to see you and your brother?"

"Not at the house." I knew I'd seen him at Kashif's funeral, standing at the back of the funeral parlor. But I wasn't going to get into all of that now. "I saw him at my high school graduation."

"Did you speak to him, or get a hug from him?"

"No. When the principal called my name and handed me my diploma, I looked in his direction. He waved at me and smiled."

"Jaie, how did that make you feel?" Terez's tone was soft and gentle "Uh-oh. Now I'm talking to Dr. Overton, the therapist."

"No, you're not. I'm just trying to get to know you." She gave us both a rest for a moment. "What about your mother? What's she like?"

"I'm not even going there tonight. I almost have you home, anyway."

A few mostly quiet miles later, as I steered my car into a parking slot right in front of Terez's apartment building, I heard the jingling of her keys. She fished them out of her bag and dangled the glinting metal pieces from her right hand.

"Dinner was great, Jaie, and the movie was a lot of fun. Thanks for asking me out."

"You're quite welcome. I had a good time, too." I noticed she wasn't asking me to come in for coffee or anything, and I didn't want to look as if I expected her to. Just as I was ready to ask when we might see each other again, the ringing of her cell phone rudely stanching my question.

Terez scrambled to rescue the minuscule receiver from the pit of her handbag. "Excuse me."

"Hey, go ahead and answer it. It's okay." I watched as she checked the caller I.D. and dispatched the caller to her voice mailbox. She slipped the phone back into her bag, but not before I read the letters "MA-N" on its little screen.

"This call can wait. It's not that important." Terez hooked her finger under the lock and pushed open the passenger door. "Thanks, Jaie." Then, as an afterthought, "Uh, did you want to come up for a while?"

Unconvinced the invitation was anything other than a New Englander's polite formality, I declined. I was too proud to be a postscript. "No thanks, Terez. Maybe the next time."

"I hope there will be a next time, Jaie. I feel as if tonight is ending just as I was beginning to learn something about you and your family." Terez's look of regret our evening was over reignited my continual need to spend more time with her and to swim toward a deeper level of intimacy.

"You can believe there will be a next time."

"Call me?"

"We can call each other, girl."

Chapter Twelve

"THIS WILL DO just fine for the time being." Seneca Wilson acknowledged the rental agent's questioning expression. "I'll be happy to sign the lease."

"Wonderful, Dr. Wilson. I have it right here." He indicated they could finish the paperwork at the breakfast bar. "Just sign and date the form on these lines."

Seneca perused the lease and finding nothing beyond the routine wording, placed her signature at the bottom of the contract.

"Thanks. Now, when would you like to move in?"

"My furniture is in storage. I can probably arrange for it to be delivered within the next two weeks."

"Excellent. The painters will be finished in here in another two days. And the carpeting gets installed on Friday. Just give me a phone call the day before you move and I'll have the service elevators reserved for you." The agent folded the lease agreement and put it inside an envelope.

"Thanks."

"You can take your time in here if you wish, in case you want to measure the windows or plan your furniture placement." After the requisite smile, he added, "And welcome to The Parkway Towers!"

Seneca nodded. "I'll meet you down in the rental office in a little while. I do want to take some measurements."

"Sure, sure. No hurry. I'll have the copy of your lease ready for you when you come downstairs. Here are the keys. Just lock up when you're finished."

Seneca waited for the agent to leave before she walked through each of the five rooms of the apartment, pausing to look out a window or to gauge where some piece of her furniture would go once it got there. Finding this place had been a coup. She was only two blocks from the Philadelphia Museum of Art and just a short ride to the city's shopping areas and to her office in the School District's headquarters.

Her car, transported from Atlanta by a courier, had arrived in Philly the day after she did, although she hadn't had much time to explore and rediscover her city. Searching for an apartment had been her top priority. Her three-year pact with the School District wouldn't begin until the first of August. So she had plenty of time to seek out her old haunts, or at least the haunts her underage counterfeit-I.D.-card-carrying self had tried to get into years ago. Who knew if any of those clubs and bars were still around? Not the way gay bars and women's clubs folded up so quickly.

Seneca reached into her leather portfolio to find her organizer. She tapped on its keyboard, listening for the beep that assured her the little electronic device still had the names and phone numbers of some of her old hometown friends. She'd call a few people tonight; now she'd be able to tell them about this upscale address, instead of the all-suites hotel where she'd been staying since she flew into town. Starting at the end of the alphabet, she pictured each friend as she scrolled through their names.

Remembering some of them brought a smile to her face and a couple even made her laugh out loud. When she reached the B's, though, and saw the name 'Jaie Baxter,' her smile turned to a look of longing. Standing in the empty master bedroom all by herself, Seneca imagined Jaie there by her side. She summoned the sensation of Jaie's body lying on top of hers on her bed, on the sofa, on the floor. Ten years ago, sex with Jaie had been the best she'd ever had up to that point in her young life. Even the make-up variety they'd experienced after their arguments had been memorable.

SENECA COULD STILL remember the Saturday in late March of their senior year when the "Q Network" agreed to go to this house party. Amin had his older brother's car that night, so he picked them up, one by one. They just knew the party was going to be a good time, even though it was hosted by a straight girl. They could handle that. And they would have handled it fine, except for one problem. Keith, the non-gay stud of Amin's fantasies, got aggressive with his thing for Seneca.

From the moment they arrived at the party, Seneca knew Jaie had spotted Keith checking out her girlfriend's body. But Jaie tried to play it off like she did every time she saw him staring hungrily

at Seneca. She'd open her lips slightly, blowing a little air through them and making a whistling sound while she called him a "dickhead."

Seneca figured Keith knew what was up between her and Jaie. So she gave him credit for still being interested in her. More than that, she wanted to see just how interested he was. She accepted the paper cup of cheap rot gut wine Jaie handed her, and she noticed how fast Jaie chugged her cup of the red swill.

Then Seneca strolled a few steps away from Jaie. She turned around in time to see Jaie motioning for Amin to approach, and she listened carefully as Jaie spoke to her male running buddy.

"Hey, Amin. Your heartthrob, Keith, keeps trying to undress Seneca with his eyes."

Seneca watched Amin rest his hand on Jaie's arm.

"I see that, girl. He's been at it ever since we got here. I tried to distract him with my fine self, but I don't think he's noticed me."

"Well, if he keeps it up, he's going to notice me." Jaie smiled at Amin. Seneca and any of their friends who were paying attention knew Jaie wasn't smiling on the inside. The needle was rising fast on her annoyance meter.

"Just be cool, Jaie. Watch me parade my stuff." Amin left Jaie's side and strolled slowly past Keith, giving him a great big smile before taking up residence against the nearby wall.

Jaie and Seneca were on the verge of believing Amin's act had worked, because they saw Keith leave his post and walk toward their friend. Then, Keith stopped when he reached Seneca. A few inches taller than she, he lowered his head and said something in her ear. Seneca recalled looking up at him and laughing before they started dancing together to a slow song.

Amin shot Jaie a look of disbelief and fear. In an instant, Jaie looked for someplace to deposit her wine. She took one step in the dancers' direction when she felt an arm go around her and hold her stock-still.

"Hey, Jaie. Hold on girl." Keyanna's grip kept her from moving

"Let me go, Key."

"Not 'til you calm down. They're just dancing. Let it slide." Keyanna waited until she could sense Jaie's resistance to her lessen. Then, she released her friend.

Now Rasheeda was standing right in front of Jaie, blocking her path and her view. "It's not worth a fight, Jaie."

From her slot inside Keith's arms, Seneca looked at Jaie and saw the angry tears start to well up in her lover's eyes. The pain Jaie was feeling didn't stop Seneca from enjoying the dance. The song ended and Seneca felt Keith relax his embrace. Again, he bent his head and whispered something into her ear. And again, Seneca looked back at him and laughed. Rasheeda and Keyanna moved away from Jaie slowly, as if they were clearing a path between the two women. A contrite Seneca glided over to Jaie and smiled weakly at her.

"You okay, Jaie?" She struggled to be able to look directly into Jaie's eyes.

"No."

"Want some more wine?"

"What I want is to dance with you." Jaie reached for Seneca's hand, but Seneca very deftly moved out of her range, and back across the room to Keith.

After that party had come and gone, Seneca often wondered exactly when Jaie jumped into a pool of insight about her mom's drinking habits. That night, Seneca watched Jaie swim defiantly toward another cup or two or three of wine. Jaie must have figured if liquor had the soothing power to stop her Mom's pain, maybe it could take the edge off her ache, too.

By the time the "Q Network" was ready to leave the party, Jaie was three sheets to the wind and crying endless tears. The last thing Seneca wanted to do was leave the party with a broken-down Jaie. She didn't care who was driving. She wasn't going to be seen with any drunk, wailing chick. She'd stay a little longer and get a ride home with Keith.

Rasheeda called Seneca early the next morning to tell her Jaie was okay, mad but all right. After stopping for a cup of "sobering-up" coffee at an all night donut shop where Amin knew they wouldn't get a curfew hassle, they drove Jaie home and walked up the front steps with her. Keyanna propped her up in the doorway while Amin rang the bell. They knew all about Mrs. Baxter's drunken tirades, and they were afraid to face her. Turned out they didn't need to fear a scene, because the only thing her Mom did was laugh and say, "Girl...you tore up. Go on up to bed with your drunk-ass self."

SENECA SHUT DOWN her organizer and put it away. Each one of her memories filled her with determination to find her high school era lover, even if she had to go to every women's bar in the city. Someone would know where Jaie Baxter could be found.

Chapter Thirteen

JUNE MEANS PRIDE Month all over the country. In Philadelphia, Pride celebrations mean parties, workshops, parades, outrageous behavior, righteous proclamations, religious right/wrong protests, and me catching up with my friends in the city. This particular Pride got here before I knew it. I'd been so involved with the grant application and my research, I barely knew what month it was, much less what was going on. My skin realized the sudden need to turn on the air conditioner in my apartment. For some reason, though, my brain failed to connect the soaring temperature with the date on the calendar. Consequently, by the time I paid attention, a lot of the annual pride events were local history.

The one event I hadn't missed was the weekend street fair where I knew I'd find a hodgepodge of everything and everyone. So I phoned Rasheeda and arranged to meet her on Saturday at a certain intersection near the "gayborhood." Rasheeda worked at a geriatric center, and this was her weekend off.

I knew I'd run into some of my other friends there, and I especially wanted to introduce Terez to them and to this part of the city's gay culture. Taking a chance she didn't have plans for Saturday afternoon, I called her. It was high time she got to know Rasheeda. Maybe it would put an end to my friend's jerking my chain every time I mentioned Terez's name to her. If she could only see Terez, just once.

"Hello, Terez?"

"Hello, back at you, Jaie."

She always said that when I telephoned her. Some women would have made "back at you" sound corny, but it flowed out of Terez's mouth in this fluid sexy way that always wrapped me right into a conversation with her.

"I'm going into Philly tomorrow to check out the Pride street fair, and I wondered if you'd like to come along."

"Oh, Jaie, I would have loved that. But I promised someone else I'd meet her there."

"Damn!" was not a socially acceptable response, so instead I mumbled, "Yeah, well, it's good you're going. You'll enjoy yourself. I know I usually do."

"Maybe we'll see each other there. Oh, Jaie, before I forget, have you heard any news about the grant?"

"You're not going to believe this, Terez. I've been so busy I've almost forgotten about it." *And I've been somewhat preoccupied thinking about you, baby, and wondering why I haven't been paying attention to anyone else.* If I hadn't lacked the guts to say that, I would have added it to my response.

"That is hard to believe. A couple of months ago, it was all you talked about."

Yeah, well a couple of months ago, we didn't know each other. "I guess my priorities have changed."

"Maybe that's okay." She paused, but I could hear her voice had *hasta la vista* imprinted on it.

"Listen, I'll look for you down at the Pride event." And for your 'someone else,' I thought.

"Okay. Enjoy!" Terez cut the conversation short, along with my plans to be with her at the public gay and lesbian celebration

THE LATE-JUNE SUN warmed up the entire city, most particularly the crowded area designated for the street fair. I'd been standing on the corner waiting for Rasheeda for a few moments when I heard her call my name.

"Jaie! How you doin'?"

I gave her a huge hug. "Just fine, Rasheeda. How are you?"

"I'm okay."

I looked around for her partner, Sandi. When I called Rasheeda about our meeting down here today, I wanted to ask how things were going with her on-again-off-again lover. I didn't want to upset her, though. Now that we were face to face, I couldn't avoid the topic. Sandi's absence was too obvious.

"It's just me, Jaie. You can stop looking for Sandi."

"You two haven't patched things up yet?"

"No, and as much as I miss her, we might not ever patch things up."

I could tell my buddy's break-up was taking a toll on her. Rasheeda was usually very bubbly, always up. Now she was subdued and somber. The tone of her voice hovered above one note instead of its customary multi-scale range, and the usual staccato speed of her speech had slowed to a crawl. It might have been my imagination, but it looked to me as if her tall frame had gotten shorter. Her shoulders sagged.

"Have you two seen each other recently? Have you tried to talk about your problems?" I didn't know what else to ask. As close as we were, Rasheeda hadn't told me why she and Sandi had split, and I thought it best to wait until she was ready to open up about it.

Rasheeda replaced the sadness in her eyes with an angry glint. "There's nothing to talk about. Sandi knows what she did."

"Okay, Rasheeda. Stay calm, girl." I patted her arm, trying to soothe her. "It'll be all right eventually. Trust me. You know I've been there."

Rasheeda nodded mechanically, acknowledging my words, while not accepting them as the truth. "Let's see what's going on down here at this fair."

We started strolling along the people-clogged street, in no particular hurry, just taking everything in. It wasn't long before we got caught up in the spirit of things. An intense drumbeat undercut by a bass thumped through the air. Scantly dressed drag queens on rollerblades zoomed in and out of the multi-hued crowd. Savvy political types had their young button-down- shirt-wearing staffers gathering signatures on petitions. All kinds of people, from the

I.D. toting young ones to the gray crew cut and mustachioed mature folks, lined up at the beer and fruit-flavored vodka concessions.

Rasheeda tapped my arm. "Jaie, doesn't this remind you of Commercial Street in P-town?"

"Yeah, kinda." I knew what she meant. The hot weather, the shirtless gym-toned boys on bikes, the young pierced and tattooed dykes, the rainbow flags everywhere. I could almost smell the suntan lotion of Herring Cove Beach and imagine the fragrance of the cologne du soir in the after hours clubs. And like midsummer Commercial Street, the sidewalk was much too narrow to define where people could walk.

Rasheeda and I stopped at the first Pride Wear booth we came to, and we both bought strands of very long, very colorful rainbow beads.

"This will be another necklace to add to my collection." I adjusted the mile long strand, doubling it around my neck.

"I usually give mine to my niece." Rasheeda roped herself with her new acquisition.

"Rah! I didn't know your niece was gay!"

"She isn't. Or at least not yet. She's only seven years old, but she's completely in love with cheap flashy jewelry." Rasheeda shot me the smile I'd almost forgotten she had.

"Yeah, but do you think you're setting her up...?" I stopped mid-sentence.

"What did you say?"

By now I'd stopped walking as well as talking.

"You're going to think I've lost my mind. I believe I just saw Seneca Wilson ahead of us in the next block." "Seneca Wilson? Your Seneca Wilson? From Jefferson High?"

"Yeah. That Seneca Wilson." Aside from my heart beating rapidly and my face suddenly streaked with heat, I didn't know exactly what I was feeling.

Rasheeda became serious, quiet. "Do you want to try to catch up with her?"

I guess she didn't know what I was going to do. Neither did I. I just stood there, galvanized. "I don't know, Rah'. Maybe I'll just leave it to fate. If it is her and we're supposed to see each other, we will. If not, we won't."

This didn't sound like me and Rasheeda couldn't just drop it.

"Why leave it to fate? You don't have anything else going on right now, except this Terez Overton chick who you say is dating someone else as well as you. So what's up with this 'what will be will be' crap?"

Clearly, Rasheeda didn't buy into my passive response to seeing Seneca. What she said about Terez sort of snapped me out of my que sera, sera trance.

"Thanks for your vote of confidence about my future with Terez." I had to smile at Rasheeda's attempt to bring me back to reality about my love life. "Anyway, if it was Seneca, this is no place for a reunion. Too many people and too much noise."

"If you ever do have a reunion with that crazy broad, you'd better have a lot of witnesses. You can trust her as far as you can throw a tank."

"Yes, Mother."

We dropped the Seneca subject as quickly as it had surfaced and walked on a little farther, pausing to pick up some travel brochures and dance club flyers. Rasheeda ran into some friends of hers from work, and she stopped to introduce me to them. I could always tell when she was talking to single women, because Rasheeda would refer to me as her "running buddy" or her "old friend from high school." That way, they'd know at least one of us, if not both, was unattached and available.

A little while later, we reached the end of the temporary merchant circuit, and we agreed to do an about-face and head back toward our starting point. Although we had traveled the entire route of the fair, we'd never caught up with the Seneca look-alike. And I hadn't seen Terez.

The crowd thickened in the time we'd been there. Semi-familiar faces floated past my field of vision. Openly exchanged glances and smiles had me wondering if I'd truly seen some of these people before, or if it was simply a matter of seeing a whole lot of the anonymous women I'd danced with, had drinks with, cruised and flirted with, and considered having sex with. Absentmindedly, I wiped away a drop of sweat racing down the side of my face.

"Hey, do you want to get something cold to drink?" Rasheeda read my mind.

"That sounds like a good idea. Do you want to get something here on the street, or go somewhere else?"

Rasheeda thought for a second. "Let's walk over to the Era Café."

"You're on." I'd been imagining the cool flavor of an iced coffee for the last ten minutes. By now, I was so hot I felt as if I could float in a huge vat of the cold liquid.

We covered the short distance between the street fair and the café in no time. Just as we got there, we saw a couple get up and vacate one of the outdoor tables. While Rasheeda commandeered two chairs, I went inside and bought us each a beverage. I would have preferred sitting inside, away from the outdoor heat and the ever-present odor of sewer gas drifting over us. But then we'd miss the constant parade of poseurs sashaying by like runway models. I didn't want to give up a second of Rasheeda's constant commentary nor her double dares, challenging me to approach some really fine sister displaying herself for our entertainment.

I carried our drinks and some napkins, butted the door open, and, with a flourish, placed everything down on the bistro table.

Rasheeda acknowledged my prompt capable service. "Thank you, Ma'am. This is just what I need right now." After a few seconds of silent introspection, my friend asked about my current drinking habits. "Girl, are you still chuggin' down gallons of coffee?"

"Yup. I'm truly addicted." I thought about my love for the dark elixir. "It keeps me awake when I have a lot of reading to do."

Rasheeda leaned back to take a long look at me. "You know I really admire you. It was gutsy to resign from your teaching job to go back to school. I couldn't have done it, sistah."

"Well, I knew teaching wasn't for me, even though I love learning and being a student."

"Yeah, I remember that about you from high school and college." Rasheeda paused long enough to look at a young black woman strutting at a brisk pace on the other side of the street. It was as if she couldn't talk and look at the same time. Eventually she returned her gaze to me. "So what's it like at Allerton? Is the program harder than it was at Clarkeson?"

"Not really. The only course that was a little bit hard was Statistics. But once I figured out all of that, I got pretty good at it." The truth was I could probably make some change tutoring folks who were struggling with it.

"What about your other courses?"

"They're not all that challenging. You just have to discipline yourself to do the research. And you know I love the writing, even if it's not fiction." My mind flew back to Terez's description of her love of writing and to her intuition about how much I love the craft. I smiled, remembering how she looked that day, sipping her coffee and sharing little parts of her life with me.

"So working on your Ph.D. isn't stressing you out, Jaie?"

"Only the friggin' politics involved." I thought about Jennifer Renfrew.

"What kinds of politics?"

"The same kind of politics that exist everywhere. Learning whose ass to kiss." I thanked God I hadn't gone through with my plan to seduce Jennifer Renfrew and to literally kiss her behind. If I won the grant, good. If Terez won it, better.

Rasheeda laughed as she did a one-eighty, looking around at the other coffee drinkers. "I hear you. Hey, Jaie, that gorgeous woman over there in the sunglasses keeps smiling at you. Anybody you know?"

I followed Rasheeda's gaze until I met a sight that never fails to stir me. "Oh, yeah, I know her." Pushing my chair back and standing in one smooth movement, I looked down at my buddy. "'Scuse me for a minute, Rah'."

As quickly as I could, I left Rasheeda and my coffee and approached the smiling woman in the sunglasses, the woman I really had wanted to be with today at the street fair.

"Hey, Terez! How's it going?"

"Hi, Jaie. It's going well." Terez lowered her sunglasses and looked directly at me.

"So what do you think of Philly Pride?"

"I enjoyed myself. It's smaller and friendlier than

the one we have in Boston." I smiled down at her. "That's because you all have that Puritan standoffishness thing going on." The Massachusetts native laughed goodnaturedly. "You're probably right."

Terez removed her shades completely, as she continued looking up at me. Her unmasking seemed intimate and welcoming, and I felt my face getting even warmer than it had been a half hour ago when Rasheeda and I were walking along the simmering streets.

"Listen, I'd love you to meet a friend of mine." I tilted my head in Rasheeda's direction. "Are you with someone, or would you like to sit with us?" Even as I invited Terez to join us, I saw two empty cups on her table. Damn. I noticed them too late to stop the first part of my question.

"My friend is inside using the restroom. Why don't I leave my jacket here, so she'll know I haven't abandoned her?"

"That'll work." I was so eager for Terez to meet Rasheeda, I practically took her hand and pulled her back to our table. God only knows what kind of uncool, idiotic expression I had on my face as I concentrated on getting their names right.

"Terez Overton, this is Rasheeda Clifton." "It's a pleasure, Rasheeda." Terez grasped my buddy's hand. "No, Terez, it's my pleasure. Jaie has said so many wonderful things about you." Again, I could feel my cheeks burning as Terez shot me a questioning look. "Rasheeda is one of my oldest friends. I'm always keeping her in the loop about what's going on."

"And I'm always asking her about her love life."

"That's enough, Rah'." I needed to shut her up before my face had its own experiment with spontaneous combustion.

"So, let's see now. You're from Boston, you went to Smith and U. Mass, and now you're working on your Ph.D. at Allerton. That's where you met Jaie, right?" Rasheeda was getting me deeper and deeper into trouble the more she blathered on.

Terez nodded slowly and cautiously, as if she were unsure whether she should feel flattered or surprised that Rasheeda knew so much about her. "Yes, you have all the facts right."

"Just ignore her, Terez. She's like a human Google navigator."

Terez returned to her comfort zone. "Well, those of us doing research could use a friend like you."

Rasheeda smiled and then added earnestly, "Yeah, especially Jaie. She really needs friends, Terez."

I reached over and tapped my buddy on her shoulder. "Rasheeda, don't we have to leave now?"

She and Terez knew I was kidding, although my blushing must have telegraphed my embarrassment.

Terez looked back at her table in time to see an older, well-tailored woman pause there and look around. Terez waved. "That's my friend. We said we were going to leave when she got back from the Ladies Room." Terez offered her hand to Rasheeda. "It was nice meeting you, Rasheeda. Maybe we'll see each other again soon."

"Same here, Terez. I'll look forward to it."

Terez looked at me calmly. "Jaie, I'll call you."

"Right. See you later."

Both of us watched her retreating figure approach the other woman. It took only seconds for Rasheeda to launch her first comments. She exhaled slowly, almost whistling and shook her head from side to side. "Okay, Jaie. I'll stop teasing you about Terez. She is something to get ready for, girl. I can see why you've been a changed woman ever since you started talking to her."

All I could do was sigh my answer. "Believe me, Rasheeda. She's not like anyone I've ever been interested in."

"Clearly. But what's taking you so long? Why are you sitting here talking to me instead of with her? How long's it been since you first met her?"

"A couple of months." I ignored Rasheeda's first question and answered only her final one. Now it was my turn to look forlorn and wear sagging shoulders as I confided in her.

"I know it's none of my business, but all you've done is go out several times? Nothing more than that?"

"Nope. Nothing more. We haven't even really kissed each other in a serious way."

Rasheeda pulled herself back in her chair. "Hey! Who kidnapped my friend Jaie Baxter? And where did they take her?"

I nodded. "That's not like me, is it?"

"No, it's not." Rasheeda grabbed my wrist and feigned measuring my pulse. "Are you okay?"

I looked at my friend and tried to find a good answer to her question. "Well, for one thing, she has this 'someone else' whom she's seeing."

"The older woman we just saw?"

"I guess so." I looked at the two empty cups still sitting on their now vacant table and thought aloud. "I wonder why she didn't introduce us to her."

"Maybe she gets off on all the mystery and intrigue. Throw in a little jealousy and she can keep you both on the hook." Rasheeda chuckled at her own speculation.

I didn't want to think Terez would play a game like that. But I was curious about her Pride Fair date. "She had a real take charge appearance, didn't she?"

"Who?"

"The other woman. Terez's friend."

Rasheeda nodded. "Yeah, like a cop or a corporate CEO."

Suddenly, I wanted to change the subject. "Oh, well, I'm not gonna stress about it. Life is too short."

Rasheeda nodded. "You're right about that. Hey, Jaie, do we have a few more minutes, or do you have to leave now? How about a second coffee?"

Sensing my friend needed to talk, I agreed to a second drink. "Sure. I can always drink a second helping of java."

"I'll get this one." Rasheeda went inside the café, giving me a moment to reflect on my latest encounter with Terez. While I was glad Rasheeda had finally gotten a chance to meet her and to see very quickly why I was so interested, I had this nagging feeling that, once again, so much went unsaid between Terez and me. The woman had me continually off-balance.

"Iced coffee with a single shot of espresso, right?" Rasheeda put the tall glass in front of me.

"A double shot."

"Yeah, I knew, but I got you a single, so you can get some sleep sometime tonight. Unless you're going to stay awake thinking about that fine Ms. Overton."

"Well, thanks for having my welfare in mind." I paused and looked carefully at my friend. "So what's going on, Rasheeda?"

"I wanted to tell you what's up with me and Sandi." Once again, Rasheeda had pulled the sad curtain down over her eyes.

"Okay." I hunkered down in my seat, determined to be a good listener.

"I know it sounds like I'm being stubborn, not wanting to talk to her and all. You have to trust that I have my reasons."

"I figured you did. What happened, Rah'?"

"Well see, there was a mix-up in my work schedule one day. I went into the center way too early, not knowing they'd changed the shift assignments. Anyway, I decided to come back home instead of hanging out there for hours and not getting paid for it."

I was pretty certain I knew what Rasheeda was going to tell me next. And I wished for her sake there would be a different ending from the one I was destined to hear.

"So when I came into the house from the garage I heard Sandi's voice. At first, I thought she was talking on the phone to someone. Then I stopped to listen to what she was saying, or moaning is more like it."

Rasheeda paused, looking off at nothing in particular. "Jaie, she was in our living room, on her back on our sofa, grinding her ass off with some other woman."

I pushed away the decade-old memory of Seneca Wilson and me having sex on her sofa, long enough to reach over and touch the back of my sidekick's hand. "Oh, Rasheeda, I'm sorry. I wish she hadn't cheated on you."

"Yeah, so do I. But she did. And we can't undo it."

"How does she feel about it now?"

"Oh, you know, the whole 'I'm sorry, baby. It'll never happen again' bit."

"Do you believe her?"

"When I'm busy or out with my friends, I don't buy her apology for a second. Then sometimes, late at night when I'm lonely and missing the hell out of her, I want to believe what she's told me."

I sipped my drink. "What's the worst thing that could happen if you took her back?"

"That she'd play me again."

"And what's the worst that could happen if she did?"

Rasheeda had a faint smile on her face. I could see her uncertainty as she weighed the wisdom of sharing her answer to my last question. "Then I'd force myself to be just like my good friend, Jaie Baxter. I'd sleep with as many women as I could without being serious about any of them. Life would be a series of sexual contests, and I'd be the steady winner."

I looked down at the table while I rubbed the tension from my neck. Straightening my head and returning my gaze to my confidante, I asked, "Is that what my life looks like to you, Rasheeda?"

"Most of the time, yeah. I mean, you're having fun, right? You're probably enjoying the hell out of a lot of different women."

I shook my head, denying Rasheeda's interpretation of my existence. "Well, that looks pretty sad, doesn't it? Especially since you just met Terez. You know what, Rasheeda? She's the one person with whom I'm not playing any sexual games, and even so, I'm still coming up the loser."

My buddy patted my hand. "This is getting pathetic, Jaie. We don't need coffee. We need a real drink."

"Yeah, we probably do. You know as well as I do I don't follow that trail, sister." I lifted my glass and drank the last of the iced coffee. Then, another thought grabbed me.

"Hey, Rah', I don't want to keep bringing up your problems." I hesitated for a second. "What's the name of the woman who was with Sandi?"

"Some chick I'd never met before. Her name was Kyra Belton."

I slammed my glass down on the table before Rasheeda could pronounce the last syllable of my ninth grade love interest's name.

"Do you know her?"

"It's a small world Rasheeda. Come on. I'll tell you all about her while we walk back to the car."

