



**Certain images contained within this e-book have been digitally marked by Digimarc Corp. If you purchased this e-book from a source other than Ellora's Cave or one of its known affiliates, contact [legal@ellorascave.com](mailto:legal@ellorascave.com) immediately. Please note that reading this e-book without first purchasing it through legitimate means is illegal and can result in heavy fines. As always, our authors thank-you for your support and patronage.**



## **NO TIME TO DREAM**

**An Ellora's Cave publication written by**

**TREVA HARTE**

**MS Reader (LIT) ISBN # 1-84360-442-6**

**Mobipocket (PRC) ISBN # 1-84360-443-4**

**Other available formats (no ISBNs are assigned):**

**Adobe (PDF), Rocketbook (RB), & HTML**

**© Copyright Treva Harte, 2003.**

**All Rights Reserved, Ellora's Cave.**

**Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc. USA**

**Ellora's Cave Ltd, UK**

**This e-book may not be reproduced in whole or in part by email forwarding, copying, fax, or any other mode of communication without author or publisher permission.**

**Edited by *Karen William***

**Cover Art by *Angela Knight***

**Warning:**

**The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. NO TIME TO DREAM has been rated HARD R, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...**

## Prologue

It was the dream again.

She knew it was because she felt the underwater quality to it, the unnaturally slow motion of bodies. She knew because she struggled to stop but, just like an undertow, she sank back into it once more.

*They were in the airport. Victor was jiggling his foot while they waited, just as he always did when he had to wait. Jen laid her hand on his leg.*

*"Less than a half hour, darling," Victor leaned over to tell her. "We'll be out of here. Anywhere in South America you want to go, Jen. Do you think you'll like Rio de Janeiro? Next assignment I'll try for Europe. I know you want to see Paris—"*

*That was when the loudspeaker announced her name. Jen's stomach knotted as she went to the phone. Victor followed behind her, his hand touching her shoulder. Jennifer listened and began to cry.*

*"Victor—my parents," she managed. "Cee Cee says they're in the hospital. It was a car accident... Vic, I have to go to them."*

*Indecision chased over his face. Then, just as she had heard it over and over in her head, done over and over a million times before, she told him, "You can go. It's a new job and they wouldn't understand if you weren't there. I'll catch up as soon as I hear—"*

*"Is it bad?" Victor asked. "How are they?"*

*"I don't know. It sounds bad but Cee Cee doesn't have any real information yet. The girls are waiting in the hospital. Someone has to be there for them. They're just teenagers. Vic, I can't go now."*

*He hesitated. For him, this was the big moment, the big job as a photographer, the chance to finally leave. He had been waiting for this chance forever. He had been waiting for them both to be able to go together. Maybe she was the only other person who knew how desperate he was to escape at last and show everyone that he could do this. She tried to smile. They both knew what his decision would finally be.*

*The airline's crackling microphone announced the final departure for their flight.*

*"I'll call," he said at last and bent to kiss her hard. "Give your parents my love. Call Jack to pick you up or get a taxi to the hospital. We'll sort it out as soon as we can. Don't worry. Jen, I love you."*

*"Victor, I love you too—"*

She was almost awake now. This was where the dream always ended and she had to wake up, realizing that the worst thing in her life had not only happened but she had to dream it over and over again.

Jennifer let out a deep breath as she woke up. She braced herself. Sometimes what came now was worse because then she knew she was awake. This part was true.

And then it came.

The hurt washed over her again, just like when it hadn't been a dream. The pain was there—it never seemed to lose its intensity. But she hadn't known what was coming when she and Victor had first made their decision, back when the scene in the airport had been real.

She struggled for more sleep, even though she knew the dream and the questions would keep coming back again.

Abruptly, Jen got up. She couldn't go back to sleep and she couldn't bear to keep thinking. Throwing some clothes on, she decided to forget even trying for a normal night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jen sat out on the porch with Poppy curled up companionably next to her. Who needed sleep when the dark night sky had bright stars and the evening breeze started to cool down the heat? It didn't matter if she was alone in the quiet. She didn't need anyone with her.

Despite what she didn't need, she smiled when the Lexus pulled into the driveway next door. Jack was home. He hesitated when he saw the porch light on next door. Obviously he wasn't in the mood for neighborly company.

Jen would have let him go on in and said nothing, but Poppy jumped up and ran over, barking furiously and wagging cheerfully, in her usual confused fashion. Jen stood up to wave and shush the prancing dog.

She felt a little embarrassed, as if she'd been spying on him. Of course that was ridiculous. Shoot, if she waited up to see him every time he came home late, she might never get any sleep.

He walked toward her. She saw the remnants of a tomcat grin on his face, saw in the way he walked that he hadn't been out late working. Or at least not working on anything to do with the firm.

"Nice night," Jen observed. "Too nice to sleep."

"Nothing wrong, is there, Jen?" Jack asked.

*What a nice guy.* He was looking at her with genuine concern. He did care. Even if he was a ladies' man and she wasn't one of his ladies.

"No. Thanks for asking, Jack." She ran her hand briefly down his cheek. "Did you get lucky tonight?"

He shifted his hands to the back pockets of his jeans and didn't answer. Jen couldn't quite interpret the look on his face but she knew enough about his expression to hastily pull her hand back. The lazy amusement usually in his eyes wasn't there.

"Sorry. That was a little personal. I hope you did. I'm sure she did," Jen hastily changed the subject. "I guess I could use an early night myself. I need to get up earlier tomorrow if I'm going to beat you into the office."

"Try it." Jack was unconcerned as he issued the old challenge. "It hasn't happened yet. But you're welcome to make me coffee if you do get in first."

They shared a smile. The older partners had their secretaries and paralegals wait on them hand and foot. Fetching coffee was just one of the ways the secretaries had to defer to them. Jack had never even hinted she was anything but a professional, with her own work to do. It was one of the things she liked so much about him.

"If I do, be careful about what you find in the cup," she said. "Tomorrow, Jack."

Her long brown hair was braided, the way it usually was. He wished it was loose.

Her thin T-shirt clung to her back. He wished she was walking toward him instead of away.

While he was at it, he wished her shirt was off. He could imagine her, her hair partially covering her skin, concealing and then revealing her breasts. Her eyes, staring at him shyly, desire in them. She wouldn't be sure what to do about what she wanted. He could show her.

He felt the desire hit him again and braced against it. After all, it was nothing new. He could live with it. Just.

"G'night, Jen."

She went inside, shutting the door firmly, with the dog trailing obediently behind her.

*Damn it, she'd done it again. Even after he'd spent hours in bed with someone else, she just had to look at him and he was twisted up with desire and despair and now this sick feeling of guilt. He didn't owe her fidelity. He didn't owe her anything but friendship. He gave her that unstintingly. Always.*



Jack sank onto the porch chair where she had sat. He could smell her scent on the chair's pillow. Then he put his head in his hands.

## Chapter One

"Hey, Molly." Jack prowled restlessly in the living room.

"Hey yourself, lady-killer," Molly responded, as she bounced Vicky up and down. "Is that some fancy cologne I smell? Mmm, my heart is palpitating."

"Control yourself." Jack paused in his pacing to ruffle her hair. "I'm saving myself for your big sister. At least for tonight."

"I'm younger and cuter. Bet I have a lot more stamina, too." Molly mock-preened and then relaxed into a grin. "Anyhow, why don't you sit down for a while? You won't have enough energy left to take her out if you keep stalking around the house like that. Don't worry, tiger. We know the plan. I have the keys and everything. I'm just glad you're the one who is going to handle her first reaction to the birthday surprise."

He laughed and continued to walk around the room, randomly touching the framed photographs on the mantle. There were recent ones—of Vicky just after her birth, of Kevin in uniform. But he stopped by the one that had two laughing adults standing behind six kids. Jen, Kevin, Cecilia, and Molly held hands. The two teenage boys stood sheepishly to the side. He remembered how Victor and he had adamantly refused to hold anyone's hand, but were secretly thrilled to be included in the family picture.

"Were we ever that young?" Jack asked. "Lord, what an ugly adolescent I was! All pimples and skinny legs."

"Don't worry. You've outgrown it," Molly assured him.

"The rest of the people in the photo look good." Jack fingered the frame.

"Mom and Dad loved that shot." Molly followed him to the fireplace mantelpiece. "They always said they finally had their whole family in it."

"But that had Victor and me—oh."

When Daniel Turner and his wife, Nora, had died, half the city mourned, but Jack doubted they had grieved with the intensity he had. Even their real daughters and son couldn't have appreciated what having them as a surrogate father and mother had meant to him.

"They were gorgeous people—inside and out." Jack didn't look up from the photos. "I loved them to pieces."

"They felt the same way about you, Jack." Molly patted his arm.

Making a faintly embarrassed gesture with his hand, Jack turned to yell up the stairs. "Hurry up, Jen! We have reservations."

Upstairs in her bedroom, Jen grinned. It sounded just the way it used to, when the boys would be anxious to go grab a pizza and yelled impatiently as they waited for her.

The slight jitters in her stomach eased. After all this wasn't a date. It was just dinner with Jack. Jack had suggested it after he was reminded about her birthday. Probably her sisters had shamed him into suggesting it.

"I'm going to check her first," Cee Cee called from outside the bedroom door. Then she strolled in to survey her older sister.

"Do I pass inspection, Mom?" Jen asked.

She wasn't entirely kidding. How a changeling like Cee Cee had been born into their casual family, Jen didn't know, but her opinion on how people looked mattered. With her sleek dark brown hair cut in a short blunt cut and her exotic green eyes, Cecilia Turner knew what looked good on herself and on others. She'd done some modeling and still had offers to go to New York for some fashion shoots. So far Cee Cee had ignored the offers. Jen didn't know why, but no one dared ask much about why Cee Cee did anything.

"Jack, hang on," Cee Cee called again.

She turned to Jen and pushed a skirt into her hand.

"I suppose the shirt will do—it isn't too old maidish, but the skirt must go up a few inches," Cee Cee told her, calmly. "This isn't a business lunch, kid. Jack's taking you out to one of the best restaurants in town. Play it right and maybe you can go dancing afterwards."

"That skirt won't match my shoes," Jen pointed out, trying not to sound desperate. Cee Cee's skirts were fine for Cee Cee but Jen didn't have the courage to wear something that would barely cover her butt and fit like a second skin.

"That's an added bonus." Cee Cee patted her a bit too sweetly on the shoulder. "I know you have some other shoes somewhere."

She stuck her head in the closet and pulled out another pair.

"My feet will cramp in those!" Jen protested. "Those heels are probably three inches high."

"You'll live." Cee Cee shrugged without sympathy. "And you'll live dangerously. Dress your age for once. Why look fifty six when you are only going to be twenty six?"

After a few more protests and some quick cosmetic touch ups by Cee Cee, her younger sister pushed Jen in front of the mirror.

"Now you're ready," she told her.

Jen looked at her hair, put up in a French twist, stared at the possibly illegal skirt and blinked. She didn't look as stupid as she thought. Instead her legs looked impossibly long in the dark nylons and high heels, her shirt suddenly looked much sexier than she had ever imagined and Cee Cee's makeup made her face look rather mysterious and alluring. This was an outfit Cee Cee could handle without a qualm. Maybe she could, too.

If she didn't fall off her high heels.

"I guess I do look like I'm ready for a night out," Jen finally admitted.

"And now you won't embarrass Jack. He's a sweetheart for taking you out for your birthday but he has his standards, you know." Cecilia sounded like Jen was about three years old and was likely to get crayon marks on her clothes if an adult wasn't watching.

"Gee, thanks." Jen briefly thought of some of the gorgeous women she had seen Jack escort into his house next door.

She couldn't possibly match up to most of them, but she didn't look too bad. Besides, she wasn't going into his bedroom tonight. She just needed to look good for her own ego. Jen winked at the reflection in the mirror. She had to admit that her ego felt pretty good right now.

"OK, Jack, she's presentable." Cee Cee firmly propelled her out of the bedroom and toward the stairs.

Molly stopped talking and Jack stood up as she entered the room. He looked her up and down for longer than she had expected. The silence lengthened.

"Am I OK?" Jen asked at last.

"You'll do," he told her, but there was a certain tone in his voice that made Jennifer grin.

"I look pretty hot, huh?" She smoothed her skirt.

"You'll do just fine."

"Then let's go, Jack."

At the restaurant Jen paused for a moment after ordering, looking at Jack uncertainly.

"So what do you want to talk about?" she asked. "We can't talk about work, since that's too ordinary. Ditto talk about Vicky or the girls."

"How about how beautiful you look?" Jack offered.

"Well, as delightful as that would be, I think we might run out of conversation in a few minutes," Jen snorted.

"Oh, I think I could keep talking about you a little *longer* than that." Jack leaned forward over the table. "I've been known to go on at length about my date's charms. It usually works, too."

"I'm not that vain." Jen shook her head. "And as for what it works for—well, let's not go into that. I suppose I could reciprocate, though. After all, you look pretty nice yourself. That could drag the conversation out a bit more."

The waiter brought the wine Jack had ordered and Jen watched him taste it and nod. The waiter began to pour for both of them.

He never made a big deal of it, but Jack knew his way around expensive restaurants. Going to one certainly wasn't the big deal to him that it was to her. Still, it was incredibly nice of him to offer to take her.

"Kevin called to say he'd have some leave around Thanksgiving," Jen ventured. "He'll come home for the holiday. We haven't seen him since he left for overseas."

"How does he like the army?"

"I guess the military suits him. I assume he's going to stay in it. He hasn't said anything to the contrary. It'll be great to see him again. I hope Molly and Cee Cee are nice to him."

"They're still angry?" Jack asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. What they expected of a twenty-year-old who hadn't even graduated from college, I don't know," Jen sighed.

"Maybe they're comparing his behavior to a certain *twenty-three-year-old's*," Jack told her. "She did all right by her family. She always has."

"Thanks." Jennifer waved her hand in dismissal of the praise. "But let's change the subject."

"Here, have some wine. It's delicious and will give you a minute to think of a new subject for our conversation."

After sipping, Jen told him, "You're invited for Thanksgiving, of course, Jack. Do you have any other plans?"

Victor had no family and Jack might just as well not have, either. For years Jack and Victor had been part of the family gatherings. Then came the accident and there hadn't been much of any family anything.

"You think I might want to join dear Mama and her latest in—Palm Springs, I think it is." Jack almost sneered. That was unusual. Jack normally maintained a grim silence about his family. "Or perhaps Daddy would want me down at the ranch in Texas with his trophy wife and the half-siblings. It boggles my mind that I have brothers and sisters who're a little older than Vicky. I guess it's no surprise Daddy seems to fear I might have too much in common with his wife. She's is a lot closer to my age than his."

