

The Inferno of a Gem

by Lisa K. Stephenson

Withdrawal. It's happening. It's been two months, one week and four days since she last had a drop of alcohol. With the anniversary of Martins death quickly approaching she could not fathom having to spend the day sober. The idea alone gave her chills.

The rubbing of her face, the glaring of her eyes, and the tension in her muscles were all firm indicators that her body was craving the vodka. Suddenly she realized the real reason she stepped into the office: it wasn't for peace, it was for satisfaction. The liquor cabinet to her right remained locked with a key. Today she decided one sniff wouldn't hurt, the scent entrapped between the case could bring her so much peace and even if it was for a moment she deserved that much. Ferociously licking her lips she fought the urge to attack the case and take a long hard whiff.

I'm not in AA anyway, she thought. Aggressively she began knocking over mantles, digging through file cabinets and rummaging her way through the office bins until she found it, the one thing that made her feel inebriated while completely sober.

"What the fuck is this?" Jewel yelled as she marched outside amidst the breakfast club. The festivities were here coming to an end as more people gathered from the neighborhood. An eleven-person party quickly turned into twenty-two without an exact headcount. Jewel was outraged. She could not bring herself to remain calm.

"What on earth are you doing?" Jade said, the charming sister, the people pleaser. Jade was embarrassed for both herself and her bewildered kin.

"Why do you have the autopsy report for Martin? Wayne, answer me, this was inside of your desk!" Jade quickly went from concerned to agitated. "Why on earth are you going through my husband's things?" Snatching the paper from her dearest sister, Jade scanned the document and not long after realized her sister was telling the truth. The document was an autopsy report for her deceased brother-in-law. They both demanded answers, but Jade refused to allow herself or her family to be embarrassed any longer. Wayne did not utter a word. Politely, he chose to retreat, taking his departure with grace.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attendance. Please accept my apologies as I must retire to my quarters a tad bit early this morning." Raising his glass, he disappeared. Jewel immediately followed. Jade remained stationed on the outdoor deck overlooking the large backyard. All six thousand seven hundred and twelve square feet of her home wasn't enough to hide the screams of her quarreling sister and husband.

Smiling, Jade elegantly took her leave.

"Please enjoy the rest of your afternoon's ladies and gentlemen."

"You son of a bitch! You are lying! Tell me right now why do you have this?" The *this* Jewel was referencing, although no longer in her possession, caused Jade to worry a great deal. *What else could she be quarreling about?* Jade thought. Immediately she entered the study.

Jewel was waving around a bottle of Phenobarb. Jade had no clue what to make of it all, that is until she looked down and read the report which said the manner of death: suicide. The probable cause of death was alcohol overdose and phenobarbital.

"My husband has never needed this! Why do you have it? Wayne, right, tell me." Jade crumbled up the autopsy reported and threw it into the trash. She took a deep breath and proceeded to get a grip on both herself and her sister.

"Jewel, baby, Wayne had nothing to do with this! I promise you,"

"Oh, so why can't he say that himself?" Wayne had no desire to quarrel. He simply rocked back and forth in his president's chair taking puff after puff of his Arturo Fuente Opus Cigar. "I

will get to the bottom of this, and I promise you, Wayne, if you so much as laid one hand on my husband's head I will see to it that I kill you myself."

"Oh, careful kitty, you live in my house," he boasted.

Wayne was a smug man, although a man of few words, he was often regarded as a man of both power and wisdom. Frantically, Jade attempted to remove her sister from his presence. She knew she had here else to go and could not afford to for Wayne to reprimand her with eviction.

It was a chilly night, a long night for Jewel as she lay awake and her mind replayed the night she found her husband dead in the first-floor living room of their home. It had not rained for quite sometime before that. She had not heard thunder rattling or the curtains wailing when she resided with her beloved. It was not because the rain did not exist, but simply because the storm could not bring her to lose focus from her husband and the wonderful life they had created together. Affixed to his side she would not ask for anything more, nor did she crave it. He was her opposite in many ways. His love was unlike any other, his touch, his smile, the way he spoke French while cooking and stirring his special sauce. Those were all the little things she craved, the small things that made her come alive, the little things that made her realize she was alone and forever would be. *When did I meet the bottle, or should I say when did the bottle meet me?* Irritated, she exited her quarters and wandered the halls, eventually bumping into her sister.

"Jesus."

"We should never take the Lord's name in vain, Jade. Take it back!"