It didn't matter much that I'd missed a lot of the Pride Week festivities. This one afternoon supplied me with more than enough action. I saw Terez and her mysterious "someone else." Rasheeda met Terez and immediately understood why I had such a serious case of the wants for the woman from Boston. I learned that Kyra Belton, the one person most responsible for my sabotaging my way out of Academic Prep High School for Girls, turned out to be half of the source of my best friend's heartache. And I left to fate the possibility I might have seen the origin of my tenyear-old nightmare, Seneca Wilson.

Chapter Fourteen

THERE'S NO WAY in hell the woman I saw in the distance at the Pride street fair could have been Seneca Wilson. I haven't seen her since graduation, a good decade ago. The last time I read about her, she was still in Georgia, doing her thing in the Atlanta public school system and no doubt upsetting some of the women down there, especially if she was still trying to get them to believe she could be monogamous. I remember the day after she danced with Keith at that party and then refused to leave with me...

I dragged my sour-stomach, headache-racked body over to her house that afternoon. There she was, standing in her doorway, wearing the tight jeans and cut off tee-shirt that used to turn me on every time I pictured her round hips and taut stomach showing off that outfit. We embraced as soon as I stepped into the vestibule. She draped her arms over my shoulders and kissed the tip of my nose.

"I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to hurt you. It won't happen again."

Before I could say anything, she targeted my mouth and kissed me deeply. I kissed her back. That was what I was programmed to do when I felt her lips get near mine. And that's all it took to forget my hurt and anger as I let her manipulate us onto the gold-colored velvet couch. Seneca's long lean legs were on either side of my thighs as I accepted the upper part of her body

onto mine. I grasped her hips and ground her into me. Pausing long enough to tear off our clothes, we did our dance. Seneca leading me toward pleasing her and me following willingly, as always. If she wanted me to lick her, I would. If she wanted me to rub her, I would. If she wanted me to enter her with one, two, or three of my fingers, I couldn't wait. If she desired me to do anything with my mouth on her special place, I begged her for the chance. The only things she never asked me to do were to love her forever and to plead with her to love me forever.

Before our senior year ended, we had three more fights followed by three more episodes of make-up sex. As good as that sex was, it always left me feeling unsure of where we were with each other. The constant uncertainty, along with the gut busting difficulties of filling out financial aid applications without my Mom's cooperation, put me squarely on top of a volcano of pressure.

Chapter Fifteen

AT SEVEN-THIRTY P.M., Jennifer Renfrew was still in her office. She exhaled a deep sigh of relief. Finally, she'd finished reading the last grant applicant's essay. She looked at the two neat stacks lying in front of her on her desk. The larger one was the pile of rejects. The three finalists were in the shorter stack. Jennifer e-mailed Charlene Gray, telling her she had completed the task of whittling down the applications from nineteen to her top three choices.

Now, she paid special attention to those final three, all autobiographical survivor tales. Jennifer picked up the first essay, an applicant's paean to her grandparents, who despite their advanced ages, had reared her energetically and lovingly. The writing was clear and crisp, but filled with an orderly obedience and devoid of any genuine emotion. The Assistant Dean of Admissions put those pages to one side. The second essay showed more craft. It read like a poetic novella. Unfortunately, it had a predictable outcome and a definite lack of drama. The writer had never met any truly challenging or life altering situations.

The third piece of writing captivated Jennifer. The applicant's words flowed, the emotions spilling all over the pages. Her life had been one long continuous challenge. That she was even in graduate school amazed Jennifer. Someone with that much ambition, grit, and fight certainly would go on to a brilliant teaching or writing career.

Something else that amazed Jennifer was that Jaie Baxter had never breathed a word to her about applying for the Adamson Prize. And Jennifer knew this best essay was written by Jaie. She recognized the pieces of Jaie's life the grad student had shared with her the afternoon they spent together not too long ago. That had been the day when Jennifer felt she was minutes away from giving up her body and her loneliness to Jaie. Jaie had stood in her apartment's foyer and picked up Pat's portrait.

Jennifer wanted to believe Jaie hadn't mentioned her submission essay because she didn't want to bias her. After all, the doctoral student wouldn't have known her lunch date was involved in the judging if Jennifer hadn't told her that information. Or would she have discovered it? Jennifer paced between her office door and her desk. She was desperate to believe Jaie wanted to date her because she found her attractive and available, not because she would have a lot to say about who would walk away with a prestigious writing prize and a nice piece of change.

"Damn it! Has she been trying to set me up?" Jennifer verbalized her suspicion to an empty office. She looked out of the window at the oak and king crimson maple trees shading the walkway two floors below, and she shook her head, trying to banish her questions about Jaie's motives for wanting to go out with her. On the one hand, Jaie's ardor had seemed so genuine. Her apparent shyness once the women were in Jennifer's apartment had seemed guileless and charming. On the other hand, Jennifer knew so many segments of the young woman's essay revealed her consummate ability to get around and past people in order to achieve her agenda.

Jennifer couldn't contain the misgivings creeping through her mind. She felt as if she'd been conned. After reading Jaie's essay for the third time, the Assistant Dean shed her need for Jaie's amorous attentions. She let the voice of wisdom whisper in her ear and tell her the fine young graduate student had over-played her hand when she wrote about being capable of getting over on people.

"You won't manipulate me." Again, Jennifer spoke to the empty space in her office.

She sat down in her chair and leaned back for a moment, taking the time to consider her next move. After drumming her forehead with her fingers, she flipped through a couple of pages in her phone directory, picked up her telephone and dialed a number.

"Hello, Jaie?"

"Hi. Jennifer?"

"Yes, it's me. Are you doing anything right now?" Jennifer stared straight ahead.

"Nothing earth-shattering. Why?"

"I have some good news for you. Do you think you could meet me at my office?"

"I guess so. Is fifteen to thirty minutes okay?"

"That'd be great. I'll tell the security guard to let you in. Oh, one more thing. If you have a nice bottle of wine, bring it with you."

"Do you want me to bring glasses?"

"No, I have two glasses right here."

"Okay. I'll be there shortly."

"Good, see you soon, Jaie."

Jennifer rested the phone. She turned on her radio and found a station playing soft contemporary jazz, the kind of music she figured Jaie would like. Then she remembered to call the security desk at the building's entrance to tell the guard it would be okay to admit one Jaie Baxter, with or without her I.D. card. She took two wine glasses out of the bottom drawer of her credenza. Almost finished with her preparations for Jaie's arrival, Jennifer went into the bathroom adjoining her office. There, she reapplied the makeup that had faded since lunchtime. She was surprised to see she was smirking instead of smiling at her reflection.

"Use me to get the Adamson Prize? I don't think so. At least, not without my getting something I want in return."

Twenty minutes later, Jennifer heard the light knock on her office door. She walked across the carpeted distance between her desk and the entrance and opened the door to admit Jaie.

"Hey, Jennifer. What's going on?" Jaie handed the Assistant Dean a bottle of red wine.

"Jaie. I'm glad you could come over on such short notice." She examined the bottle's label. "And you just happened to have a very nice bottle of Australian Shiraz. Excellent!"

"Yes, that was lucky." Jaie glanced quickly at the Aussie import. For a split second, she seemed distracted.

"Did you have another plan for this particular bottle of wine?" Jennifer's expression was friendly, but her question was pointed with an arrowhead of suspicion.

Instead of looking at Jennifer, Jaie focused on the wall behind the Assistant Dean. She imagined that sharing the wine with Terez would have been nice. "No, no special plan."

Jennifer dismissed an opportunity to tell Jaie she suspected she was lying. Instead, she gestured to the love seat on the other side of the large office. "Why don't you sit down over there? I'll open this wine and pour us a drink." She watched Jaie move fluidly toward the couch. "Are you curious about my surprise?"

Jaie nodded. "A bit."

"Well, here it is. Tomorrow morning I'm submitting my choice for the winner of the Adamson Prize." Jennifer paused, wanting to give Jaie a chance to anticipate what she was going to say next.

"You've finished reading all the applications?" Jaie's face wore an indeterminate expression.

Jennifer handed Jaie a full glass of wine. She knelt down on the carpet in front of the grad student. "I have indeed. And I wanted to be the first one to tell you, Jaie, that you're my winner."

A smile bloomed slowly across Jaie's mouth.

"Wow. I can't believe it."

"Oh, believe it, honey." Jennifer tapped the rim of her wine glass against Jaie's, toasting the young writer.

"But if the essays were numbered and anonymous, how do you know you selected mine?" As she asked the question, Jaie divided her attention between the incoming answer and Jennifer's hands, which were now partially covering Jaie's knees. Jennifer pushed one knee away from the other, separating Jaie's legs. Then she rested her glass of wine on the floor and began caressing the tops of Jaie's thighs.

"I recognized the parts of your autobiography you described the day we went out to lunch. I had no idea you were such a talented writer." Jennifer's hands became more serious, probing the insides of Jaie's thighs and coming dangerously close to the zipper and snap that would release Jaie's pants.

Momentarily, Jaie ignored the sensations Jennifer was creating, and she flashed back to the last time she saw Terez. All she could think about was wanting to touch Terez where Jennifer was now touching her. She attempted to capture Jennifer's hands and return them to a neutral place, but before she could do that, Jennifer unfastened her jeans and, with lightning quick speed, grasped two of the belt loops and tugged them partially away from Jaie's waist and stomach.

"Uh, Jennifer. I don't think this is a good idea. What if the security guard comes in?" Clearly, Jaie was uncomfortable.

"He wouldn't do that without knocking. And besides, I locked the door."

Jennifer had succeeded in inserting her hand in the space between Jaie's unzipped pants and her Jockeys. She began massaging Jaie and then worked her way under the soft fabric of Jaie's panties toward the younger woman's very center.

"Come on, baby. Don't you want to thank me for the grant?" Jennifer, eyes beginning to glaze over with her need for the grad student, looked up at Jaie.

Jaie grabbed Jennifer's hand and forcefully pulled it from under her clothing. Not trusting what might happen next, she grasped Jennifer's wrist and spoke firmly. "Jennifer, I didn't see anything on the application about all of this."

"But I've chosen you to win the grant. I thought you'd be grateful, and you'd want to show me your gratitude. After all, it's not like we're total strangers. We had a chance to do this weeks ago in my apartment." Jennifer used her free hand to pick up her glass of wine and swallow deeply.

Jaie stood, tugging at the waistband of her jeans. The cool tone of her voice didn't match the animosity she felt. "You know what, Jennifer? I did think about having sex with you. I didn't think it would go down like this, though."

"How did you think it would 'go down,' to use your words? Did you think you'd call all the shots?" Now Jennifer was standing in front of Jaie, looking at her in an accusatory way. "Did you think this older woman would be so grateful for your young ass she'd automatically rank your essay number one? Is that the way it was supposed to go down, Jaie?"

"To be honest with you, I did plan that once upon a time. Then I changed my mind. Winning the grant became less important to me."

"And just what caused you to change your mind?" Jennifer fired off her question, giving Jaie the impression she wouldn't believe her answer, no matter what it was.

"I'm not sure. It just happened, that's all." Jaie lied as she tucked her shirt inside her pants and zipped and snapped herself back together. She knew it was the possibility of having a relationship with Terez that had caused her to change her course of action with Jennifer.

The two women stared at each other, each waiting to see who would make the next move.

"You need to leave now." Dismissing Jaie, Jennifer turned her back to her and took a few steps toward the office window. "And don't forget to check out at the Security desk."

"Sure." Jaie exhaled a sigh of relief, noiselessly closing the door behind her. Her wave and nod interrupted the security guard's boredom as she walked past him and headed outside to the parking lot between the Admission's building and the library.

She'd been so eager to get to Jennifer's office with the bottle of vintage wine and then so shaken by the last half hour's events, she never noticed she was parked one row in front of a tan and green almostlike-new Subaru. Nor did she see the car's owner watching her arrival and departure from the vantage point of one of the library's first floor windows.

Ten minutes later, Jennifer walked to her car in the same parking lot, just as Terez arrived at hers. Unlike her failure to remember the older woman's name the day they bumped into each other in the Pierce Athletic Center swimming pool, Terez recognized Jennifer right away. Recalling the conversation she'd overheard in the shower room, along with her own memories of the Assistant Dean's unabashed flirting during her interview, Terez couldn't help wondering if Jaie's early evening arrival with what looked like a bottle of wine had anything to do with Dean Renfrew's late office hours.

Chapter Sixteen

TWO DAYS LATER, Terez sat down at the first vacant library table she saw and pulled her unopened mail out of her canvas bag. Absentmindedly, she pushed aside a thick tendril of hair as she shuffled the envelopes, putting them in order from least important to most. This hot June morning, she'd been in such a hurry to get to her Statistics class she hadn't even opened the large envelope bearing the Allerton University seal. Being late to class was not one of her habits. When she'd literally collided with Jaie at the entrance to the classroom building, she'd found it easy to linger through a conversation with the ear-nest-eyed doctoral student. Terez surprised herself with her willingness to delay going to her course.

She and Jaie skirmished verbally each time they were together, pushing against and pulling toward their attraction to each other. Just thinking about their exchanges had totally distracted Terez for the last hour and a half. So much so that she didn't have the slightest clue what her professor had covered during the class session. The usually serene and together Terez Overton discovered that her lack of attentiveness, coupled with her increasing desire to see more of Jaie, was unsettling.

Carefully, Terez slipped her thumb under the envelope's glued flap. She could see the words 'English Department' written in the bold print of the letterhead, and she wondered for a moment if this piece of mail were related to the Adamson Prize. It couldn't be. That decision might have been made, though it wouldn't be announced for a couple more weeks. She removed the envelope's contents: a letter of explanation, along with full details about the two Freshman English sections she was slated to teach during the fall semester. There was no need to write a syllabus, as the English Department had one she was obliged to follow. Perusing the required reading list, she felt relief upon seeing she was more than familiar with all of the writers and the material.

"Great!" She tapped the library table triumphantly! She'd be able to continue working on her dissertation proposal instead of doing a lot of research to prepare for her teaching load.

Terez glanced at the other envelopes and determined that nothing was important enough to be opened right then and there. After all, she thought, she did have her priorities. This late morning belonged to the research she needed to accomplish in the library. Even if Jaie Baxter herself were to show up smack dab in front of her, Terez was duty bound to follow through with her plans. When she robbed a second to be totally honest with herself, Terez knew the vaguest suggestion of Jaie's appearance felt like a seductive whisper in her ear. She conjured up the heat Jaie's presence always brought with it and momentarily forgot her reason for being in the library.

Why, she wondered, did she continue to be evasive whenever Jaie hinted she wanted to see her more often? Why did she, a basically honest person, continue to flirt with Jaie but not tell her how eager she was to spend more time with the handsome, amber-eyed woman? Was it the arrogance Jaie had displayed the first time they met? It couldn't be that. Jaie's presumption was no longer visible. It had slipped away silently, along with her confident talk of winning the Adamson Prize.

Terez remembered the morning when they'd first met each other in the English Department office. She had known immediately that Jaie was gay. Her sexual identity was spread all over her assertive walk, and there was the way Jaie held onto her hand seconds longer than she needed to while introducing herself. She'd felt Jaie looking at her, barely concealing her desire. Their quickly agreed upon coffee date had sealed Terez's first impression of the dashing grad student.

As easy as it would be for Terez to allow herself to know Jaie better, there was something holding her back. There they were, two black graduate students steaming their way through the ocean of white academia. Recognizing the politics of their shared reality gave Terez only a few seconds of comfort followed by long moments of doubt. Terez's sense of how to proceed in this world told her she was a tip-toer, while Jaie was used to stepping all over the terrain and leaving a trail behind her.

Terez suspected Jaie was just this side of dangerous. Recalling a tee-shirt slogan she'd read long ago, the Boston-born woman figured it expressed her impression of Jaie. Jaie was "...the lesbian your mother warned you about." Terez didn't characterize herself as being overly cautious. Some inner voice, though, warned her that if Jaie were to become a significant person in her life, it would be wise to tread slowly around her perimeter instead of marching right into her center.

They'd gone to a movie together, had dinner twice, lunch three times, and had tickets to go to a concert soon--not to mention the growing frequency of their phone calls and their tendency to instant message each other from time to time. Despite all of that, they were executing a sly and sensuous dance when it came to openly expressing their attraction for each other. Caution rode on Terez's shoulders and controlled restraint seemed to keep its grip on Jaie's. Each time they'd had an opportunity to touch or to kiss, something had held them back.

Now, even as she imagined going to the concert and sitting in a dark theater, having Jaie's body less than an inch away from hers, Terez felt unsure of her emotions and how far they might take her with this woman who seemed so confident and self-assured. She didn't know exactly why she felt so off-center. Perhaps it was because of the few facts she knew about Jaie's background, an environment so very different from hers. Something breathed "be careful" in Terez's ears.

Attempting once again to put Jaie out of her mind, Terez recalled why she'd come into the library in the first place. She got up and walked over to the computer area. Swiping her I.D. card through a scanner, she registered for usage time, logged on, and got to work. Three hours later, she stood up, stretched, and loosened the muscles in her shoulders and neck. She noticed a young woman standing on the other side of the room waving at her. It took a few seconds for Terez to put a name with the woman's face. Of course, that pretty girl, Isola, from one of her seminars last semester.

"Hi! It's Terez, right? How've you been?" Isola approached her.

"Just fine, thanks, Isola. How about you?" Terez felt surprised to realize she was genuinely pleased to see this young woman.

"I'm great!" Isola looked down at Terez's stacked notebooks. "Looks like you've been busy. How's it going?"

"Let's just say it's going, but slowly I'm afraid."

Isola nodded her understanding. "Are you taking a summer course?"

"Yes. *Research Design*."

"Well, if the stat in that course doesn't kill you, you'll survive the whole degree process. I took it last fall, and I'm not really a math person, so I had to get a tutor."

Isola cast Terez a look of sympathy.

Terez smiled back, grateful to have a compassionate ally. "So far, it's not too bad. And if I run into trouble, I'll know who to call to get the name and number of a good tutor."

"Don't hesitate to call me. Here's my number, and here's my e-mail address." Isola quickly wrote her information on the back of a slip of paper.

Terez folded the paper and tore off a small section of it. She wrote her numbers down for Isola. "Thanks. Here's my info."

"Great! We'll keep in touch." Isola's smile became a look of concern. "Uh, Terez, do you have a minute to talk?"

Puzzled, Terez agreed. "Sure. Want to go down to the lounge? I could use a cold drink and something to eat." She packed her belongings and the two women descended the stairs leading to the lower level snack bar. After trading some loose change for cans of juice from a vending machine, they sat down on lounge chairs opposite each other. Terez noticed Isola's fidgeting movements. She could see the other woman's discomfort.

"Look, we don't know each other very well, but I feel like I need to tell you something."

Now it was Terez who began to feel less at ease. "What is it?"

"It's who not to call if you need a tutor for statistics, even though she's real good at it." Isola looked around nervously. "I've seen you with her a couple of times now. Like this morning, in front of the Cleary Building."

Knowing she had talked to Jaie earlier outside that building, Terez was both anxious and on guard about what she was going to hear. "Isola, what do you need to tell me? Is there something wrong?"

"Well, I don't know what your relationship with Jaie Baxter is, but you might want to be careful."

"Why?" Terez sipped her fruit juice, tasting the flavor of approaching trouble more than the sweetness of the fruit nectar.

"She's not the best person in the world to have as a friend. Or to have as anything else for that matter."

"Could you be more specific?" Terez tried to keep a benign expression on her face.

Isola looked away for a second, then she refocused. She seemed to lose herself in a bad memory. Her voice became tense, angry sounding. "Yeah, I can be very specific. Jaie's specialty is sniffing out fine women of color, lesbian women of color in particular, and playing them."

"Playing them?"

"Yeah. You know how it goes. She takes you out, gets what she wants and then leaves you high and dry, just when you're falling for her."

Terez lowered her voice and looked directly into Isola's eyes. "Is this her reputation, or do you know this from your own experience?"

"The latter." Isola paused, letting her words settle, and then she continued. "You probably think I'm telling you this because I want to get back at Jaie." Isola shook her head. "It's not like that at all."

"Is it possible you had a bad experience with her, and she doesn't treat every woman that way?" Terez weighed the little bit of information Isola had shared. She wanted to keep things in balance, knowing Jaie wasn't there to defend herself.

"No. Enough of us have been burned by her, we could start a club, or at least a therapy group." Isola rested her hand lightly on Terez's arm. "Look, I can tell you're not from the same places Jaie's used to. So let me be very direct with you, Terez. Jaie Baxter goes through women as quickly as a Hummer goes through a tankful of gasoline in stop and go traffic in New York City."

Pausing only long enough to reload and compose her next few sentences, Isola continued to hold forth. "She'll take you out for as long as it takes her to get you in bed. And if she doesn't get you in bed exactly when she wants, you're history. Even after she's had a chance to screw you, she's out of there."

Terez nodded her understanding. "Thanks for letting me know about this. I want to believe you're telling me these things, so I won't get hurt."

"I'm not going to pretend to be that noble, Terez. It's just that Jaie embarrassed and hurt me a couple of months ago. I don't know how long she's been seeing you, so I don't know if our little episode happened on your time or not. But I've seen her with you. Trust me, Terez. She likes to fuck over women."

Terez drained her can of juice and took a few steps to the trash can to throw it away. She returned to her seat and nodded at Isola. "I'll remember that."

"Terez?" Isola stood up and flung her bag over her shoulder. "Be careful. Jaie can make you believe she's falling in love with you, even if she isn't. She has this way of looking at you, like you're the only woman in the world. She doesn't know I've watched her giving you that look. But you still have time to avoid getting hurt." Pausing, she asked, "You're not falling in love with her, are you?"

Terez thought long and hard before giving a stranger an answer she couldn't give to herself. "I don't think so. But to be honest, I don't know."

"Well, sorry to be the bearer of bad news. You seem to be a nice woman who doesn't deserve to get screwed over."

"Nobody deserves that, Isola. Thanks for the information."

"Sure. I'll see you around." Isola walked toward the stairwell and disappeared behind its double doors.

As Terez gathered her notebooks and her thoughts, she replayed all that Isola had told her about Jaie. Recalling that she had seen first Jaie and then Jennifer Renfrew leave the parking lot right outside this library two nights ago, Terez considered the possibility that every word Isola had uttered might be true. Maybe Jaie was dating Jennifer Renfrew and her at the same time. Terez was glad, in retrospect, that she'd let Jaie think there was someone else in her life. Or was she? At the time, she wondered if she were being too duplicitous in allowing Jaie to think the times they couldn't go out were dates that had been promised to Sherry Yancey. Had she fooled herself into believing a "mystery" woman would keep Jaie interested in the pursuit as well as give herself a safe "out" in case Jaie no longer seemed like such a good idea?

Isola said she'd seen a look on Jaie's face, a look that meant she was falling for Terez. Terez now knew two conflicting facts. First, if Isola's version of Jaie Baxter were true, she could not trust Jaie with anything. Not with her body, her promises, or any part of her soul. Second, if Jaie were to appear before her at this very moment, if Jaie were to kiss her, hold her close, and call out her name, nothing could stop her from giving Jaie all of her body, all of her promises, and all of her soul.

Chapter Seventeen

"WANT TO GO to New Hope next weekend?" I cradled the phone between my ear and my shoulder, narrowly escaping a steam burn as I ironed the last piece of clean laundry.

"I can't, Jaie. I am so behind in my *Research Design* assignments. Maybe another time?"

"Sure. New Hope's going to be there for a while." I was disappointed Terez couldn't make it, although I was glad she hadn't used a date with "someone else" as her reason.

"How far is New Hope from Allerton?"

"It's about a fifty minute ride from here through some pretty countryside." I pictured the drive we would have taken, the time we would have had to talk and listen to each other. There went my plan to spend an entire afternoon and evening with Terez, going through shops and galleries and having a drink and a good dinner at The Edgar Allan, a gay restaurant just outside of the town.

"What is there to see in New Hope? What's it like?"

"Sort of artsy-craftsy, with its share of rainbow flags. I think you'd like it."

"Then we definitely need to go. I hope you'll ask me again."

"You can put money on it."

"Good, because New Hope sounds like a place I'd like to see...with you."

I liked the sound of warm honey I heard in Terez's voice. I swear if I were a bee I'd drown in her voice.

"Jaie, it's almost time for the decision about the Adamson Prize, isn't it? Do you remember the exact date they're going to announce the winner?"

"No. I forget." This wasn't a lie. I knew Jennifer had submitted her list of finalists. I didn't know how long we'd have to wait for the public announcement. And after our contentious rendezvous in her office, I didn't know for sure if my application were still in the lead. I doubted it.

"You know, we've talked about how you'll feel if you win. How will you react if you don't?" Terez sounded serious.

"I'll just have to accept it, that's all." I snapped the cap back on the can of spray starch.

"You'll be at peace with losing it?"

Walking the hot iron into my bathroom and propping it upright on the basin, I felt my voice drop to a cautious tone. "Do you know something about the results that I don't know?"

"Absolutely not." Terez paused for a moment. "The only thing I do know is when we've talked about the competition, you used to be so sure you're going to win."

"You're right. There was a time when I was convinced I would win that grant. I would have bet my car on it."

"Is that because you were confident you were the most talented writer, Ms. Baxter?"

I could hear the sound of disbelief in her voice. "No, Ms. Overton. I mean, I am talented. But it's not always talent that wins the prize. Sometimes, it's who you know." I paused to listen for her reaction, but I heard only silence. "It doesn't surprise you to hear me say that, does it?"

"No." Terez took a deep breath. "But I guess I wanted to believe the process wouldn't be tainted by crap like that."

"Believe me, whenever money is concerned, the process is always tainted." I didn't have the guts to tell her I was the one who had been willing to contaminate this particular process with my crap.

I listened carefully and heard Terez's voice become softer, almost a whisper.

"Are you telling me that if you win, it will be because you know someone who is influencing the decision?"

I had to be careful answering this question, honest, but cautious. "If you had asked me that question a week ago, I would have said yes, that if I won, it would be because I knew someone and not because I had any more talent than anyone else."

Terez's silence pushed me close to panic. It seemed like hours, not merely seconds, before she spoke again. "And what about this week? Because I'm asking you the question right now."

I felt compelled to match Terez's serious no-nonsense manner with a straightforward tone of my own. "This week, things are different. If I lose the competition, it's because I know someone who's influencing the decision."

"And just how has that happened?"

She hurled her question with a hand-on-her-hip attitude. I couldn't tell if Terez was angry with me or disappointed with what I was telling her. I wished we could be having this conversation face-to-face instead of on the telephone. I needed to look deeply into her eyes, so she could see the regret and contrition in mine.

"Let's just say there was more to do to win that prize than simply filling out the application and composing an essay, and I wasn't able to fulfill all the required tasks." I hoped she could read between the lines and understand I was telling her I hadn't been willing to go to bed with someone in order to get the grant money.

Terez's voice was filled with skepticism. It was clear I hadn't won many points with her in the trustworthiness department. "I have to have faith in that being a good thing, Jaie. I'd like to say your name and the word 'honor' in the same sentence."

"You can do that." I wanted her to speak my name accompanied by so many other words, like 'care' and 'kiss' and 'hold.'

"So, back to something lighter. What kind of stores do they have in New Hope?"

Grateful to her for changing the subject, I cleared my head and drew a word picture of Main Street in the little tourist town. "A lot of gift shops and art galleries, some clothing stores, a big book store, restaurants. There's one galley in particular I know you'd like, because I've seen you wearing turquoise jewelry." I loved the way the silver disk embedded with the bright blue stone made itself at home on her lovely throat.

"Does the gallery have a lot of Southwestern art?"

"Yeah. It's one of those spaces with photos of sun-bleached steer skulls, displays of gorgeous Native American jewelry, and huge paintings of the desert, sort of Georgia O'Keefe-like. You know, the kinds of paintings that make you feel small and lost especially if you're strictly an East Coast city kind of woman."

I was treated to the comforting sound of Terez's laugh.

"Have you ever been to New Mexico, Jaie?"

"No." I wanted to push my luck and say something like *"but I'd like to go there with you."* Instead, I changed my sentence to a question. "How about you?"

"Once, with my family, when I was a kid."

"Did you and your family travel a lot?"

"Just about every summer until my brothers went away to school. After that, our summer jobs took over. What about you? How did you spend your summers, Jaie?"

My summers with my family spun through my mind. All I could remember was the stifling heat and choking humidity of the city. The thick stillness of the smog as it clung to the statue of William Penn atop City Hall. The way the cooled air in the local branch of the public library bowled me over every time I took shelter there. The different summer jobs that rescued me from my mom's anger. My airless bedroom where at some point everyday I escaped into the pages of a book, or into my many journals. And finally my brother Kashif's voice sharing airtime with the bullet that sheared through him just as he reached our front porch. I languished through all of these memories, but I said simply, "I spent my summers waiting for September to arrive."

"Jaie?"

I could hear Terez's breathing. "Yeah?"

"If I were with you right now, I'd give you a big hug."

"You are with me right now, and I can feel your embrace." I willed, sensing her arms around me, my body pressed to hers.

"You know what, Terez? I'm enjoying getting to know you." That was true. I'd lost my awareness of competing with her a long time ago--probably the first time I was conscious of wanting to make love to her instead of beating her out of some writing prize.

"I feel the same way. But Jaie, I need to ask you about something."

"Sure."