"Jack." Jen put her hand on his arm. "I didn't mean it that way. But you know that for the last few holidays you have done things like go skiing or flown down to someplace sunny. You can come to our place if you don't have anything better to do. We'd love to see you."

"There could be nothing better than going to your place." Jack sounded sincere. "I like my ski trips and beach trips. I can't lie about that. But the only reason I haven't shown up recently is that I didn't think anyone wanted to celebrate."

"Well, maybe you were right," Jen sighed. "But I want to this year. I'm happy Kevin'll be back and Vicky's getting old enough to enjoy holidays."

"I want to see Vicky get mashed potatoes all over her face and see you cope with cooking a turkey." He smiled at her. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Oh no." Jen shook her head. "We have new rules. The visitors bring the turkey."

"There's a joke I could make now, but it's too obvious," he said.

"Actually, never mind. If I insisted on that, you'd just make poor Mrs. Beale fix it, wouldn't you?"

"Well, she is my housekeeper. I bet she cooks a great turkey. I could ask her."

"You make her suffer enough. I wouldn't demand that of her as well," Jen told him, loftily. "I don't know why she has stayed with you all these years."

Jack's smile softened. Ida Beale had been the housekeeper at his place since he was a boy. She had probably stayed with him for longer periods of time than both his parents put together.

"I don't know why she puts up with me, either. She probably enjoys the chance to scold me." He toyed with the fork on the table.

"Maybe I'll invite her over for Thanksgiving instead, seeing as she can cook," Jen said.

"Ah, and speaking of cooking, here's dinner."

Dinner was wonderful. Dessert was wonderful. Jennifer declined his offer of dancing afterward, being mindful of her high heels and the fact that they both had work tomorrow. Besides, with the look Jack had in his eyes—well, she was probably imagining things, but perhaps dancing wouldn't be prudent.

They strolled out to the parking lot with Jack holding her arm very correctly. His parents may not have been wonderful human beings, but they did manage to teach him wonderful manners. If the warmth of his hand, pressed firmly on her skin, felt a little too good, that was her problem.

The valet pulled up in a small Volvo. It wasn't new, but it was just as shiny as the latest model.

"Thanks." Jack tipped him.

Jen looked at him and said, incredulously, "Jack, how much've you had to drink? This isn't your Lexus."

"Happy birthday, Jen." He looked at her, a little defiantly. "Hope you enjoy your twenty-sixth."

Jen blinked. Suspicion formed. She blinked again.

"What is that?" she began.



"Your birthday present. OK, so it isn't midnight and your birthday yet. Sue me," he said.

"Who got me this?"

"I did. Cee Cee and Molly chipped in. Kevin sent some money also." His voice was very even.

"Why do you think I would accept such—such an expensive present?"

"We can get to the where and how questions later, Reporter Jen," Jack retorted. "But the why is easy. You need a new car."

"Do you really expect me to believe my kid brother and sisters actually could afford to put any real money into this? I know who paid for this and Jack, I can't accept a present like this from you." Jen glared at him.

"Don't you like it?" he coaxed, holding out the keys.

"Of course. That isn't the point. The point is—"

"The point is that you had a piece of junk. Maybe you want to risk your life, but what about Vicky? Don't you remember your parents died in a car accident? This is a good, safe car, damn it." Jack moved closer to her.

"Don't try to out-argue me, you—you lawyer." Jen reached to push him further away.

"The point is—" He looked down and felt something crack inside him. She looked so fierce and so vulnerable with her lips trembling and eyes blazing. "The point is I want to give this to you and—oh, to hell with the point."

Jack bent down to do what he'd told himself would never happen. That long-kept promise crumpled up and blew away when Jen's face turned up to his, as if she craved the same thing he did.

Her breath caught as their lips met. That caught breath let her lips part long enough for him to slide his tongue inside. To explore the sweetness of her mouth for just a

moment. He wanted that. He needed that. How long had it been since he first imagined what she would feel like?

Too long.

She tasted just the way he'd fantasized. Better.

He might've handled it, kept things light and exploratory, pretended he just meant to keep her quiet a moment...but their tongues met. Oh. God. She didn't turn from him.

She should've slapped his face. Shook her head. Stepped back. He would've stopped with just a gesture from her.

Instead she made a small sound in the back of her throat. She trembled.

Maybe she was afraid.

Maybe she liked it.

He couldn't help himself. Jack found himself pulling her closer. Yes. He wanted her closer. He wanted to be inside her. He wanted to consume her.

He might not know what Jennifer meant by letting the kiss go on, but he knew what he felt. He'd been angry with her. Furious. But now the fury was being overwhelmed by the way he always felt, deep down, around her.

Her fingers closed around his shoulders. She wasn't pushing him away. Oh God, *yes*.

He was hungry. Starving. He was turning into fire and she wasn't stopping him.

The kiss only took seconds to ignite. Punishing, passionate. Fierce.

Sweet, powerful, drugging...

Amazing.

Perfect.

He could feel a trickle of sweat crawl down his back. He was hard. Harder than he could ever remember being. Jen was soft. He wanted—

The old protective instincts fought one last time before he went up in flames. The rich desire sweeping over him was almost overwhelming, but he'd been careful too long. His last remaining sane thought shrieked a warning.

*Wrong.*

This was all wrong.

He stepped back fast, before he stopped thinking again.

"Take the keys, Jen," he said. "Damn it, you *will* accept this. Take it for Vicky, if not for yourself."

Jen shook her head a little. What had happened?

After a kiss like that, to have him go back to the argument without missing a beat was disorienting. She couldn't even speak for a moment while he stood in front of her, unaffected.

"No," she told him at last.

Thank God she could remember what was going on. Remember and get angry.

"Yes."

She got up as close to nose to nose with him as she could—thank heaven she was wearing her highest heels—and very distinctly told him, "No."

"I towed your old car," Jack answered. "You'll have no transportation if you don't take it. My staff needs to come in on time. You can't rely on public transportation if you need to leave late."

"I rarely stay late." Jen's words were spaced evenly. She could hear ice forced out with each one.

For just a minute she could understand all the fearful respect he got at the firm from everyone else. He was ruthless when he wanted something.

Well, too bad!

"I'm the boss, honey." He crossed his arms. "You stay late if I say so or you're out of a job."

"So I take the car or lose my job? Who are you? The King of Siam?" Jen raged, the ice gone now, melted with the heat of her fury. "This is the most irrational, most illogical, most ruthless bit of maneuvering I've ever seen anyone try to do to me."

"I'll do what it takes to get you to accept that car," Jack said. "You know I've wanted you out of that heap you owned for years. It was junk when you had it in graduate school. It's worse now."

"You'll do what? Fire me, force me into submission by kissing me? Or would you try seducing me into agreement? I wonder."

"Is that an invitation? I'd love to take you up on that." He growled out the words from low in his throat and she saw his eyes shift down to her breasts. His hands bit into her shoulders as he pulled her near. They were so close that Jen suddenly realized he was aroused. She could feel him, hard and potent underneath that elegant suit. "Do you think I wouldn't? Couldn't?"

They looked at each other and Jen swallowed.

She'd never seen Jack quite like this. Angry, aroused, domineering. She wasn't sure how to respond.

Of course he had known how she would react to this all the while he had been playing charming host and all the while she had been enjoying herself, unprepared. Jen mentally took a step back and rethought what to do.

"Of course I believe you could, Jack," she said, quietly. "You're a very accomplished seducer. I've seen you at work for years. But you wouldn't. Not to me. Maybe we should stop being angry and work out a compromise."

"What do you have in mind?"

He wasn't backing off, even though they both knew, both could feel his aroused body pressed against her.

Was this some crazy plan on his part to win his argument? Whatever it was, her knees felt about ready to buckle. Steady. Maybe there was just a little too much passion here. They were both losing sight of the argument. Reason could work. Reason almost always worked with Jack.

"I'll take it on loan, Jack," she told him. "Since you were so kind as to get rid of my only other method of transportation, I'll have to accept. But I'll ask Accounting to take ten percent of my paycheck and transfer it to you every payday until I've paid you back."

"You want the entire firm to start wondering what the hell kind of blackmail I am into?" Jack stared at her. "Fine. If you must, you can pay me personally when you get your paycheck. Damn you."

*Gotcha.* Jen smiled. It meant less pay for her but he was going to accept her terms.

"Deal," she responded, coolly. "You can stop looming over me now. Pig."

But she said it without as much heat. Getting the better of Jack in anything he set his mind to do—and he seemed willing to use any method to win this time—was rare. He didn't move immediately as he looked down at her.

"Deal." He frowned. "Mule."

*Gotcha.* He had authority to issue up to an annual ten percent raise for his subordinates when and how he saw fit—any more was a matter for the firm to decide. But what he could decide, he would. Ms. Turner was about to get her annual raise next week.

And she was right to try using that reasonable tone of voice on him. They needed to use reason. If he didn't back off now he might do something really stupid, like fall to his knees in front of her.

He didn't even want to think about what he might do with her in that position.

Jack stepped back and, in a courtly gesture, offered her the car keys. They smiled at each other, relieved the crisis was over and suddenly mutually amused.

"I'm afraid this means you'll have to drive home," he told her. "Luckily you drank less wine than I did."

"Get in the car, Jack." Jennifer clicked open the car door locks. "You're right. You obviously have had too much to drink. Since you're very concerned with vehicular safety as I can tell, we'll pick up your car tomorrow."

"Delighted, Ms. Turner." He moved toward the passenger side. "I just love having some big, strong woman take charge of me."

"I suppose you say that to all the girls," Jen murmured as she opened the car doors.

"Every single one," he agreed and folded himself into the passenger's side. "Go on. Take me home, baby. All the way home."

"You really are a pig, Jack." She then turned to kiss him squarely on the mouth. In gratitude, of course. "But such a sweet one."

He moved toward her. For just a minute she thought something more would happen and her breath stopped. Then he relaxed back into his seat and smiled.

"Just for you, Jen," he said. "I don't have to buy cars for all my women. You can be the exception."

She laughed and gunned the engine.

"You're definitely over being mad, aren't you?" He looked at her, slyly. "I mean, the girls told me what kind of car you had said you wanted. I did think about what you'd like. Right, Jen?"

"I wonder how fast a Volvo can go?" she taunted.

"Not as fast a Lexus, kid, so don't even think about trying to beat me to work," Jack said.

"So that's your nefarious plot?" She nodded. "Preparing to dock my pay because I come in late?"

"Don't think I won't." He smiled again. "Now try it out, Jen. I know you want to."

Jen drove sedately out of the parking lot and then let the tires squeal just a little bit.

"Jack, last night when the girls were talking about my birthday, you acted surprised," Jen remembered suddenly. "Did you actually arrange this all in one day?"

"Honey, guess what? I'm a lawyer."

"I've heard rumors to that effect."

"You know what lawyers are?"

"What?"

"They're sneaky, conniving sons of bitches. Do you really think I would forget your birthday? We had this worked out for weeks. Cee Cee made the overseas call to Kevin. They all really did contribute to the car, Jen. To the whole scheme. The girls and I went out to the car lots to check out the best car for you. Molly drove the car here tonight and took a taxi home. Of course I masterminded the whole thing."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time I think I can trust you."

"You do that, Jen. You do that. Remember that I can't be trusted an inch. Not an inch."

"Jack, despite this being a sneaky thing to do, I really love you."

"I know, hon."

"Now hang on tight. We'll see how fast a Volvo can go."

"Hey, you weren't supposed to use this thing as a racecar!"

Laughing like a maniac, she stepped on the gas and the car sped off into the night.

When she came home, still chuckling a little, she saw Molly was waiting up for her. Jen paused to make a face at her little sister.

"Things are OK, then?" Molly asked.

"Jack and I yelled at each other some, but yeah. You shouldn't have done it, you know."

"We know. Vicky is safe in bed. Good-night." Molly exited hastily.

Jen smiled as she climbed the stairs, but she could feel the loneliness start again. This was her birthday. People started thinking about what they'd done with their life so far on their birthdays. She wasn't where she had planned to be by now.

Jen felt the tears begin to slip down her cheeks as she shut the bedroom door. She let out a slow breath. Now she had done it.

*It was night in the rain forest. The man who lay on the blankets on the rough floor opened his eyes.*

*It'd been a dream. There'd been an airport and someone crying. Someone he cared about.*

*Once again his mind fumbled. He saw the tears on her face. She was crying about her parents. Yes, her parents. There was something wrong with them. He could see her explaining the problem to him but he couldn't hear the words.*

*Then he heard his voice echoing in his head.*

*Jen, I love you.*

*Yes, her name was Jen and she was crying and she was beautiful and he loved her.*

*Then, suddenly, miraculously, he heard her voice in his head, replying.*

*Victor, I love you, too—*

*His body jerked, so abruptly that it jarred his leg. The pain made him grunt. It had finally happened. He had a name again. His name was Victor.*

*His name was Victor and he had spoken English to her with an American accent. He knew he could speak Spanish, because he had been able to make himself understood to the rubber tappers who housed him, but he had known his accent was not theirs. He knew part of it was that they were in a remote region and their Spanish was mixed with a much more native tongue.*



*Now he knew the other reasons. He was able to speak Spanish but English also came easily to him. His Spanish came from a different country entirely.*

*His name was Victor, he was from the United States of America and his woman's name was Jen.*

*It wasn't much to remember after all this time. He wasn't even precisely sure how long it had been, since he had been out for so long after the accident and the rubber tappers were not exactly forthcoming with their information. Pieces had been coming back for months now but this was the first useful information he had remembered.*

*The gnawing worry in his gut, the worry he had refused to admit until it was now eased, subsided so abruptly that he almost jerked again. The remembered pain of the last time he moved kept his body still. It was going to be all right.*

*He had a home, he had a name—even if the last name eluded him for the moment—and he had a woman waiting for him. He was going to figure out how the hell to get back to where he came from. Even if it all didn't seem quite real to him yet, he knew that the images in his head came from a real place and time.*

*He just needed to wait it out a little longer. He was suddenly sure it was going to happen. He was going to get back. He wasn't going to be trapped here forever, wondering why he was here and who he was. It might take a while—he remembered he was near the Amazon but he wasn't even entirely sure what country he had landed in.*

*It seemed to be a rubber plantation on the very edge of the very isolated rain forest. It wouldn't be easy to get to an airplane and home. But he was that much closer to managing it now that his memory was returning. He pulled up the blankets and went back to sleep.*

*Maybe if he kept dreaming he'd be able to remember more.*

Jen woke up with a start. Oh God. The dreams were changing. Instead of the same one, over and over, about the airport, the dream had continued. Now she was imagining Victor alive. Of course he could be alive. He could be remembering who he was right now.

It seemed so real. She could feel his thoughts, see him in the jungle, desperately trying to remember his name, to remember her.

But she must be wrong. She must be so out of touch with reality she was creating a new one for herself. That meant she had to do something.