"Jewel, your behavior! I would never act that way towards Martin."

"You mean would have never because he is dead, thanks to your husband!"

"Jewel don't become accusatory! Don't you dare come into my home and allege my husband of something so heinous as murder!" The women were pacing back and forth in the third-floor hallway.

"He murdered my husband!" Jewel could not take it any longer. She had broken. The alcohol was missing, her husband was dead, his murderer was unknown, and an autopsy did nothing but indicate lies.

"Jewel, please, you must believe me! Martin had never had one drop of alcohol a day in his life. Please." Sobbing, Jade could do nothing but pet her sister's soft brunette hair. Their hair both as dark as night and yet, as smooth as silk.

"Why do you believe such lies, Jewel?" Lifting her head, Jade stuttered and begged her sister to let it go, to allow Martin a chance to rest in peace. He was gone but never forgotten. She amicably reminded her. Jewel's face smothered in tears.

Stomping into her room, Jewel begged, "I just need a sip!"

"No, absolutely not. You cannot allow the alcohol to control you. Please, Jewel, control it." Jewel and Jade sat down for a moment, Jewel cautious at how she made eye contact with her beloved elder sister. Weakened, drained and feeling without purpose, Jewel curled into the fetal position. She opened her mouth and closed her eyes as if to motion the feeling of alcohol entering the rear of her throat.

"I think you should see a doctor," Jade said, frightened.

Turning to face her, Jewel said, "You mean one of the doctors who lied on an autopsy report, or one of the doctors who took my husband's pulse and while he was still alive told the other paramedics that he was declared dead? You mean those doctors? Those people?"

Jade's arms were racing with goosebumps. She was becoming fearful of her baby sister. "Just get some rest."

"Tell me, Jade, tell me! Why was he taken to an empty room?"

"Gem, you need sleep," Jade shouted.

“Gem? Only Martin called me that, Jade. During intimacy. How the hell did you know he called me that?”

“You need sleep.” Jade immediately left the room.

Jade fled to the parlor where her husband impatiently awaited her appearance.

“Right on time,” he said. The clock read 2:10 PM. It was early, and the sun was still clear in the sky.

“I need a drink!” Jade said frantically.

“What did you do?”

Trembling, Jade had no response.

Grabbing Jade by the arms pressing them alongside her torso and squeezing, Wayne began to shake his mate.

“How do I fix it? Just please tell me how to fix it. I called Jewel Gem!”

Relieved, he said, “Oh Jesus! That’s it?” A satisfied Wayne released her.

“Please tell me, what do I do?” Jade begged.

“I agreed to let her stay here because you said you could keep things under control. My study! What the hell was she doing in there? The AA meetings you said would keep her calm, would keep her distracted. she’s a raving lunatic all sober and shit. Listen, give her a drink if you have to. Allowing her to relapse right about is what you should do.”

Jade felt relieved she wasn’t going to be thrown out, bitten or slapped for her apparent mishaps and poor judgment. Wayne was fair. He was giving her another chance and this time she refused to mess up. Grabbing her cheeks, he kissed her softly. Jade remained a skeptic.

“I love you, Gem,” he said.

“You-you can’t call me that, Wayne. That’s what Martin called Jewel.”

“Sure, it is, but we both have different meanings behind it. His Gem was valuable. Mine not so much. Try not to let her fuck up again, okay?” Just like that, Wayne took his leave.

“Okay!” Jade said, sobbing. Wayne had no time for sobbing or crying or even whining, for weakness repulsed him. That night Jade lay low until she knew for sure her sister had showered and gone to bed. It wasn’t long before she heard the winds howling and the shudders banging against the windows, and that’s when he knew the moon had finally settled into the sky. Pennsylvania was known for its gelid nights, and this had often become an indicator for Jade whenever it was time to turn in, or on some occasions ponder her husband’s whereabouts. Jade knew her husband was right, and there was only one way to put her sister’s curiosity to bed and that was to awaken another danger. Alcohol.

Jade proceeded out of her bedroom and began making her way down to the study where the showdown had initially started. As she tiptoed inside, she could see a shadow, an unfamiliar shadow, the shadow of a man.

“Shh, are they gone?” it said. Jade remained bewildered. She had no idea what to think or say. For the first time in her life, she was speechless. As the headlights from the cars sped past their home, the image of the shadow became far more coherent and what her eyes beheld caused her to faint slightly. Her eyes lowered and her legs gave way.