"I was at the library two evenings ago, and I saw you go into and then come out of the Admissions Office Building."

I took a deep breath, knowing I was going to have to tell Terez where I'd been. "Yeah. I got a phone call to come over there."

"And to bring a bottle of wine with you?"

"Yes. The wine wasn't my idea. It was part of the request for my presence." I hadn't even kissed Terez yet, not the way I'd been wanting to. But I felt like I'd been caught in a riptide of unfaithfulness. Waves of understanding pulled me under the surface and then righted me as, finally, I admitted to myself that having Terez at the edge of my heart was the real reason I'd rejected a sexual encounter with Jennifer.

"You know what I said earlier about failing to do something extra in order to get the grant?"

"Yes."

"Well, the evening you saw me leave the Admissions Office, I kissed the Adamson Prize good-bye."

"What did you do?"

"It's what I didn't do. I refused to jump through the last hoop."

I heard Terez sigh deeply. "Hum. Does that hoop work in the Admissions Office?"

"Yeah, she does." I knew Terez had put two and two together.

"Jaie, there's more to life than money, you know."

"I'm familiar with the concept, but I usually hear it from people who never need to worry about their rent, or their tuition, or their meals." "And that would be you, Jaie. As long as you can work, you don't need to worry." This woman had thrown me a life jacket. "I like you a lot, Terez."

"I like you, too. Talk to you later?"

"That's a promise."

I hung up the phone and sat down at my desk, fingering the two concert tickets lying there, my tickets to the next time I'd be with Terez. Maybe we could prolong that evening with a visit to a women's bar in the city, or even to Amelia's, Allerton's small club. Anything to get to spend more time with Terez. I would sit and watch cement dry if it meant an opportunity to be with her. She was different, and she was making a difference in my world. It no longer revolved around me.

Terez represented all the girls I've looked at more than once and known I couldn't talk to. Separated by the gulf of "good" and "bad" neighborhoods and caste and class barriers, Terez was that fine unattainable young woman from the wide azalea- and rhododendron-bordered boulevard miles from my home. I'd known her all of my life, but from a distance. My skin, too bronzed to overcome the segregation within our race. My untamed and unstraightened curls, too wild to lie on the same pillow next to her smooth waves. My zip code, a foreign country where passions were yelled out loud through front doors flung wide open, not hushed behind richly carved and locked entrances. My shallow stemmed family tree, no match for the generations-old roots of hers. My ancestral credentials not regal enough to allow me to whisper to her about grace and love.

But now we are grown women on equal footing, able to gaze into each other's eyes and speak of our truths and desires. I have made my way clear across town to her doorstep. And I'll wait for her to notice me standing here, patiently.

Chapter Eighteen

JENNIFER LOOKED UP from her work, acknowledging the knock on her office door. "Come in."

"Sorry to bother you, Ms. Renfrew. The messenger from Dr. Gray is here for the packet."

"Thanks, Susan. Tell him I'll be right out with the material."

Jennifer waited for her secretary to close the door behind her. Then she picked up the top three folders from the pile of applications. She took the first one and slipped it under the third, changing their order. The last thing she had to do was to fill out the cover sheet, by copying the folder numbers in the order in which she had ranked them. Jennifer made a final careful inspection of the application materials, making sure Jaie Baxter's folder and folder number were in third place, not first. She placed her signature on the cover sheet and put it inside the large ecru colored envelope. She then walked to the door, opened it and handed the envelope to the young male messenger.

"Please tell Dr. Gray I actually enjoyed helping her with this project, and I'll be in touch soon."

"Sure will, Ms. Renfrew." He all but saluted Jennifer as he took the materials from her and set off for Charlene Gray's office in the English Department.

"I'll bet you're glad that chore is over." The secretary smiled at her boss.

Jennifer nodded at the young woman. "Susan, you have no idea how glad I am. Now my life can get back to normal. Do you know how many hours I...Excuse me."

The sound of her ringing phone cut right through Jennifer's sentence and sent her back inside her office. "Jennifer Renfrew, Assistant Dean of Admissions."

"Hi Jennifer! It's Johnetta Jones."

"Johnnie! It's so good to hear your voice." Jennifer dragged the phone wire behind her as she closed her office door. "How have you been?"

"I'm just fine. I was thinking about you, and I realized we hadn't talked to each other for a while."

"I know. We shouldn't let so much time go by between phone calls."

Jennifer was truly fond of Johnnie Jones, Pat Adamson's former partner in the Special Victims Unit. After Pat's murder, the two women had pledged to stay in touch with each other. Johnnie had known Pat almost as well, though less intimately, as Jennifer had. In some ways, she had been more supportive of Pat than her lover had been.

"How are things at Allerton University? Calm, I trust?" Johnnie gave the little chuckle Jennifer had come to appreciate over the years.

"Yes, pretty calm. Although I've been unusually busy."

"Admission applications at this time of year?"

"No, it's not that at all." Jennifer swung around in her chair until she faced the window at the far end of her office. "Do you remember the grant we administer here? It's named after Pat, and we

award one per year to a grad student in the English Department who's a particularly talented writer."

"Oh, sure. You used to give it to a former Jefferson student."

"That's right, until the pool of good students from Jefferson dried up." Even as she said this, Jennifer knew Jaie must have been at the top of her class at Jefferson. She really was a terrific writer. Jennifer dismissed the pang of guilt that crossed her brow. She, more than anyone else, knew Jaie deserved to win the grant, although she had seen to it that Jaie would not be in first place.

"Yeah. That's a shame. There used to be some good kids who came out of that place."

"I'm sure there were, Johnnie." Jennifer paused for a few seconds, again picturing Jaie Baxter. "Well, anyway, this year I agreed to be one of the judges, and my vote has twice as much weight as any of the others." Her voice brimmed with pride.

"Wow! How did you handle all of the reading along with your regular work load?"

"It was tiring, though I read some very compelling essays." *The best of which is in third place*, the Assistant Dean thought.

"That's encouraging. The next generation still knows how to write, huh?"

"Yes. Quite a few of them do. And we have a winner as far as I'm concerned."

"A Jefferson kid?" Wrapped in conflicting feelings, Johnnie was interested in the possibility of a kid from a neglected city school making good, even if the kid had been a Jefferson student.

"No. No way. That school isn't sending strong candidates to undergrad colleges, much less to graduate school." Jennifer turned off her remaining thoughts about Jaie.

"Yeah, that place went to hell in a handbasket. After Pat was shot, the Department withdrew its antiviolence initiative. They knew they needed more officers in the building, and they didn't want to pull any more off the streets. Plus, the community took a stand against having cops walking through the hallways. One hot-head claimed that if Pat hadn't been armed, she wouldn't have gotten shot." Johnnetta sighed resignedly.

"Yes, I remember that." Jennifer stifled the bitter taste of that particular memory. "You know, Johnnie, the situation might have been a little better if an arrest had been made."

"Well, we would have had some closure, at any rate. But on to something more positive, Jen! My son is getting married three months from now! You're going to get an invitation to the wedding, of course, but I wanted to tell you about it myself."

Jennifer could hear the joy in her friend's voice. "Oh, Johnnie. You must be so happy."

"I am. I'm happy and proud. He's always been a good kid."

"You know I'll be there with bells on."

"Thanks, Jen." Johnetta's voice took on a serious tone. "Listen, I'm afraid you're going to see a lot of cops there who knew Pat, so I hope it won't be too hard for you."

"Oh, Johnnie, thanks for being so sensitive, but don't worry about that. Your son's wedding day is a time for everyone to be happy." Jennifer hoped Johnetta could hear her sincerity.

"That's very gracious of you." After a pause, "Hey, when can we get together for a drink or dinner?"

"Let's make it soon. I'm looking at my calendar now, and I see I have some free time week after next. I'll give you a call and we'll set something up."

"Perfect! You take care now."

"I will. You, too, Johnnie."

Jennifer hung up the phone and looked down at the blotter on her desk. A small version of Pat's portrait stared back at her. Jennifer kissed her fingertips and then placed them on the clear desk cover protecting Pat's memory.

Chapter Nineteen

"IT'S REAL SIMPLE. Make the high schools smaller." Seneca looked across the conference table at her two assistants and she felt irritated because they didn't agree with her. She was certain that by the time they finished their assignments, they would be on board.

"That's probably a good idea, Dr. Wilson, but where's the money going to come from?"

Seneca pursed her lips, thinking that Tim Islen was so predictable with his pragmatic approach. "That's not my problem, Tim. I'm the idea person. I come up with the concept, sell it to the woman at the top, and steer you through the process of making it happen. It's your job to find out where the money is." She pointed to both her employees in an effort to emphasize her position.

"Do we shrink all of the high schools or just the largest ones?" Michelle Sanders, less pragmatic than Tim but just as task-oriented, wanted to get started right away.

"A little of both. We want to begin with the giants, like Truman and Jefferson. But we want to tackle the medium-sized ones, also. We'll need to look at the feasibility of constructing walls to divide the bigger, older buildings, especially if there aren't any tracts of vacant land available for new construction."

"I'll contact the facilities department." Michelle jotted herself a note.

"And in the other cases, we're going to need new buildings all together."

Tim developed another wrinkle on his prematurely furrowed forehead. "This is going to be a major budget buster. We're barely in the black as it is."

"Well, you'll figure out some way to approach the School Commission and I'll work on the CEO." Seneca offered nothing less than a full plate of confidence. "She's the one who talked me into taking this job, so she should be amenable to my ideas."

"I guess she's got to look like she's made a good decision hiring you. That should guarantee her supporting your plans, at least in the short term." Michelle projected satisfaction with her savvy way of thinking.

Seneca glanced at the attractive, well-dressed assistant. She thought it was smart of her to have figured out the politics of the situation, although it wasn't very wise of her to verbalize her thoughts. She might have the potential to be a hot little number in bed, Seneca calculated, but being able to fuck her didn't mean being able to trust her. Not for one minute.

"So, do we know where we're going with this?" Seneca leveled her gaze at Tim and Michelle. Not waiting for them to respond, she issued their assignments. "Tim, I need a print-out showing me all the high schools sorted by enrollment and starting with the largest. I need to know the age of each building and its square footage. And I need a committee of engineering types ready to make site visits. Finally, I want an accurate list of city councilpersons, matching them with the schools in their districts. Could you have it for me in a couple of hours?"

"Sure, Dr. Wilson." He got up immediately and left the room.

While Seneca's eyes roved Michelle's body, her mind remained focused on the business at hand. "I need you to contact the Research Department and have them prepare a summary of every article they can find that speaks about the superiority of smaller high schools and/or large ones with small learning communities."

"I'll do it right away." Michelle smiled at her boss, somewhat smugly. She didn't mind it at all that Dr.

Seneca Wilson had visually raked her body.

"And be sure they look for articles that include hard research and a lot of statistics. The CEO lives and breathes statistics."

"How much time do I have for this?"

"I need at least half a dozen summaries by three o'clock." Then, taking a second to consider how empty her new apartment felt, Seneca fleshed out an additional detail. "If they're not ready by then, could you deliver them to my home later on today or early this evening, Michelle?"

"Sure, Seneca, no problem." Michelle glided toward the door, confident her superior was watching every inch of her departure.

The school district's new chief planner wondered why her sexy assistant assumed they were mutually on a first name basis. She'd have to talk to her about her license of familiarity when they saw each other later. Of course, by then using first names might be more appropriate.

She swung around in her brand new, ultra-comfortable chair, allowing herself the luxury of looking at the tree-lined city streetscape from the large window in her office. Although she couldn't see it from here, she knew that her old school, Thomas Jefferson High, was only fifteen minutes away from where she sat. The journey she had made from that school to this office had been pretty incredible, a testament to her brainpower, persistence and ability to manipulate her fate.

When she thought about Jefferson High, she thought about Jaie, not her first lover, but certainly a significant one in a series of strikingly handsome young women. She recalled the excitement she felt when she introduced Jaie to the wonders of having sex with another female. It was an accomplishment that had left her satisfied for a brief time. Seneca tried to remember exactly why deceiving Jaie in order to get a male date to the prom had been so important. She couldn't recall the reasons. She didn't even recollect the name of the boy she'd had to seduce and fool into thinking she wasn't really a lesbian.

The last time she saw Jaie was at their high school graduation in the cavernous gymnasium of nearby Clarkeson University. They didn't speak to each other that day. Not one word. Jaie's friends had surrounded her, forming a protective shield that even Seneca, especially Seneca, couldn't penetrate. Her inability to speak to her ex-lover had annoyed and frustrated her, especially when she watched Jaie receive her diploma and then wave and smile at someone in the audience.

Ever since she was a little girl, Seneca had understood the power she wielded. It had always been easy for her to control most people. Dominating Jaie and getting whatever she wanted from her hadn't been a great challenge. On graduation day however, Seneca had not gotten her way. Their eyes met once during the commencement ceremony and Jaie's steely stare warned Seneca she had exerted her influence over her for the final time.

Since returning to Philadelphia, Seneca hadn't been able to reconnect with Jaie. She didn't know with any certainty Jaie still lived here. But she knew she would find out. Her next step was to contact the alumni office at Clarkeson. She was sure someone there could be persuaded to give her Jaie's last address and phone number. In fact, she'd make that call right now.

"Seneca?"

A female voice was at her doorway. Seneca turned around and saw her young subordinate standing there, a petulant smile on her face. "Yes, Michelle."

"Research told me there's a ton of literature available about small versus large high schools. They can get a lot of it summarized for me by this afternoon, but they'll have more if I can stay until five."

"Is staying until five a problem?"

"Oh, no, not at all." Michelle hesitated and then asked her supervisor a question to which she already knew the answer. "Uh, then do you want me to run the material to you at home?"

"Yes, please, unless it would be a problem." Seneca let her gaze drift from Michelle's eyes down to her lips and then to her breasts. She wanted the young woman to know exactly what her intentions were.

Michelle met Seneca's stare with a knowing smile. "No problem at all, Seneca. I know where you live, and I'll be there shortly after five."

"Good. I'll expect you."

Seneca nodded a good-bye at the petite brown female standing in her doorway and then dialed information for the phone number of Clarkeson University's Alumni Office.

Chapter Twenty

"JOHNNIE, IT'S SO good to see you!" Jennifer sprang from her chair, reaching Detective Johnetta Jones in three long strides. "You look great!"

Johnetta hugged her former partner's widow, verbally appraising her. "You look good, too, Jennifer."

"I'm so glad we could get together for lunch today."

"It seems like such a long time since we've seen each other."

Susan, Jennifer's secretary, stood by quietly in the doorway. "Excuse me, Ms. Renfrew, but you have an important call."

Johnetta was already backing out of Jennifer's office. "Don't mind me, Jen. I can go back into the waiting room."

"I'm sorry, Johnnie. This won't take long, whoever it is." She returned to her desk, a little annoyed about the interruption.

"Hello, Jennifer Renfrew speaking."

"Hello, Jennifer. It's Charlene."

"Hi, Charlene."

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, no bother. Well, actually I am on my way out to lunch with Pat's former partner, from when she was with the Special Victims Unit."

"Well, I won't delay you. I have the final results of the Adamson Prize for you."

"Okay, let me jot down their names. The winner?"

"Ramonita Ortiz."

"Wonderful!" Jennifer crowed victoriously.

"Do you know her?"

"No, I don't really know her well. And second place?"

"Terez Overton."

"Okay."

"Finally, in third place, Jaie Baxter."

"I'm in total agreement." Jennifer exhaled.

"I was rather surprised she didn't rank higher, Jennifer, but the essay counted for a lot and that was your call."

"Right. Is it okay that we have three women and no males?"

"As long as we can justify the rating system, it is fine."

"And we can, I'm sure of that. Thanks for calling me. Are you notifying the winner and the others?" Jennifer shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"I'd really appreciate it if the notification to the winner came from you on behalf of the readers. I'll let the others know the results."

"Sure, I can do that. I'll be more than happy to do it. "

"The date for the notification is exactly two weeks from today."

"Got it. I'll see that the winner's letter is sent out then."

"Thank you, Jennifer, for participating in the prize selection. I know it must have been difficult to fit all of the reading in with your other tasks, and I appreciate your having done this. I'm mindful, also, that you were on your way to lunch."

"You're quite welcome. And don't worry about the interruption. It was for a good cause. 'Bye now." Jennifer picked up the sheet of paper she'd used to record Charlene's news and put it inside the top drawer of her desk. Then she grabbed her handbag and rushed out to the waiting room to see Johnetta.

"Sorry about the delay. Susan, I'll be back in an hour. Thanks for letting me know about that phone call. It was important."

Her secretary nodded in her direction.

"Where do you want to eat, Johnnie?"

"Someplace close because I'm starved. And I have to eat and run. I'm due back in the city in ninety minutes."

"I know just the place. It's two minutes from here, and we can walk." Jennifer closed her office door behind her.

"Great!"

The old friends walked briskly to one of the newer buildings on the Allerton campus.

"You must be working out these days, Johnetta. I'm having difficulty keeping up with you."

Johnetta noticed Jennifer was a step behind her. She figured all of the time in the gym was paying off. "This old broad has to keep in condition if she wants to continue being a cop."

"You don't seem old at all." Jennifer took a deep breath. "You sure are making me feel aged. Could you slow it down for a second?"

"Sorry." Johnetta looked at her friend and laughed. "With all of these hills on your campus, I woulda thought you'd be in better shape than I was."

"Well, I'm not, so thank God we're almost there."

The two women approached a modern red brick building with soaring wood-trimmed windows. Jennifer guided her guest through the front doors and past a small combination reading room and lounge. They walked down a wide corridor to their destination, the Faculty Club Dining Room. Jennifer steered them toward a table for two near a large window overlooking the Oval, a spacious stretch of lawn bordered by some of the oldest buildings on the campus.

"This view is absolutely beautiful, Jen. Do you eat here often?"

"Only when I have some time. It's easier for me to pack my lunch and eat at the office."

Johnetta continued to enjoy the vista on the other side of the window. "But this is so relaxing. Man, if I worked at this school, I'd spend time in here every day."

Jennifer sparred with her friend. "If you worked at this school, you'd be surprised how busy you'd be. You wouldn't have time for long lunches."

A work-study student stopped at their table and gave them each a menu along with glasses of water. Johnnie looked up and smiled at him.

"Thanks, hon."

Admiring her friend, Jennifer smiled. "Sometimes I'm amazed at how gentle and soft you've remained after all the years you've worked in Special Victims. How do you do it, Johnnie?"

"I don't know, Jen. I've never thought about it. Maybe it's my son. He's kept me balanced through it all. Or maybe it's that we're constantly working with people who have been victimized. They need so much understanding and support."

"Pat didn't handle her duties the way you seem to. The job really got to her, and she became so moody." Jennifer looked down at the table, and then she returned her gaze to the detective. "It wasn't always easy being with her, you know."

"I know." Johnetta nodded, remembering how stressed Pat had been before she asked for a work assignment change. "That's why we thought her job transfer to Jefferson was a good thing."

Their student waiter returned to take their orders.

"I'd like the turkey special on rye, please, and a side salad." Johnnie deferred to her lunch mate.

"And I'd like the chicken Caesar salad with the dressing on the side. Thanks."

After the young man was no longer within earshot, Johnnie leaned forward in her chair and asked Jen, "So, my dear, are you seeing anyone special?"

"No, I'm afraid not. At least, no one seriously."

Johnnie sat back in her seat. "Don't wait too long, Jennifer. You're a good person. You should be sharing your life with someone."

"You're right. Have anyone in mind? Any good looking, smart detectives you can recommend?"

"Oh, I know a couple of people who would fit that description, but I'm afraid they're already taken." Johnetta chuckled.

"Well, keep me in mind whenever an available one comes along. Of course, they'd probably be near retirement age now."

As Johnetta laughed she looked, once again, out of the window.

"It's twelve forty-five, time for the rush to the one o'clock classes." Jennifer sought to explain the sudden increase in the pedestrian traffic that now filled the paths outlining the Oval.

"I never knew how crowded your campus was during the summer." Johnetta homed in on two females who had stopped to talk with each other. "Oh, Lord, I don't believe it. I just don't believe it. Of all the places in the world. Here she is, after all these years."

Now Jennifer was staring through the window, trying to figure out exactly who had snared Johnetta's attention. "Who are you looking at, Johnnie?"

"Do you see those two African-American women over there?" Johnetta pointed to two young women. "The two who are laughing. One has her hand on the other one's arm."

Jennifer took a closer look. Not far from the Faculty Club Dining Room stood Jaie Baxter with that attractive grad student, Terez Overton. How ironic that Johnnie would be interested in them. "You mean Jaie Baxter and Terez Overton?"

"Right. I don't know Ms. Overton, but I do know Ms. Baxter."

Jennifer's curiosity was stirred. "How do you know Jaie?"

Johnnie searched Jennifer's eyes, looking for some signal that her friend recognized the name Jaie Baxter, and connected it with her past. "You don't remember, do you?"

"I know Jaie from the university community. She's in one of our Ph.D. programs."

"That's very interesting. So she's making a success of herself." Johnetta paused for a few seconds before she continued. She forced herself to look at Jennifer instead of continuing to watch Jaie and Terez. "I know her because of the two tragedies that touched me, Jen. Don't you remember? Jaie Baxter was one of the Jefferson High students who were questioned exhaustively after Pat

was killed. She and the other girl were the two people who were standing closest to Pat at the murder scene. Neither one was charged. And, as you recall, we never found the murder weapon."

All the color drained from Jennifer's face. She took a sip of water and convinced herself to forget about the nausea threatening to surge up from her stomach. She was overcome by the vision of Jaie handling Pat's picture the day Jaie visited her apartment after their lunch date. "I purposely must have forgotten Jaie's name. It's been ten years."

Jennifer turned to the window. She saw Jaie and Terez standing close together, so wrapped up in each other and in their conversation, they were oblivious to anyone else's presence, much less to anyone observing them from a short distance.

Trying to stay calm and not show Johnetta how shaken she truly was, Jennifer struggled to focus on her friend. "But you said you knew her in connection with two tragic events. What's the second one?"

Johnetta stayed silent for a few seconds, as if she were trying to decide what to say. She tussled with her decision, her mind fighting her mouth when she tried to speak. "I...shot and killed Jaie's brother. He's the only person I ever shot in all these years on the force." Johnetta seemed to age right in front of Jennifer.

"What happened, Johnnie?"

"Kashif Baxter was driving a stolen car when he struck an old man who was crossing the street. He knew he hit the old guy, so he stopped, jumped out of the car, and then took off on foot. I chased him into the next block. All of a sudden, he stopped running. I didn't know it, but he stopped right in front of his house. When he started to turn around, I could see he had something metallic in his hand. I thought I saw him pointing a gun at me, so I shot him. The bullet hit him in his throat. Jaie was in her house when all of this happened, and she heard him yell right before I fired my gun. She ran out to him, but it was too late. He bled to death before the ambulance arrived. When I got closer to him, I saw he was holding a cell phone, one of those earlier ones, before the phones got so small. He didn't have a gun at all."

Jennifer listened to her friend's confession with disbelief. She reached over and patted Johnetta's hand. "Oh, Johnnie, I didn't know. It must have happened before you started working with Pat."

"Yeah, it did, one month before we started partnering."

"I'm so sorry."

"For me or for Jaie?"

"For both of you."

"Thanks." Johnetta rubbed her forehead. "It was almost fourteen years ago, and I'm still carrying around all of this guilt. The memory of killing somebody, even when you're a cop, stays with you forever, you know?"

Johnetta looked out the window again and saw that Jaie and Terez had vanished. Although the two women were no longer in sight, the detective continued to talk about Jaie. "I've often wondered about her. The damn streets are so ugly. Did she go to college? Is she happy? Is she bitter? Does she hate all police officers? She had such a grudge against the police. You know, I can still hear her, how she screamed her guts out that day. Said she'd never forget my face, that if I had any children, she hoped they would end up in jail, or worse."

"You've hauled a lot around with you for a very long time, Johnnie."

Johnetta let out a big sigh. "This is true." The detective attempted to shake off her bad memories and return to the present. "And so have you, honey. That's why the next time we see each other, I want to hear there's a new woman in your life."

Jennifer smiled broadly. "I'll see what I can do, how's that?"

"Perfect. And I'll see...Oh, damn it! My phone's ringing."

Johnetta unclipped her phone from her belt. "Detective Jones here. Yes, I can. I'm about thirty minutes from there. Right away."

Jennifer, one eyebrow raised, stared at her friend. "Problem?"

"Yeah, as usual. I don't know why I expected I could actually eat a meal with you." Johnetta put her phone back on her belt. "I'm sorry this lunch has to end so quickly." She took out her wallet to leave some money for the meal.

"Put that away, Johnnie. I have a faculty account, and you're my guest."

"Okay, sweetheart. Thank you." Johnetta bent down to kiss Jennifer on her cheek.

"Don't mention it."

"I'll call you soon so we can get together again. You take care of yourself, Jennifer. And be on the lookout for someone special, okay?"

Jennifer saluted. "Yes, Ma'am. Will do."

After Johnnie left, Jennifer pushed her salad around the plate. She had no appetite. It washed away in the wake of the information she'd heard about Jaie Baxter. Well, she thought, at least she didn't have to contact Jaie about the Adamson Prize decision. Charlene Gray had that responsibility. As per their phone conversation, the only person Jennifer had to contact was the winner. The Assistant Dean of Admissions smoothed her linen slacks as she stood up. She

shuddered when she thought how close she had come to sleeping with and then awarding the grant to the person who might know the identity of Pat's murderer.

Chapter Twenty-One

LUTHER VANDROSS'S SOULFUL voice provided the sound track accompanying Terez's hurried movements. Contrary to the singer's calming tones, Terez moved like a house on fire, whirling through her chores before getting ready to go to the jazz concert with Jaie. There was something to be done, no matter where Terez looked. Hit "save" for the proposal abstract, empty the stone cold coffee mug into the sink and rinse it out, check the time, iron the Indian tunic top--the black one with the gold trim that had teased a compliment from Jaie, allow enough time to shampoo, pick up the unread sections of newspaper littering the floor, and answer the phone, damn it!

"Hello?" Terez stepped on top of the twisted telephone cord, almost losing her balance.

"Hi, Terez? It's Sherry. How you doing? What's up? You busy?"

Terez noticed Sherry always asked at least two or three questions in a row, without waiting for an answer to any of them.

"Oh, hi, Sherry. Yeah, I'm sort of busy right now. How are you?"

Sherry's unexpected call felt like one more tedious detail Terez had to attend to before her date with Jaie.

"I'm okay. Real busy? Well, I won't keep you long, babe. What are you doing Saturday after next? I'm asking in advance, because I know someone as fine as you are gets your dance card filled early."

Terez wondered if she would enjoy spending an entire evening with Sherry. It wasn't that she didn't have fun with this woman. It's just that she was sure she could have more fun spending time with someone with whom she could actually have a dialogue. She and Jaie had long talks. Sometimes their talks were more like debates. They stimulated Terez. What bothered her though, was the realization that Jaie persisted in working so hard to keep some space between them. Jaie seemed to run hot, then cool, interested, then detached. So, what the hell? What about another date with Sherry?

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. Maybe a movie. Maybe a club. Maybe dinner at my place."

Terez caught sight of her facial expression, somewhere between apprehension and amusement, reflected in a nearby mirror. Sherry's place? She didn't think so. After all, Sherry was not much more than a distraction for Terez until Jaie finally made up her mind to act as if she had some sense.

Sherry was nice looking enough, tall with broad shoulders and slim hips, a swimmer's body. She had a playful dimpled smile and the straightest, brightest teeth that could have won an audition for a tooth-whitening commercial. But despite all of the things Sherry had going for her, Terez had little interest in sleeping with her. She'd been careful to make that abundantly clear. There were times when she could tell Sherry didn't want to buy her apathy as far as a sexual relationship was concerned. And Terez knew an evening spent at Sherry's apartment might turn into one of those times when the potentially aggressive Ms. Yancey would try to push beyond Terez's established boundary.

"I like the idea of a movie. Why don't I check out the film section in the newspaper next Saturday morning?"

"Okay." Sherry vacillated. "Do you like to dance?"

Grabbing the opportunity enrobed in two seconds of silence, Terez answered, "Yes. I love to dance. How about you?"

"Not much. I like to listen to music though and watch other people dance. And I do like Amelia's.

Have you been there yet?"

"No, not yet." Someone, perhaps Isola Valdez, had mentioned the women's bar to Terez. "What's it like?"

"The music is good and the beer is cheap."

"Well, I guess those two things are important in a club." Visualizing a crowded bar on a typical Saturday night, Terez wondered if Jaie were a regular there. She'd never said too much about the place. "Do a lot of Allerton students go to Amelia's?"

"Yeah, during the regular semesters more than in the summer. Now it's mostly the locals."

"How about us black women?"

"Not a whole lot. There's more going on in Philly for the sistahs."

Terez felt slapped by disappointment. "Well, I'll check out the movie page that day. Listen, Sherry, I'm sorry I don't have time to talk right now, but I have a couple of things to do before I go out."

"What? You're goin' out tonight with my competition?" Despite her words, Sherry's question lacked any genuine envy.

"I'm going to a jazz concert."