She'd only been pretending to herself all this time. Move on? She hadn't moved on. She was still fantasizing about her high school boyfriend, only now her fantasies had become dangerous.

She had to do more. Push herself to do more than just dream.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jennifer Turner, are you sure?" Molly asked. "What's he like?"

"Please. You don't have to make it sound as if it's impossible." Jennifer was vaguely annoyed. "I'm not that unattractive."

"Two dates with two men in one week? Jennifer, I don't think you've ever done that in your life," Cee Cee pointed out.

She probably hadn't. The only "date" she'd ever had, or at least the only one she could remember that ever mattered, was Victor.

"I don't think Jack counts as a date." Jennifer dismissed the idea.

"A lot of other women would count him as a date," Cee Cee told her.

"Yeah, but I know Jack. I really want to know about this new guy." Molly wasn't going to be diverted. "I can't believe you're going to go out with someone you haven't known since high school."

"Yeah, well maybe she needs to go out with someone she hasn't known since high school. You know, like a normal person." Cee Cee gave the words her most sarcastic twist.

"Will you two be quiet!" Jennifer snapped. "I'm nervous enough as it is. His name is James. James Wystall. He's an attorney."

"Well, that figures." Cee Cee rolled her eyes. "Who else would Jennifer meet? She never goes anywhere but to work."

"Is he at your firm?" Molly asked.

"No, of course not. Our firm has a policy against employees dating each other. People have been fired for doing it. James' firm has a lot of work with our firm and we got to know each other while he and Jack deposited the same people. Anyhow, when I mentioned it was my birthday, he invited me out for drinks. It's all very simple. Got it?"

"Sure. I just never figured you would," Cee Cee muttered.

"Shut up." Jennifer responded with as much dignity as she could.

Truthfully, she wondered if she would have even noticed James, much less accepted his invitation, if it hadn't been for her night out with Jack. The undertones of that evening had left her disturbed. She felt a little itchy. Achy.

If she could imagine making love with Jack after all these years, she must be ready to go out and meet a member of the opposite sex. Damn that kiss. She couldn't stop thinking about how good it had felt. It had been two years since she last had made love and she was now frustratingly aware of how much she missed sex. Not, of course, that she planned to immediately try anything with James. But maybe it was time for her to make a fresh start into the whole man-woman jungle.

"So what is this guy like?" Molly asked again.

"Well, he's a little older—"

"Forty? Fifty?"

"Probably around thirty-five or forty, I guess. He's in good shape, OK? Not heavy, umm, about medium height."

"Balding?"

"N—no. Not really."

"Receding hair?"

"Maybe a little."

"Receding chin?"

"No! Now stop it, you two! I won't have you grilling him like—like annoying little sisters when he comes to pick me up tonight. He is a pleasant man who invited me out for a pleasant night out at the Kennedy Center and that is all you two need to know. In fact, I'm starting to wonder if you needed to know that."

"What're you going to wear?" Cee Cee asked next.

"I suppose I'll wear what I did with Jack this week. Everyone seemed to think that looked good," Jennifer thought out loud.

"It might be too good for someone we don't know about." Her sister scowled. "Jack can handle it. I don't know if this guy can."

With that bit of help and encouragement, Jen decided it was no wonder she was so nervous when it came time for James to pick her up. The girls had spirited Vicky off since they explained there was no need to spring a baby daughter on a first date. Jen hesitated, then agreed. Otherwise that could involve explanations that she had no intention of making so soon. Still, it made her feel odd.

He arrived promptly. That shouldn't have been any surprise, but at the sound of the doorbell Jen almost dropped the perfume bottle she had been holding while she tried to decide if she should put that particular scent on.

She heard one of her sisters answer the door. Jen made a face. Now her sisters would be in position to ask questions of the man before he even got in the door. She put the bottle down and hastened down the stairs.

James Wystall stood as she walked in the room. He smiled at her while he did. She relaxed. Everything was fine. Cecilia sat in the room, looking demure, as James bent to pick up his coat.

"It's a little chilly out," he said. "Let me help you on with your coat."

He said good-bye very nicely to Cecilia as they left. Jen thanked him as he opened the door for her. She told herself firmly, once again, that she was going to have a very pleasant, very grown-up evening with him. Very, very pleasant.

It was probably the knowing look on Cecilia's face that made Jen's heart drop as they left the front door.

Jen walked into the house, her head throbbing and her mouth hurting from the fixed smile she'd had on her face throughout the evening. She opened the door as quietly as possible, then stopped. The light in the living room wasn't on just to guide her in. Her sisters were sitting up and—oh horrors! Jack was there, too.

"Well?" Molly looked at her, expectantly.

"We had a bite to eat at a very nice restaurant in the city and the play was very well done," Jen said evenly, refusing to meet anyone's eyes.

"And?" Cee Cee prompted.

"And then he brought me home." Jen turned away. "Here, let me take these shoes off. My feet are killing me."

She kicked them off, still refusing to meet anyone's eyes. The silence spread for a long moment. Jennifer idly fingered the flower arrangement she had put up on the coffee table. No one said anything still. She looked up.

"We talked about his job. We talked about my job. We talked about politics. He talked about golf. Eventually we stopped talking and went outside the Kennedy Center to see the view from the plaza. It was spectacular. He kissed me there—once, very lightly on the lips—since there were other people around. He asked me out again. I said I'd think about it."

"And will you?" Cee Cee asked.

"I doubt it. There, does that sum it all up for you?"

"I could have told you that whole scenario the second I looked at him." Cee Cee looked smug. "The man didn't have an interesting bone in his body. No sexiness at all. Face it, Jen, you're used to better."

"Stop it." Jen was suddenly close to tears. "I had to try, didn't I? What I was used to before doesn't count."

"I'll go make some tea." Molly moved away, sensing danger.

"And bring some aspirin." Jen held her forehead. "I can't stay up late at night any more. It just kills me."

"I'll go get it," Cee Cee moved quickly.

Jen wheeled to look at Jack, who was still sitting quietly in the easy chair.

"Well, why did you have to check my date out?" For a moment the anger at seeing him here almost drove out the headache. "You know James. I suppose you'll claim you knew how it would turn out."

"Hey, Jen, I'm sorry you didn't get lucky tonight," Jack said, almost quoting her words back to her. "Hearing the post-mortem on the date almost gave me the chills. It makes me wonder what women tell their friends and sisters after I drop them off."

He stood up, his hands in his back pockets, smiling. The smile didn't quite reach his eyes however.

"I was here because I needed to see you were all right," he told her. "I thought I knew how you would react to Wystall. I was more concerned how he would react to you. You're a very sexy lady. I'm glad you're starting to poke your head up out of the sand and take a look around at the world. But you need to start picking better men to go out with. You could do better."

"I appreciate your advice." Jen got the words out through her teeth.

"Now me, I wouldn't care if there were other people around if I wanted to kiss you." He stood there and watched at her. "You'd just have to give me a look—one look—and

I'd kiss you witless. I might not stop there, depending on the situation. But then I don't consider myself boring."

"No, you aren't boring. Sometimes you are boorish, however." Jen snapped the words out.

"Oh, I think I've been quite gentlemanly with you, Jen." Jack took a step closer to her. "When we went out, I was very restrained, wasn't I? I took my cues from you."

Why was she feeling more sparks than mere anger would create? Jen knew what the tingling awareness meant. It tightened her breasts. It weakened her knees.

Damn celibacy. She was finally losing her self-control. But why now? Why Jack?

"We quarreled in the middle of a parking lot," Jen reminded him.

"That was much more restrained than what I wanted to do with you." Jack looked grim.

"You did kiss me, Jack."

"I stopped. Don't I get points for stopping?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jen said, crossly, and turned when Molly came with the tea and aspirin. "Thank you, Molly. I thought I was going to die from this headache."

"No, damn it, I don't suppose you do yet." Jack retreated a few steps. "That means, I'm afraid, that it's time for me to go home."

"Good-night, Jack."

"Sweet dreams, Jen."

Jen gave a bitter laugh. If only he knew!

Cecilia came into the room, hesitantly, standing close to Molly as Jack left. The two of them looked at her, suddenly big-eyed and looking about as young as Vicky. The worst was that she wasn't sure if that was how they felt or they had decided to pretend to feel that way. Jen gulped her aspirin and sighed.

"You have something more to discuss?" Jen asked.

"I'm sorry, Sis," Cecilia said. "We're both sorry. You just—well, we aren't used to having you go off on dates and changing things. I guess it kind of shook us up a little. You've been really great to us when we try stuff out and like, well, when I go out with guys. We weren't very nice to you."

"Well, I guess it was an experiment for all of us." Jen could feel the headache fading just a little bit with the words. "It's too bad it didn't work out, but that's what an experiment is for."

"I think you should experiment more with someone else," Molly told her.

"I suppose I'll have to, if I ever want to get the hang of this dating thing." Jen smiled, ruefully. "It may be more trouble than it's worth."

"No, I mean one particular someone else. I think you should go out with Jack."

Jen saw Cee Cee's elbow graze Molly's ribs.

"Yeah, right." Jen laughed a little. "I think I should go out with a guy I've been friends with ever since high school, too. Friends are all we have ever been for years now. I think we should leave Jack alone."

"What's wrong with him? He's handsome, he's funny, he's rich, he certainly is sexy." Molly stepped away from her sister's prodding and glared at her. "Just stop it, Cee Cee."

"He is my boss, he was Victor's best friend and we have no interest in each other," Jen said, firmly. "I think those are plenty of good reasons. Besides, Jack deserves better than having me experiment on him, too. And much better than having two pesky little sisters prying into his love life."

"He wouldn't mind," Molly muttered and took another hasty step away from her middle sister.

"Well, I would. Enough." Jen stood up. "It has been a very long evening and I'm ready for bed."

"Well, it could've been worse." Cecilia was thoughtful. "You could've had old James in it."



Jen took a pillow from the couch and threw it at her. All of them started to laugh.

Then Jen walked up the stairs and to her daughter's crib. Vicky was sleeping, looking as angelic as a sleeping toddler could. Jen very lightly touched her dark hair. Vicky looked so beautiful and so much like her father, just as intense asleep as awake.

What was she doing, dating men she hardly knew and hiding her daughter from them? The whole thing was ridiculous anyhow. She didn't have time to meet some man, much less get to know him well enough to tell him the story of her crazy life.

Jen heard upraised voices below her and wondered what the girls were arguing about now. Cee Cee had certainly been trying to tell Molly something. Oh well, it hardly mattered. She would find out soon enough if it was important.

"Anyhow, baby, I know you're the important thing." Jen whispered to her little girl. "There's nothing else in the whole world as important."

## Chapter Two

Jen thought about it while she put together files the next day. Routine had gotten her through a lot. But routine wasn't everything. She was ready for a change in her life. Being willing—or desperate—enough to go out with James proved it.

But Victor had spoiled her for most men. If she had to hold out for another man like Victor, she was in for a long wait. Then again, as long as she was having these insane dreams about Victor being alive and thinking of her, she just might not be ready to see other people.

Going out with men wasn't the only thing in the world, though. She needed to do something besides work and stay home or else—

"I'll go nuts." Jen said the words aloud, realizing the truth for the first time. "This just isn't enough for me."

"Those files aren't enough?" Laura asked in surprise, looking up from the receptionist's desk. "They look like plenty to me."

"No, I wasn't thinking about that," Jen answered. "It was something else. Laura, I need some excitement."

"Don't we all." Laura nodded.

"I need to do something more than what I am doing." Jen tapped her fingers on the desk. "I'm just not sure what it should be yet. Maybe I should go back to trying my hand at some journalism. I used to be good at that about a million years ago."

"Well, that may spell excitement for you." Laura shook her head. "Personally I need a new man in my life. That's my kind of excitement."

"I can't make one ride up and sweep me off my feet." Jen sighed. "I need to do something I know I can handle on my own. Maybe I should take a few classes at night to work on finishing up my degree. Maybe I should go and try to work on getting a law degree."

"Oh, now that's a thrill." Laura was at her most sarcastic now. "Hey, I know! I just read about this in the newspaper today. Look!"

She got the newspaper and opened it to an inside page.

"They're running a contest for a columnist-for-a-day," Laura said. "Your dad used to write columns, didn't he? I bet it's in the blood. You could do it, too."

"Hmmm." Jen stared down at the newspaper thoughtfully. "It's an idea. And it's something different to try."

"I'd try some of the personal ads in the newspaper first." Laura shrugged. "But you aren't me. We all get our kicks where we can find 'em, I suppose."

Jack walked in just in time to hear Jen say, thoughtfully, "Maybe I should cut my hair. That would be something different."

She looked up and saw his face and began to laugh.

"No. Bad idea," he responded, promptly. "Very, very bad idea."

Laura registered Jack's return and responded by hastily grabbed some files that had been sitting at her desk for hours and walking toward the file room down the hall.

"I thought I might look—well, sexier," Jen ventured. "Cee Cee's haircut definitely does things for her."

"Cee Cee is Cee Cee," Jack told her. "You're plenty sexy with your hair the way it is."

Just for the fun of teasing him, Jen continued, "But I've had it this way ever since junior high school."

"And you've looked great ever since then," Jack said. "Take it from someone who saw you then and now."

"All right, all right." Jen gave in. "Could I dye it? Just a little bit?"

"I'd have to set the police on you before you did that." Jack looked solemn. "Maybe slap a restraining order on you."

"I guess it will have to be the body piercing then."

Jen snickered when he clutched his heart.

"This is Mrs. Jamieson," the voice said on the other end of the line. "I want to speak to Mr. Logan. Immediately."

Didn't she always? Jen stifled a sigh and looked over at Laura, who had switched the call over to her. Laura rolled her eyes.

"What I don't need is to be transferred from one subordinate to another. I hired a lawyer and I expect to speak to him, " the woman snapped.

"I am so sorry, ma'am." Jennifer gave it her most polished effort. "Mr. Logan's in a meeting right now."

"When will he be done?"

"Not for several hours," Jen told her. "Can I take a message or help you in any way?"

"When he's done I expect him to call and arrange a meeting with me. If he doesn't, I'll call again until he does."

Jennifer almost made a face but she heard a strange catch to the older woman's imperious tone. Jennifer hesitated. Jack's client had caused a lot of talk when, after her first, decades-long marriage, she had immediately married Charles Jamieson. Charles was probably fifteen years younger. Maybe she had a right to a little shakiness now that her second marriage was ending in less than a year.

The gossip, which she had ignored by going out frequently and very publicly with her new husband, was going to be vindicated. Nancy Jamieson wasn't an easy woman, but there were plenty of nasty rumors about Charles, too. Maybe she could actually feel some hurt.

"I'll leave him that message, ma'am." Jen began to write on the message pad.

"Do. I don't want to have to waste my time again."

Jen clicked the phone down and looked at Laura again. Laura threw her hands up and began to laugh.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She kept laughing. "I know I should've dealt with her myself but she scares me. I could've laid money on her calling today, too."

"Oh?"

"I guess you don't read the gossip columns much," Laura said. "There is a nice little story there about Charles escorting some female who is probably half his wife's age to a charity ball. Mrs. Jamieson is probably ready to add a little tar and feathering to the divorce settlement."

"Well, she ought to do all right in the deal." Jen finished writing. "She brought a lot of money into the marriage."

"I'm sure Charlie will get his share," Laura said. "But I bet Mrs. Jamieson wants back every dime. With interest."

Jen shrugged and put up the message for Jack. It wasn't enough that he was going to court in a few days on a complicated tax transaction for another client. Now he had to placate Mrs. Jamieson, too.

Just then Jack strolled in.

"Lucky you." Jen held out the message.

Jack read it and shook his head.

"I bought you a little time—I said you would be gone for several hours," she told him.

"Naw. Might as well get it over with." He let out a sigh. "Call and arrange some time in the afternoon for her to stop by. Jen, I want you in the conference room with us."

Jen nodded. She usually was there anyhow, but she had seen some of the looks Nancy Jamieson had been giving Jack. Charles Jamieson wasn't the only younger man she could be interested in.

That afternoon, as arranged, Mrs. Jamieson came, dressed in sunglasses and a demure peach suit that looked as expensive as it probably was. She didn't acknowledge Jen or Laura as she swept into the adjoining conference room. Jen grabbed her notebook while Laura buzzed Jack.

The older woman had her back to them both as she looked out the window. Jack shut the door behind him.

"I don't want her here," Mrs. Jamieson said, curtly, without a glance Jen's way.

"I'm afraid Ms. Turner must stay," Jack answered. "She is my employee and will keep everything you say in complete confidence."

The woman sighed.

"As you wish."

She turned abruptly. Jennifer choked off a gasp. Although she was carefully made up and her hair was artfully done, with her sunglasses off anyone could tell Nancy Jamieson had a vicious-looking black eye.

There was a short silence.

"Your husband did this?" Jack said in a neutral tone.

"Yes. Foolishly, I allowed him into the house last night. I knew better." She ran her finger up and down one temple of the sunglasses. "He seemed quiet enough but that changed very quickly."

"Then he's done this before?" Jack asked.

"Yes. Of course," she responded. "I—need to sit down. This isn't an easy thing to discuss. What do you need to know?"

"Why don't we start from the beginning." Jack was all business. "Tell me what you can. Do you need any water?"

"No. I can do this."

Jennifer jerked her attention to her notebook and began to write down the list of abuse Nancy Jamieson recited in a detached voice. There had been other black eyes and bruises—never enough to go to the hospital, never often enough to be completely expected. She didn't falter once in her recital. When she finished, she looked at Jack, and she once again seemed her usual impatient self.

"Well," Jack said. "My sympathy, Mrs. Jamieson."

"Sympathy wasn't all I wanted." She frowned. "I decided to tell you for a more specific reason."

"You think it will win you points for your settlement?"

"Won't it?" she asked, turning back to the window. "No, don't answer. I know the answer already. Perhaps. But perhaps the judge will wonder why I so conveniently brought it up now. It could be a trick."

"It could." Jack was honest. "If it helps, I don't think you would say this for that reason. You don't like looking a victim."

"No. No, I don't. I prefer to have others think twice before they cross me. This doesn't help that image."

"So why have you discussed it?"

"That girl. The one Charlie is seeing. He says he wants to marry her."

"Yes."

"She's the age I was when I married my first husband. I had no idea what I was going into then. Of course I had no idea what I was getting into with this husband, either. I remember once being grateful we had no children. He might've abused them. But she could have children. He says he wants them, you know. It would be—" The clipped voice wavered again. "It would be wrong to not let her know."

"And how do you want her to know?"

"I want to press criminal charges this time and put it in the court records," Nancy Jamieson said. "The girl might not believe me if I told her myself. But there's something

very hard to ignore about a report like that in black and white. Besides, if I just told her—even if she did believe me—Charles wants children. There are other young women. This would let them all know what to expect."

Jack began to talk about counseling but Jen knew that the other woman wasn't listening.

Jen swallowed as she looked at Nancy Jamieson. The woman suddenly turned and looked directly at her.

"I loved Charlie for a long time," she told Jen. "Hell of a thing, love. It lets you hurt yourself so horribly. You never know if you are choosing the right thing or not."

The rest of the day was equally awful. Between helping to report the abuse to the police and the frantic scramble to prepare for court, Jack asked her to stay late.

He shooed her out to get some take-out at the nearest Chinese restaurant somewhere around nine o'clock when both of them realized they were almost cross-eyed from fatigue and hunger.

They ate the food in relative silence.

Jen finally asked, "Do you believe her, Jack? She sounded so honest, but she can be so manipulative."

Jack didn't look up from his chopsticks. He neatly tucked rice into his mouth and swallowed before replying.

"I've seen women lie about their ex-husbands abusing their children and themselves. I've seen them lie about them not abusing the family. Hell, Jen, it happened to me," Jack said.

"Your parents abused—"

"Not physically. Sometimes things got very ugly verbally, not that either of them would admit to what they had done to themselves or to me with their words." Jack shut his eyes and opened them again. "But that isn't what I meant. My mother did try to



suggest my father was an unfit parent and that he knocked me around a little. I remember having to testify about that in court. God knows why she said he was unfit in that way. She could have picked almost anything else he'd done. He was unfit to be a parent. So was she. Unfortunately it wasn't as if there was anyone else who could take care of me instead."

For just a moment Jen remembered the gawky little boy who had lived next door to her. The one with the desolate eyes. She remembered her mother and father murmuring in another room about him. *Total disregard for a child. What is wrong with those parents?* She had been only five or so, but she remembered.

Jen put her hand out to him. They gripped for a moment. Then he smiled and slid his hand away.

"But Mrs. Jamieson—"

"She didn't lie," Jack said. "But I wouldn't swear to it."

"Then again you won't have to. You'll just tell the judge that it's so." Jen gave a cynical smile. "It doesn't matter what you really think, does it?"

"Exactly. The situation is for the judge to decide. I'm glad I'm not the one who has to. God, why does anyone think being a divorce lawyer is worth it?"

He sagged against the couch. She picked up the food cartons and tossed them into the trash.

"It's hard to help untangle people's legal problems when there is—was—love involved. Emotions can make things pretty messy. You did a good job today." She took a closer look at him. He was drawn. Tired. "Here, let me help you relax."

She massaged his shoulders. His knotted neck muscles gradually began to loosen under her touch. She looked down at the unfastened tie and undone buttons. She glimpsed the hair on his chest. She smelled his scent. She felt the smoothness of his skin under her hands.

His eyes were half-closed as she kneaded his shoulders. He sighed and let his head droop.

"Bless you, sweetheart," he got out in a drowsy tone.

She sighed, too. Jen gave a little half-smile as she kneaded his flesh. Jack had very nice muscles. She remembered what her sisters had said. Jen hated to admit it, but they were right. Jack was one sexy male. Even she could understand that. It was fortunate that they were just friends. It would be so complicated if she let herself fantasize about anything more.

Her hands slowed. She could feel the heat from his body. It felt so good to touch—

What if she undressed him? Touched him the way she used to touch a man? She could imagine stroking down from his shoulders to his chest, to his stomach. She could imagine feeling his muscles bunch and quiver under her hands. She could even imagine slipping her hands down slowly, teasingly to his cock and watching it jump under her caress. She would watch as the cum dripped slowly, tantalizingly, from that sensitive opening—

Jen realized her hands had gone from a simple massage to long, lingering strokes against Jack's neck and hair. He had such beautiful hair. It clung to her fingers...

Jen stopped. She was caressing him, for heaven's sake, without even thinking about it. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

Then she realized Jack's body was no longer relaxed. She looked down and swallowed. He'd noticed, all right. She could tell how very unrelaxed his body had become. Good Lord, his cock was big. Jen couldn't keep from staring at his crotch. She still had her hands in his hair.

This was embarrassing.

She needed to laugh and apologize. No, she shouldn't laugh. There certainly wasn't anything to snicker about. Jack's body was beautiful.

Jen cleared her throat. She'd say she hadn't been thinking, that it had been an emotionally and physically draining day and one moment she was thinking about heading for home and peace and the next—

Then it hit. Everything. Jen's hands began to shake.

She stared at him. The flame-red hair tickling against her fingers. His sensual lips and strong chin. His broad shoulders. His long legs. That hard-on. Her eyes kept coming back to that erection.

Her breath caught. Every sense in her body was alert and screaming. Screaming for him. For this man who lay so quietly under her touch. For Jack.

All this time, he was the one who had backed her up, been there for her. She'd known the things he did for her. She'd known how attractive he was to other women.

The jokes they had laughed over together about how he was the most eligible lawyer in the building came back to her. But she hadn't seen it for herself—hadn't seen how his blue eyes could look right into a woman's soul, how the muscles rippled in his back and chest and how his mouth could—She hadn't let herself see it. She wanted him. She *really* wanted him.

Oh God. This was Jack. It was just...

"Jack?" She couldn't stop the word.

What did she look like, staring at him like she had never seen him before? No, worse than that, like she was some kind of teenage groupie who—She snatched her hands away from him.

His head turned and he stared up at her. It took one moment. Two moments. God, his eyes were so beautiful. So questioning. She knew exactly when it dawned how in lust she was with him.

Within two seconds he turned from being a drop-dead gorgeous, drop-dead tired attorney into a man with his entire attention focused on her.

His eyes narrowed as they looked at her, just at her. His face hardened, became predatory. Hungry.

"Jen."

Even his voice sounded different. More dangerous. More exciting.

She couldn't think what to say. What could you say to someone you had known your whole life but whom you had just found out could look, could be—Jen forced her hands away from his body.

What should she do?

She put her hand out to him. What if he...no, he wouldn't laugh, he was too nice to laugh, but what if—

Her mouth was dry. The words wouldn't form.

*I want you.*

She didn't say that, but now he was doing the talking.

"Jen—do you remember when I told you that you'd just have to give me a look and I would kiss you witless?" Jack's voice was as unsteady as her legs.

"Yes."

"And I told you I might not stop there, depending on the situation?"

"Yes."

"Honey, have we got ourselves that situation now? I want to believe we do but I'm not going to do anything you don't want...or...Jen, I'm not misunderstanding this, am I?" His eyes were very blue. She had never seen his eyes so blue.

She could stop things now.

"No, Jack. You're not misunderstanding anything." She had thought she would sound nervous but she didn't. She sounded very sure. "Jack, how about I kiss you witless instead?"

She leaned over and kissed him. It started off gently. Jack hadn't kissed her often before this, but when he did, it had been something like this.

She sighed at the gentleness. Sweet. So sweet.

But she didn't need sweet right now. She was dying for something more.

Jen ruthlessly made their kiss less gentle, and less gentle yet. Her tongue touched his, urgently, begged silently for more. Her fingers clawed suddenly, sharply at his shoulders.

More. *More!* Hotter, harder, faster.

She couldn't quite believe what she was telling Jack with the kiss, what she was telling herself with the kiss.

Jack was the one who ended it, but she didn't have time to wonder why before he tucked her tightly against his body. He kissed her neck, caressed her shoulders. His caresses felt so nice. They felt so right. She felt so right with him.

Jen twisted to get even closer.

"Jen, I want to fuck you bad. I—I can't tell you the way I should tell you—"

"Don't tell me anything, Jack. Not right now. Just go ahead and fuck me."

Then her reliable, nice buddy, her considerate boss, became something else. She was suddenly backed up against the couch. Before she had a chance to do anything she was flat on her back and pressed against the cushions.

Her breath stopped. His hands were under her skirt without any more finesse than the teenager she felt like. It didn't matter. Jen felt herself getting wet and hot without any more than a touch of his fingers. Her hips jerked up, begging for more. Then her panties were gone and she saw him unzip his pants and jerk them down.

She whimpered. Had she whimpered before, for Victor? She couldn't remember. She couldn't remember him, she couldn't think, she couldn't breathe. It was Jack who was hard and very, very close to her.

"Is this OK?" Jack's voice cracked.

She looked at him again. It was Jack. Jack with his eyes gleaming into hers, with a sheen of sweat slicking his face. She didn't recognize this Jack, but it had to be him.

"Yes," she whispered. "Better than OK."

Without any more words, he was inside her. He was stretching her, filling her. It had been so long that his cock hurt at first. God, he wasn't even in completely and she was wondering if she could handle this much, this fast.

Jack paused momentarily when she shifted uncomfortably beneath him.

"Jen, you're so tight. You feel so damned good. Nothing ever felt so good. I'm going to try to make it good for you, too, but, God, Jen, I want you." His hands ripped at her shirt and then his mouth was close to her breast. "Tell me if it hurts you. I'll stop if it does. Even if it kills me."

She tried to tell him touching her breasts didn't work for her, never had, but his teeth gently bit down on one nipple. She jerked forward like fire had touched her. Both nipples tightened under his now soothing tongue. Maybe she had been wrong before.

She couldn't talk, but her muscles tensed throughout her body and her fingers burrowed under his shirt, digging into his back. She could hear his hoarse breathing. He moved slowly, slowly into her wet, stretched channel. She writhed and groaned but not from the pain. Both of them knew it wasn't pain.

Finally he was all the way in. It didn't hurt at all by then. Far from it.

She whimpered again and bucked. He groaned and then began to move, slowly, carefully. She moved her legs over him and dug her heels into his back. Heat was shimmering through her but it wasn't quite enough. She had to make him move. She just had to.

She heard him say something to her, but she couldn't recognize the words. Maybe it was because his voice was choking or maybe it was because the blood pulsing all the way up to her head was making her hearing, sight, all her senses shut down to concentrate on her one hot, shimmering need.

She writhed. She gasped.

"Jack, hurry," she finally managed to say clearly. "*Faster.*"

The moment she said the words, he thrust into her. Faster. Harder. Rougher. She screamed. Yes. She was so close! She was going to go insane if she didn't—if he didn't—

He moved harder, uncontrollably, and, suddenly, she tightened, convulsed, screamed again, just as he groaned and collapsed onto her.

Later—she wasn't sure just how much later—she found herself propped up next to him on the couch while he stroked her shoulders. Her breathing had settled down, her heartbeat was almost normal. She felt amazingly good. Good heaven, she'd needed this. She'd been horny without Victor but she hadn't let herself realize just how horny and lonely and needy she was.

Sex was a wonderful thing.

Jen blinked sleepily at him as he spoke in a low voice, not looking at her.

"I pictured in my mind a million ways I was going to handle this, if it ever happened in this century."

He touched her jaw.

"Was this way in that picture?" Jen smiled. She couldn't help but smile.