"You goin' by yourself or with that other university woman?" She didn't give Terez a chance to respond. "That's okay, babe. Just teasin' you. I'm not the jealous type. I'll see you Saturday after next."

"Okay. 'Bye, Sherry."

Terez hung up the phone and rededicated herself to the race with the clock, quelling the hunger pangs in her stomach with the memory of Jaie's promise they'd eat a light supper before the performance. She tore into the bathroom, flipped up the water's temperature control lever, and stepped into the shower stall the same moment the phone rang again. Speaking to no one but the water that cascaded over her head and ran down her soapy body, she uttered, "I'm letting the machine pick this one up."

Out of the shower and drying herself, Terez made a mental note to spray on the same perfume she'd worn last weekend. She remembered seeing Jaie inhale her fragrance and then smile faintly as she'd gotten into Jaie's car to go explore a new coffee bar.

In the few months they'd known each other, she'd noticed so many things about Jaie. It was as if she had videotaped their times together and put special emphasis on everything that had to do with the amber-eyed woman. She could envision Jaie's fine profile, her precisely trimmed, short curly hair, her strong jaw line, her half smile. Each time she watched Jaie drive, she looked at her bronze-colored forearm and saw the muscle there tense and then relax as she held onto the car's steering wheel. The veins that coursed their way through the back of Jaie's hands left their impression in Terez's memory. And she remembered always wanting to touch Jaie's thigh through the smooth cover of her lightweight slacks. So much of her wanted to touch all of Jaie and to be touched by Jaie.

Terez stole another quick look at herself in the hallway mirror as she passed by the answering machine. Looking down, she noticed the red "message" light blinking, reminding her the phone had rung as she was getting into the shower. She pushed the device's 'talk' button.

"MESSAGE ONE: THIS is a message for Terez Overton. Terez, it's Mandy Reese from *City Magazine*. It's been a couple of weeks since we had our meeting at the Era Café, and I wanted to know how serious you were about doing that feature story for us. Have you had a chance to read all the background info I e-mailed and scanned for you? Let me know ASAP, and I'll send you a freelancer's contract to sign. Take care. You have my number here at the magazine."

SHE SCOWLED, REALIZING that now she had to share her pleasant pre-date anticipation with the burden of having to speak or e-mail her decision about a journalism opportunity. Although the job was meant to be a short-term assignment, it had the potential to cost her time she didn't have and a loss she didn't want to sustain. Terez's sublime desire for the inevitable to happen with Jaie tonight was suddenly subverted by a tape recorded message and supplanted by a vague notion of uneasiness.

Without as much as a second to analyze why her feelings were in flux, Terez dashed from the hallway to her desk where her cell phone threatened to vibrate its way over the edge and onto the floor.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

Jaie's warm voice soothed her. "Hey, back at you."

"Have you checked your e-mail in the last hour?"

"No. Why?"

Terez didn't hear alarm in Jaie's voice and that was a good thing. Surely bad news wasn't waiting for her on her computer.

"They've announced the results for the Adamson Prize."

"How did you do, Jaie?"

She knew the answer before she asked. Jaie would have been more animated had she won.

"Let's just say I may have to be teaching Freshman English in the Fall."

"I'm sorry. I know you don't want to do that."

She did truly regret that Jaie hadn't won the grant, and she was concerned about Jaie's clearly bruised self-confidence. "Look at the upside. If we're both teaching, we can share lesson plans."

"Yeah. How about that? I'll be by soon. Check your e-mail, girl!"

Terez hung up the phone reluctantly. She didn't want to end their conversation with Jaie sounding so down. Maybe she'd rebound by the time they saw each other. Terez wondered if she should drive them to the concert, so Jaie would feel free to have a couple of consoling glasses of wine this evening.

She closed the flip top of her phone and put it in her shoulder bag. Then she opened her computer, took it out of stand-by and signed on to the Internet. That annoying mechanical voice

alerted her right away that she had three new e-mail messages. One was from Dr. Charlene Gray and it was titled "ADAMSON PRIZE RESULTS." She aimed the cursor and clicked. A quick but careful reading told her what she needed to find out; whether she needed to protect Jaie from her good news, or commiserate with her about their shared rejection notices.

The middle message, from Jaie, was titled CONGRATULATIONS/OH, BOY, I'M SORRY YOU LOST. Terez laughed out loud as she navigated her way through the text. She was relieved to see Jaie still had her sense of humor at least.

Mandy Reese authored the last message. It reiterated what she had said to the telephone answering machine. Terez recognized the pressure this woman must be under as she attempted to plan a future article in her magazine. She knew also, that she wasn't making that planning any easier with her procrastination. She could use the experience writing a feature article in a popular local magazine would give her. She could use the journalistic credit on her resume, and God knows, she could use the money she'd earn. But the word "use" had an unpleasant flavor clinging to it, and Terez wasn't comfortable with the notion of using anyone for her personal gain.

The intercom buzzed just as Terez shut down her computer.

"Jaie?"

"I'm here."

Although Jaie was only a little late, Terez knew they were pushed for time. "Why don't I come down?"

The little metal grill covering the apartment's entry system emitted the usual electronic crackles along with Jaie's, "Sounds like a plan."

Within a minute, Terez burst through the front door of her building. Jaie offered her a quick smile. Even though she was in a down mood, she didn't miss taking in Terez's image in one long sweeping glance and experiencing the "first second of seeing Terez" rush she always felt. "You look great."

Terez returned the compliment, admiring the dramatic contrast of Jaie's banded collar white linen shirt against her burnished complexion. "You do, too, Jaie."

"So...?"

"No, I don't sew. I'm afraid I have to buy all of my clothes."

She knew Jaie was asking about the grant decision, but she felt compelled to add some levity to the situation.

"Don't be a smart ass. Did you win it?" Jaie was doggedly persistent.

"I ran out of time. I'll check when I get back." Some phantom pushed that less than honest answer out of Terez's mouth.

Jaie looked at her date with disbelief clouding her eyes. "How can you deal with all the suspense?"

"Win or lose, it's not going to make one iota of difference in my life tonight, is it?"

Jaie didn't answer her. They were two feet away from the car when Terez reached out and touched her arm. "Jaie, is my having won or lost this grant going to make a difference in my life tonight, or in our lives?"

Jaie took a good long look at Terez. In an instant she realized how tentative Terez must be feeling about her. This beautiful woman's question was really about them, not about the Adamson Prize. It was about Terez's need to know how Jaie would treat her if Terez were the grant winner. Would Jaie take what she wanted from her and then move on to the next woman, or would she remain in Terez's life and understand how much they deserved to explore a relationship with each other?

Noticing Terez's hand was still resting lightly atop her arm, Jaie shook her head from side to side. "No. It's not going to make a bit of difference in our lives tonight."

"Good. That's settled. Why don't I drive this evening? That way you can have more than one drink if you'd like."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I don't drown my sorrows in alcohol. My mom's done that for as long as I can remember, and it's not the route I want to take."

Terez nodded at her, understandingly. "I forgot about that."

Jaie snapped to attention. "How could you forget that? I never told you about it." Jaie knew very well she hadn't talked to anyone since high school about her mother's problems.

Terez remembered exactly how she had learned about Mrs. Baxter's substance abuse problem. She couldn't disclose this to Jaie. Silently she cursed the way tonight's date was starting. In the space of three minutes, Terez had lied twice. First, about not having checked her e-mail and now omitting the source of her knowledge about the alcoholism in Jaie's family.

The concert venue was a theater in another Philadelphia suburban town west of Allerton. Jaie underestimated the amount of traffic she'd need to battle and the number of cars to be parked. By the time they found a spot within walking distance to the auditorium, it was much too late to get even the quickest of dinners. So they made do with some snacks and soft drinks from the concession stand. Jaie seemed annoyed as she peeled open the small bag of popcorn she'd bought.

"This is not what I had in mind when I said we'd get a meal before the concert. There's an excellent Tex-Mex restaurant a block from here. Somehow I pictured us eating a leisurely dinner there."

"We can always eat there some other time. Don't worry about it, Jaie."

Terez, sensing Jaie's frustration, felt as if she were wearing cleats while marching on top of a paper thin crate of eggs. Jaie's disappointment about losing the grant and her saber-sharp self-protective response about her mother's substance abuse blew through them like stiff gale force winds. Terez's attempts to make small talk went nowhere fast. Even now, as they chatted about the stylized features of the art deco theater and tried to estimate the average age of the arriving audience, she could see Jaie had only one foot in their conversation. The woman was distracted and inattentive. Worse than that, she kept staring at an attractive concert-goer who entered the theater seconds before they did and was walking ahead of them down the center aisle.

"Is that someone you know?"

"Yeah, and I don't believe it. That was her at the street fair." Jaie knew her answer was cryptic at best, but it was the only response her surprised feelings could muster.

"Is she someone you know well?" Terez asked her guardedly.

"More like someone I used to know. I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

Even though she asked Terez to repeat herself, it was evident Jaie was paying more attention to the other woman.

In full self-defense mode, Terez answered her. "I said why don't you catch up with her before she gets seated."

Jaie heard the wounded edge in Terez's voice. She stood as close to her as she dared and whispered in her ear. "Girl, I'm still trying to catch up with you."

Terez remained on guard. "Nice recovery, Jaie. I hope it's more than just a line."

The very moment they found their seats was also the very moment Seneca Wilson turned around in hers and spotted Jaie. She left her date, Michelle Sanders's, side and walked deliberately slowly, a few rows back up the aisle. A practiced smile crossed her lips.

"Jaie Baxter."

"Seneca Wilson."

Seneca ignored Jaie's formally outstretched hand and reached up to kiss her on the cheek. "It's been such a long time. How have you been?"

Jaie ignored the question and turned slightly, so she could include Terez. "Seneca, this is Terez Over-ton."

The two women shook hands.

Seneca's monotone, "Hi. Nice to meet you." and her steady eye contact with Jaie dismissed Terez completely. Looking fully and unabashedly up and down the length of her former lover, Seneca continued. "You look good, Jaie."

With an off-hand glance, Seneca included Terez. "Don't you think she looks good?"

Terez looked at Jaie before refocusing on Seneca. "Oh, most certainly. But we don't want her to be too sure of herself, do we?"

Seneca continued smiling at her former lover. "Jaie has always been sure of herself. That's one of her features I remember adoring so much." Seneca lowered her voice to the land of intimacy. "That and a few other attributes."

Seneca challenged Terez non-verbally by sending Jaie one of those proprietary 'I've been here before and I can come back any time I want to' looks.

"What are you doing in Philly, Seneca? Don't you live in Atlanta now?" Fully reminded of the destructive potential of Seneca's presence, Jaie was far from flattered by her former girlfriend's compliments.

Seneca closed the space between them and touched Jaie's hand. "I've been back in the city for a couple of months. And, I've been looking for you."

"Why?"

"Because."

Terez couldn't decide if she should excuse herself from what had become a terribly personal and intimate reunion between Jaie and Seneca, or stick around to remind Jaie she was there and she did matter. The house lights dimmed the need for any decision, but not before Seneca fired a parting shot.

"Here's my card. Call me soon, Jaie. We need to get together."

Rather than drown out Terez's uneasy reaction to Jaie's and Seneca's interlude, every note and chord the musicians played echoed the scene Terez had witnessed between the two former lovers. Terez wondered if the joyful melodies were the backdrop to Jaie's and Seneca's chance meeting, and if the mournful sad songs were the prologue to her own future if it included pursuing a deeper relationship with Jaie.

One of the performers, a saxophonist, played his instrument as if he were blowing his life through the horn. And along with it came Terez's longing and confusion about the woman sitting next to her. Each time the guitarist teased the strings until they wailed, Terez wanted to scream she already knew the score, musically and otherwise. She knew exactly who Seneca Wilson was and what she had meant to Jaie, the same way she knew about Jaie's mom having saturated her life with alcohol and drugs. Mandy Reese, the magazine editor, had seen to that through her e-mails and phone calls.

The size of the crowd must have been too much, even for a woman of Seneca's determination, because she didn't seek out Jaie when the concert ended. Perhaps Seneca figured Jaie's thinking about the bait was better than Seneca's attempting to reel her in right away.

The long walk back to the car was just that, a long quiet walk. Terez felt small and insignificant, and she was angry she'd allowed Jaie's mood and Seneca's presence to influence how she felt about herself. The two women were back in Allerton when Jaie finally broke the ride's deadly silence.

"What are you doing next week, Terez?" Jaie struggled to find a way to approach Terez and to offer first aid to her obviously hurt feelings.

"I have to prepare for my Stat final." Terez stared straight ahead. Her voice was flat and dry.

"Oh, yeah. The summer session is almost over, isn't it? And you never complained about that course the way most people do. Was it easy for you or what?"

"Not particularly."

Jaie parked the car near Terez's building. She turned off the ignition. "Why didn't you ask me to help you? I'm good at stat."

Terez recalled Isola Valdez's testimony about Jaie's prowess with statistics. "I didn't want you to be my tutor."

"Why is that?" Jaie asked her this so gently. She had no clue why this incredible woman hadn't asked her for help. She would have given it so willingly. Wasn't she always looking for any excuse to spend time with Terez?

"I didn't want you to teach me anything I could figure out myself."

Jaie knew instinctively Terez's answer covered more bases than simply the statistics course. She wasn't sure she wanted to plumb any deeper. "Okay. I respect that.

And I'm sorry I wasn't the best company tonight."

"Don't worry about it. It's not important. Look, I'll understand if we don't see each other for a while. I know you might want to reconnect with your friend from the concert, and I'm still seeing someone else."

Jaie sat back in her seat and looked as surprised as she felt. "But I do want to see you. A lot and soon, Terez."

Terez eked out a runner-up's smile. "I have a feeling you're going to be pretty busy catching up with old times with your friend, Seneca." She remembered the business card Jaie had tucked into her pants pocket, even if Jaie didn't remember it.

"The old times weren't good times, so I'm not interested in catching up. I want to spend time with you."

"It's okay, Jaie. Seneca seems pretty determined to reunite with you."

"Don't I have some say in this reunion business?" Jaie turned her body so she could face Terez. "I don't want to reconnect with Seneca. I've been trying to forge a connection with you. It's not easy, you know. You're always going out with that 'someone else.' Who is she anyway? That older woman who was with you at the Era Café?"

Terez struggled to remember who was with her the day of the Pride street fair. "No, that was someone else."

"So now there are two other women you're seeing? And you're worried about Seneca? I'm the one who has to deal with the competitors. It's a miracle I'm still hangin' in there."

"First of all, I didn't say I was worried about Seneca, Jaie. And second, you and I are not at that place where either of us has a reason to be worried about the other people we see." Terez unlocked her car door and got out of the vehicle.

Jaie raised her voice so Terez would continue hearing her. "I'm gonna wait here until you get into your building. Okay?"

"You don't have to do that. I'm fine." Terez aimed her response over her shoulder.

Jaie, her tone softening, added, "I know I don't have to do it. I want to do it. And yes, Terez, you are fine."

Terez walked backward a few paces and shot Jaie a look of annoyance. "You talk a lot of trash, Jaie."

"Not where you're concerned." She continued to speak softly. "I'll call you, Terez."

"That's something else you don't have to do."

"I am going to call you, Terez."

The Boston-born woman entered her apartment and went straight to her computer. Not taking the time to sit down, she moved the cursor and hit the keys that lead her to her e-mail. She reread the message Jaie had sent her earlier in the afternoon. Methodically, she typed her response:

"Jaie, I didn't win the Adamson Prize, either. Guess we'll both be teaching freshman English. See you now and then on campus."

Then, thinking more clearly than she had in weeks, she wrote a response to Mandy Reese at *City Magazine*:

"Thank you for offering me the chance to write the investigative article. I cannot do that assignment for personal reasons."

THE LAST THING Terez did that night was feed her paper shredder all of the printed e-mails and scanned pages about the Patricia Adamson murder investigation Mandy Reese had sent to her during the past few weeks.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I READ ALL of my e-mails and checked out the latest lesbian posts on Black Voices before I shut down my computer and turned off the light. I was exhausted and disappointed about losing the Adam-son grant. I felt proud, though, that I never went through with my plan to seduce Jennifer Renfrew, nor allowed her to extract sex from me.

The alarm clock perched on the bedside table stared at me. It was two in the morning after the night I thought would have brought me Terez. These were the post-midnight hours I'd hoped we might have spent making love. I wanted her so desperately that my skin could feel her cool softness. My arms already knew their way around her waist. My lips were already acquainted with the excited hardness of her nipples. My mouth and tongue were already at home in the warmth of her lower lips and her pearl. But loving each other last night and this morning was not meant to be. Nor was my being able to fall asleep.

I wrestled with the cold cutting storm that was Seneca Wilson. She had returned, bringing with her the last of my nightmare memories. The souvenirs of an ill-conceived relationship, a wrong-headed, wrong-hearted romance that ended in the worst possible way, with an uncalled for death. Why was she here now? Why did I have to fight with these memories...?

AS MUCH AS I hated to do it, I took my "bout to graduate" self to my mother to ask her for money. "Mom, this is the last time I'll ask you for money, I swear. But I need to pay the registration fee to Clarke-son to hold my place in the freshman class."

I sounded as serious as I could. This was goddamned important to me. It was my future. It was my route out of this house and this neighborhood.

"This isn't a good time, Jaie. I don't have that kind of money." She was as serious as I was. She didn't raise her voice, didn't yell that I should get a job and forget about college. She didn't even look up from her *TV Guide*.

I nodded passively. "Okay. I'll get it from somewhere else."

Headed for school, I left the house a minute after lifting my mom's ATM card from her wallet, which she'd dropped, as usual, in the fruit bowl on the kitchen table. My best friend, Rasheeda, was waiting for me on my porch.

"Yo, Jaie. Do you know her password?" In my determination to be enrolled in Clarkeson University, I'd forgotten this little detail.

"Shit, no! Now what am I going to do? I need to pay that money, Rasheeda. Why is this so friggin' hard?"

I had no clue about the password. Was it my mother's birthday? It couldn't be my birthday. She hadn't acknowledged that date for the last four years, not since Kashif got killed. Maybe the magic word was related to his birthday. One thing was sure. If I didn't find out how to tap the money out of her account, I was screwed. I'd lose my spot at Clarkeson.

Rasheeda and I talked and schemed all the way to school that day without coming up with a solution to my predicament. No friend of frustration, Rasheeda was eager to change the subject to a happier one.

"Hey, Jaie, you and Seneca are going to the gay prom at Penn, right?"

"Yeah. That's why I don't have the cash for Clarkeson. Between the tux and the car I'm renting..."

"And the hotel room?" Rasheeda jabbed my arm.

"How'd you know about that?"

"Amin opened his big mouth and spilled the beans. You know you can't tell Miss Mary crap if you don't want the whole world to know."

"Yeah, well that's why I'm so poor. Hell, I figured we only have one senior prom, and it's the big all-city gay prom, Rah'. You know Seneca and I have to be there. The hotel room is a little something special to help us celebrate." I couldn't conceal my smile from my buddy. "The next time I'll see Seneca in a hotel will be in Atlanta, when I go down to visit her at Spelman."

I hadn't decided how I really felt about Seneca's going away to college in Atlanta. Spelman was a big deal. I acknowledged that. And she'd won a full ride there, so her mom didn't have to worry about tuition and room and board. The only thing that bugged me was that Atlanta was so damn far from Philly.

I'd been accepted at Clarkeson, less than a mile away from my high school. I'd wanted to apply to other schools, so I could put at least a little distance between me and home. But the application fees were steep and my mom made it clear she'd pay for the Clarkeson paperwork, and she'd sign on the dotted line for the local Community College. I had a work-study package, so I'd keep some money in my pocket. Enough, I hoped, to be able to fly down to Georgia once in the fall and maybe once in the spring to see Seneca.

"I know you got that hotel room to get your thing on with Seneca on prom night. You're not fooling me, you little horny..." Rasheeda suddenly stopped talking. She was staring at something. I followed her gaze and immediately wished I hadn't.

There, right in front of us, her back against a locker and her mouth fastened onto Keith's, was my girlfriend, Seneca. I just stood there, frozen. Rasheeda didn't have to hold me back or tell me to be cool, because at that moment, I couldn't move. Our stillness, compared to the busy crush of the other students making their way past Seneca and Keith made it possible for them to kiss each other again and not see us. It felt as if an hour passed before they broke their huddle.

Seneca's first class was mine, also. So I couldn't believe she'd stood near the classroom and kissed that bastard, knowing I might come by and see them. I watched her back disappear as she entered the classroom. Then I went in, sliding into my seat a few seconds after she took hers. I could tell she was looking at me, trying to get me to glance at her. When I finally did shoot her a look, I met her smile with the coldest, most hateful glare I could summon. If I'd been the mean, crude, disrespectful bitch I'd been raised to be, I would have slapped her out of her chair. Instead, I riddled her with an angry stare. When the class ended, I got up and walked out of the room.

Keyanna was waiting for me in the hallway. I guess Rasheeda had already told her about Seneca and Keith. "What are you gonna do, Jaie?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything!"

"You need to punch the bitch in the face!"

"That's what I feel like doing. She really hurt me this time, Key."

"She keeps hurting you, Jaie. First at the party, then at the track meet, then..."

I stopped walking and stared at Keyanna. "What the hell are you talkin' about? What track meet?"

"Oh, shit, Jaie. I wasn't supposed to tell you about that."

"Then don't tell me. But was it with that punk Keith?"

Keyanna looked down at the brown and tan tile floor. "Yeah, it was with him."

"Before this day is over, I'm gonna kick both their asses."

"We got your back, Jaie. Just tell us when and where."

I thought for a second before answering my friend. "Before lunch, on the third floor, near the Physics class."

I didn't know exactly what I was going to do. Physics was the other class I had with Seneca and with Keith. So if something were going to jump off, it would be then and there. In the meantime, I'd have a chance to calm down and think during my Journalism class. The teacher, Mrs. Castor, had been in the middle of proofreading my editorial yesterday and judging by the expression she'd had on her face when the bell rang, she'd found it interesting.

The extra minutes I took to talk to Keyanna slowed me down and made me late for class. I got to the room and found my way to my seat a full minute after the late bell rang.

"You're late, Ms. Baxter."

"I know. I had to talk to someone before I got here."

"And that makes it all right for you to be late?"

"Okay, Ms. Castor. You don't have to be so hard on me. I was just a minute late. No biggie."

Ms. Castor reduced her voice to a sugary sarcastic tone. "You're right, Ms. Baxter. Being a minute late for class is no biggie. Do you know what is a biggie, Ms. Baxter?"

She didn't give me time to answer. And that was okay, because I didn't know what to say.

"A biggie, Ms. Baxter, is when you commit plagiarism."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about, Ms. Baxter? I'm talking about the editorial piece you turned in yesterday. That's what I'm talking about." She picked up the typewritten paper with my essay on it and walked toward me. "Do you understand what plagiarism means?"

"Of course I do. I'm not an idiot."

"I read part of your essay two Sundays ago in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The fact that you've duplicated that writer's thoughts and passed them on as your own makes me believe you think I'm an idiot."

"I never copied anybody's work! I wouldn't do that! These were my thoughts!"

"See me after class, Ms. Baxter! I'm not going to waste any more of your classmates' time with a dishonest plagiarist!"

"Fuck you and fuck this class!" I stormed out of the room and walked the halls, every single one of them. I couldn't believe this shit was happening to me. At the end of the period, I began my long trek to the third floor Science wing. As I approached my classroom, I saw Seneca and Keith standing next to each other, outside the room. She was probably telling him I knew about their little romance. I looked at the girl I thought I was in love with, and I saw blood. Yards before I reached her, I yelled out her name.

"Seneca! I'm not good enough for you anymore?" I was as close to being out of control as I'd ever been.

"Jaie! Hey, we need to talk about this, girl." She took a quick look around and saw that I had gotten us plenty of attention. A small knot of students had stopped their conversations and were staring at us. "Just the two of us, Jaie. We need to talk."

"Naw. We've done that to a fare thee well, Seneca. Those talks don't work."

Some of the other students were beginning to egg us on. "Y'all gonna fight or just kick it? Either way, we get a show."

"Jaie, we're too grown for this. Come on. Let's talk. We can include Keith if you want to." Seneca was starting to sound unsure of herself, like she didn't know how to calm me down or control me any more.

But I was just getting started. "Include Keith? You've been including Keith. It's me you've been leavin' out."

"Oooh. She probably been fuckin' him behind your back, girl!" Some disembodied voice from the large crowd surrounding us encouraged my rage.

"Is that right, Seneca? Is that what you've been doin'?"

Seneca rebounded, suddenly gripped by some rage of her own. "Yeah, that's right. And I've been enjoying it with him more than I do with you!"

"Dyke fight! Dyke fight!" The crowd spoke with one roiling voice.

I heard the approaching static of walkie-talkies, so I knew someone had called for security and they were nearby. "You can forget about the prom!" I didn't realize my one trump card was not only impotent, it became a weapon to be turned around and used against me.

"That stupid ass gay prom? With the faggots and dykes? Nobody wants to go to that bogus thing! I'm going to the real senior prom with Keith! You can take your gay prom and stick it up your ass!"

Now Seneca and I were face-to-face and about two feet away from each other. I stared dead at her, forgetting I'd ever connected her with love. All I saw, heard and felt was Seneca and Keith having sex, my mom throwing a glass of beer at my head, Kashif's life hemorrhaging out of him while a female cop stood over his body, and some teacher's voice accusing me of not having enough intelligence to formulate my own thoughts.

The crowd sucked up all of our air and I could hardly breathe, much less think of any come backs for Seneca's trash talk about the prom. I saw the school's only city cop approach us. Somebody from the right side shoved me just as that cop got into my space, and I crashed into her, pushing her hard against the wall. I thought I heard her moan in pain. I know I saw her eyes close the second her head slammed into the cinder block barrier.

I don't remember; no, I don't know what happened next. Not really. A female arm and hand reached into that cop's jacket and came back out with her gun. I didn't know whose arm it was. Mine? Seneca's? Someone else's? I didn't want to know. I heard the clicking sound of the gun's safety as it left its cradle. I tried to look away in the same second I pulled myself back. In one agonizing fragment of time, I saw a red and yellow explosion, and I smelled sulfuric death. Seneca repelled herself from me and I from her.

Jefferson High School was closed for three days. I lost the hearing in my right ear for almost five months. Somebody must have told the cops that Seneca and I were real close to that police officer and that we were yelling at each other a few minutes before the gun went off, because the police picked us up two days after the shooting. They questioned both Seneca and me off and on for three days straight without pressing any charges against either of us. No one really saw what happened, and they never found that cop's gun.

WITH MEMORIES LIKE these, it's no wonder sleep continued to play hide and seek with me. When I closed my eyes I sought Terez and I saw Seneca. Inner peace was a fantasy as rest eluded me.

My common sense warned me to be as far away from Seneca as I could be. Why hadn't she remained in Atlanta? I didn't know how many miles lay between that city and Philadelphia. Whatever the distance was, I had allowed it to wrap me in a cocoon of forgotten pain for the past ten years. Now the cocoon was stripped off, just when I'd found a woman whom I wanted to love.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I NEEDED A break. I'd been elbow deep preparing for my proposal seminar for over two weeks now. Buried under all of those tasks, in addition to the annoying chore of avoiding any contact with Seneca, I knew it was time for a change in my daily routine of read, write, check facts, and revise. By now, my little Eclipse knew how to steer itself between the library and my apartment. I was well on my way to eroding a trench in the apartment's floorboards, etching a trail from my desk to the kitchen to the bathroom and back. Aside from Rasheeda, my faculty advisor, Dr. Gray and Terez's answering machine, I'd spoken to no one. I could easily forget the sound of my own voice. It was time for a change of scene.

My pulse needed to quicken with the kind of female energy you can find only in a women's club. My feet needed to dance to some music, and my eyes needed to see women's bodies moving in rhythm with each other.

Whenever I felt this way and didn't want to drive into Philly to pay a fortune parking in some poorly lit urine reeking garage, I turned to Amelia's, Allerton's small club. The spot sported a suburban-dyke/gaystudent crowd, and there was never any cover charge. The beer prices were dirt cheap. There were two dance floors and a pretty decent big-city-wanna-be DJ. Another draw of Amelia's for me was the unlikely prospect of running into Seneca there. She might have known about this bar because she's into knowing as much as possible, but Seneca was an urban club crawler. She wouldn't be caught dead in this little place on a Saturday night, not even in slow mid-August when most of the regulars were away in not too distant Rehoboth Beach or in P-town.

Refusing to be put off by Terez's answering machine, I phoned her to ask if she'd go out with me. We hadn't seen each other since the disaster at the concert almost two weeks ago, but true to my word, I kept calling her and leaving messages. When I finally heard her instead of her machine, she'd used her chilly and proper Bostonian voice to tell me she had plans already with her "someone else." Her ice-tinged words assured me once again she'd understand if I wanted to go out with Seneca. I vowed to her repeatedly that seeing Seneca was definitely not what I intended to do.

Phone calls were my only contact with Terez. And I remained hungry for so much more. There were no dinners nor late afternoon coffee "meetings" and no plans for any in the near future.