"I told myself I'd be inside you in two seconds if you so much as looked at me as if you wanted it but I think I filed that away under a wet dream fantasy." He put his face next to her neck to bite it. "I honestly thought I would have a little more control."

"What a filing system." Jen squirmed a little. "Are you blushing, counselor?"

"I also sort of expected to have all our clothes off before we came," he muttered.

"You *are* blushing," she said.

She squirmed, more deliberately, against his body.

Jack looked directly at her then.

"Shut up and let me do it right this time," he told her. "I can make it even better."

"It was just fine last time," she assured him. "But don't let me stop you."

He took her at her word. His mouth was on hers, his fingers on her body, stroking her legs, her stomach, her pussy...then he stopped.

Jen bit off a whimper of frustration. Who would have thought Jack could be such a tease?

"Jen, we're in my office." He looked up, staring as if he had just realized this fact. "The door—thank God, at least it's closed but—Jen, you've made me crazy. It's not locked."

"Oh." She tried to care.

"We should get to my place."

"It's right next to mine," she reminded him. "Everyone at home will know what we're do-"

Her eyes began to glaze over as his fingers touched her again, as if he couldn't help but touch. Those fingers were shaking.

"OK," she managed. "In a minute. Just keep on doing that for a—minute. Jack!"

She ran her fingers down that long, lean torso. She didn't stop until she rested them on his thighs. Then she turned her palm to cup his balls.

"I don't care if the whole cleaning crew comes in to applaud," he said, "But I think we could get a lot more comfortable if- Jen, don't. I can't think when you do that. Oh, hell."

She saw his eyes half shut as she squeezed again. He had gotten so hard, so fast. But then he hadn't really felt anything but hard all this time, even after he had pumped into her. Had she done that to him?

She wanted to purr. She damn well had done that.

"I want to touch you, too, Jack," she whispered. "Don't make me wait. I love seeing you get bigger."

"Jen, no!" He half-groaned, half-laughed. "Wait. Just let me get you—hon, hang on."

"No!" she laughed, too, but her fingers tightened again.



"Damn, Jen, if you don't stop I won't do any better than last- Jen, wait!" Suddenly he moved. "Jen, here, let me give you something to tide you over."

He moved her hand firmly away and put his own hands on her, stroking her, exciting her, spreading her apart with his fingers. She felt heat licking through her again and she sensed more than saw him kneel between her legs. She was wet. Soaking.

"Here you go," he said.

She felt like she would levitate when his tongue brushed her clit.

"Jack, I haven't—we haven't—I haven't even cleaned up from last time," she muttered.

"Shut up, Jen. I don't care. Trust me, this isn't my usual style. None of this is my usual style but I can taste you and me together and—" His tongue was dancing on her again. "God, you taste good."

She wanted to scream but Jack's warning vaguely ran through her head. The door was closed but they were in his office and—she tried desperately to swallow the noise of her loud cries.

"Oh, no," Jack's voice rumbled. "Don't hold back on me. Not ever again."

His teeth nibbled and she had to cry out. His mouth and tongue knew what to do to drive her insane. It felt like last time. Better than last time even as the tension became unbearable. Finally she heard her own cries. His fingers thrust into her pussy and she moaned. She soared, fast, blazing hot, into orbit.

When the haze cleared from her eyes, she saw Jack grinning at her.

His eyes, however, were glittering again.

"Now let's get out of here. Maybe we can make it to the car before I get into you again." He stood up. "Damn it, maybe not. Hurry!"

"If I can walk." Jen tried to smile, too, but her legs began to shake. She couldn't button her clothes up properly. Her fingers didn't want to respond.

"Oh to hell with what people might say." Jack scooped her up and carried her, laughing, into the car. She half-expected more—at least a kiss or a smile—but he didn't look at her as he started the engine.

Jennifer wasn't sure if she admired his self-control or wanted to hit him for his ability to keep away from her. Despite everything they'd already done, she was desperate for him. So desperate that she clutched hard at the car seat to keep from grabbing at him. She'd been without a man for a long time. Now he'd turned her into a sex maniac.

They drove a mile or two before he suddenly pulled into a deserted parking lot.

"Jen." Jack's voice was very gentle.

"Yes?"

"Call me an asshole if you want—"

"Gladly."

"Funny. Call me anything you want after I ask this question but answer it first." He forced her to look at him as he spoke. "Jen, why?"

She could have evaded the question for a little while at least, but she knew he would get an answer from her one way or another. She swallowed.

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not—I feel like I've fallen over and hit my head and haven't come out of shock yet, Jack. Yesterday I swear I wasn't even thinking of you like that. At least I don't think so. I must have been on some level, I know, but I—This is all overwhelming to me. Why did *you*?"

She asked the question flippantly, but she saw his eyes and swallowed again. She wasn't sure now she was ready for the response.

"Jen, before I answer that I need to remind you of something I swear I just thought of myself." He let out a breath of air. "I didn't protect myself or you. Did you use anything?"

She opened her mouth, shut it again. What an idiot she was. She'd done it again. OK, she hadn't been thinking of having sex with anyone until about an hour or so ago, but what idiot let herself in for all the problems she had faced for the past two years because she forgot. A second time.

She shook her head.

He sighed, just a little, once again.

"No, of course not. Jen, no matter what, I'm not sorry about this. I'm going to be with you again and again for as long as you want me. Hell, for as long as you let me. I'm not even sure how much you want me right now—"

"Jack, I—"

How much she wanted him? Just a universe of want.

"Jen, let me get this out fast before we start anything more. I need to be honest with you. God, I hope you'll understand."

"There's nothing you could say that I wouldn't understand."

"I hope so. First, Jen, I swear I'll take care of protection next time, but I was out of my head. I can't remember when I ever—hell, I've *never* been like that before. Honest to God, Jen, you're my own personally addictive drug. I can't think straight right now except that I know I'm not leaving you. You'll have to throw me out and get an armed guard to keep me away from you. Do you understand me? I'm not Victor—"

"I know that."

"I hope you do. The second thing is, I love Victor, maybe almost as much as you loved—love—him. But I saw you first. I wanted you first."

"What? Jack, I've been Victor's since—I can't remember when I wasn't his girl..."

"I can." His face set hard as he ground out the words. "*And I wanted you before that.* I wanted you when I figured someone would shoot me if they knew I thought that way about anyone your age. Hell, someone should've shot me. I wanted you about the time I figured out you were a girl and had started to grow breasts."

"Jack, you're kidding me."

"Do you remember when my parents finally decided I could be released from boarding school—my mother was living here with someone from the German embassy that year—and I entered high school? We hadn't seen each other in years. You walked over to say hello and boom! I thought I would swallow my tongue."

Jen remembered the adolescent who had refused to meet her eyes at first and mumbled a greeting to her. She knew he had been all over Europe and had been disappointed, since she had imagined a more sophisticated image. She certainly hadn't thought he was thinking—

"A kid's crush—"

"Jennifer."

"Yes?"

"I'm older than you. OK, not by much, or it doesn't mean as much now that we're older, but I think I've wanted you like a man wants a woman ever since I was old enough to know why I get hard. That isn't refined or elegant or what you should hear, but it's the truth. I kept telling myself you were like my baby sister and I should keep away." His hand touched her jaw, traced up to her ear lobe. Then he pulled his hand away, as if afraid to keep touching.

"Baby sister? Jack!"

"By the time I figured out that Victor wasn't keeping away and he didn't see you as a baby sister, I'd long since missed any chance of you. I wanted you to be happy but then you weren't and I wasn't sure what to do. I knew I couldn't do what I wanted, because you didn't even see me as a man. But I wanted you like one."

"Jack, you've had all those women—" Jen shook her head, as if to clear it.

"Who have I had, babe? List 'em for me."

"My God, there was Sarah and Kaye and, um, Michelle and that redhead—Barbara—Liz—and, well, I don't know all of them! For a while there they were in and out of your house like a parade."

Jack started the car again before he said, "You don't know how glad I am that you at least noticed. Jen, how long did I stay with any of them?"

"Well, you stayed with Kaye about six months."

"She was the longest, Jen. Tell me about Kaye."

"Jack, this is weird. Why do I have to—OK, I liked Kaye. Maybe I wouldn't like her as much right now if you were with her," she saw his smile and briefly smiled, too, "but she was nice. We could've been friends. She and I had a lot in common..."

"Yes, Jen. What did she look like?"

"Jack! Oh, all right. She had brown hair and eyes and was about as tall as I was and—Jack, I really don't like where this is going...She sort of looked like me."

"You looked alike enough to be sisters." Jack's voice was slurred, almost as if he was drunk. It was probably fortunate they rolled into his driveway then since Jen wasn't sure she could trust his driving ability. "I liked Kaye, too. But I knew what was going on and then Kaye figured it out when she got to know you well enough. She was you, Jen. She was the closest I could get to you. I don't know how to make it plainer. I've always had this—this thing for you. I probably always will. Now, maybe I should be a little more noble and make sure Victor's out of your system for good, but I'm not. I can't be. I mean it when I say you're goin' to have to kick me out and then set up a shotgun for me if you ever want out because I'll be back. You'd probably have to kill me to keep me away. Now that I've had you, Jen, you're goin' to be mine as much as I am yours."

He held out his hand to her.

"Come with me, Jen."

She hesitated. He wasn't inviting her in for tea and they both knew it. All she had to do was turn and walk next door to say no.

Instead she took his hand and followed him.

Now what? she wanted to wail. She'd been Victor's and thought he had been hers. Then there was nothing. Jack wasn't even saying he loved her. He said he got hard because of her and had stayed that way, if she could believe him—and she wanted to—for over a decade.

His obsession could have sounded creepy, but it was getting her hot again, hot enough to walk in his door. Right now the only thing that was important was feeling his hand leading her through the darkened rooms.

Neither of them said anything but neither of them paused. Maybe he couldn't speak. She knew she couldn't. If they stopped for just a moment she would immediately attack him, wherever they were. They walked up the stairs. Lord, how much longer would it take?

She wondered if feeling this way was wrong. Some people would think so. It certainly made her stupid. What if she was pregnant? What of the future? She had a little girl to think of. She had her own sanity to think of.

And she wasn't even able to be properly upset because at last she was inside, in bed and Jack was on top of her again.

"Thank God we made it to the house." He reached his hand out blindly to the bureau near the bed.

He held to his word, she had to admit, as she began to writhe under him. Somehow he got the condom on without much help on her part. She was so far gone she knew the risks and still she just wanted him inside her. Now. No matter what or how or—

"Forget what happens later. Get in me *now*," she heard herself saying.

His hard cock slid into her. She moaned. How did it keep getting better? How could she keep wanting him even more?

"Done, Jen. Good as done."

Despite his words, for a moment he simply rested his weight on his elbows, not moving. Jennifer opened her eyes.

"What?"

"What indeed? What do you want, Jen? It's dawned on me that you haven't told me what you like. I'm not usually this selfish." Jack grinned at her, that grin contradicting the humble words.

He knew damn well that whatever he did, she liked. Jen frowned. She didn't want to say what she wanted. Somehow that made her—

Oh, damn. Of course she was participating. But she didn't want to admit it. She wanted Jack to keep seducing her. Instead that delicious cock of his slowly, slowly slid out of her.

"You aren't usually shy about saying what you want, Jen."

Did Jack know?

"This is different." Jen swallowed. "I can't."

"Can you show me?" Jack kissed her neck and she relaxed. "Yes, of course you can."

He pulled away her rumpled shirt and let his lips move down her shoulders and almost to her breasts. He paused again. She could feel his tongue lift up under her bra cup and taste her areole.

"Naw. You wouldn't like that." He turned his head and spoke gravely.

Her nipple was already hard. What was he talking about? Oh. Realization dawned.

"You—you tease!" Jen tried not to pant. "Of course I do."

"Gentle?" He barely traced the nipple with his tongue's tip. Jen purred. "Harder?"

He sucked the nipple in, the pressure suddenly forceful and urgent. Jen moaned and her hand moved, almost involuntarily, to bury itself into his hair and hold tight. He stopped again and Jen tried to catch her breath.

"I guess I like it both ways. Maybe you should try again with the other side." Jen tried to sound as serious as he did. "Just to be sure."

"Good idea."

He was still hard. She could feel his cock rubbing up against her as he made his way down her body, testing all the erogenous spots she had. She whimpered, she laughed and pleaded, but he kept going, slowly, deliberately.

"I love your skin, Jen." Jack stroked from waist to hip. Jen let out a soft breath. Why would his touch there make her excited? But it did. Anything he did made her quiver. "It's so soft. So pretty."

She felt the rasp of his chin as he rubbed his face against her stomach. She squirmed. Well, if he was going to tease and touch—She deliberately rubbed her wet pussy in a slow circle against his shoulders and upper chest. Those muscles were hard, too, though not exactly what she wanted.

"Mmmm," was all Jack said in response, but she felt the whiskered rasp slide down. His tongue paused to worry at her pubic curls.

"You're a monster! *Please*, Jack. I need you."

"Where?" The word reverberated against her clit.

"I need your tongue or your cock or *anything* inside me. Please, *please*, Jack. I need you a hundred time more than when you told me it was good as done." Jen could hear her voice crack.

"Well, you're even more done now, aren't you?" The words were amused, but his voice was as shaky as hers.

This time, when his cock finally, finally slid back to where it belonged, Jen wound her legs around his body and clung, just to make sure it stayed there. They were sweaty and Jen would have sworn he couldn't, hard as he was, make things last much longer.

He didn't need to. She came the moment he began to thrust.

But he didn't stop. She climaxed and tried to catch her breath, only to realize that Jack had managed to work up a good, steady rhythm with each movement, one where his penis slid sweetly against her clit with each stroke.



She started to climb right back up toward orgasm. How did Jack know, with just one careful exploration of her body, exactly what would make her endlessly come? She slipped against him, her body was so slicked with sweat. She forced her lungs to get air.

Oh hell. Air was overrated anyhow. Jen could feel herself reaching the edge where she was about to freefall into an even sharper orgasm than before.

No. Not without Jack. Not this time.

Jen clawed at his back and then bit his shoulder. She felt his cock swelling harder inside her. She dug harder into his skin and he gasped. Yes. She wanted him needing as much as she needed, desperate as she was, completed when she was complete.

"Come with me!" she demanded. "I want you to come!"

They hurtled into blinding pleasure together.

### Chapter Three

Jen's eyes opened slowly. It wasn't the alarm clock she heard as she had sleepily thought. It was the telephone.

She lifted her head and nearly jumped when she saw a man sit up next to her and grab the phone's receiver. His voice rumbled into the phone. She knew that voice.

Jack.

She put her head back down on the pillow. No wonder she was so tired. So sore. No wonder she felt so good. How could she have forgotten anything, even though she had been exhausted? She was in Jack's bedroom. Next to Jack.

His hand came down and absently caressed her shoulder as he spoke. She was so tired that she almost drifted right back to sleep under that comforting touch. Then she heard the sharpness in Jack's tone and jolted back awake.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me that in the first place?" he snapped. "Yes, of course I'll come down, Lisa. I can make time for an emergency. I'll call when I have the reservations."

"Jack, what time is it? What's wrong?" Jen sat up, the sheet dropping from her body.

She pulled it back up as he glanced down at her. She saw the white gleam of his teeth in the dark as he grinned.

"You got something to hide there, hon?"

"I guess not." Jen slowly put the sheet down, thinking back about what they had been doing for almost the whole night.

"It's about two o'clock in the morning, Jen. That was my stepmother. After pussyfooting around, she finally deigned to tell me that she was calling from the hospital. My father had a heart attack."

The words had no particular emotion in them.

"A serious one?"

"It doesn't seem that way. But my father wants me to come down as soon as possible. It has finally occurred to him that he may not live forever. He wants me to handle a few legal issues—not that I could be his lawyer, of course. But I can review what he has in mind and sign for some things."

"Oh. I'll be—sorry to see you gone. Oh my God! I need to get back to my house anyhow. The girls will be ready to call the police." She'd never forgotten about them or her Vicky. Never before this.

"I called your sisters already." Jack sounded as though his mind wasn't on his words. "While you were asleep."

"Oh." Jen pondered the explanations she would have to make. It would be worse in some ways than trying to tell her parents.

"Jen, come with me. Please."

"Me?" Jen gaped at him. "But—well, I guess the boss would understand but—well, there is Vicky—and—"

"Bring her, too." Jack got up from the bed and began to pace. "I'd appreciate it if you came along. Both of you. Really. And, no, not just because I'm dying to keep my grubby hands on you for the weekend, although that has a real big appeal as well."

Jen thought about Jack's bitter words during her birthday.

*It boggles my mind that I have brothers and sisters who are a little older than Vicky. And Daddy seems to fear I might have too much in common with his wife, who is a lot closer to my age.*

Perhaps she should go. It would help Jack, who hated going to Texas to his family and—even more importantly—it might show Mike Logan and Lisa that Jack was interested in someone besides his stepmother. After all, Jen now had a vested interest in this man.

Jack stopped his pacing, turned to smile at her as she stared at him. His worried expression changed as he smiled. A slow and sexy smile. When he walked back to the bed and leaned over, she was reminded of a panther on the hunt.

Jen kissed Jack's ear. As he began to nuzzle her throat, she blinked. A vested interest? Did she have one? Well, she must. Why else would she have made love with him—three, no four, well now it looked like it would be five times in a little more than five hours? It was just that her brain seemed to have clicked off of any rational thought. All she really wanted was to keep on making love and ignore anything else. Jack was a wonderful lover. She hadn't even imagined some of the things they had done together and she and Victor had certainly managed—No. She wouldn't think about that. She would concentrate on what Jack was doing. Jack made it very difficult to do anything else.

Her bite marks were on his shoulder. His hands were on her. Jack was already making her wet as he just brushed her breasts lightly. Her body knew exactly what was coming next and was begging for more.

"You know how to keep a girl from feeling awkward when she wakes up the morning after," Jen managed to say, lightly. She wasn't feeling awkward at all. She was on fire. Her legs shifted restlessly. His hands moved to touch the insides of her thighs. She gasped.

"The only thing I want you to feel the morning after is me," he growled and proceeded to demonstrate as he stroked her nipples. Oh God. All she could feel was him. That and hot anticipation. "Besides, I need to prepare myself for the rest of the morning. Maybe we can have some foreplay on the plane under a blanket, but I foresee a hell of a lot of frustration until we touch ground. Hours and hours of frustration."

"I haven't said I'll go."

"You are going to be there with me, aren't you, Jen?"

"I don't know—"

His voice was suddenly a little strained and tight. "You aren't regretting this, are you?"

"Jack, I don't know how I feel about this except that I know I enjoyed myself very, very much last night."

"Then you are coming, right?" His fingers were reaching further up her legs, up her thighs, up to the pubic hair. They slid inside her, touched her swollen, slick clitoris. Greedily, she clenched those fingers tight. She shuddered. Jack had found his way to all her most sensitive nerve endings last night and he hadn't forgotten any of them.

"I think I am—this morning and right now." Her voice cracked on the last two words. "I can't say no."

"That's damn straight," he growled, as he spread her legs, spreading them wide across his shoulders.

One finger. Two fingers. Jen arched up, desperately, as he slid them up high inside her.

"Oh God, *yes*."

"Yes, what?" His fingers eased back, just a little. Grazed her sensitive clit again and then danced more deliberately against it. Shocks scattered through her sensitized body, from the clit outward.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming!"

Which was how Jen found herself on a plane taxiing out of Reagan National early that afternoon, holding a wildly excited toddler with one arm and—well, she hoped a wildly excited male on the other. She was glad she didn't have to explain anything at the office, since it was the weekend and Jack made it clear they would not stay at his

father's ranch for long. She hoped that what they had been doing in the office the night before wasn't clear to the cleaning crew, since she hadn't had a chance to go back and tidy up as she had half-decided to do before she found out she was leaving. Was that being paranoid? She figured it probably was.

Leaving so abruptly had made her explanations mercifully brief for Molly and Cee Cee as well. Beyond the simple truth that she had been at Jack's and telling where she and Vicky intended to go in the next few hours, she hadn't had time to say much more. The girls' faces promised more questions were coming, but they all scrambled to put together a suitable wardrobe for a weekend with a Texas oilman and his family. Jennifer had only seen Lisa once or twice in her life, but she remembered that casual was not Lisa's style.

Jack had picked up Victoria and put her on his lap as the plane lifted off, giving her a pacifier to soothe her sobbing and her sore eardrums. He leaned over the armrest and gave Jen a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Sleep while you can, hon," he soothed. "I know you didn't get much last night. It won't do to face the family in a weakened condition."

Jen smiled, would have protested, then yawned. Maybe he was right. Perhaps she could nap a little. She was asleep in minutes, her head against his shoulder, feeling vaguely soothed and protected even in her slumber. Funny, she hadn't been on a plane since—well, since before Victor died. Somehow she had thought she would be terrified. Maybe it was because Jack felt so comforting that she could sleep. If there was any terror lurking, exhaustion chased it away.

*Jen, I love you...*

She woke up, breathing hard, disoriented. For a moment she almost remembered what she'd dreamed. What was it? Then Jen's eyes focused on the people next to her and her uneasiness disappeared.

Vicky remained asleep, slack-jawed, on Jack's lap. Jack, however, was awake. He touched Jen's hair, briefly, when he saw Jen staring at him.

"More rested now?" he asked.

"Much, thanks." She leaned over to him and whispered, "I'm sorry we had to take a rain check on the foreplay under the blanket, though."

"There's still the ride back," he pointed out. "I'll hold it under advisement."

Jack held Vicky and most of the carry-on luggage as they left the plane. Jen, who had struggled to get places with an increasingly heavy and lively toddler in tow, marveled at how simple it was to transport her daughter with some masculine strength to help.

"Miguel will be meeting us," Jack said.

"And Miguel is—?"

"The ranch foreman. My dad actually has some aspirations about keeping the place a working ranch." Jack began to scan the faces in the crowd. "Fortunately he bought it as a hobby. Cattle ranching is a risky venture."

"That was after he sold his oil business and did his stint in Congress?" Jen asked.

"Dad has lots of hobbies." Jack shrugged. "Come to think of it, I suppose the ranch must make money. All his previous hobbies have done well for him."

What was she doing with this man, Jen wondered as Jack picked Miguel out of the crowd and introduced them. She was a middle-class woman-in fact, middle-class was too lofty a term for how she lived now that her parents were dead. She had only moved in next door to Jack because her parents had bought in the right neighborhood at the right time. But when she was with Jack she forgot the amount of money his family had. That was either a tribute to Jack or showed her amazing stupidity. It should be hard to forget that someone came from millions of dollars.

She wondered uneasily whether the clothes she had borrowed from Cee Cee were going to be enough to maintain the illusion that she and Jack belonged together. She had a feeling Lisa, at least, wasn't going to be fooled.

It took a while to drive to the ranch gates. Jack kept his arm around her but said little until they reached the entrance. Then he looked at her, smiled, and gave her a hard kiss. She shivered.

"Don't turn tail on me just because Lisa's a snob and my old man's an S.O.B., huh?" he murmured. "I need you here."

That was a comforting thought. It remained her sole comfort as they arrived in time to see the nanny bring down Jack's little brother and sister—he had been accurate enough about their ages so that Vicky was easily absorbed into the nanny's routine and taken away for luncheon.

Lisa was exactly the way Jen remembered. Jen's chin went up when she saw Lisa surveying Vicky and her.

Let Lisa think what she wanted about Jack being with someone who had a child already, a child who had a lot of the same features as most of her servants. As long as Lisa stayed quiet, Jen would be quiet, too.

Jack excused himself after lunch and went to visit his father in the hospital. Jen noticed that Lisa didn't rush to visit, too, but since both of them were saying as little as possible to each other, Jen decided she could keep on staying quiet only if she was out of the house and well away from Lisa.

"I believe I'd like to swim, if you don't mind," Jen said. "Jack mentioned a pool."

"Yes, of course." Lisa graciously gave permission the way any lady of the manor should. "I believe Rachel has unpacked your things by now. Shall I show you to your room?"

"Yes, thanks." Jen tried to sound gracious, too.

"So tell me more about yourself, Jennifer. I believe you are Jack's—secretary—"



"Legal assistant," Jen said through her teeth.

"It must be so fascinating to work with a lawyer. I had toyed with the idea of going to law school myself before Mike and I met," Lisa said, without missing a beat. "I'm sure you find it a benefit to work with so many interesting men."

"There are a number of interesting women lawyers there as well." Jen worked hard to keep her voice clear of any emotion. "Yes, I'm fortunate to be able to work. It's nice to be able to feel useful, don't you think?"

"Certainly." Lisa didn't sound as if it was any work at all to keep the emotion out of her voice. "Your room is here. One of the servants will be happy to tell you where the pool is. I'm rather busy at the moment."

Meow, Jen thought. That was a catty exchange—and could still be seen as polite on the surface. Well, if Lisa thought of her as a desperate secretary on the look out for a man, so what? Calling Lisa useless in turn was only fair.

The pool was a refreshing change from Lisa. It was huge and lined with Spanish tile. Jen swam leisurely back and forth, before finally floating idly on her back. Maybe living the life of a decorative ornament had more advantages than she thought.

The sound of running footsteps opened her eyes. She had just enough time to see Jack execute a neat dive into the pool before the water hit her.

Laughing, Jen swam toward him, intending to splash back.

Abruptly Jack pulled her against him in the pool. She felt him straining behind his swimming trunks as he rubbed himself against her. Didn't he ever get tired? He seemed to have a teenager's sexual drive and stamina. She wrapped her legs around his hips, her arms around his shoulders and smiled. Why complain? The water lapped over them as they remained together, Jack keeping them chest deep in the pool.

"God, that feels good," he said. "I was beginning to think I wasn't going to get my hands on you for the rest of the day."

"Has seeing your dad been tough?" Jen was concerned. "How is he feeling?"

"He's feeling about as hardheaded as he always has. I don't know about his heart." Jack tried to sound nonchalant and then the concern crept in, too. "His color is off, but he seems alert and strong enough."

Even as he spoke, he continued to rub himself against her. Her lips parted, just a little and he slipped his tongue between them. Jen sighed.

He pulled back from her mouth to look at her closely.

"How're you feeling, baby?" he asked. "I gave you a strenuous workout last night. Are you sore? I know it's been a long while."

"Not too sore," Jen told him, quickly.

He looked skeptical before he changed the subject.

"I love seeing you with your hair undone." He let the long length of wet hair run through his fingers. "You never wear it loose in public any more."

"Not for years," Jen agreed. "It gets in the way."

"That's true," Jack nodded. "I know it'd be all I would think about if you left it undone like that at work. It's too damn sexy."

"My hair? I just pull it back, braid it and forget about it."

"You scared the hell out of me when you started talking about cutting your hair that day."

"Men are so predictable," Jen snorted. "They always want to see women with long hair, no matter how big a pain long hair is or whether they look good in it—"

He moved against her again and she lost track of her conversation. They flowed together in the water, not moving for a long moment, just absorbing each others' need.

Jen was the one who pulled his swim trunks down and then wiggled her swimsuit bottoms lower.

The weightlessness of her body as she shifted against him entranced her. Seeing the drops of water on his eyelashes and being able to raise herself against him to lick them off fascinated her.

The doubts that had settled on her during the visit so far whisked away as Jack nipped her earlobe. She was bewitched and dazzlingly in lust with him, just as she had been last night. She didn't have to think with him nearby. She just had to feel.

He was so beautiful, too. She loved that lean body, the almost hairless chest. She also liked the thin branching of hair from nipples down to his crotch. She traced it right then and felt the muscles tense. She loved to feel his muscles bunching under her fingers, just as she loved to watch him lying spent and relaxed, after they had made love. How did she get so lucky? How could she have missed all this for so long? She dug her nails into his shoulder once, twice, just for an excuse to touch.

Jack slipped easily inside her, as if he was a part of her. He felt so good. His cock was warmth among coolness, hardness against the give of the water. Jen hid her face against his neck, fighting tears, fighting a cry of fulfillment.

This was perfect. She could feel her own heat building.

"Excuse me." Lisa's voice was cooler than the pool water. "Your father is on the telephone. He wanted to speak with you."

Oh God, this was embarrassing.

Jack barely acknowledged her presence as he took the phone from Lisa. With his other hand he kept his grip on Jen, forcing her to remain exactly as she was. He shifted his own body, keeping Jen shielded from sight.

For a moment she tensed, feeling Lisa's eyes on them, then Jen forced herself to relax.

Wasn't this what Jack wanted? It was one of the reasons she had come along with him. Lisa was going to get the idea that Jen had staked her own claim on Lisa's husband's son. Jen lowered her head to Jack's shoulder and felt his hand caress her back briefly again as he spoke on the phone, just as he had early this morning.

So what if she felt totally out of her league today? So what if they'd been caught in the act? Lisa expected her to be embarrassed. The woman had done her best to

intimidate her while Lisa showed off what Jack was used to. Servants, expensive furniture, the life of leisure and wealth.

It didn't matter. None of it. Jack may have come from this, but he wasn't a part of this life. She knew more about how he lived than his family did. And they had chosen each other, at least for now. Jack wasn't ashamed of anything they'd done.

He seemed intent on the phone call but he stayed hard and inside her the whole time. Ashamed? He was proud. Jen tried not to move, but even with their audience she could feel her tits hardening, knew she couldn't stop the small clenching movements of her vaginal walls against Jack's erection.