When I answered her e-mail about our both losing the Adamson Prize, I commiserated over our shared fate and suggested we take a long drive in the country to lick our wounds. It was probably too soon after the shitty concert evening scene with Seneca, because Terez accused me of being all about licking more than our wounded egos, and she wrote as much in her reply. Once again, she had plans with "someone else," and she couldn't be enticed to change those plans. She

wouldn't budge. The basest part of me muttered, "Fuck it!" But the best part of me admired her for not breaking a date and for being loyal to this "someone else." Without knowing she had, Terez gave me a reason to allow the best part of me to emerge.

After Terez turned down my invitation to go to Amelia's, I phoned Rasheeda. I'd forgotten my buddy was engaged in her own domestic quagmire, still trying hard to forgive Sandi and jump-start their relationship. There was no way she wanted to spend a Saturday night with me at some bar. I couldn't blame her. It was just that I didn't particularly want to go club hopping all alone. If I wanted to go at all, however, it would have to be by myself.

The night air was thick with August's smothering heat, a reminder that summer was still hanging over us. I circled the block where Amelia's is located, until I spotted a car pulling out of a spot three doors down from the club's entrance. I couldn't use the lack of a nearby parking space as an excuse for not going into the place. I passed through the discreetly marked door and entered the women-only space.

Black and white photos along with hand drawn caricatures of female icons from the entertainment world filled one wall of the dimly lit bar's front room. The place wasn't crowded yet, so it took me no time to get the bartender's attention and order a club soda. I looked at the surroundings and discovered that, while I didn't know the names of any of the dozen or so women seated on the well-worn stools pulled close to the oval bar, I did recognize a few familiar faces. A couple of the women nodded their hello to me.

Pairs of women, obviously coupled, occupied some of the small tables and booths. Seeing their closeness and assuming their intimacies nudged me toward a sensation I wasn't used to: a feeling of being incomplete, of missing someone. Where was she? And how much longer was I going to pretend I didn't need her in my life? When was I going to tell Terez I couldn't handle her dating me and "someone else?" Maybe we were too different from each other. Perhaps I needed to forget about Terez and look for a "someone else" for myself, right here in this bar tonight.

The DJ ramped up the volume, sending out the beat of a familiar song to pull some women to the smaller of two dance floors. I busied myself wiping off the condensation from my plastic cup, wondering what tune the mix master would blend in next and questioning again, why I was here without a dance partner.

While I enjoyed watching the partiers and feeling the music throb through my chest, I felt oddly off balance. Without really thinking about it, I picked up my drink and headed in the direction of the sharp clinking sound of pool balls smacking against each other. As one area of the club melded into the next, the music's loudness ebbed and then surged, giving my feet their walking rhythm. My fingers tapped out a beat on my cup as my eyes grew accustomed to the even dimmer light in this second room.

This space, anchored by a long narrow bar, was smaller than the first one and far more crowded. A quick look around suggested that I didn't really know anyone in here, either. Finding that hard to believe, I slowed down my survey. All of these women in here and I knew absolutely no one except the stunning dark-haired woman standing near the far end of the three-sided bar.

Terez. She didn't see me at first, so I took advantage of my invisibility and just appreciated the gift of looking at her. I didn't know if it was the cut of her khaki colored trousers and how they fit her slim but womanly hips the same way my hands would fit them if given half a chance, or if it was the way her upturned mouth was poised around the neck of one very fortunate Coronita. Probably, it was everything about her. I forgot I'd been on my way to visit the pool tables, and instead, I remained glued to that one spot watching her, wanting and waiting for her to see me.

I stayed there, immobile, visually caressing her from a safe distance. I could see she was at the bar with her rather gregarious and butch "someone else." This was not the same woman who had been with Terez at the Era Café during the Pride street fair. This woman was younger and better looking. She appeared to have her hands full trying to entertain her thirsty fans at the bar while aiming one eye and an occasional smile at her date.

Moments passed and I saw Terez begin to scan the room. She looked my way, caught me staring at her and then smiled and waved. Assuaged by her welcoming look, I braved walking in her direction.

"Hey."

She faced me, leveled her gaze and blew back, "Hey, back at you."

Her "someone else" was close by, buying drinks for half the crowd perched on their barstools like sparrows lined up on an electric wire. Ms. Debonair was busy growing her bar tab. Her proximity to us didn't stop me from asking Terez if she wanted to dance. And it didn't stop Terez from saying yes, taking my hand and leading me out to the center of the room. The movement inspired by Next's "Too Close" had us dancing smoothly enough for people to believe we were dance partners, but not familiarly enough to be taken for lovers.

I raised my voice above the music. "When I phoned you the other day to ask you out, you didn't tell me this was where you were coming tonight."

"That's because the other day I thought we'd be going to the movies. This was a last minute decision." Terez smiled at me steadily, and I wanted to believe I was forgiven for the sin of my surprise reunion with Seneca.

I inclined my head toward the bar area. "Looks like your friend knows a lot of the women who are here tonight."

Terez glanced back at the bar for a second. "Yeah, it looks that way. She makes friends easily."

"And she seems to be very generous."

Before Terez could respond, the singers' voices melted into René and Angela's "Your Smile." I wanted to keep dancing with Terez, but I didn't think I should assume that I could. Again I inclined my head toward the bar. "Is it okay if we keep dancing?"

"It's more than okay." Terez pulled me in with her eyes and instinctively fit herself to me.

I drew her closer and gently murmured in her ear. "It's strange that we've known each other for months now and this is the first time we've danced together."

I could feel Terez moving her wave-filled head slowly from side to side. "We've been dancing ever since we first met, Jaie. Sometimes it's been toward each other, and other times it's been away from each other."

Her words wove their way through me, rendering me mute. There was nothing I could think of to say. My only response was to hold her more closely. She rested her arms over my shoulders, and I held onto her lightly but firmly at the base of her back. My hands wanted to travel lower, to cover her hips. Because I knew where we were and who might be watching us, I willed my hands to stay where they were and to be content touching her where they could.

Then, I silently hoped Terez was listening to the song's lyrics, and she knew intuitively that the songwriter was speaking for me. Terez moved her body with so much grace, so much feeling. She moved me with her very essence. Her round places fit my hollow ones and mine fit hers. I was aware of the lightly perfumed fragrance of her hair, of the silky light moisture where our cheeks were touching, of the way her thighs felt, alternately one at a time gliding in between mine. Her undulations were making me wet in the place where wetness counts when you're falling in love. I was amazed by how good she made me feel. Before I could stop myself, I did what only seemed natural. I placed the imprint of my lips on her soft caramel throat. She answered my feather-soft kiss by saying simply, "Jaie," and by moving against and with me so sensuously. Without thinking, only feeling, I let a moan-tinged question escape from my mouth.

"Baby, what are you doing to me?" I felt like I was tumbling from a cliff into a bottomless whirlpool.

"I'm dancing with you, Jaie. You're doing all the rest yourself."

She was right. I had wanted to hold and feel Terez for so long that when it happened I got perilously close to coming right there on the dance floor, swaying against this woman who made me want to feel all that is tender in life. The song segued into another slow one. As much as I wanted to remain wrapped around her, I pulled back, terrified of drowning in the sea of Terez.

"We'd better stop and get you back to your friend." I looked for clarity in Terez's eyes and instead saw her face through the soft focus of unanswered desire. "I don't want her coming after me."

I thought feigning fear was as good a cover as any for the earthquake that had just rumbled through me, kidnapping my voice and taking it to a lower range. I followed Terez as we walked away from the other dancers. She smiled and looked back over her shoulder at me as she got close to the bar.

"She's harmless. I'll introduce her to you."

We reached our destination and Terez's "someone else" opened her arms to capture her. Terez's gaze swept over at me before I could disguise my disappointment.

"Sherry, this is Jaie Baxter. Jaie, this is Sherry Yancey."

Sherry had one of those "glad your ass enjoyed dancing with my woman, but she is my woman and don't you forget it" kind of handshakes. I got her message long before she stopped crushing my fingers.

"So, Jaie, can I buy you a drink? What would you like? How about a beer?"

I was pretty sure Sherry wouldn't be able to reach for her wallet since she was holding onto Terez with both arms and hands. The relief I would have felt seeing her break that embrace should have been reason enough for me to violate my no alcohol policy and order something strong, but I didn't want to. It was past time for me to leave the club. After the sweet intimacy of our dance, I had no intention of punishing myself by looking at Terez plastered to Sherry for the rest of the night.

"No thanks, Sherry. I'm getting ready to leave, and I'm my own designated driver."

"Oh, that's too bad. I thought I could get to know a little about you." Sherry cocked her head to one side and continued. "I do know you're the other woman Terez sees from time to time."

Terez extricated herself from Sherry's hold and spoke to both of us. "I don't like secrets. I try to be up front with everyone."

"That's one of your best qualities, Terez." I was more than a little happy to see her get free from Sherry's proprietary grasp. I didn't feel a pressing desire to get to know Studly Sherry. I had made up my mind to leave while I could still feel the echo of Terez's body on mine.

"Well, I have a lot to do tomorrow, so I'm going to shove off. Nice meeting you, Sherry."

Knowing that I needed my right hand to drive, I traded in my good-bye handshake with Sherry Yancey for a quick wave instead.

"Same here, Jaie. See you around."

I fought the temptation to say, *I hope not wrapped around Terez.*

I'd gone to Amelia's tonight to hear some good music, to dance a little, maybe to find a diversion to help me spend less time dreaming about Terez with her on-again, off-again availability. And here I was, ending the evening with a fifteen-minute ride home, filled with the soul-shaking memory of our dance together. I had an unrelenting need for this woman that our dance had only aroused. There was no doubt that Sherry Yancey was a significant presence. She was not going to stand in my way, though. I was the only one who could be an obstacle.

On desire overdrive, I steered my car away from home and toward Terez's apartment. Quite simply, I hungered to see her again tonight. I needed to hold her, taste her, and make love to her. How I would finesse all of that remained to be seen. I stopped at an open-all night coffee place and bought a large cappuccino to keep me company while I waited for Terez to come home. Parking as close to her apartment as possible, I was willing to hold a vigil until dawn if I had to. That she might be planning to spend this hot humid night elsewhere crossed my mind, although it didn't deter me. She had to return home some time.

While I waited, I imagined all sorts of possible scenarios. And they all ended the same way, with my hands meeting her softness and my mouth enveloping her essence for the first time. Two hours passed by. One hundred and twenty minutes with my sweat-slicked back plastered against my car seat. Seventy-two hundred seconds filled with inane chatter and the top one hundred tunes flying out of my car radio; nervous tension guiding my channel selector and switching the stations, alternating between smooth jazz saxophone riffs pushing Terez's image into my arms and seductive crooners' lyrics flowing from my lips to the daydreamed port of Terez's ears.

My patience and determination were still going strong when, three hours into my sentry duty, I spotted Sherry and Terez going into the brick three-story apartment building. I just had to hope that Sherry would leave and pray that Terez could still feel the place on her throat where I had kissed her gently. I could still feel her tender, warm skin touching my mouth. I swear if I closed my eyes I would hear the music we had danced to, smell her fragrance, and feel her body seducing mine on the dance floor.

I waited for a while longer. By now, all that was left of my cappuccino was some cold foamy milk. I upended the cup, coaxing some of the sweet froth into my mouth and at the same time imagining how Terez must taste. Oh, God. I didn't want tonight to end up on my imagination's cutting room floor.

God or someone must have heard me, because the door to the apartment building opened and Sherry emerged, walking quickly to wherever she had parked. I flipped open my cell phone and speed dialed Terez's number as I stepped out of my car.

Her honeyed voice rewarded my ears. "Hello?"

"Hello, back at you."

"Jaie? Hey, are you okay?"

I responded to the surprise in Terez's voice by telling her the truth. "No...not really."

"What's wrong?"

"I keep thinking about what you said to me earlier tonight. That we've been dancing toward and then away from each other."

"I meant that." Terez spoke softly, seriously.

I whispered into the phone. "I felt so *good* dancing toward you tonight, baby."

"Then we should do it again sometime, Jaie."

"Sometime soon?" I didn't try to conceal my eagerness.

"Yes."

"How soon, baby?" The door between the building's lobby and the apartments had been left unlocked. The only thing separating me from Terez was a flight of stairs and a short walk down her hallway.

Terez breathed her reply. "Jaie, the way you keep calling me 'baby' with that low voice of yours makes me think it should be very soon."

"Good. Could you open your door, please?"

"What did you say?"

I could hear her smiling. "I said, could you open your door for me? I'm on the other side of it."

Terez stood in her doorway looking at me, a slight smile spreading across her lips. In the space of a second, she took my hand and pulled me into her apartment and into her gentle embrace. I shall always remember that first serious, for real kiss. Terez's fingertips touched both sides of my face as I cupped her chin. Her mouth was as I had imagined it would be, soft, generous, pliant and giving.

We paused long enough for her to ask a question. "How did you know I was at home and alone?"

"I've been parked outside waiting for you, and I saw Sherry leave."

Terez grinned. "Jaie Baxter, are you stalking me?"

"Definitely."

She looked at me with a smile that begged for a kiss, and she touched the corner of my mouth. "You must have had a cup of your cappuccino. You've got a trace of whipped milk here."

"That's not a very sophisticated look, is it?"

"Sophistication is overrated. Come closer." And with that, Terez licked the border of my smile. "You taste delicious, like coffee and cream."

I responded by seeking her tongue with mine and making our second kiss deeper than the first had been. I don't remember how or when my feet moved from that spot in her living room and made their way to the bedroom.

When we got there, we closed the door and I backed Terez against it, cradling her head so I wouldn't miss a single chance to kiss and explore her mouth. I wove her hair through my fingers and began kissing her face and her throat. My lips instinctively found her breasts through the gauzy fabric of her shirt. She inhaled deeply as I found one, then the other nipple and began to outline their increasing hardness with my lips.

"Jaie..."

"Yes, baby."

"I want us to make love." Terez rubbed her fingers deep into the base of my neck, as I continued enveloping her nipples with my tongue.

I stopped long enough to answer her request. "There's no way we can't make love, Terez."

I pulled her shirt over her head, inviting her to unbutton mine and push it past my shoulders. I unzipped her slacks as she helped me step out of mine. We inched our way closer to the bed. I removed what was left of my clothes and fears and continued undressing her.

Through desire-clouded eyes, I bathed Terez in a loving glance. "Baby, you are beautiful. I want to dance toward you again, right now."

I trembled as I felt the warm and soft reality of her skin touching mine. I kissed every conceivable space I could find, making sweet discoveries here and there of the spots that especially moved her and stopping to revisit the places where my kisses were answered by her moans. My mouth left love tracks on her tender shoulders, and my tongue sampled a heady mixture of roses and lemons as I licked a trail from her collarbone down to the inviting cavern of her navel. I painted her breasts with the sweetest kisses I could create, and I felt her nipples bloom inside my mouth.

"Jaie, you're making me feel wonderful. I want you to feel that way, too." Terez began to flower kisses all over my body, reminding me of my sensitive, vulnerable areas.

I turned to lie on my back, encouraging my fingertips to play a love song on her shoulders and run down the length of her upper arms, all the while coaxing her to lie astride me.

Terez covered my length, so that our stomachs and groins fit perfectly. I placed my hands where they'd longed to be ever since our dance earlier in the evening, on her smooth round hips. Hungry for the contact, I pulled her in to me with the most urgent but tender pressure I could manage. Terez fused her mouth to mine and held onto my shoulders. We moved in and out and up and down as one, playing our own music, our own rhythmic sexy love notes.

The pace of our undulations quickened. Terez began to moan as her moisture escaped from between her thighs. I deepened my movements slightly, just enough to telegraph my desire to travel somewhere else with her, to take us further. I needed to taste her wetness, to speak her name, and declare my feelings deep inside her sacred place.

"Baby, I want all of you. I need you completely."

"Oh, yes, Jaie. Please, baby."

I braced myself above her and slid slowly down the course of her honey-toned body, alternately calling out her name and kissing her as I traveled her beautiful span inch by inch. When my mouth sensed its closeness to her center, I gently guided her legs over my shoulders, caressing her thighs and cradling her hips in my hands.

"Terez." I blew her name onto her inner lips as my tongue found its way to her diamond. Kissing and then sucking her jewel brought me so close to the edge of my own ocean. Terez grabbed my hair and pulled me even deeper into her. I became lost inside of her waves, senseless.

"Jaie! Jaie! I can't hold on any longer!"

I kept my tongue where it made her feel so perfect and then entered her with two of my fingers. "Let it happen, Terez. Please come for me."

The tidal wave of her climax swept me up in its current. When the waters receded, she guided my hand to her mouth, tasting herself and our lovemaking. All I had to do was realize what we'd just created. That and the sensation of her tongue on my fingers, was enough for my mind to rock me to my own orgasm.

Unsure that it was enough, Terez began to kiss my breasts and then my stomach. She would have continued, I know, if her lips hadn't found a warm slightly salty rivulet when she kissed my face.

"Jaie. Baby, are you all right?" Her voice quickly voyaged from arousal to concern.

I reached for her, pressing her body to mine. "I'm more than all right, baby. Probably more all right than I've ever been."

She caressed my face, erasing joyful tears from my cheeks with her fingers. "Do you always cry when you make love?"

"I don't cry when I have sex. This might be the first time I've really made love."

She kissed me deeply and profoundly.

"You've got so much power over me, Terez. You strip me of who I am. You reduce me to someone I don't know."

"Does that frighten you?"

"I'm scared to death."

Terez slowly traced the outline of my mouth. "Don't be afraid of us, Jaie. I don't want to reduce you in any way. I want you to be more of who you are."

I held onto her. I wanted this to be the first of countless times we would make love to each other. Even more than making love, I wanted Terez to give me all of her love, as I wanted to give her all of mine, beyond our boundaries and beyond our differences.

Chapter Twenty-Four

SIX DAYS, FIVE hours, and twenty minutes before my scheduled proposal presentation, I sat in my apartment in front of my computer, checking the online announcement posted on the university's web site. All of the information was correct. The time, place, and details were complete, and I was as prepared as I'd ever be. In fact, I wasn't planning to review my notes and bibliography until the day before the session, so my mind would be as clear and focused as possible.

Charlene Gray, one of my three advisors, gave me good advice when she told me early on to attend one or two proposal presentations, so I'd know what to expect. I knew I'd get some questions and comments. If anyone had a problem with my dissertation topic, especially the jerks who showed up regularly at these things just to try their hands at humiliating the doctoral students, I hoped they'd challenge me early on and get it over with. I was counting on that.

Something else I was counting on was Corey Lomax and Kinshasa Jordan's presence. They've known me since my high school days at Jefferson, even though I wasn't in their writing program. Having the chance to learn about writing with those two sisters was my incentive to come to Allerton. Over the years, I'd read and reread Kinshasa's novels and Corey's short fiction collections. I knew they would have my back if Professor Washington, the resident sexist homophobe in the English Department, started tearing me apart, or if some overly patronizing blockhead with diminished expectations of my abilities began to dumb down my discussion.

Terez would be there, also, keeping me calm and excited at the same time. She watched me rehearse my presentation a couple of nights ago, right here in my living room. When I finished, I wanted to crawl up into her smile and kiss those hands that held my sense of well-being in them. All I wanted to do was make love with her for the rest of that night. And I would have gotten my way if Terez hadn't been so single-minded that evening. She had been determined to be more my coach than my lover.

Terez had read my abstracts and done what I'd requested by challenging me with some difficult questions. Her queries though, had nothing to do with my dissertation. She wanted to know about my family, my adolescence, when I knew I loved women, how important Seneca Wilson had been in my life. That night I told her everything, even about my brother's and Patricia Adamson's

deaths. I confessed to her that Seneca hadn't been the first female I'd kissed, but the first lover I'd had.

We talked for hours. Come to think of it, we talk for hours every chance we have. We're different, Terez and I. For one thing, Terez has a family she loves. She grew up casually, always assuming she would go to one of the best universities money could buy. I assumed I'd have to fight my mother in order to attend college.

Sometimes, when I've told her about Jefferson High or about my mom, she's looked at me as if she couldn't quite grasp what I'd said. I haven't told her everything, because I haven't wanted my history to scare her away. It's possible, though, she wouldn't be frightened of anything in my past. I've seen a glint in her eyes that has told me how strong she is. She may be stronger than I am.

Once in a while, I've cried when I've remembered how Kashif's voice sounded screaming my name the second before the bullet exploded in his throat. I've ended up holding onto Terez and thanking her when she's assured me that crying is okay, that she's not been afraid of my tears and I shouldn't fear them either.

Today, I've been dialing Terez's phone number for hours, her cell phone as well. We hadn't planned to see each other tonight, but I wanted to hear her voice, if only for a few moments. Feeling at sixes and sevens, I was on my way to the kitchen to pour a glass of ginger ale when my intercom buzzer awoke from its sleep. Maybe Terez had listened to all the lust-filled messages I'd left on her answering machine. Perhaps she wanted to hear my voice, too.

"Hey?...Terez?"

"No, it's not Terez. It's Seneca, Jaie."

Shit! This is just what I needed! "What do you want, Seneca?" The cold clammy grip of annoyance laid its arm around my shoulders.

"We need to talk, Jaie. May I come up?"

"May you do what?" Just that quickly, I saw the red visitor button pulsing on and off in a menacing way.

"I'm downstairs, in the vestibule."

Damn it! It was just like Seneca to find out where I live. "Look, you can come up for a few minutes only. I'm very busy."

It looked to me as if Seneca were the same person she'd always been, only more so. I'd thrown away the business card she gave me the night of the concert, without looking at her phone number, much less using it. Now here she was showing up at my door. I felt the strangling

tentacle of tension coil itself around my spine. Yanking open the apartment door, I stood to one side as Seneca slithered past me and invaded my home.

"Hi, baby." She started to move toward me, ready for a non-existent welcoming kiss.

"What do you want, Seneca?" I took a step backward, out of her reach. I wanted this surprise visit to end as quickly as it was starting. "I have things to do, and I don't remember your calling to set up an appointment to see me."

"You're right, baby. I didn't call, because I didn't have your phone number." Ignoring my verbal attempts to be business-like, Seneca staked out a spot on the love seat and made herself feel at home in my living room.

"You found out where I live, but you didn't get my phone number? That's hard to believe."

"The Clarkeson Alumni Association doesn't have your phone number, just your address, sweetie."

I wondered if the Alumni Association's giving up my address didn't violate some sort of privacy law.

Seneca eyed the living room and dining area. "Small...but nice, Jaie."

"It's temporary." I wanted her to get to the point and then get the hell out of my space.

"Do you teach here at Allerton?" She offered me her sickeningly sweet smile.

"I will in September."

"Are you still teaching at that school in the city?"

Her interrogation was making me feel queasy. "No. I'm in grad school. Why all the questions?"

Seneca ignored my question about hers. "That's great! I knew you'd be a success, Jaie. After all, you were always such a good student. In some ways you know, you taught me how to excel." She patted the cushion next to her on my couch and invited me to sit down.

I refused. "Yeah, right. There were things you taught me, too." We were not going to have a cozy chat if I could help it.

"And I remember what some of those things were, baby." Seneca stood up and stepped closer to me.

"Don't call me 'baby'. That shit is all in the past." I moved away from her, letting the distance between us express how I felt.

"You're still angry with me, after all this time has passed and I don't blame you." Seneca must have been waiting for me to say, 'No, I'm not still mad at you.' Realizing I wasn't going to utter those words, she continued her act. "I never should have cheated on you with whatever his name was."

"Like I said, that's all in the past. I'm real busy, so what more do you have to say?" I stood face to face with her, my arms crossed in front of my chest.

"I want to talk about us, Jaie."

"What 'us'? There is no 'us,' Seneca." I couldn't believe her gall. Yes, I could. It was Seneca.

"There used to be and there can be an 'us' again."

She looked me straight in the eye as she said this crap. As soon as I saw that pretense of self blame mixed with seduction, I remembered all the times Seneca had fucked up our relationship, admitted her guilt and then, lying on her back with her legs open, begged me for another chance.

"And just why do you think we should see each other again?" Her thinking was so ludicrous that the reasoning part of my brain just had to ask about the logic behind it.

"Because I want you, baby."

I nodded, as if I understood and agreed with her. "You want me? You like the idea of wanting me, Seneca. But you don't even know who I am now."

"I'd like to have the chance to find out who you are now." Seneca reached over and touched my face, targeting my mouth.

Once again, I pulled back from her. "That's not even an option."

Indifferent to my rejection, she continued pitching her game. "We were good together, Jaie. You can't tell me you never think about how hot the sex was between us. You were devoted to me."

"Oh, I think about you, and I remember everything, Seneca. For example, I remember there was more than just sex between us. There were lies, manipulations, arguments, fights, and bad headaches whenever I drank too much after you embarrassed my ass. You think I want to go back to all of that?" No longer curious about her illogical reasons for wanting to resume our relationship, I armed myself for a full battle with her.

Seneca walked back toward the sofa, taking a few seconds to regroup her forces and re-strategize. "I guess you don't want to go back to that, especially now that you're with that cute little thing. What's her name? Terez? Is she your latest fuck buddy?"

In total control, I smiled faintly. "I'm not talking to you about Terez. And don't sit back down. It's time for you to leave."

Seneca did sit down again, launching a smileless stare. "I heard about you, all the way down in Atlanta. I met some women who knew other women. You know how it goes, Jaie. They knew all about you. They said you'd become quite a heartbreaker, going through the entire black lesbian population of Philadelphia. They didn't tell me you were advancing through the suburbs, too."

I felt no need to defend myself, but I did want to be clear about one thing, so I spoke evenly, seriously. "Look, Seneca, Terez is off-limits. She's someone special in my life. You need to know that, take that information with you and leave right now."

"Not before I give you some information, Jaie. It's real simple, but you need to listen to me carefully. Are you ready?"

My heart started beating furiously. I had no idea what Seneca was getting ready to say, but I knew it wasn't going to be good. I remembered what Seneca, the girl, was capable of doing. I couldn't fathom the amount of destructive power she possessed now that she was a grown woman.

"I've been contacted by a woman named Mandy Reese, a writer who works for *City Magazine*. She's editing an investigative article about the unsolved murder of Detective Patricia Adamson. It seems that Adamson's is the only unsolved cop killing in the city's history. Ms. Reese knows that, at the time of the killing, you and I were questioned about it and then released. And she knows that the murder weapon was never found. I'm a little nervous about all of this being reopened now that I'm back in Philadelphia with a high profile job. I don't want it touching my career. I'm sure you don't want it to interfere with your academic future, either."

"Where are you taking all of this, Seneca?" Numbed by what she was saying, I knew she wasn't through, that there was more bile to come.

"Here's where I'm taking it, baby. This investigative reporter will probably call you, too. If she does, you need to tell her, as I will, that you and I are tight friends, that we've always been friends. Hell, it's the Twenty-First Century. I don't care if she knows we were and are lovers."

I shook my head in disagreement. "What the hell are you saying, Seneca? We are not lovers."

"Well, see...that's the thing, Jaie. We are going to be lovers. I never stopped wanting you, and I can make you want me again if you'll stop fighting it. You're gonna cut this Terez bitch loose and come back to me because I'm the one woman you've always loved."

She paused for a second, long enough to watch my reaction. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The blood must have drained from my face and gone all the way down to my feet. Surely, I was imagining this. Certainly, Seneca had lost her mind.

"If that doesn't happen, I'm going to tell that reporter I've been covering for you all of these years. That I saw you shoot Detective Adamson at point blank range. We were fighting over my going to the prom with some boy, and you were insane with rage and jealousy. Add the fact that you'd been carrying around your anger against female cops ever since one shot and killed your

brother. When Adamson got in your face that day, you lost control. You grabbed her gun and shot her to death."

"Jesus, Seneca! I didn't kill that cop. You must be crazy! Who's going to believe you?" All of the blood returned to my face. I felt hot and cold at the same time.

"Maybe you've forgotten, baby. But I'm good at everything I do. By the time I'm finished, everyone will believe me, starting with your Terez."

I was a cornered animal. If I were willing to relinquish Terez and take up with Seneca again, Seneca would grant a harmless interview with the magazine journalist, indicting no one and sympathizing with Pat Adamson's survivors. If I refused to say good-bye to Terez, Seneca's published lies would send me straight to the hell of a prison term or worse. All of the shitful, suffocating situations I'd ever encountered or caused during my short lifetime had been leading me to this one. A boa constrictor named Seneca Wilson was wrapped all around me, squeezing my breath out, and I realized I had one huge problem.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"YOU'VE GOT A visitor out here, Johnetta. Some woman magazine writer."

The desk sergeant stuck his round florid face into Johnetta's cubicle. He'd come a long way in the time they had worked together and no longer referred to females as "broads" or "chicks." Johnnie knew he wasn't the most enlightened of her male colleagues, although she did give him props for having made progress.

Over the years, she wondered if he had been the one who wrote "DYKE" on her late partner's desk. And if so, how had he felt after Pat took out her penknife, etched those letters even deeper and then darkened them with fresh ink? She recalled smiling at Pat that day. She hadn't understood the depth or the source of that smile until a few years later, when she'd finally succumbed to her own needs.

"Okay. Send her in, Dave."

Johnetta extended her hand, welcoming a tall, rather striking looking woman into her work space. The visitor's well-tailored, expensive pinstriped pants suit announced she was a professional of some sort.

"I'm Detective Jones. How can I help you?"