"I don't really see any reason to do that," Jack sounded bored. "Oh, very well. We'll be there as soon as visiting hours allow."

He handed the telephone back to Lisa with a civil, if curt, "Thank you."

Then he turned his attention back to Jen.

"The old man wants both of us to come visit him this afternoon."

"Of course," Jen agreed, although she was curious. Mike Logan had never wanted to see her before.

"Will you be back for dinner?" Lisa asked, staying exactly where she was.

Jack could be proud of her, her insides could be screaming for more, but Jen was not going any further with an audience. She gave Jack's chest a little push, silently commanding him to stop.

With a small smile at her, Jack eased himself out of Jen, pushed their swimsuits back into place. He took his time, his hands lingering as he smoothed her clothing back into place. Jen wasn't sure why the water didn't sizzle around them.

Lisa cleared her throat but Jen refused to look at the other woman. She was having enough problems calming herself down.

"No, probably we'll eat out." Jack began to pull himself out of the pool.

"I'll let Carmen know." Lisa walked away.

"She sure doesn't care for me, does she?" Jen murmured.

"She probably figures you're in the way. Last time I was here she came sniffing around. Things got a little—problematic." Jack was very careful and lawyerly as he chose his words. "I wasn't interested, but I never handled a situation like that before."

"I'm honored to be your bodyguard," Jen told him. "Especially against her."

"She's a piece of work," Jack said. "So beautiful, so intelligent, and so damned cold. My dad has a talent for finding that kind of woman. My mother isn't much better."

"Speaking of your father—"

"Yes, I know. We need to go visit him now." He leaned down into the pool, pulled one swimsuit strap off of her and kissed the hollow of her shoulder. "You have to make me behave, Jen. I'm starting to think we won't get any privacy during our stay here and I'm getting just a little desperate."

"I'll meet you by the front door." Jen hastily pulled herself out of the water. "Fifteen minutes?"

"Fine. We'll go somewhere casual to eat afterward," Jack called and she felt his eyes following her out of the courtyard.

"Damn it. Damn Lisa and her prying!"

Jack dressed quickly, still feeling Jen's body against him as it had been in the pool. He shut his eyes and fought his arousal. Even the thought of Jen got him harder than he had been in his life.

Lisa had put them in separate bedrooms while he was gone. Bitch. Did she really think she was going to keep him away from Jen for the whole visit? On the other hand he didn't want to embarrass Jen by telling Lisa exactly what to expect if she kept trying these tricks. Jen wasn't used to his stepmother and didn't know what Lisa was capable of. Jen had been uncomfortable enough with the scene at the pool. He didn't want her to feel cheap.

Hell, he just wanted Jen. Now.

He was damn near ready to jack off but he knew that wouldn't be nearly as good as being inside Jennifer. She'd already gotten him addicted to her slick warmth, her muscles tightly clenched on his eager cock. Hell, her being around was the only thing he was glad about during this visit.

He had to have her near him today. If she hadn't flown out with him he would have been sure it was a dream. He'd waited too long to leave after only one night with her.

Now he had a ridiculous urge to show her off. He wanted to strut around with her, to say mine, mine, mine. Damn, being able to feel her body, to see her holding him made him feel not just aroused but proud in an embarrassingly macho way. She was his now. He'd won. Finally.

He took another deep breath. Jen wasn't anyone's possession but—he still wanted to display her as if she was a trophy. He'd be ashamed of himself for the thought if he wasn't so disgustingly proud of getting her.

Jack caught his reflection in the mirror and almost laughed. He was still naked, totally forgetting what he was supposed to be doing, while he thought about Jen. His cock was still hard, too, the way it usually was when he thought about Jen.

He ran a finger down the length of his penis and it twitched upward.

Then his hand squeezed hard at the base of his cock. He could wait, damn it. She'd make this worth waiting for. He wanted to see her here in front of the mirror with him when they both came.

Jack took a breath, ran a comb through his hair. He needed to be presentable. He needed to behave himself. If he didn't keep himself in line he wasn't going to keep her. This was serious for him and he was pretty sure she wouldn't have had sex with him if it wasn't serious for her but-

Was she just as proud to be around him as he was with her?

Even lying flat on a hospital bed, Mike Logan was a large man. He had the same red hair as his son, but Jen saw no other similarities.

His gray eyes were calculating, his smile quick, but not jovial. He looked a little pale, but otherwise reasonably healthy. She tried to remember what he had looked like when she was little, but couldn't. Perhaps he had been home so rarely that she wasn't able to remember.

The huge bouquets of flowers everywhere looked a little out of place next to such a large male, but they reminded her that this was both an important person who people paid respect to and a private room in a hospital. The luxury in the room almost made you forget where you were if you ignored the medical equipment. The monitors next to his bed continued to work at what seemed a steady, reassuring rate. Jen assumed that meant all was as it should be.

"So this is Jennifer," his voice rasped. "I remember your parents, of course."

"Of course," Jennifer echoed. She wondered. Mike Logan struck her as a man who remembered only the people who could help him.

"Lisa told me you had come here with Jack to visit." The man's eyes narrowed on her.

For the first time it occurred to Jen that Jack hadn't told his family that he was bringing two additional guests along. Perhaps Lisa had some reason for coolness—and for what she had undoubtedly been telling her husband.

Jen looked at Jack, startled. Then she remembered that Lisa had had a room waiting for her when they arrived. A separate room. Jack must have at least informed Lisa someone else was coming.

But had Lisa told her husband that? Mike Logan's voice had sounded anything but welcoming. Or was there some other reason he didn't seem to care for her?

"I thought it was time you met Jennifer again," Jack spoke up behind her. "If you remember her family at all, you will remember how important she's always been to me."

He kept his hand on her shoulder.

"It's the first time Jack's bothered to bring a young lady to visit," Mike said. "Let me tell you, I was beginning to wonder about the boy."

Wonder what?

"I can assure you that Jack is completely heterosexual, if that is what you are concerned about, Mr. Logan." Jen heard the words come out of her mouth before she had really thought them out.

For an instant she caught Jack's eye and both of them were tempted to grin.

The big man let out a sudden, barking laugh.

"He damned well better be," he told her. "No, I didn't have any doubts on that score, even though he's damned closemouthed about any ladies."

At that moment a nurse wandered in to check his vital signs. With an annoyed grunt, the man submitted to the inspection and waved her out again.

"No, I've been wondering when the boy would settle down." Mike kept his eyes on Jen. "I hear you have children already."

"One girl."

The man looked her over a moment more and then, wordlessly dismissing her, turned to Jack.

"I've some things I want you to have locked up at the bank. Have Morgan go with you to the safe deposit box tomorrow before you leave. You might as well take some of the stuff in it now. He'll know what I want."

"Very well. Good-night, Dad."

"I hope you are feeling much better soon, Mr. Logan."

"This won't keep me down," the older man assured them. "G'night, both of you. Stop by here before you go in the morning, boy."

As they walked down the corridor, Jen looked at Jack.

"What was that all about?" she asked. "Why the command performance?"



"I expect he wanted to look you over," Jack told her. "Lisa must have given him an earful. Fortunately he tends to listen to her about as often as he listened to my mother. In other words, only when it pleases him."

"And what opinion did he form?" Jen asked.

"I couldn't say. I've only known him all my life," Jack said, cheerfully. "Mike lets you know what he wants you to know exactly when he chooses to tell you. I can tell you more after Morgan and I get whatever it is he wants me to pick up. I think your visit and that are connected. That's just a guess on my part, though. For such a loud man, Dad rarely lets anything slip. Does it matter? I know what I think of you."

"Let's go someplace very casual to eat tonight. Maybe Mexican," Jen decided. "I think I've had it with the lifestyles of the rich and famous for one evening."

"Tacos and beer sound good," Jack agreed. "We can while away the hours avoiding Lisa until dark. Then, at the proper time, we can go back and I can get into bed with you and be improper."

"We have separate rooms, Jack."

"We have doors that let us get in rooms, Jen." Jack kissed her hands suddenly. "I think we've both been damned good sports about this visit. But if I have to wait more than twenty-four hours to get my hands on you again, I will cease being a good sport. You'd hate to see me in a really bad mood."

"Let's go have a beer, Jack, and maybe listen to some songs on a jukebox." She ruffled his hair. "We can discuss it."

"I can assure you we'll do more than discuss it," Jack murmured. "I can be very persuasive when I put my mind to it. In fact, have you heard that people pay me very good money to be persuasive?"

"Really?"

"But this is your lucky day. I've decided to persuade you for free."

Jen laughed.

"I have enjoyed parts of this visit," she told him. "Mostly the parts where I'm with you."

Jack tucked his arm into hers.

"That's how it should be," he assured her.

"Well, if Lisa guards my bedroom door to make sure you don't come in tonight, there's always that blanket on the plane," Jen teased.

"Don't underestimate me, love," Jack said. "I think I can manage both tonight's visit and the plane tomorrow."

As they left the hospital, it occurred to Jen that Jack might never tell her what he was going to pick up the next morning for his father. Then she would never find out Mike Logan's opinion of her.

But at the moment it didn't concern her at all. She knew now, absolutely, that Jack had excellent reasons for avoiding familial visits. She was also supremely grateful that Jack had so little in common with his father.

"Jen? Open the window."

"What?"

"I feel like I'm in some stupid romantic movie here. Open the window."

She finally located where the voice was coming from. The bedroom window? Jen stifled a giggle and fumbled with the latch.

A rose was thrust into her face. Jennifer took it as Jack's legs, then his torso, slid into the bedroom. When his head came into view, she leaned over to peck him on the lips.

"Why the window, Romeo?"

"Because I don't feel like explaining things to Lisa. I swear the woman is probably outside the door, waiting to pounce on me."

"So I'm the bait and you're her prey?"

"Could be." Jack took another rose from his pocket and brushed it against her lips. "Besides, you're pretty enough to be Juliet."

"You're a flatterer, Mr. Logan. But tell me more." Jen was suddenly aware of how sheer her nightgown was.

"Sorry, darling. I'm not a poet. I'm just an ordinary man." With one quick flick, he ripped the nightgown off her.

"Oh!" Jen gasped.

"An ordinary man with a very special woman in front of him." The rose dipped, curved down between her breasts.

She backed up. Jack followed. When the backs of her knees hit the edge of the bed, she fell backwards, silently inviting him to join her.

He said nothing, neither did she. The sound of their breathing seemed to fill her ears, her brain, her heart. He stood before her and the rose traced its way across her stomach. Jack's gaze never left her body.

"I have some scars...from Vicky."

"You're beautiful." The rose tickled between her thighs.

Jen clamped her lips tight shut, trying not to give in so easily. That would make this all end way too soon. But her nerve endings twanged as the petals lightly brushed her thighs.

*I love you.*

She wanted to scream it aloud.

She didn't want to ever say those words to anyone again.

It was sex. She was so used to love and sex always being combined that she was getting confused. The longer this delightful torture continued the more she was going to get mixed up. He got on his knees in front of her and leaned forward.

"Oh, Jack—" she moaned as flower and tongue began to stroke together. "Finish me, please. No teasing. I can't stand any more."

"Oh yes, you can. You're tough. Beautiful and tough and sexy as hell. Scream for me, Jen. I love that."

"Jack—" The strokes, sometimes with the flower, more often his tongue, intensified just enough to make her want to scream, but slow enough to forestall any relief.

She'd die. The gentle teasing would kill her.

"Don't shut your eyes, Jen. Sit up and look at me. I love see your eyes when you come. You're so close, aren't you..."

Jennifer obeyed. Jack's face looked ferocious, his lip curled up in an almost snarl. His control was costing him as well as her.

Why? Why was he holding back from her? She jerked her hips upward and he moved back slightly. She twisted and squirmed and silently demanded. His thrusts slowed even further, became more shallow.

"Damn it, hurry!"

The tip of his tongue circled teasingly in response, just grazing her clit.

Jen wanted to scream. Or cry. Damn it, she wanted to come! Her heart was hammering and she felt like she would break in two if Jack didn't—if he did—She was going to fall apart in a moment no matter what happened. She wanted to fall apart with his cock fully inside her.

"Make me, sweetheart." Jack whispered the words, quite lovingly, against her, the vibrations humming against her nerves. "You know you can."

Jen pulled fiercely on his arms. Jack obeyed her silent urging. When he stood up again, she stroked his penis. It was smooth and hard and hot. She squeezed. Once, twice. She traced the swollen head with a thumbnail. It turned slick with drops of his cum.

"Why don't you scream for me when *you* come?" she invited.

He groaned. One of his arms snaked over, dragged the full-length mirror by the bed to face them.

"I've been imagining—I want to see us—Do that again, Jennifer."

She leaned forward, licked the cum from his penis tip. So salty. So right. She trembled with her own power as his cock thrust forward this time, unable to keep control.

The rose dropped, tumbled past her thigh to the sheets, as he shifted his body to push her down on the bed, his knees bent as he moved over her. She tasted him, absorbed the convulsive shudders under her hands as she held his ass tightly, as she let his cock slide inside her mouth.

"Look at us, Jen."

She watched her reflection arch back to take more of his cock down her throat. She saw his reflection as Jack stared at them both in the mirror.

She watched Jack's real face contort.

"Not yet," he groaned the word this time. "I want us both to come. Together. I want to see us. Oh, my God, Jen. Get on top."

They couldn't wait much longer. She knew it as well as he did. Jen shifted her own body as he rolled them over on the bed and then lifted her up to place her on top. When she straddled him, his fingers pulled her hips down hard on top of him. God, he was strong. She wanted that strength all for her.

Fast and frantic, she rode him. Fast and frantic was what her reflection showed when she stared at her own tortured face, flushed skin, tumbled hair. Fast and frantic was what she heard as his gasps and hers mingled. He was watching her, watching their mirrored images, entangled, fighting against each other and then fighting to stay near.

Sweat and need. Hard, pumping thrusts up and down. His cock filling her as she moved against him.

Pleasure. Pleasure flowing from her and him. She couldn't wait any longer, she couldn't, she couldn't...

"Jen!" The shout sounded like he was dying.

Jen gave a long, satisfied sigh as she collapsed on top of him.

The next morning at breakfast Jen dug into the huevos rancheros with real enthusiasm. For one thing, Jack had depleted her energy last night and for another, they'd be leaving shortly.

Vicky had firmly and loudly refused to be left with the nanny and the other two children this morning, so Jen held her on her lap, shoveling bits of toast in Vicky's mouth. Lisa came in and served herself at the morning buffet.

Jack came in last. He had gone early to finish up his father's business, Jen surmised. Briefly he dropped a kiss on Jen's neck. She remembered the evening before, when he had been much less restrained and then she smiled and dutifully pecked him back.

"All done now?" Jen asked.

"Yes." Jack sat down. "Miguel will be by to get us in another twenty minutes."