The stranger gave Johnetta her business card. "Good morning, Detective. I'm Mandy Reese and I work for *City Magazine*. She paused for only a second. "I'm supervising an article being written about one of your unsolved cases, the murder of Patricia Adamson. I understand she was your partner."

"Not at the time of her death." Johnetta stiffened immediately. She hated being reminded that Pat's murder remained unsolved and that someone walked away scot-free after ending her friend's life.

Ms. Reese glanced down at some notes. "Oh, I know that. She had transferred to the other division by then. However, she had been your partner and that probably means you two were close on some level."

Johnetta frowned as she answered the magazine writer. "Partners are always close, Ms. Reese."

"Yes. Well, I read you were called in to help with the investigation, even though her murder wasn't the type of case you usually worked on."

"Sometimes, the cases I'm assigned to do involve a homicide. I asked to be involved in Detective Adamson's case and my captain approved it." Johnetta answered the reporter cautiously.

Mandy Reese nodded, as if she'd already been privy to this information. "You did some behind the scenes work preparing the interrogation when they brought in those two Jefferson High School girls, right?"

"That's right."

"Was that because you already knew one of the girls, Jaie Baxter? Because you'd been involved in her brother's death?" Mandy looked at Johnetta with the eye of a surgeon preparing to make the first decisive cut with the scalpel.

"I did get to know the Baxter family after that incident." Johnetta paused, thinking she'd already said more than she wanted to. She was giving this interview purely on a voluntary basis and just like that, she decided to end it. "If you're finished, Ms. Reese, I have a lot to do."

"Actually, I do have some more questions about those two girls. Well, they're not girls anymore, are they? Do you know where they are?" The reporter fired away, ignoring Johnetta's attempt to end their conversation.

"I haven't spoken to either of them since the investigation." Johnetta arose from her chair and attempted to return the journalist's business card to her. "That's it, Ms. Reese."

"No. You can keep that. You might remember something later you want to share. By the way, do you have any idea where I can find Jaie Baxter? The other young woman, Seneca Wilson, recently has moved back to Philadelphia from Atlanta. She's a big deal with the school district.

Works within spitting distance of Jefferson where poor Detective Adamson drew her last breath." Mandy Reese returned her notepad and pen to her overstuffed handbag.

Johnetta tossed the card on her desk. "Your article should be very interesting. I'll pick up a copy of the magazine when it comes out."

"I'll send you one, Detective." Pausing at the doorway, Mandy smiled. "Wouldn't it be something if the article could help solve the murder?"

"That would be something. Good-bye, Ms. Reese." Johnetta let a quarter of an hour pass before she telephoned Jennifer Renfrew in Allerton University's Admissions Office. She wanted to give Reese plenty of time to leave the precinct before she phoned the reporter's next contact.

"Jennifer? Hi. It's Johnetta."

"Hey, Johnnie. It's good to hear from you again so soon."

"I'm sorry this isn't a purely social call. I wanted to give you a heads-up about something." Johnetta picked up the journalist's card and tapped her desk with it. "A magazine editor named Mandy Reese may try to phone or visit you."

"You're too late, Johnnie. She's already called me and made an appointment. I'm supposed to meet with her tomorrow at lunch time."

Johnetta smacked the top of her desk. "Damn it! Did she tell you what it's about?"

"Yes. She explained everything. She asked me if I would be willing to be forthcoming about my relationship with Pat."

"Damn it again! And what did you tell her?"

"I said yes. I don't hide that from anyone any longer. Life is too short. Johnnie, she thinks her article could help solve Pat's murder."

"Yeah, she said that to me, too." Johnetta's response dripped with disbelief.

"Well, wait until she finds out the person who probably knows who shot Pat is a grad student here on campus. You know I can steer her right to Jaie Baxter. For all we know, Jaie might be Pat's killer."

Johnetta's radar started buzzing. "Hold on, Jen. That's a very serious allegation. You could mess up that girl's life forever if you accuse her."

"Like what she did didn't mess up my life forever?" Jennifer defended her plan to expose Jaie to the journalist.

"But you're jumping to conclusions. We were never able to prove that either Jaie or the other girl, Seneca Wilson, did anything other than be in that hallway when Pat was shot." The detective couldn't hide her exasperation.

"But you thought Jaie could have done it, didn't you?"

"I thought it could have been possible. But I've had a long time to look at what happened and to think about it." She paused and took a deep breath, realizing she had to talk Jennifer out of accusing Jaie of the most serious of crimes.

"Jennifer, look how that girl picked herself up and out of that rough neighborhood, worked her way through college and a master's degree. And now you tell me she's in a doctoral program?"

Jennifer listened patiently. "That doesn't mean she's innocent of murder. What if she's just a very bright and manipulative young woman who's been able to charm her way through school?"

"I don't buy that. And I've got a cop's sixth sense, Jen." Johnetta recalled the lunchtime scene on the Allerton campus not many days before. She remembered watching Jaie talk with another attractive female student.

"For one thing, I can tell you she's in love with the girl who was with her when we saw them outside the faculty dining room. I saw the look on her face as they spoke to each other. The Jaie Baxter I know is bright and she is charming. She's capable of sincerity, too, and she has feelings. I'd bet part of my pension that she has a conscience."

"So what are you advising me to do about Ms. Reese?" Jennifer's patience was wearing thin.

"All I'm saying is, don't pull the trigger on Jaie."

"That's an ironic choice of words, Johnetta." The Assistant Dean remained unconvinced. "I'll think about it."

"Hey, Jen?"

"Yes, Johnnie?"

"Has something gone down between you and Jaie?" Johnetta, the friend, hated to ask this question. Johnetta, the detective, had to ask it. After all, she'd been close to Pat. So close that a few weeks before her death, Pat had shared her suspicions with her partner. She'd told Johnetta Jennifer had started wandering away from their relationship and seemed to be returning to a past one with a former lover. It was the uncomfortable memory of that conversation from the past that fueled Johnetta's present distrust of Jennifer's motive for implicating Jaie Baxter in Pat's shooting.

Johnetta pressed on further. "Jen, is it possible you tried to get a little something going with Jaie, and she turned you down?"

"You're good at what you do, aren't you, Johnnie?" Jennifer sighed into the phone. "I don't know what to say. I feel like shit. I'm ashamed and I feel a little foolish."

"You're not foolish, Jen. You're a single woman who hasn't been in a loving relationship for a long time." Johnetta wanted to console her deceased partner's lover. "Look, I know Jaie. She's brash and as openly gay as they come. I figured she'd hit on you."

"Did you think I had hit on her, as well?"

"I knew there was a possibility. She's a head-turner. Always was, even when she was in high school. She's probably had any woman she's ever wanted. It's natural for you to be attracted to her."

"But I've acted so stupidly, Johnnie, thinking in my own vain way she might be attracted to me."

"You need to give yourself a break, hon. As far as Jaie is concerned, just don't tie her to a crime she didn't commit. Don't do anything that could ruin her life." It was Johnetta's turn to sigh. "I contributed enough to that effort all by myself."

"Oh, Johnetta, you didn't set out to kill her brother." Jennifer wanted to reach through the phone to her friend.

"Listen to us! We're conducting our own combination confessional and therapy session." Johnetta chuckled, relieved she'd convinced Jennifer not to accuse Jaie of murder.

"It does sound like it, doesn't it? Thanks for understanding everything, Johnnie. I'll be very careful when I speak to Ms. Reese tomorrow."

"Don't mention it. Nobody goes through life without making mistakes."

"You're right. But you'd think that by now..." Jennifer let the thought die. "Listen, why don't you come on over for dinner Friday night? This time you won't get called back to work, and we'll have time to talk all about your son's wedding."

"That sounds like a good idea, Jen. I'll bring the wine. There's a lot I need to tell you."

Chapter Twenty-Six

HERE I AM, sitting in a vacant cubicle in a deserted second floor section of the library, with a new volume about the Black Arts Movement propped open in front of my tired eyes. I could have checked it out and done this work at home, if it weren't for the phone that keeps ringing

there. During the past week I've been dodging calls from the magazine writer Seneca mentioned to me. And I've been dodging messages from Seneca, too. My machine even captured a message from a real surprise caller: Detective Johnetta Jones. That call knocked me on my ass. She didn't say much; something about not talking to any reporters. Why she would care is a mystery to me. I used to wish I'd pick up the newspaper and read that somebody had shot her to death, the same way she killed Kashif. Now, I'm wishing just about the same thing for Seneca. I keep trying to figure out what to do about her. I won't give in and forsake Terez. That's for damn sure. If Seneca believes I'm going to live without having Terez in my life, she's damn crazy.

"Excuse me. But are you Jaie Baxter?"

I looked up to see a tall, older black woman wearing a severely cut charcoal gray suit and a starched white shirt. She looked like a friggin' FBI agent. She also looked familiar, although I couldn't place where I'd seen her before. The only thought running in my head was that Seneca had already dined me out with her lying self and this sister standing in front of me was about to read me my rights.

"Yes. I'm Jaie Baxter."

"Hi! My name is Mandy Reese. I'm an editor at *City Magazine*."

Shit! She wasn't a cop. She was the magazine writer. And it was her voice that was recorded five different times on my answering machine!

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm in charge of a project at the magazine. We want to do an investigative piece about the killing of Detective Patricia Adamson. And we'd love it if you could give us an interview. After all, you were there. When she was killed, that is."

I took a deep breath and trusted that my instincts would dictate the right answer. "Yes, I was there. But I don't give interviews. Sorry, Ms. Reese."

"Look, I'll get right to the point. If you're nervous about exposing your relationship with Seneca Wilson, you don't need to be. I realize you might not trust talking to me because I'm a straight journalist. So I can send a lesbian writer to interview you, if it will make you feel freer to talk. In fact, we have a freelancer who's a student right here at the university, like you are. Do you know a Terez Overton?"

The library floor opened up and swallowed me. I had to answer this woman, but first I needed to wrap my mind around what she was saying. "Yeah. I know her." I felt like I was shouting up to her from the depths of an underground cave where I'd fallen. "You say she writes for your magazine?"

"Not full time. Not yet, anyway. But she has a very promising future, and you could help her out if you'd give her an interview."

My brain was on automatic pilot, taking my mouth wherever it wanted to go. "Could I get back to you in few days? I have a lot going on right now."

"Sure, Ms. Baxter. I need to reconnect with Ms. Overton, anyway."

I took the business card Ms. Reese handed to me as she continued to talk. "She keeps turning down this opportunity, and it would be so convenient for her."

"Did she say why she keeps turning it down?" I began my climb out of the cave.

"Just that she can't take the assignment right now."

I believe she said it was for personal reasons."

All I could do was nod. "When was the last time you asked her?"

"Why?"

"I'm just curious, that's all."

"That's the kind of curiosity I like my staff writers to have. Uh, I think her last e-mail to me was about three weeks ago."

"That's when a lot of us were busy finishing the summer session. You know, writing papers and studying for finals." Now I was completely out of the cave and in bullshit mode.

"Oh. I never thought about that. Thanks! Well, I'll expect to hear from you soon."

"Right." I watched the editor walk away. All of a sudden I knew why she looked familiar to me. She was the "someone else" who had been at the Era Café with Terez the day Rasheeda and I were in town for the Pride street fair.

My head was bursting with questions to ask Terez. When had she been contacted by this Mandy Reese to write an article about Pat Adamson's killing? Was it before or after we first met? Did she know about the reporting assignment the first time we went to the Café Pronto? Was she doing primary source research for her article every time we went out together, or every time we talked on the phone? Did she already know about me even as she spent hours asking me about all of my friends and my family? Is that how she seemed to know about my mom's drug and alcohol problem? Did she set out to seduce me in order to get a more "authentic" story? Did she really want us to make love or did she just want to find out how this 'murder suspect' would fuck her? Did she mean it when she said she was falling in love with me? Did she care about *me* or her journalism career? Did she care about *me*? Did she *care* about me? *Did she care about me?*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"WHERE ARE YOU? Where are you? Pick up your phone, Terez!" I've called her number every half hour, all day long, and I've left so many messages I've exhausted the tape on her machine. It won't record another syllable.

Terez was mysteriously unavailable, leaving the most important questions of my life unanswered. This woman, whom I had begun to love, was juggling my emotions in the air. Was she genuine, or genuinely teasing me into giving her a career jump-starting blockbuster of a magazine story?

My poisonous ex-lover, Seneca, was blackmailing me by dangling the option of a murder accusation or a sentence of life without Terez in front of my face. I had only three days to go before my proposal presentation and I couldn't care less about it.

My phone rang at last. Terez. "Hey, where have you been?"

"Hi, baby. It's Seneca."

Now she had my phone number as well as my address. "What do you want?"

"It's a rainy Friday night. I'm all by myself and I want you."

"Just keep on wanting, Seneca." A conversation with her was the last thing I could take.

"You're talking like you're running this show, Jaie, like you've got all the marbles in your pocket."

"No, Seneca. Everybody knows you have all the marbles. You've always had them." God, I wanted to hang up on her.

"There's no need to be bitter, baby. I'm generous, and I'm willing to share them."

I was tired of her machinations. "What do you want specifically?"

"Do I have to come right out and say it?" Her voice was insincere.

"Yes."

"I want you to come see me tonight. I want you to make love to me, the way you used to."

I felt like I was going to throw up. "You can't be for real. Give me a friggin' break."

"Oh, I'm for real, Jaie."

"You wanna have sex with me, Seneca? Maybe it won't be as great as you claim you remember it was."

"Oh, it'll be good. For both of us."

I could feel the fangs attached to her simulated sexy purr right through the telephone lines, and I'd had enough of her crap. I would go to see her all right, but not for the reason she wanted. I had to call a halt to her jumping all over my life. One more face-to-face talk with her, one more chance to get her to be reasonable couldn't make my situation any worse than it was already.

"I'll be there in an hour."

I went out and got into my car. The trip into Philly would take almost sixty minutes with all of the rain that was pouring down. Good! I needed time to think, to plan. What the hell would I do once I got to her apartment? How could I make her understand how much I loved Terez?

And where was Terez? Why hadn't she called me by now? I had so many questions about us, and she was the only one who had the answers. Hell. I just plain needed her. I was completely and thoroughly strung out on her, just like my mom was addicted to her alcohol, her "little taste" every day. If I had to obey Seneca and give up Terez, I didn't think I could make it through the agony of withdrawal.

What was I going to do about Seneca and the magazine article? For the life of me, I couldn't remember what happened when Pat Adamson was shot. Sometimes I thought that if Seneca said I did it, then maybe I did. It was true I hated all female cops, especially Johnetta Jones. She robbed me of the only person who helped me survive my mom. After Kashif was killed, I owed my survival to my mother's three lovers: malt liquor, joint, and cocaine. That evil trio kept her off my neck long enough for me to finish high school and get into college.

If my hatred of Officer Jones hadn't pushed my hand into Adamson's jacket, then my anger with Seneca for fucking Keith and telling the whole school about it could have forced me to reach in and grab the cop's gun.

Damn! The wind was pushing my car all over the road! The rain was blinding, even with the wipers slicing their way over the windshield at full speed. And now the Adamson case was going to be reopened, all because of the magazine article. Seneca was planning to suggest I was the shooter, unless I promised to leave Terez. But I can't give her up. Crap! I wasn't making it any easier to see the road ahead of me if I kept crying! I couldn't help myself. Terez, I won't give you up. You're so good for me and we're so right together. How can everything be so out of control? The traffic light ahead was blinking yellow. Better slow down, pump my breaks. Terez is the first woman who has let me feel safe. Who has let me feel. Here's the blinking yellow. I guess the cars coming the other way have a blinking yellow, too. I can't let her go. I won't let her go. That's what I'll say to Seneca and take my chances. How come that car over on the left is going so fast? I can't admit that I killed someone if I can't remember doing it, can I? I can't...

"WHAT IS IT that you can't do, Ma'am?" A white-sleeved arm hovered next to my face.

"What?" I wanted to say more, but for some reason I couldn't. That's not like me. I'm a very verbal person, always have been. "I can't stop my car from skidding."

The white-sleeved arm was attached to the warm hand taking my pulse. "Yes, Ma'am. You did have a problem stopping your car." The voice was soft, soothing. It continued. "But you're going to be okay. You had an accident and bumped your head pretty hard. You've suffered a concussion. The good news is that you didn't break any bones."

I let that information sift through my brain as I tried to turn my head so I could see where I was. A dull pain verified what this guy was saying to me.

"Where exactly am I?" The bright lights and vague antiseptic odor gave me a clue.

"County Suburban Hospital. In the emergency room. Can you tell me what your name is?"

"Jaie Baxter and my birth date is October 3rd, 1978."

The guy dressed in medical whites smiled. "All I needed was your name."

"I'm an over-achiever. Are you a doctor?"

"Nope, I'm a nurse. My name is Jonathan. But the doctor has examined you. She ordered x-rays and a CAT scan to make sure you didn't have any broken bones or internal bleeding."

"Everything look okay?" For some reason, I knew I could trust what this guy was telling me.

"No sign of any serious damage. We're going to keep you here overnight, though, just to keep an eye on you." He jotted some notes on a chart, my chart I suppose.

"Here in the ER?"

"I'm afraid so. It's a stormy night. Unfortunately, that means we have a full house."

I weighed everything he said and tried to remember what I'd been doing before I woke up in this room. Suddenly I had the feeling I'd left something behind. "Do you know where my car is? Do you know where my bag and my clothes are?"

"Your clothes are over there in the black bag, hanging up on the hook on the door." He pointed to show me where my belongings were. "Your friend has your bag with your valuables."

"My friend?" I couldn't remember having anyone in the car with me.

"Yes. And what a good friend to have. She has an 'in' with the police and the EMT's. I'll tell her you're ready for company now."

I smiled at the nurse. I didn't know how long I'd keep that smile on my face, because I didn't know which one of my friends was going to walk through the door. It couldn't be Terez. I hadn't been able to get her on the phone all day long. Maybe it was Rasheeda, although I seriously doubted it. How would she have known where I was? With my luck, it would be the magazine writer, here to interview me while I'm flat on my back.

I could hear noise in the hallway as the door opened. A calm, even-toned voice from long ago sailed into my ears. "How are you feeling, Jaie?"

I turned my head toward the voice and saw Officer, no, Detective Johnetta Jones standing there, looking over toward me sympathetically.

"I guess I've felt better. What did I do, run through a red light?" Why else would she be here, if it weren't to tell me I'd committed some crime or traffic violation?

"No, you didn't. The other driver failed to slow down for his blinking red." Detective Jones stood in front of the bed, so I could see her. "You were almost through the intersection when he hit you in the rear on the driver's side. The impact spun you around, and your car crashed against one of those concrete cattle chute barriers. Then your airbag deployed, and it must have smacked you in your chest. The traffic patrol officers think you struck your face against your steering wheel when your car spun out of control, a second before the airbag inflated."

I nodded, trying hard to follow her description of what had happened to me. "Well, I'm glad I didn't break any laws, because you and I always seem to meet when a crime has occurred."

Detective Jones's eyes bored down at me for a second. She seemed caught between two different decisions. Then, she broke out in a grin. "A smart ass as always, huh, Jaie?"

"Yeah, that's me." I looked around the small space, all the while aware of the cop's presence. "How come you're here?"

"I was on my way to meet a friend for dinner in Allerton when I saw the collision happen right in front of me. I called the local law, and they called for the ambulance. When I saw it was you in the car, I decided to tag along to the hospital. Thought I could vouch for you in case you couldn't call your next of kin."

"You mean my mother?"

"That's right."

I thought of a million different things to say next, before settling with, "Thanks, Johnetta."

It must have been the right response, because the detective took a step closer to me, looking like she'd laid down a heavy load. "You're very welcome." She cleared her throat. "Here's your bag, Jaie. I'll put it on the table next to your bed. But keep your eye on it. Valuables tend to disappear in hospitals. Especially in emergency rooms."

"That's good advice."

"Want some more advice?" Standing close to the bed, she didn't wait for me to say yes or no. "I know I already left this message on your answering machine, but if someone from a magazine contacts you in the near future, don't agree to talk with her. And while I'm on a roll, an old friend of yours has returned to the area."

"Seneca Wilson."

"Yup. Don't agree to talk with her, either."

"I already have, but I'll take your advice from now on." Now I remembered. I was on my way into Philly to meet with Seneca when I had the car accident.

"Is there anyone you'd like me to call for you? Anyone other than your mom?"

"Yeah, there is someone. Could you call a friend of mine, Terez Overton?" I motioned to the table where she'd left my bag. "Take my cell phone. Press the search button, then the "T" key. Her name will come up on the screen."

"I'll borrow your phone to get the number, but I have to call from the desk. They don't like you to use a cell phone in this part of the hospital."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. Please tell her where I am and that they're going to release me tomorrow. If she's not there, I don't think you can leave a message."

"Doesn't she have an answering machine?"

Remembering I'd overused the device, I simply said, "It's broken."

"Okay. Anything else in case she is there?"

"If it won't be too embarrassing, tell her I love her very much."

Johnetta grinned down at me. "Oh, that wouldn't embarrass me, honey. But have you told her?"

"In my own way." Heat infused my face. Now I was the one who felt self-conscious.

After Johnetta left the room, I began to wonder if hating her all these years had been a waste of my energy. A half buried memory flickered through my mind, the recollection of a gruff sounding police investigator whose voice I'd heard barking an order to quit interrogating me; Johnetta Jones didn't believe I'd killed Patricia Adamson. And they owed it to Pat to pay attention to her former partner. Maybe Detective Jones had sensed something in me years ago that no one else had, until Terez came along.

I'd lost track of the time, so I couldn't tell if I'd been lying in that closet of a room for ten minutes or for a couple of hours. I did know that enough time had elapsed for Johnetta to phone Terez. I wished she'd come back in to tell me if she actually spoke to her and what Terez said when she heard I was in the hospital and that I loved her. I was suddenly aware of the sound of agitated voices on the other side of the door.

"Well, where is she? In here?" A gust of wind rushed through the tiny treatment room, along with Seneca Wilson. "Jaie? Are you hurt, baby?"

Oh, Jesus. "My head hurts, Seneca. And you're gonna make it worse. How the hell did you get in here, anyway?" I stared straight ahead, refusing to look at her.

Seneca maneuvered her way around the narrow bed until she stood by my side. "I walked in. They didn't dare try to stop me."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Well, I kept waiting for you to come to my apartment. When a couple of hours passed and you didn't call me, I knew something must have happened. So I listened to the traffic report and heard there'd been an accident right outside of Allerton."

Seneca stood over me, caressing my arm. I pulled away from her, but I couldn't go very far.

"So you put two and two together and figured it was me in the accident and that I was here?"

"I called the two closest hospitals to see if they had admitted anyone who'd been in a car accident. When I called here, they wouldn't give me your name, but they said they had admitted an African-American female accident victim. So I drove all the way out here, in the rain, to see if it was you. Aren't you glad I've gone to all of this trouble?"

"Thanks." I tried to make my voice as flat as possible.

"I knew you'd appreciate it." Again, Seneca ran her fingers over my arm. "And that you'd find some way to thank me."

I answered her by turning my head away. Mindful of Johnetta Jones's advice about not talking to Seneca, I thought ruefully, it was too late and I was trapped. Any way you cut it, I was Seneca's captive, just as I had been during my last two years of high school.

The sound of metal bumping against metal riveted my attention. I watched Seneca detach my medical chart from its holder at the end of the bed and then proceed to read it.

"You're not hurt. Not really. Just some bumps and bruises and a concussion."

"Put that down. It's none of your damn business." My headache was worsening, but I didn't want to ask for any painkillers because I needed to be alert with this barracuda in my midst.

"Oh, you are my business, sweetheart." She put the chart back in its place and returned to the head of the bed. Bending over to speak in my ear, she whispered. "A concussion means you'll have a headache for a little while, probably shouldn't fall asleep, definitely can't drink. But there's nothing broken, nothing to keep your hands and mouth from making me feel good."

"Get the hell away from me, Seneca." Revulsion replaced my headache.

Instead of pulling back, she used her fingertip to touch my hospital-gowned shoulder, and she plotted a trail across my left breast and onto the upper part of my stomach.

"She said to get the hell away from her, Seneca." Terez walked into the small room slowly and surely, her eyes never leaving Seneca's form.

I willed my body to sit up, but it was a struggle. Anything the airbag had hit was talking back to me painfully.

"Are you still on the scene, Terez?" Seneca looked down at me. "Jaie, haven't you had that little talk with her yet?"

Terez looked at me from her vantage point at the foot of the bed. "How are you feeling, Jaie?"

"Basically, okay. Just a bad headache." I tried to text a message to her with my eyes, telling her that anything Seneca was about to say wasn't true and anything that might happen in the next few minutes had nothing to do with my feelings for her.

"Terez--" Seneca cut me off. "So how did you know Jaie was here in the hospital?" Continuing to gaze at me, Terez answered her. "I got a phone call from one of Jaie's friends." "Do you know where Jaie was going when she got into the accident?" Seneca's voice held pure venom. Terez looked away from me and locked onto Seneca. "I can probably guess. Your place?"

"Bingo! You're pretty and smart." Seneca licked her lips as she surveyed Terez. "Nice package. If I weren't so intent on having Jaie, I might have given you some play."

Terez stayed amazingly calm. "You wouldn't have gotten very far. You're not my type."

"And what type is that? Strong and aggressive? That's not the real Jaie, you know. But you've probably discovered that already." Seneca gestured toward me. "She's better at taking orders than giving them."

"Seneca, would you shut up and leave?" I felt so small at that moment. "Terez? Please don't believe anything she says. I love you."

Terez just looked at me with a half-alive expression in her eyes, distrusting what I'd just said to her. "Were you headed into the city to see Seneca, Jaie?"

"Yes. I needed to settle some things with her."

"She was going to settle right into my bed. Weren't you, Jaie?" It was clear that Seneca was running this scene. "Obviously, there are a few things you're not aware of, Terez. Some things Jaie hasn't shared with you. For example, did you know that at one time Jaie was a suspect in a cop's murder?"

Terez stood stock-still, impassive.

"Let me lay it all out for you, Terez, so you'll understand what happened. You see, at the time of said murder, Jaie was the one with the motive, her hatred of female cops. She had the opportunity, standing closer to that cop than I am to you right now. She had the weapon, the cop's own service revolver that she grabbed out of its holster. And she even had the right frame of mind, blind anger with me after I'd humiliated her publicly by telling everyone around us I'd had sex with some stupid boy in our high school."

I was helpless, broken and needing to re-weave the quickly unraveling cord that tied me to Terez, if only tenuously. "Terez, I don't remember everything that happened that day. I do know I didn't shoot anyone."

I searched her face for some sign of a reaction to Seneca's spin, but I couldn't gauge what she was feeling. She continued to stare at Seneca, daring her to continue.

"I'm the only one who knows what happened, because I was standing as close to that cop as Jaie was." Seneca punctuated the end of her tale with a smirk.

"And you've never told anyone the truth, have you?" Terez found her voice.

"You have a lot to do with that, Terez, and this is how it's going to work. I want Jaie back in my life, and I'm going to have her. If you walk away from her now, no one will ever know the truth about the killing. But if you're selfish and stupid enough to challenge me for Jaie's love, I'll get very loud about Jaie being the shooter."

Terez stood her ground. "Then neither of us will be able to have Jaie's love."

"That's just the way it will be, isn't it?" Seneca stood there triumphantly, one eyebrow raised.

"No. I love Jaie way too much to let you accuse her of a murder she didn't commit." Terez answered Seneca, but she looked right at me.

"That's what I thought. I calculated right." Seneca's face wore a self-satisfied grin.

"Not exactly." Terez refocused on Seneca. "Tell me what you think about this scenario, Seneca? After you set quite a few bonfires in your relationship with Jaie, you totally fucked things up by screwing around with your male prom date. You'd burned your last bridge with Jaie and you knew it. It wasn't going to be business as usual after that, and you were desperate to get her back. In a split second, you decided to shoot Pat Adamson and tell Jaie you did it to avenge Kashif's

death. You were certain that was the one thing you could do for Jaie to cement her to you forever, or at least for as long as you wanted her."

Terez continued, "You were the one who reached in for the cop's gun. And you were the one who shot her. You fired the gun so close to Jaie's ear it caused her temporary deafness for months afterward. In the moments right after the shooting, you had no trouble passing the gun to Keith, and he, in turn, gave it to someone else. Does that sound just about right to you, Seneca?"

I heard the words come out of Terez's mouth, and I watched Seneca's expression change from imperious to furious to cornered. She grabbed the side of the bed and screamed at me. "Jaie, that's not what happened!"

"That is what happened, Seneca. It is what happened! For the first time in ten years, I know what really went down in that hallway." The truth was all so clear to me.

"I didn't mean to hurt you with Keith. I loved you! I proved how much I loved you by getting even for your brother's killing. I did that for you! I knew how much you ached about Kashif, how much you missed him every day, baby. I got back at every female cop in Philadelphia, and it was all for you. I shot that cop to get your love back. I needed you! You're the reason I was able to get through that goddamned queer-hating school!"

I sat all the way up and swung my legs over the side of the bed. Seneca may have been the one who expected an embrace after her confession, but I was reaching for Terez. She glanced at me for a second, hesitating. Then she backed away from me, opened the door, and left the room.

Johnetta came in with a uniformed policeman. As one, they approached Seneca. The officer spoke calmly, but was unmistakably in charge. "Seneca Wilson, you're under arrest for the murder of Detective Patricia Adamson. You have the right to remain silent..."

Seneca stared straight ahead, stoically, as the cop finished reciting her Miranda rights. She let him end before she said anything.

"When do I get to call a lawyer?"

"Right now, if you want to." The uniformed cop ushered Seneca out of the hospital room, but not before she looked at me once again.

"I love you, Jaie. And I still want you."

"I don't love you at all, Seneca. You have to accept that."

The door closed on her shadow.

"Detective Jones?" I needed to reach for someone, and she was the only person there.

"Yes, Jaie?"

"You always knew it wasn't I who killed Pat Adamson, didn't you?"

Johnetta took a step toward me, reducing the space separating us in the small room. "Yes, honey. I always knew." She put her hand on my shoulder, in a comforting way. Her eyes held a supplicating look. "And did you know I shot Kashif because I was certain he was pointing a gun at me and not a cell phone?"

"Yeah, I knew. But I was in so much pain I needed to hate someone so the hurt would go away."

"I understand that, Jaie. And I understand, also, that it's all about forgiving people. If you could absolve me, at some point you'll need to pardon your mother for all the hurts she's given you."

We started to cry, and we hugged each other for all we were worth. I figured being forgiven made Johnetta cry. And me? I was crying for the people I missed, Kashif and my mother. And I cried because Terez's eyes spoke good-bye when she looked at me and then backed out of the room. I was undone by that soul-crushing look of farewell. I was totally broken.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"YOU DON'T LOOK any worse for wear, girlfriend." Rasheeda plunked my belongings into my lap as I sank down into the wheelchair, ready for the mandatory ride to the hospital's door.

Discharge paperwork in my hand, I was more than anxious to get home and try to contact Terez.

"Thanks for the compliment. Could you make yourself useful and go get the car, Jeeves?"

A cute hospital volunteer, dressed in a crisp pale blue uniform, pushed me and the chair, so I tried to dish the conversation ball to Rasheeda's comedic side, setting her up for a witty come back. But Rasheeda must have been bowled over by cutesy-pie or by the hospital setting or by what I'd told her about the night before, because she was close to mute the entire time it took the three of us to travel from my roomette in the ER to the exit that faced the parking lot.

"Rah'! Rasheeda!"

"Yeah, Jaie."

"This is the part of the script where I get up from this chair and walk out to the car. Say good-bye to the nice lady!"

I stood up faster than I should have and got an instant reminder of the explosive power of automobile airbags. There was no use in my trying to sling my gear over my shoulder. No part of me was working pain free.

Rasheeda winced. "You look like you hurt a lot, Jaie." "I do. But at least I can still talk. What happened to your tongue back there?"

"Oh, that? I knew what you were trying to do. And Miss Volunteer was cute, but everything's going smoothly with Sandi right now. I don't even want to glance at anyone else."

"But you weren't the one who glanced outside your relationship with Sandi in the first place."

"I know that. Just the same, I'm doing everything in my power to keep this thing together."

I felt happy for my buddy. "That's good, Rasheeda. What I wouldn't give for a stable relationship with Terez."

"From what you've told me, it sounds like Terez may be nothing more than a sweet memory. Maybe you should have gotten that volunteer's phone number." Rasheeda side-eyed me and gave a little laugh.

"That's not funny, Rah'." For the umpteenth time I remembered how Terez looked at me right before she backed out of the hospital room. Her eyes reflected so much hurt, fear, and distrust. "I need to talk to Terez, to make sure she really understands why I was going to Seneca's place on Friday night."

Rasheeda looked me dead in the eyes as she put my bag in the back seat of her car. "Do you understand why you were going there? Because you'd better be sure you know why you were headed to Philly, before you explain it to Terez."

My buddy was right about that. I sank into the passenger seat and let my mind wander as we put some distance between us and the hospital. Rasheeda lowered the volume on the radio just as I thought I heard a news report about Seneca's arrest in the cold case murder investigation of Patricia Adamson. She tried to divert my attention from the all-news radio station. "Where did they take your car?"

"I asked Detective Jones to have that guy from the cheap repair shop in Allerton come and tow it."

"Are they reliable?"

"Very. And reasonable, too. They're used to dealing with students' budgets. I'll call them as soon as I get home. Hope it doesn't take them forever to repair Old Faithful"

"Can you get a rental while it's being fixed?"

"Probably. I'll do it at the beginning of next week."

Rasheeda took her eyes off the road and I could feel a question coming my way. "Jaie, don't you have some big presentation at Allerton coming up soon?"

"Oh, damn! It's on Tuesday." I groaned, as the reality of my proposal seminar jarred me.

"Why don't you get it postponed?"

"No, I want to get it over with." Even as I said this, I wasn't so sure it was a good idea. I wanted to be done with this stage of my work, and I knew I was prepared. I had to hope my body would cooperate with me.

Rasheeda slowed the car as we entered the university town.

"Hey, could you drive up Cloverly Lane?"

My friend looked at me, wrinkling her nose. "Did you get amnesia along with that concussion? Cloverly Lane is not the street we take to get to your apartment, Jaie."

"I know, but it'll take us past Terez's."

Rasheeda looked over at me and shook her head. "Okay, girl. We can do that. Don't get pitiful on me."

I didn't think I was pitiful, but Rasheeda must have felt sorry for me, because she circled the area around Terez's building twice. There was no sign of her car. Then, without my requesting it, she drove all over the campus area, slowing down near the library and the building where the English Department office is located. No sign of her green and tan car anywhere.

I worked on convincing myself it was Saturday. Terez probably had a million things to do and not one of them was on campus. "Thanks, Rah', but it looks like she's not around. She's probably running errands. You can just drop me off at home."

Moments later, I slumped into my empty apartment. It was quieter than I'd ever remembered, and I've always lived alone. I turned on the television, so I could hear other voices. I checked my answering machine. No blinking red light. No message from Terez. I must have dialed both of her phone numbers ten times, only to find she wasn't there, or wasn't answering either of her phones. I didn't leave any messages for her because I didn't want to exhaust her machine the way I had the day before.

My body felt like it was weeks away from being able to move without pain. So, between the discomfort I was in and not having my car, I was forced to slow down. I glanced at the Philadelphia newspapers Rasheeda had bought and left for me to read. Each one ran a discreet and detail free article about Seneca's arrest. Her name and Johnetta's were the only ones mentioned and for that I was grateful. I wondered how Jennifer Renfrew was feeling about the

arrest. Would it bring her some closure? Had Johnetta Jones called and told her about my role in all of this? And if so, what did Jennifer think of me now? Did my involvement with her lover's death make her think even less of me than she did before?

I tried to ignore my aching body, but I gave in to it. I searched my bag for the little white envelope with the pain medication the ER nurse had given me. Not wanting to take one of the pills on an empty stomach, I opened the refrigerator, stared at its meager contents and then closed it without removing anything. I wasn't hungry, at least not for peanut butter or leftover pasta. I figured if I took my time, I could manage the short walk between home and a Chinese take-out restaurant. But if I went out for food, I'd miss that desperately wanted phone call from Terez. My mind hovered above the possibility of willing my phone to ring, when it happened. My hand trembling, I picked up the receiver.

"Terez?" Uncool of me, I know. I couldn't help it.

"No, hon. It's Johnetta Jones."

"Oh, hi." Disappointed it wasn't love on the line, I felt comforted that at least the caller was someone who cared about me.

"I phoned the hospital, and they told me they'd released you."

"Yeah. A couple of hours ago. My friend Rasheeda picked me up and drove me home."

"Good. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit. I ache all over."

Johnetta chuckled. "That will pass. Just give it some time. Do you need anything?"

"My car."

"Just give that some time, too. How are you fixed for groceries? Do you need any aspirin or Tylenol?"

"No, I'm okay."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah...Hey, Johnetta?" I needed to ask a question I'd had ever since Rasheeda turned down her car radio on our drive home. "Where is Seneca right now?"

"She's in jail waiting for her arraignment. There won't be any bail because she's going to be charged with murder. Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to know." That was no lie. I needed to make sure Seneca didn't have access to Terez, or to me for that matter.

"Do you know any attorneys who practice criminal law, Jaie?"

"No. Should I?"

"You're going to get a call from the District Attorney's Office sooner rather than later. They'll need your testimony. And you can bet Seneca Wilson is going to try to drag you into this. Give me a day or so. I'll come up with the name of a good lawyer."

"Thanks, Johnetta. Why are you helping me with all of this?"

I heard Johnetta pause, then clear her throat. "To make up for all the older people in your life who didn't help you when they should have."

"Well, I appreciate it. Thanks."

There was another question I had to ask her. "Hey, Johnetta. When you saw Terez at the hospital, did she say anything to you about going away? About leaving Allerton?"

"No, honey. She didn't. She's not around?"

"Nope. Not since Friday night." I wanted to ask her to please send out some squad cars to look for Terez, but that was a stupid fantasy.

"She'll come back to you. Remember, she had a lot to deal with on real short notice."

"Yeah." I stared at the bookcase across the room from me, stalling to get enough nerve to ask Johnetta just one more question. "Uh, when you called to tell her I was in the hospital, did you deliver the entire message? Did you tell her I loved her?"

"Sure I did, Jaie. You told me you wanted me to say that, and I did."

"How did she respond?" I was so desperate to hear Terez's voice, I was willing to settle for a proxy.

"She said she knew you loved her and she loved you, also."

"Okay, thank you."

"You're welcome, Jaie. I'll get back to you about that attorney. In the meantime, if there's anything you need, let me know."

"I will. Thanks again, Johnetta." I hung up, sick with the certainty that I'd lost a lover. Gaining an unexpected ally wasn't consolation enough. Having a new friend didn't come anywhere close to shoring up my broken spirit or feeding my hunger for Terez.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

AIRTRAN FLIGHT 768 was completely full as it took off from Philadelphia International Airport early Saturday morning. Terez wondered why so many people needed to fly from Philly to Boston on this non-work day. Assigned to a window seat, the Massachusetts native stared at the space beneath her. She was barely aware of the clouds and the woven patchwork of gold and crimson the Fall morning provided. Terez's formal body language expressed her unwillingness to make small talk with her elderly seatmate.

The wizened traveler smiled in a motherly way and dared ask a question. "A weekend getaway, dear?"

"A quick trip home."

That was the beginning and the end of Terez's dialogue. She returned her attention to the once clear but now age-clouded window and to the situation that brought her here. She could see Jaie's image so clearly when she gazed out of the smoky porthole. Jaie, so joyful each time she'd unexpectedly run into Terez on campus; so loving whenever she could lie in bed next to her lover; so filled with passion whenever they'd make love; so crushed as she looked up at Terez from the emergency room bed, pleading with her to trust the love she offered.

Terez looked down at her clenched fists. She relaxed her hands, took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she held her own silent monologue with her absent lover.

Jaie. I just found my center with you and now it's gone. How do I trust a woman who acts as if she loves me and then goes off to accept an invitation to have sex with someone else? How could I have been so stupid and gullible to have believed you? Isola Valdez was right. She warned me about you and your womanizing ways. Why didn't I listen to her? Why did I let myself fall for your lies?

The Boston-bound plane landed at Logan Airport at 8:32 A.M. By the time Terez rounded the corner at baggage claim, she could see her small tapestry suitcase protruding from the mouth of the baggage chute and tumbling down to the carousel. She grabbed it and pulled the wheeled piece of luggage behind her as she walked the length of the terminal. She took her time deciding whether she wanted to ride the T into the city and then get a cab, or simply get a taxi right there at the airport.

Terez was flying home to see her father and her old neighborhood. More than anything, she wanted to visit and touch things familiar to her. She sought comfort, understanding, and answers in a place where explanations had always lived. The events of the last day and night had left her feeling empty and hollow.

Terez and her luggage picked up their pace. Veering to the left, the grad student used the exit leading to the taxis all lined up waiting for their passengers. *I've already over-spent my budget flying up here. Might as well blow some more money to hell*, she reasoned.

Terez approached the lead taxi, got into the backseat, and gave the driver his assignment. She saw the unshaven cabby alternately look at her through his rearview mirror and then stare ahead at the road in front of his vehicle. Terez busied herself staring at the square of tattered plastic holding the driver's photo, name and hack license. She wondered how much more yellowed the plastic overlay would become before someone discovered that it was no longer translucent and that no one could read what the devil the documents said.

The cabby quickly drove beyond the network of airport access roads and headed toward the busy route leading to the city.

"Nice mawning. Gone to rain latah on, though."

"Really? Is that the weather forecast?" The Boston accent never failed to fascinate Terez. She swore that some people practiced in order to master it, the same way they practiced a foreign language. What was even stranger to her was that she'd never spoken with an accent. Nor had anyone else in her family. It was as if the Overtons were immune to the Boston patois.

"Naw. The TV says it'll be cleah all day. But my shouldah is aching. It's moah reliable than the weathah fawcast." The cab driver, clearly pleased he was one up on the National Weather Service, flashed a quick grin. "Fly in from any place exciting?" He was all set for a chat.

"Philadelphia." Terez's mood hadn't improved since her arrival. She wasn't any more ready to chat now than she had been during the flight.

"Oh. I have some cousins they-ah. I was they-ah last summah. It's not too exciting." He gulped something from the metallic insulated thermos that had been resting on the front passenger seat.

"Trust me. The Philadelphia area is exciting." Terez forced herself to answer.

"Oh, yeah? Like how?" Now the cabby was hooked. An attractive female rider, going to a real nice part of town. And she knows about some excitement in his cousins' city.

"I really don't want to go into any details. Just trust me when I say there's excitement in Philly." With that, Terez clammed up.

The driver, put off by Terez's sudden shut down, accelerated as he left the expressway and wound the cab through the steep curve of the exit ramp. Terez grabbed at a piece of vinyl

protruding from the split in the seat cover. Her bag, which had been resting next to her, sprang to life and slammed into her body. Instinctively, she rubbed her forearm where the suitcase had made contact and then checked the cabby's rear view mirror in time to see him looking at her, a slight teeth revealing smile stretching his lips. "Sorry about that. You okay?"

"Certainly." Terez was determined she wouldn't look rattled, nor be dragged into any more conversation.

They weren't too far from her destination when suddenly she felt the need to prepare herself for her visit home. Exactly how she would explain the reason for her unexpected homecoming was unknown to her at that moment. What would she tell her father about the last twenty-four hours? So much of what had happened to her heart these past few months remained her secret. If the joy of discovering love with Jaie had gone untold, surely the recent upheaval should remain unspoken. She would just be glad to see her dad, to be able to talk to him. She trusted his wisdom and she was grateful for his willingness to let her live her own life as she wished.

The cabby slowed the vehicle. "Is that the address ovah they-ah?" He pointed to the Overton's Tudor style home.

"Yes, that's the one."

He steered the cab one house past the Overton's before maneuvering a wide arcing U-turn. Stopping directly in front of his destination, he shifted the lever on the fare meter. "Nice house."

"Thanks." Terez read the amount she owed him and then paid the fare along with a tip. "Have a good day."

"Yeah. You, too. Hey, maybe I'll call my cousins in Philadelphia." He waited for her to close the rear door before peeling away from the curb.

Terez tucked the extension handle of her suitcase into its stowaway compartment, lifting the bag until, one at a time, it cleared all four of the steps that began at the sidewalk and ended at the double width blue-stone pathway leading to the front door of the house. Every one of the burning bush shrubs that formed a semi-circle in front of the living room's bay window was a brilliant orange-red color. As Terez got closer to the front door, her view included part of the next door neighbor's house. She thought she saw a curtain move in the Marshall's second floor side window.

Terez set her bag down and rang the doorbell. She could hear its peal echoing inside the house. The hollow reverberation of the bell was the only sound she heard. Thinking her dad might be upstairs or in the back of the house in the laundry room with the washer and dryer going at full speed, Terez lifted the heavy brass pineapple knocker and sent it banging against the door three times. Still no response. She left her small suitcase and walked the length of the driveway toward the garage and the rear yard. A rather new Toyota SUV was parked about five yards shy of the garage door. There was no sign of her father's silver Dodge Intrepid. Terez wondered if her dad had bought a new car. She doubted he'd ever buy an import.

Just as she began to return to the front door, a voice interrupted her trip.

"Hello! Hello there, Terez!" Mrs. Marshall, the Overton's next door neighbor, approached Terez and offered her a hug.

"Hi, Mrs. Marshall. How are you?" Terez returned the hug with as much warm enthusiasm as it had been offered.

"Oh, I'm just fine. And how are you, honey?"

"I'm well, thanks." Terez was aware that her neighbor smelled like chocolate chip cookies, although she didn't look like a stereotypical cookie baker. No stained apron, no flour smudges on her face, Mrs. Marshall always wore make-up, no matter what time of day or night it was. She wore her gray, freshly permed hair styled smartly, and of course, her clothing was tasteful and abundant. When she was growing up, Terez had often heard her mother say she never saw Mrs. Marshall wear the same outfit twice.

She dressed as if frequent shopping for new clothes was a drug, and she was an addict.

"Don't tell me your father forgot you were coming for a visit this weekend!" The senior woman's brow furrowed with concern.

Terez shook her head. "No, he didn't forget. I wanted to surprise him. He had no idea I was coming up to Boston."

Mrs. Marshall added pursed lips to her furrowed brow. "Oh, my. This isn't the best situation. Your brother Ronnie went up to Maine to look for a summer property, and your father went with him. They left yesterday, took your father's car and left Ronnie's here." The kind neighbor clasped her hands. "They said they'd be back on Monday. I don't even know exactly where in Maine they went. Your father asked me to take in the mail and the newspapers while they were gone. My dear, you've come all this way, and they're not here."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Marshall. I have a key to get in." Terez concentrated so much on consoling the stylishly dressed neighbor, she temporarily forgot to feel disappointed she wouldn't see her father and brother during her weekend visit home.

"But now you'll be all by yourself. Would you like to stay with me?"

"That's so kind of you, but no thanks." Terez thought quickly about the enforced quiet that would surround her for the next day or so. Part of her welcomed the promise of that solitude and another part of her feared it. "I have some work to do, and it'll be nice to do my work in Dad's den."

"Well, all right then. But I'm just a stone's throw away if you need anything." Mrs. Marshall patted Terez's shoulder. "You're such a pretty girl, Terez. A real beauty. And you're working on your doctorate. Your father is so proud of you."

"That's good to know." Terez began to walk away from her neighbor. Then, seized with an afterthought, she stopped her progress toward the front door. "How's my dad doing, Mrs. Marshall?"

The older woman smiled. "He's doing just fine, honey. He has his aches and pains, but we all do as we get older. I know I do. I look out for him, though. Well, to tell you the truth, we look out for each other. I bring him cookies and muffins, and he's always wanting to take me out to see a movie or to go to a concert." The sharply coifed woman looked off into space.

Terez smiled, remembering the complaints about his neighbor her dad had written in a few e-mails. "Well, thanks again, Mrs. Marshall. I'm grateful for every muffin you bake for him."

"You're welcome, Terez. And just knock on my door if you need anything this weekend."

As she once again approached the front door of the house, Terez unzipped an inside compartment of her handbag. Her fingers probed the bottom of it until they found the set of keys she needed. She distinguished her father's car key from the one that would unlock the door to the house and she let herself in.

With the weakened fall sun at her back, Terez made her way into the wide foyer. The demilune table that usually served as the mail repository held a key case, with one key exposed. She figured they probably belonged to Ronnie. Her dad would never leave keys unattended.

Taking off her jacket and leaving it in the foyer atop her suitcase, Terez decided to take a quick tour of the first floor. The living room was spotless, no doubt unused, Terez figured. Her dad preferred the quiet of his den or the warmth of a good fire in the family room fireplace. The dining room was, likewise, spotless. Her mother's favorite fall centerpiece adorned the African mahogany table. Terez was pleased to see everything was in its place. This didn't surprise her because, of her two parents, it was her dad who was the stickler for neatness. Dishes always washed, dried and put away; drapes, curtains, or blinds always opened or closed uniformly; books, tapes, CD's, and videos always shelved harmoniously. The orderliness Terez saw meant her father was continuing to live his life following his routines. There was something about this knowledge that rested gently on Terez's shoulders.

She glanced at her watch. Ten-thirty here. Ten-thirty in Philadelphia. Where was Jaie? Still in the hospital or discharged and sent home? How had she gotten home? One of her friends? Rasheeda? One of her other conquests? Certainly, Jaie was resourceful enough to figure that one out. She was probably at home right this minute, prepping for her dissertation proposal defense and being attended to by one woman or another. Maybe someone she'd met during her overnight stay in the hospital.

Terez flipped open the top of her cell phone and pressed the button that connected her to Jaie's. It rang only twice before the disappointed lover hung up. She realized she didn't know what she would say if she heard Jaie's voice. She didn't trust her feelings.

She wandered into the kitchen and explored the refrigerator. Finding an apple and a wedge of cheese, she picked a small knife out of the cutlery drawer and began the task of preparing her snack. As she peeled the apple she turned on the mini television suspended from the bottom of one of the maple cabinets. She found the remote control and scrolled through five different Saturday morning cartoon shows before she located CNN.

"And related to our report on national violent crime statistics, we have a story out of Philadelphia, where a ten year-old murder mystery has been solved. This is a photo of Patricia Adamson, a Philadelphia police detective who was murdered in a city high school ten years ago. Until last night, that crime went unsolved. That murder sat in a file drawer among other cold cases. Ironically, a former partner of Detective Adamson was in on the arrest of the alleged perpetrator, a woman named Seneca Wilson, who in another twist of irony, is now an official with the city's school district."

Terez dropped the apple and lost her appetite. The newsreader's voice became distant, thick and muffled. Someone from CNN was interviewing Johnetta Jones, the police officer who had phoned to tell her that Jaie had been in a car accident, that she was in the hospital and that Jaie said she loved her.

"Damn you, Jaie. Damn you!" Terez couldn't stop the huge tears flowing from her eyes. The choking sensation in her throat threatened to stop her breathing. She paced back and forth between the kitchen and the adjoining breakfast room, alternately sobbing and then wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. No longer listening to the television, she turned it off.

She felt a desperate need to regain her composure, so she forced herself to be calm. She walked over to the kitchen window and saw the thickening clouds and their reflection on the hood of her brother's gleaming car.

Without further thought, Terez wrapped the piece of fruit and the wedge of cheese in Saran. She looked around to make sure she hadn't left anything out of place. Walking resolutely to the front door, she pushed her arms through the sleeves of her jacket, slung her handbag over her shoulder, wrapped her fingers around the handle of the suitcase, grabbed the visiting key case from the table in the foyer, and closed the door behind her. There weren't any comforting embraces or answers for her here, in her family's Boston home. Maybe she'd find what she was seeking in Wellfleet, at the summer cottage.

Terez knocked on the next door neighbor's door.

"Yes, dear. Come in." The chicly dressed woman stood to one side.

"No, thanks. But could you do me a favor? I should be back here before my father is. But if I'm not, please tell him I've borrowed Ronnie's car and driven out to Wellfleet. He'll know where I am. I expect to be back by tomorrow night, because I have a very early flight back to Philadelphia on Monday morning."

"Okay. I'll tell him if you're not back before he is." The neighbor hesitated for a second before asking a question. "Terez, are you all right? You look upset...like you've been crying."

Terez averted her eyes before answering. "There's nothing to worry about, Mrs. Marshall. It's just a personal problem."

"Do you want a pair of ears to listen to you? Do you want to talk about it?" Suddenly, Mrs. Marshall looked less like the mature sophisticated widow out to snare Terez's father and more like a kind caring friend, older than Terez's peers, but just as sincere and perhaps wiser.

"Not really, Mrs. M. It's too fresh. It hurts too much." Terez surprised herself with her honesty.

"I understand. You go on and take that drive out to the Cape. It'll make you feel better. And Terez, think things through carefully, honey. Maybe you need to give her another opportunity to show how much she loves you."

Terez was stunned. She didn't know Mrs. Marshall knew she was a lesbian, nor that she'd taken a step beyond tolerance to acceptance of her life's reality. The older neighbor read Terez's thoughts. She offered a gentle smile. "Didn't think I knew about you, huh?"

"No, I didn't. My family is good at keeping secrets and not sharing our business." Terez wasn't certain how much she could say. But something about the older woman's absolute lack of censure encouraged her to at least share some part of her pain.

"Oh, I didn't need anyone to tell me about you, honey. Remember, I've been living next door to your family for ages. I watched you and your brothers grow up. You had a couple of young fellas come around. Then there was the guy you almost married. He always seemed happier being around your brothers than spending time with you."

Terez smiled slightly, as she remembered the mutual expressions of surprise quickly followed by sighs of relief when she and her ex-fiancé ran into each other at Atlanta Pride a few Labor Days ago. She was there with some friends from U. Mass. Her ex-fiancé was there holding hands with his boyfriend, a leather-clad biker.

Mrs. Marshall continued her explanation. "But you never looked at any of those young men the way you looked at that girlfriend you brought home with you from college a few times. I forget her name, now. But I do remember she was a little on the tomboyish side."

Terez felt her cheeks grow warm. "Were we that obvious?"

"Well, yes." Mrs. Marshall winked. "And I've always been in tune with anything that smacks of love and romance. I don't know. I guess it's just my nature."

Terez nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I think my dad picks that up. You know, that you may be interested in him romantically."

"Oh, that. Well, he is a handsome man, and he is eligible. But I'm satisfied to have him as a friend and to go out once in a while." The petite woman continued. "You know, going out with your father has made me a lot more sensitive to what it's like being in an alternative relationship."

"How's that, Mrs. Marshall?" Terez looked puzzled.

"Don't you think that in downtown Boston, a white woman on the arm of a black gentleman, even in this day and age, gets stares?"

"I hadn't thought about it, but I guess it does."

"You're damn right it does. But I've said to your father more than once, I've said 'Hiram, the more they stare, the prouder I am that you and I are friends.'"

"What does my dad say to that?"

"He just chuckles. But once he said that if his daughter was brave enough to be in a same-sex relationship, then he could be courageous enough to go out with whomever he wanted."

"That sounds like Dad. He's always seen the bravery that goes along with being different."

"Your father is unique, all right." Mrs. Marshall grew serious. She reached out and touched Terez's arm. "You think about what I said before. About giving your girlfriend a second chance. You're a mature, levelheaded woman. You've outgrown the 'I have a crush' stage, and you've probably had enough girlfriends by now to know the difference between the short-termers and the ones who matter. This one could be the one who matters in your life, you know."

Terez nodded, carefully folding Mrs. Marshall's wisdom and placing it gently where she could find it again if she needed it. "I will think about it. But I'm a long way from knowing what to do, or even how to feel. I need some time, Mrs. Marshall."

"All right. Then drive safely now." She gestured toward the sparkling vehicle at the other end of the driveway. "That's a nice new car your brother bought."

"I'll take care of it. I'll be back tomorrow." Terez pressed her jacket pocket, feeling the key case she'd put there. She trundled down the driveway and climbed into her brother's SUV. Inhaling the new car smell, she put the key in the ignition and drove slowly out of the driveway, waving to Mrs. Marshall's retreating figure.

The heaviest of the Saturday Boston to Cape Cod traffic was over as Terez left the city and used the I-93 south ramp to enter Route 3. She and her borrowed car swept by the familiar place signs, making their way to the Mid-Cape Highway with its beach plums and ragged-looking scrub pines. Noticing that her brother had, as usual, allowed the car's gas tank to get perilously close to empty, Terez left the highway, so she could refuel at a service station near the Hyannis exit. As she mindlessly filled the tank, she thought about how close she was to the Hyannis office of the

Cape Cod Times. Maybe she should have stayed there writing her little mundane stories, instead of leaving the state and branching out to pursue a doctorate and fall in love with a woman who didn't know how to nurture that love.

Terez refocused her attention on the two women at the gas pump to the right of hers. Heads bent under their car's open hood, one held a container of light blue windshield washer fluid poised over the neck of its receptacle, while the other woman looked on intently and then signaled when the task was done. The women smiled at each other, easy and carefree, happy to be climbing into a car wearing a PT sticker and a rainbow flag.

Terez dove into a pool of thought. *They're probably headed for Provincetown. I'd had the stupidity to let myself think that the next time I drove to P-Town, I would be with Jaie. That she'd hold my hand while we walked down Commercial Street. That we'd hold each other while we waded waist-deep in the chilly water at Herring Cove Beach. Where are you right now, Jaie? At home going over your presentation notes for Tuesday morning? I'm up here on Route Six. On the road that slices Cape Cod right down the middle. And I'm thinking about you.*

Terez reattached the gas cap. Before starting the car, she pulled out her phone and dialed information.

She let Verizon 411 contact County Suburban Hospital outside of Allerton, Pennsylvania. Terez put her hurt on hold long enough to find out if Jaie were still hospitalized.

"Patient Information, please. I'm calling to find out how one of your patients is. Her name is Jaie Baxter and she was admitted last night. Yes, B-a-x-t-e-r. I see. Thanks very much. No, there's nothing else. Good-bye." She closed the phone and put it back in her handbag. At least now she knew where Jaie was. Was she in pain or not? Was she alone or with someone?

Terez drove on. She used the long single-lane stretch of highway that could have bored her with its sameness as a palette for her thoughts. Twenty-four hours earlier, she'd been in a small conference room in the editorial department of *City Magazine*. She sat at a large round table, Mandy Reese on one side of her and Carla Dixon, the investigative writer-reporter newly assigned to the Adamson murder article, seated on the other side. In front of them, as well as stacked in two piles on the floor, were reams of paper, all connected in some way to the murder case, most connected to Jaie and to Seneca.

Terez had been determined to know all of the facts surrounding the crime, to understand Seneca's ties to Jaie and to learn just how sinister and powerful Seneca was. The night she'd met Seneca at the concert, Terez had fed all of the information she'd received from Mandy Reese to her paper shredder. Now she was obsessed with reading it. She spent eight hours yesterday at *City Magazine's* headquarters, pouring through the material, sometimes with Mandy's and Carla's help, other times alone, with just her thoughts, suspicions, and conclusions keeping her company. At the end of her sojourn there yesterday, she was fairly certain she knew what had really happened in the third floor hallway of Thomas Jefferson High School a little more than ten years ago.

Terez pressed on. She drove past Eastham, Chatham, and Orleans. A few minutes after exiting Route 6, she heard the crunching sound of tires compacting fragments of clam and oyster shells as she eased the SUV onto the driveway of her parents' cottage in Wellfleet. When she slid down from the driver's seat, the first thing she noticed was the clean smell of the ocean mixing with the scent of the pine and balsam trees that surrounded the modest property. The fragrance reminded her of the small stubby incense cones she and her undergrad friends used to burn to disguise the odor wafting from the joints they would occasionally smoke in their dorm rooms.

She recalled sharing those stories with Jaie and watching how her lover laughed when she told her about her first experiences with marijuana. Jaie had kissed the tip of her nose when she'd said she'd simply fallen asleep that first time.

The key to the cottage's front door and the key to the Boston house shared the same worn leather fob. Terez opened the door and, for the second time that day, left her bag in the entryway while she took a look around the house. The first floor of the Cape Cod saltbox held a cozy fireplace living room, a small bathroom, a reading nook, a kitchen, and a dining area. The second floor accommodated three small bedrooms and a second bathroom. It seemed to Terez everything was where she remembered since her last visit more than a year ago.

As she entered the kitchen, a sudden hunger pang reminded her that the only thing she'd had to eat since that morning's half bagel and cup of coffee in the Philadelphia Airport was a slice of apple and a tiny chunk of cheese. Her dad probably hadn't stayed at the cottage for at least a month now, so the refrigerator's empty condition didn't surprise her. Terez took her wallet from her handbag, made sure she had her keys, and headed out the door to walk to Nelson's, the closest grocery store.

It was as good a day as any for the half-mile walk. The threatening clouds that hung over Boston hadn't yet covered this part of the Cape. A vague grayness was just beginning to intrude on the mostly blue sky. If it were going to rain at all out here, the moisture wouldn't arrive until after dark. A cold-edged breeze surrounded Terez as she emerged from under the trees that provided cover for the first two blocks of her trek. She welcomed the chill. It reminded her that her skin could feel the cold, as well as remember the smooth warmth and urgent need in Jaie's hands as they explored her curves and undulations.

The streets were almost empty, yielding no hint of last summer's crowds and noises. Some of the seasonal businesses had closed, unlike most of the art galleries and the stores that kept life afloat for the year-round residents of Wellfleet. Terez focused on the block ahead of her, and she saw a customer leaving Nelson's. She felt thankful the town had enough of a twelve-month population to sustain the vestiges of commercial life.

Unimpeded by the busy presence of other part-time shoppers, Terez made her selections and approached the cashier. There were only two silent, taciturn customers ahead of her. She concentrated on studying the backs of their heads, instead of reading the headlines that were plastered across the newspapers flanking the checkout area. She wanted to avoid seeing any additional media reminders of Seneca Wilson's arrest.

Terez left the grocery store, her arms filled with a bag containing a pint of milk, a small plastic box of roasted vegetable salad, a container of clam chowder, and two Portuguese rolls. She trusted her dad's habit of never letting the coffee supply dwindle, so she didn't buy any.

Terez took her time walking back to the cottage. A ship's bell clanged in the distance, reminding her to peer in the space between the buildings and steal a glimpse of the harbor's glassy gray water. She examined the neatly kept properties with their yellow, orange, and burgundy mummified window boxes and porch planters. These floral displays were signs of the comfort and hospitality that resided in the town. They represented lives steeped in peaceful contentment, divorced from the knowledge that anyone could live in any other condition. Urban war games never encroached these shores. Ship bells never peeled the alarm of poverty.

The dark-haired grad student knew that so far she had lived her life in a gently swinging hammock, protected from the ugliness that had surrounded Jaie. When Jaie told her what it was like growing up in her household in North Philly, Terez imagined some monster with its tentacles wrapped around her lover's throat, dangling her over a gaping pit of uncertainty, violence, and fear. Knowing Jaie for just this short period of time had knocked Terez out of her hammock and onto reality's floor. The summertime serenity that was Wellfleet, Massachusetts, was no longer the real world for Terez. Jaie was Terez's real world; that is, if Terez wanted to find her way back to her.

The young woman stopped to look through the display window of Valerani's, her favorite art gallery. Gone were the playful beach scene collages and the colorful pastel still lifes that Terez imagined had been there a couple of months ago. In their place were somber-colored seascapes that mirrored Terez's dark, pensive mood.

With only three blocks remaining between the walker and her family's cottage, Terez was feeling colder and colder. The incoming gray clouds obliterated the sun, and the breeze had changed to a heartless wind, coaxing tiny tears from Terez's eyes. She hugged the grocery bag tightly to her chest, long enough to free both hands so she could zip the bottom of her jacket. Terez picked up her pace and counted each step as she approached her destination. Once inside the house, her body shivered involuntarily.

She was glad for the shelter's quiet, although she missed the sounds and sensations of Jaie's "Hey, girl" whispered in her ear. Terez unpacked the grocery bag and decided to eat right away. She needed to do something with her hands, so she wouldn't be tempted once again to phone Jaie.

She heated the soup and ate it, along with some of the salad and one of the Portuguese rolls. Opening a bottle of red wine she found nestled in an alcove of the wine rack, Terez made a mental note to offer to replace it the next time she spoke to her dad. Certain he'd turn her down, she knew she'd feel better making the gesture.

Terez tried to memorize the name of the Israeli import as she poured herself a generous glassful. She drank it quickly, enjoying its dry aftertaste. As she poured herself a second one, she thought

about Jaie's refusal to drown her disappointment in a drink the night she found out she'd lost the Adamson Prize. That had been the same night they'd seen Seneca Wilson at the concert.

Terez took her glass and the bottle of wine into the living room, where she tried to hide between the covers of an out-of-date *Newsweek* magazine. The television, not connected to its cable service, offered a bland menu of programs. Finding anything remotely entertaining to watch in the late afternoon wasn't an option. Terez opened her small suitcase and removed her journal. She found a pen in her handbag and tried to do some writing. Strangely, the only thing that her wine-dampened imagination led her to inscribe on the pristine page was the name "Jaie Baxter."

What in hell am I doing? I'm worse than a high school girl with a ridiculous crush. I'm like Jaie was when she kissed that girl in the ninth grade, or when she fell for Seneca. I should have known Jaie when we were in high school. There wouldn't have been any deceit with a boy. We wouldn't have had any screaming argument in the hallway at that school. There wouldn't have been a shooting, and no one would have killed a cop.

The beautiful, conflicted woman rested the pen in the centerfold of her notebook. With the little energy she had left, she replayed the conversation she'd had with her family's neighbor earlier in the day. Mrs. Marshall had told Terez that she was beyond crushes. So why in the world was she thinking about Jaie in those terms now? Terez speculated that perhaps she hadn't needed to drive all the way out here to Well-fleet to look for answers. Maybe Mrs. Marshall, with all of her wisdom, had given Terez the answers she needed and the sage advice for which she'd been searching. Embraced by the soft sofa cushions, eyes fluttering closed and yielding to her exhaustion, Terez exhaled and whispered, "Jaie." She slept deeply, dreamlessly, never hearing the sound of the night's rain pinging against the cottage roof.

Chapter Thirty

RASHEEDA AND JOHNETTA were right when they told me a little rest would ease my aches and pains from the car accident. By Tuesday morning, my body felt much better. It was the hurt in my spirit that needed more than the combination of sleep plus fewer physical activities to heal me. I got up early, skimmed my notes one final time, brewed myself a cup of extra strong coffee, and said a prayer. My single-minded goal was to get past today's presentation. And it appeared I had to do that without Terez's gentle voice near my ear, assuring me I'd be okay.

By yesterday, the enormity of losing her had overwhelmed me. I couldn't believe Terez hadn't phoned, not even once. Her silence spoke to me every waking moment. Her absence invaded my bed. Last night belonged to the demons who reminded me how much I'd screwed up our newborn relationship and how I was going to pay for that rupture big time with cold midnight tears replacing gentle sleep for many nights to come.

I realized how fearful and angry Terez must be with me. Maybe that's why I couldn't reach her all day last Friday and why she disappeared over the weekend. When we first started seeing each other, she'd had no idea she was signing up to carry all my past baggage. She'd had no notion of the kinds of trips I'd traveled with Seneca, nor any idea how foul those trips had been. No doubt she could feel Seneca's toxicity, and she probably needed to protect herself from it. I figured that, in some way, Terez needed to get back at me and to hurt me as much as I had wounded her last Friday night when I set out to drive into the city to see Seneca.

A cold, tentative rain began to fall shortly before I left to head to the university this morning. By the time I parked my rented car, the raindrops were pelting the ground more decisively. Believe it or not, I welcomed that damp and dreary weather. I hoped it would convince some of my inquisitors to stay at home where they could be warm, dry, and totally oblivious to my academic fate.

I took the long route to the campus, through the commercial section's caterpillar-slow traffic and into the residential area just beyond the university's property. I had plenty of time to stop for the school buses and obey all of the red lights. I had more than enough time to crawl past Terez's apartment building and read the license plate numbers of every damned car parked within a three-block radius.

I managed to find a parking slot pretty close to my destination. With difficulty, I toted my rucksack up to the second floor conference room I'd reserved for the presentation. A lonely podium stood sentry duty in the front of the room. One large empty table and a company of desks arranged in a wide semi-circle filled the rest of the room. I looked around the space, feeling like a novice matador in the hours before her *alternativa*. Any second now, the bull would enter the ring. And all I had to defend myself was a bag full of researched materials along with reams of writing. My second, Terez, was missing.

Two of the university's catering service workers arrived and broke into my bullfight fantasy. They pushed a cart to the opposite side of the conference room, narrowly avoiding a collision with a few of the desks. One of the men lifted an institutional-sized coffee urn from his cart and onto the table. The second guy got busy setting up a hot water dispenser.

"Are you the one who ordered this, Miss?" The older of the two men unfolded a sheet of paper and hastily read something. "Are you Ms. Jaie Baxter?"

"Yes, I am." I had forgotten about this detail of the presentation, maybe because I hadn't thought to plan it.

"You want it set up over here?"

"Sure. Thanks." That was as good a spot as any. The food and beverages had been Terez's idea. She'd said people with empty stomachs wouldn't be nearly as amenable to my proposal as folks with full bellies would be.

The workers busied themselves emptying boxes of tea bags, cups, condiments and napkins. Not a movement was wasted as they arranged fruit and pastries on plastic trays. For some reason, the presence of all of that food and the absence of anyone here to eat it made the space seem larger and emptier than it was when I'd arrived a few moments earlier.

I heard the sounds of footsteps and voices approaching as I unpacked my materials and placed a hand-out packet on each desk.

"Good morning, Jaie!"

"Good morning, Dr. Gray." I shook my advisor's hand, glad she was the first one to poke her head in the door. She was intensely supportive, always interested in what I had to say.

"How are you feeling? I heard you had a car accident on Friday night." Her bluish-gray eyes flashed with concern.

"I'm fine, thanks, just a little sore." She looked more closely at me, as if she were searching for some visible signs of my injuries.

"Well, when you didn't reschedule the presentation, I figured you were okay. You did have that option, you know." She touched my arm, seeking to be convinced I'd made the right decision to go on with the planned program.

I nodded. "Oh, I know. But I'm so prepped for this, I didn't want to push it back."

"Wanted to get it out of the way, huh?" Dr. Corey Lomax walked directly to us.

"Hi, Dr. Lomax." I extended my hand to the writer whom I admired so much. "Thanks for being here."

"You know I wouldn't miss your seminar for anything, little sister." Corey beamed at me. "Kinshasa wanted to be here, too, but it wasn't convenient for her to cancel her class this morning. I know she'll be thinking about you."

"Thanks. I can use all the good luck that's out there."

A few grad students, along with my two additional advisors and some English Department staffers arrived and took their seats. The rain hadn't dampened their attendance one bit. Nor had it stifled their appetites. The students, especially, loaded their plates, and Dr. Gray was working on her second cup of caffeine. It occurred to me she might like the dark brew as much as I do, although one cup had been enough for my nervous stomach this morning.

I stole a quick look at my watch. "Well, I can't keep shooting the breeze. It's almost time to begin."

Dr. Lomax patted my shoulder and I did my best not to wince from the pain. "Take a deep breath and you'll be fine."

I remember doing just that. I looked at the faces in front of me. Once in a while, I glanced at my notes. I found an imaginary circle on the wall behind the attendees, and I tried to focus on it. Five minutes into my presentation, I saw a swatch of brightly colored fabric travel from the doorway to a seat in the back row. Terez? No, some latecomer trying to cloak her tardiness with a speedy entry. I must have gotten through those ninety minutes on sheer adrenaline. I was able to speak easily and fully about a topic I'd been exploring since the first time I seriously studied the Harlem Renaissance. And I guess my explanations were adequate because I fielded only three questions. The proposal seminar reached its end before I knew it.

Most of the folks whom I didn't know very well made tracks for the door as soon as they could. A few hung back to make sure none of the pastries would have a chance to get stale. I had to smile as I watched them scarf down the remaining pieces of the icing-covered triangles. Terez had been right on target. Terez. That hollow space in the middle of my chest reminded me once again that my lover was not there. With all of these people here in the room, their expressions curious and expectant, I hadn't been able to gaze at Terez and have her return my look with one of her confident smiles.

I began the job of collating my pages of notes when out of the corner of my eye, I saw Corey approaching me.

"You did a wonderful job, Jaie. I'll look forward to reading your dissertation."

"Thank you, Dr. Lomax."

"You know, don't you, that Kinshasa, Charlene, and I keep a careful watch for our Jefferson High kids."

"I was hoping you did, even though I'm no longer a Jefferson kid, and I was never in your writers' group back then."

"That doesn't matter. You're still a Jefferson grad, so we look out for you." Corey looked at me steadily, a worry creasing her forehead. She seemed to hesitate before continuing. "Jaie, I read about Seneca Wilson being arrested for Pat Adamson's murder. How are you feeling about the whole thing?"

It made sense someone would ask me about Seneca's arrest, and I was glad it was Corey Lomax. After all, she had known me and Seneca and Pat Adamson. "I feel unsettled about it, as if I just woke up from a bad dream. Maybe I feel that way because I was right there when it happened."

"When she was arrested?"

"Yeah. And also when the shooting occurred."

Corey stepped back and tilted her head as she listened to me. "I knew you were at Jefferson when it happened, and I'd heard you were in a relationship with Seneca. But I had no idea you witnessed Pat Adamson's death." Corey's disquiet for me was obvious.

"This is going to sound phony, I know. It's just that even though I was there, I can't remember all the details. Everything happened in one blurry moment."

"That's not phony at all. You were probably traumatized." Corey touched my arm.

"Look...Kinshasa and I were talking, and we wanted you to know that if you need anything, even if it's just friends to talk to, we're always here for you."

"I appreciate that Dr. Lomax. And please thank Ms. Jordan, also."

"You bet. And it's okay for you to call us Corey and Kinshasa, you know."

"Thanks." I started organizing my papers so I could pack up and leave. Suddenly, I had another thought. "Uh, Corey, maybe you can help me. Do you know a doctoral student named Terez Overton? She's in our department."

"Yes, I know Terez. Actually, I only know her when I see her." Corey sent me a smile that suggested she could guess why Terez might be important to me. Allerton is not an enormous university. Those of us who are gay know each other, whether we're faculty or students. Corey Lomax has known me since my days at Jefferson. And I haven't hidden who I am since I arrived there for tenth grade.

"Charlene has mentioned Terez Overton to me. She says she's a talented writer with loads of potential. You've met her, haven't you?"

Her question colored my cheeks. "Yes...I know her. I was wondering if you'd heard anything about Terez withdrawing from the university and leaving Allerton."

Corey looked at me with an expression of incredulity filling her eyes. "I haven't heard anything like that at all. In fact, I saw her downstairs on the first floor when I came into the building this morning. I thought she was on her way up here to attend your presentation."

"Are you sure you saw her downstairs?" A flush of hope spread through my chest.

The professor nodded. "I'm positive. Maybe she has a class in this building."

Corey Lomax, my unofficial mentor, stood there watching me pack the rest of my materials. Stuff my materials is more like it. I crammed my note cards and papers into my bag haphazardly, paying no attention at all to order or neatness. I took a chance my sore muscles would let me sling the backpack's weight over my shoulder.

Corey and I walked side by side to the door.

"Hey, Jaie. Mind some advice from an older woman who has a hunch you may be right where she was a few years ago?"

I grinned at her and thought about Johnetta Jones's recent tips. "Sure. Lately I've been open to advice from older women."

Corey's eyes locked onto mine. "I could be way off base with this. So I'll ask you to indulge my intuition for a moment, okay?"

I nodded silently.

"Forget about trying to be cool with Terez. Be honest and real with her. And one more thing, don't be afraid to let her love you. Otherwise, you could be sacrificing your best chance to be with someone of substance."

I smiled my thank you. "That sounds like good advice."

"Here's some more. Maybe if you hurry, you can find her. Because believe me, if you don't catch up with her, somebody else will." Corey paused between thoughts. "One more thing. You may want to pick up those leftover handouts. Otherwise, next semester we'll be reading term papers filled with your research, instead of our students' work."

She pointed to a section of desks that hadn't been occupied by anyone during the seminar.

"Thanks again, Dr. Lomax. For everything."

"My pleasure. I'll see you soon. And remember our offer. We're good listeners."

I eased my way out of my backpack and over to the handouts I'd almost left behind. I scooped them up, recalling the night Terez helped me staple the pages together. I was grateful Terez had shared her brainstorm with me. She came up with that idea. That was the same evening I'd held Terez and told her, her good looks kept seducing the hell out of me. She responded with something like, "Good looks are purely coincidental, Jaie. Good deeds are done on purpose."

I unzipped my bag and pushed the remaining packets into it, while I made a beeline for the exit. If I knew for sure Terez were somewhere on the first floor, I could set a new land speed record getting down there. Not waiting until the door closed behind me, I turned left and headed for the stairwell. There, three paces in front of me, stood Terez, head held high and proud. Looking serene and calm, she faced me.

"Hello, Jaie."

"Hello, back at you."

"How did your seminar go?" Terez's face wore an impenetrable expression. Her voice was subdued, neither joyful nor sad.

"It went okay." I wanted to touch her, but I knew better than to try. "I missed you."

"You must be glad to have that part of your work behind you."

Hadn't she heard me say I'd missed her? I put my bag down on the floor and then gazed at her. "I tried to reach you all day last Friday. Where were you, baby?"

"Doing some research at *City Magazine's* offices."

Terez held up her hand, stopping me from asking her why she'd spent the day there. "I had no intention of writing any article for them, but I did want to know what happened the day Pat Adamson was killed."

My throat felt tight, and I knew the tears were close by. "And what about this weekend? I kept calling you."

"I flew home early Saturday morning."

"Up to Boston?"

Terez nodded and spoke softly. "Yes. I went there to spend a little time with my dad and to figure out what to do."

"Did he help you?" I had no idea what it might be like for a woman to be able to go to her dad for advice.

"He wasn't there. His next door neighbor told me, among other things, that he and my brother had gone up to Maine for the weekend."

"So you stayed there even though he wasn't at home?"

"No. I borrowed my brother's car and drove out to the Cape."

"All by yourself?" I pictured Terez driving along some highway all alone. I would have given anything to take back the pain that had put her on that lonely stretch of road.

"Yes. I needed some time to be alone and think."

Corey's advice echoed in my mind. I did want to be honest about my feelings. "It's just that I missed you so much. When did you get back?"

Terez cleared her throat. "Yesterday morning."

Realizing that Terez hadn't contacted me even though she'd been so close for the past twenty-four hours felt like a scalpel slicing through my flesh. "And you didn't call?"

"I wanted to phone you, Jaie. I tried, then..."

"My number hasn't changed." My hurt slipped over the border, sounding more like anger than pain.

Terez looked beyond me. I could see she was keeping an answer tucked deep down inside of her. "Look. I'm sorry I missed your seminar."

"You could have been here. Corey Lomax told me she saw you downstairs before the presentation started."

Terez's clear brown eyes stared sadly into mine. She bit her lower lip and then nodded. "You're right. I could have been here on time. But after what happened on Friday night, I wasn't ready to see you, and I didn't know if you were ready to see me, either. The last thing I wanted to do was distract you. You worked so hard for today." Terez gestured toward the conference room's closed door. "This was important, and I couldn't risk our messing things up with our personal problems."

I took a step toward her, wanting to cancel the space between us. "Terez, I didn't know when we'd see each other again."

"I don't know if it's a good idea for us to see each other now."

"Why?"

"Because so much about you scares me, Jaie."

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Terez." I reached out for her. "Please let me hold you."

Terez shook her head from side to side. "I don't think so, Jaie. Too much has happened too quickly. It feels as if everything between us spun out of control, and I don't know if I can trust you anymore."

I dropped my arms to my sides. It was clear that Terez didn't welcome my embrace. "Because you think I was going to see Seneca on Friday night?"

"You were going there, weren't you?"

I breathed in deeply. "Yes, but not for the reason you think."

Terez narrowed her gaze. "You two were just going to visit and talk? Is that what you're telling me, Jaie? Is that what I'm supposed to believe?" Her brittle voice teetered on the edge of an accusation.

I was determined to pull her back and meet the harsh sound of her anger with the tenderness I had in my heart. "I needed to straighten things out with Seneca. She wanted me to leave you, and I wasn't willing to do that."

"Seneca wanted you for herself. Period. And for all I know, you may have wanted her, also."

"Not for one second. Seneca didn't have a claim on any part of me."

"She didn't act as if she knew that, Jaie. She made it pretty clear she intended to have you." Despite the fury in Terez's voice, there was a hint of vulnerability in her eyes.

"But you should have known it, baby. You knew how I felt about you and how we felt about each other."

"All I knew were the things you'd said to me. And I knew you'd said some of those same things to other women. You have a reputation, you know."

"You're different, Terez."

"How am I any different from any of the other women you've gone out with?"

I shook my head from side to side. "You're not like anyone I've ever known. You make me feel different about myself."

"And I'm supposed to believe you're not the same 'fuck-them-and-then-walk-away-Jaie-Baxter' you've been ever since you found out you could do that to a woman? Is that what you're telling me?"

Wounded, I took a step back from Terez. "Where did you get that? What did I ever do to make you believe I would treat you that way?" Not waiting for her to answer, I continued. "Oh, that's right. You're the part-time journalist who was going to write an investigative piece for *City Magazine*. You know all about me and my life, don't you?"

Terez looked startled for a second. I knew I could have stopped right there. But a little of the agony that's always around for the ride began to seep through my skin. "So, tell me, Terez, do you have a copy of the newspaper interview? The one I gave after Kashif was killed, when I said I wanted to see a female cop die to pay for what she did to my brother? Have you had a chance to examine all the interrogation transcripts from the murder investigation? Are the cops quoted, also? Because they had some choice names for Seneca and me when they were convinced that one of us had murdered Pat Adamson."

I never wanted to drag Terez into the volcano where my anger simmered. The anguish wrapped up in all those memories was too intense for the newness of our relationship. But if I loved her and if I wanted her to love me, she needed to see clear through to the bottom of my sorrow. She had to hear all about the shit I'd been through. So I kept going.

"Did the magazine send you a copy of my school records from Academic Prep? Did you read what they wrote about my 'deviate sexual behavior' after I kissed my first crush? And did those records describe the crap I had to put up with from the other students every fuckin' day? Or did they just say I developed a pattern of cutting and absenteeism that led to enough failing grades for them to be able to kick me out?"

"Jaie, you don't have to go through all of this." A crystal clear tear spilled from one of Terez's lovely eyes.

"Yes, Terez. I have to get rid of all this crap. I want to know if you read about the times I had to take my mom to the hospital to get her stomach pumped when she took too many drugs with her alcohol. And did anyone scan and e-mail you my high school era journals, so you could read about all the hateful names my mom used to call me and all the times she told me I'd never amount to anything?"

By now I was crying. I hated to do that, but I couldn't help it. All of the upheaval and fear of the last few days finally caught up with me. Terez stepped forward and pulled me close to her, mixing her tears with mine.

"Jaie, I'm sorry for all of it."

I whispered in her ear. "Terez, no one has ever hung in there with me." We kept holding on to each other. I needed to connect with Terez's gaze, so I could see what she was feeling. "On Saturday when I got home from the hospital and saw you hadn't called or returned any of my messages, I felt so abandoned. The sad thing is I knew all along it wasn't about your leaving me. I lost you. I let you become another short-term road to a nowhere relationship. And if I couldn't break that cycle with you, I couldn't break it with anyone."

"You are breaking the cycle with me, Jaie." Terez brushed her fingertips along one side of my face. She gazed at me and looked like she was trying to dive into my soul. "Soon after we started seeing each other, I knew I couldn't take that magazine assignment. I wouldn't do that to us."

I placed my hand on top of her fingers. "Thank you."

I searched for my life in Terez's eyes. Pressing her close to me, I clung to this beautiful woman. I sought to speak to her with my mouth, my hands, my whole body. And I wanted to hear her speak back to me. We both knew we were in the middle of a hallway in a classroom building. But that didn't stop us from kissing each other; lips, teeth, tongues making promises that we'd keep later on in our private place.

"Baby, we should leave." I whispered into that same spot on Terez's throat I'd kissed that night in the club some time ago.

"I know." Terez bent down to pick up my bag from the floor. "I'll carry this. I can tell that you're still aching from the accident."

I nodded. "Yeah, I am. I can manage my bag, though."

She squeezed my left shoulder, making it hard for me to keep the pain from registering on my face.

Terez pursed her lips. "Sure you can manage your bag. I can see how easy that is for you." Then, she looked at me with such loving tenderness. "You don't have to handle every little thing twenty-four/seven, Jaie. I know all about you; even the things you think you're still hiding."

"I don't have anything left to hide from you, baby."

We walked down to the first floor and then left the building. Challenging the wind-driven rain, Terez hooked an arm through mine. Linked together, we strode the distance of one short block before reaching my car. Terez settled my bag in the back seat and then she kissed and held onto me for a few precious seconds.

"I'm in love with you, Terez. Please believe that."

"I believe you, Jaie. And I'm in love with you, also."

"Don't be afraid of us. You can trust me."

"I guess I'll have to take a chance."

Every feature on my face smiled at her. "Can we please see each other later? Do you want to come to my place?"

"You can't keep me away."

I started the car. And as I slowly steered it away from the curb, I watched Terez walk gracefully away from me. Buoyed by the hope we could find a way back to each other, I knew in this close-to-the-bone honest moment, that holding on to Terez was more important than simply reaching for her.

I wasn't in any particular hurry to get back to my apartment, so I cruised the streets that ran through the rain-drenched campus. I drove past the library, then the University Center where the dining halls were located. My little rental car made its way past the rectangular brick structure that housed the English Department Office where, one day months ago, I first met Terez. I continued my drive past the gray stone building where Jennifer Renfrew was probably working in her office. I hoped she carried one less burden on her shoulders now that Pat Adamson's murder had been solved.

Then, I meandered a couple of miles away from the university, until I arrived at the door of the Café Pronto. I parked and went inside for a take-out order of mocha cappuccino with just the right amount of whipped cream on top. It was a shame I wouldn't be able to keep that cup of java hot until Terez came to my apartment later on. Too bad I wouldn't be able to keep a thin

unbroken line of whipped cream on that spot right above my mouth, just waiting for Terez to arrive at my threshold, look into my eyes, tell me she loves me, and kiss that trail of whipped cream away.

About the Author

S. Renée Bess is a former secondary school Spanish and French teacher. She is from Philadelphia, and she and her partner live in one of that city's northwestern suburban communities. Renée has engaged in creative writing all of her life, although her dedication to her teaching career prevented her from a serious pursuit of the craft until now.

In 1994, one of Renée's short stories won First Prize in the fiction contest sponsored by *Labyrinth, The Philadelphia Women's Newspaper*. In November, 2005 the author's first novel, *Leave of Absence*, was selected as the "Pick of the Month" by the African-American lesbian literature website, www.sistahsontheshelf.com.

Renée remains grateful for the time to write. She is dedicated to the notion of making a contribution to the body of lesbian fiction as a whole and, in particular, to creating stories that depict the lives of African-American women who are gay.

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