"Hurry and eat something then," Jen urged. "Who knows what we'll get on the plane. Much as I've enjoyed flying first class, Jack, the food still leaves a little something to be desired."

"My compliments to the cook." Jack looked up after the first bite.

"I'll convey them." Lisa briefly looked up from her coffee.

"How is your father this morning?" Jen thought she should ask, since Lisa didn't seem inclined to find out.

"Doing better, I think," Jack said. "The doctors expect him to be home again soon."

"I'm glad." Jen gave another glance at the silent Lisa.

"Dad sends his love." Jack left some ambiguity as to just whom the love was being sent to.

At that moment Vicky looked up and beamed at Jack, mouth full of toast.

"Da," she repeated and reached her arms up to Jack. "Da."

Jen's chest tightened when she saw Jack stare at Vicky. There was a long moment where he just looked stunned.

Oh God. He wouldn't say anything to hurt her baby's feelings, would he?

Then he scrambled over to the little girl and held her.

"Sweetheart," Jack said to her softly.

Vicky's hands clung to his neck and her buttery lips formed a big kiss for him. The two of them smiled at each other.

Jen would have burst into tears had she not noticed Lisa's sudden movement at her place at the table. There was pure fury in Lisa's eyes.

*To hell with her. Jack has been the closest thing to a father Vicky ever had and better than most.*

"I guess it's time to go." Jen stood up quickly as Miguel entered the room.

"Bon voyage," Lisa told them.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Jen answered, too sweetly.

She took satisfaction in the sight of Jack leaving with Vicky firmly planted in his arms.

*Eat your heart out, girl. For now at least he's mine. Mine and my baby's. And we both know he'll never be yours. Enjoy your old husband and his money and house. I wouldn't trade with you for anything.*

## Chapter Four

"Hey, Jen! I'm going to take an early lunch break since it's been so quiet this morning," Laura called cheerfully. "The old slave-driver won't be back until another hour or so. Can I grab you something?"

"No, that's OK," Jen responded, absently. "I'll get something when you come back. I really want to finish this up."

"Well, I'll try to get in before Jack so you can scoot out and eat. Once that red-headed devil is back, there is no point in even trying to eat."

"Laura, why are you always so mean about Jack?" Jen still didn't look up as she made her automatic reply to Laura's complaints.

"Jen, just because he is nice to you doesn't mean he isn't a devil and a slave-driver!" Laura shook her head. "You're just lucky that he never snaps at you. And he works both of us like dogs when he's around. You're just a glutton for punishment. You keep it up even when he isn't around."

"Maybe that's why he doesn't snarl at me."

As Laura walked down the hall, Jen worked on the will the previous client had outlined for Jack. It was odd—working for Jack was almost the way it always had been. It was easier when he wasn't in the office, to be sure. When he was around, she could get blindsided by a quick glance from him and have a sudden, crazed urge to jump him right there.

Still, they kept their hands pretty much to themselves at work. She was actually afraid she'd have no self-control if they started anything. But they knew the office policy on dating—if going home to have sex two or three times a night counted as



dating—and had both agreed to keep quiet. Each of them knew who would be asked to resign if anyone found out and Jen needed her job. Her family depended on her paycheck.

She had no intention of living off Jack based on an affair. Not that Jack had offered to have her live off him, live with her or made any other long-term offer at all.

On the other hand, she couldn't give up what she was doing with Jack. Working with him before had been a pleasure. Now being with him at work was a delight. Being with him after work was—was mind-numbingly wonderful.

Mind-numbing was the right word for her time with Jack. Jen felt lost in sensation around him. She couldn't think about what she was doing or its ramifications. All she wanted was to be with Jack, preferably making love.

This had never happened before. Not like this. She didn't even know if she was in love with him—of course she loved him dearly and always had, but what they had together was so intense. It seemed too intense to be real.

Had she felt quite so confused and happy when she had been with Victor? She couldn't compare what she had with Jack with anything else that happened to her before in her life. What she felt, how he reacted to how she felt—it was all too much and yet nothing was enough to satisfy the need. They both seemed to want more from each other constantly. And both of them kept trying to give more.

*We'll probably kill each other in bed some night and die willingly. I never thought I would ever think that about anyone. Was I that sex-starved before or is Jack just that good?*

Once again, just as it did every time Jen tried to think about why or what was happening or its future implications for the two of them, her brain defensively clicked off into a pure daze of longing, lust and delight.

There was no need to analyze it now. She was working after all, she reassured herself, not being paid to think about her sex life. And her brain, soothed, went back to thinking about the law and the demands of her job.

A large man walked to the desk just as Jen punched in the last bit of data she wanted. She looked up. He looked like he was in his thirties or forties, rather heavysset, and hostile. Jen frowned. He looked familiar, but she was sure she had never met him. He got closer.

"Hello, sir." Jen stood up. "I'm sorry. Do you have an appointment with Mr. Logan today, Mr.—"

"Where's Logan?" The man ignored her words.

"He isn't in right now—"

"Then, by God, you'll have to do." The man abruptly grabbed her arms and half-dragged, half-threw her into the conference room.

"What—?" Her wrist hit against a chair as she stumbled.

The man slammed the conference room door shut.

"The name is Jamieson and I want you and your fucking shyster boss to lay off of me and what I do with my private life!" he roared.

Jen backed up behind the conference table.

"Let me explain that better," he said with an open-palmed slap across her face. "My girlfriend just got rid of me because of what got splashed in the goddamned papers about what I did with my wife. My own fucking wife. Maybe I can't get near her right now but I guess I can take care of the bastard who put her up to it."

Jen saw stars. Then she let out a scream. Damn it, someone must be around the firm, even at lunchtime. She ducked another blow.

He was blocking the door—and only exit—from the conference room. She eyed the telephone in the corner. Would she even be able to dial before Jamieson got to her?

Desperate, she scanned the room. A pair of scissors rested on the table. Well, God knew that wasn't much, but she snatched them anyhow. Maybe he could grab them from her or, even if he didn't, maybe she couldn't hurt him much, but anything was better than just standing and being attacked.

Jamieson muttered, something incoherent and angry about women, and started toward her again. She braced herself.

Just to do something, she screamed again. The damned conference room was soundproofed, but she knew people could hear some sound if she was just loud enough. Heaven knows Jamieson was. His thrashing as he moved toward her sounded like an elephant. What was she supposed to do? She had one pitiful weapon, and he was at least one hundred pounds heavier than her.

Where was everyone?

The door was thrown open.

Jack didn't waste much time assessing the situation.

"You're dead, Jamieson!"

Jen had barely had enough time to get air into her lungs from her last scream when she saw Charlie Jamieson go flying backwards into a wall as a furious Jack hurled himself into the older, larger man.

"Get out, Jen," Jack hissed through his teeth as the large man got to his feet and lunged toward this new target.

Jen shrank back when she saw Jamieson pick up a chair and throw it. Jack ducked under the chair and came up with a kick to the stomach. She'd forgotten the years of karate training Jack had had—thank heaven he hadn't.

Jen ran for the reception area and the telephone. The sounds in the conference room were ugly but, mercifully, brief. She dialed the emergency number with trembling fingers.

By the time the police came, Jamieson was slumped in a corner of the conference room.

All the while the police questioned and wrote their reports, Jack held Jen against him. He was dead white, his face drawn tight as if he was in pain. For a little while Jen had thought Jamieson had hurt him, but when she saw the ferocity blazing in his eyes,

she knew it was sheer rage and adrenaline. Jen could feel some of the aftereffects herself—she couldn't seem to stop trembling, much as she hated it. To compensate, she kept her voice very level as she told the police what had happened. After one glance, she refused to meet her former assailant's eyes.

Jack looked her over carefully after the police handcuffed Jamieson and led him out of the office. His gaze missed nothing.

"Are you all right?" he barked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure? You're shaking."

"I'm fine. My wrist just hurts a little, where he grabbed it. It's nothing," she got out.

He looked at it and said no more, but his one hand cradled that wrist very tenderly. He didn't look at her again. Jennifer didn't know what that meant. If he was angry at her for some reason she couldn't care right now. She burrowed against him to help keep herself upright.

When the last officer had left, Jack turned to Laura, back from lunch break at last. She was muttering her distress over and over as she applied ice to Jack's knuckles and Jen's cheek.

He ended Laura's murmurs when he lifted Jen to her feet.

"Jen and I are out of here for the afternoon," was all he said as he walked them out the door.

His arm was still around her waist as they got out into the parking lot.

"Jack, how are you?"

"Don't say anything to me right now, Jennifer." He almost shoved her into his car. "We'll talk when we get home."

His face was set fiercely and he refused to look at her as he drove. Tears began to roll down Jennifer's cheeks.

Was he angry with her? Was Jack blaming her in some way for all this?

They got back to Jack's house in record time. When they got inside Jack's entrance hall, he slammed the door shut.

"What is it, Jack?" she whispered, gathering her courage. She didn't deserve his anger. This wasn't her fault!

Suddenly she was slammed against the door. And Jack was slammed against her. He held her so tightly she could hardly breathe.

"Damn it, I thought I would go out of my mind when I saw him manhandle you," Jack growled. "Are you all right? You're sure?"

Her shirt sleeve ripped apart as he grabbed at her.

"Are you taking off my clothes so you can check?" Jen tried to laugh, but her heart rate accelerated.

He didn't laugh back. He growled as her pants' zipper refused to budge. He yanked it open. She could hear it rip. Her shirt was already half off her shoulders, but he pulled it off further. Despite her surprise and previous upset, she felt a little shiver of excitement. She could tell Jack was way beyond that.

"I'm taking off your clothes because—" His cock slid inside her, hard and urgent. "That is the only way I can tell—you're OK—and with me. *Damn it!*"

It was over almost before it began. He took her up against the wall, and with fierce, almost brutal thrusts, he finished in minutes. She clutched at his shoulders, as sudden desire began to kick in. He kept thrusting, even after he was spent, as if to deny to them both that he was done. But slowly he slid out, despite all his efforts. Jen whimpered, the sudden kick of lust inside her denied fulfillment.

Damn it, he hadn't waited!

When it was over, Jen slid down from her temporary perch on the hall table as he braced himself with his head against the wall, his shoulders heaving. Her breath hissed in and out, too. Jack's head snapped up.

"Jen, did I hurt you?" Jack sounded agonized.

"Only by finishing without me," she said. "It's all right, Jack."

He looked at her, his hands gently smoothing her hair. She relaxed at the gentle touch. It was all right. It was Jack, after all, and he was back again.

His head was against her neck and for a moment she felt trickles of dampness on her skin. Was that sweat or tears?

"Jen, I wanted to kill him, I swear I did," he muttered. "The damned coward. I would have killed him, if the police hadn't shown up."

"Then I'm glad for a lot of reasons that the police did show up when they did." Jen kissed his mouth and tasted the dried blood on his lip. "Jack, are you hurt? Did he do anything to you?"

"I'm fine. Honey, let's go to bed." He was gentle now as he cradled her head. "I'll make it up to you and then we can sleep. I want to feel you near me. Breathing. Alive and safe. "

"Why wouldn't I be? You saved me. My hero." She tried to laugh. She almost managed to make it sound like a joke until her voice caught. "Oh, Jack, thank you. I was—I was just so scared until you took care of it."

"I'll be here for you, Jen, you know that." He looked very reassuring right then. "On the other hand, maybe I better enroll you in some self-defense classes. Just so you can handle things, too."

"Some Mace or whatever it is you're allowed to buy wouldn't hurt either," Jen observed.

They walked to the bedroom. Lovemaking was slow this time. He wanted to know all the places she had been hurt. He kissed the cheek that had started to bruise. He kissed the wrist that was sore from where she had caught herself on the table. He kissed a lot more. The kisses were very tender.

Then he turned her on her stomach and, still caressing her, entered her from behind.

Jen shivered—his hands were everywhere and he felt particularly large in this position.

He felt her tremble.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" he asked. "Nothing hurts? Not feeling scared, are you? Do you need to see me getting inside you? You're shaking and, God knows, I don't want you to be afraid. Not of me."

"N—no. I'm not afraid. I know it's you."

"I like feeling you up this way, honey. I love your ass—then again your legs aren't half-bad and I can feel your breasts this way, too. Mmmm. Feels good. Better yet, if I don't see you, just feel you, I can go a lot slower. Real slow. Sometimes just looking at you gets me a little too eager and not ready to wait, you know that? That can be good. But I shouldn't have done what I did that last time. This time will be good for you. I'm going to make it really special for you. For me, too."

She felt her wetness slicking them both, the warmth there now although she hadn't felt much from his first, desperate encounter. That last time she hadn't had the chance to become completely aroused. This was going to be different. She could feel her excitement growing as he caressed where a flood seemed to beginning. She shivered and felt her muscles contract and grip him. They both moaned.

Still he didn't thrust wildly but continued to murmur and gently ease his way in and out of her until a lingering climax took her almost by surprise. As her climax slowly ebbed, she felt his satisfaction start. That was just right. Just what she needed. She sighed her pleasure. She wanted to feel him shaking with his climax. As he slowly ended, her eyes closed. Even then he didn't withdraw from her body. Instead, he put them both on their sides and kept his arms tight around her.

Still joined together, both of them fell asleep.

She heard screams as she woke up. Even more frightening, she knew the screams had come from her. Her throat felt rasped from the cries. Had she ever screamed this loudly before? It was dusk. She wasn't in the airport or in her own bed. Those were the two places she expected to be after such a vivid flashback. She was—she was in Jack's bedroom.

It had been really bad this time. Jen sat up, shivering, the tears still on her cheeks. She tried to shut down the sobbing and shivering. It shouldn't have been so awful. Things were different this time when she woke up from the dream.

This time there was an arm around her. It felt comforting and her shuddering subsided.

"My God, Jen, what is it?" Jack was wide-awake next to her.

"I have—dreams," Jen said. She realized her voice was hoarse from the screaming. She felt horrible. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Have I been screaming a long time? I'm sorry I woke you."

"I'm not important. Forget me." Jack gripped her shoulders. "What dreams? Jen, you scared me. Was it about Jamieson or is it from before?"

"Before," Jen got out. "I haven't had any in weeks. Not since the two of us have been together. I thought maybe it was over. Oh, damn. When will it be?"

"Tell me."

"Usually it is just the same thing. Over and over. I'm in the airport, and Victor is leaving and I'm going to the hospital. Stupid, huh? I don't cry about my parents and seeing them on life support. I don't dream about having to tell the doctors it was time to take them off life support. I don't think about how Victor must have felt going down in that helicopter. It's just the airport. But in the dream I know things are going to be hell and I'm all alone."

Jennifer thought about the new additions to the dreams and decided to say nothing about them. Just talking about the old dreams was making Jack look upset enough.



"You've been fighting with this at night for years? And this happens often?" Jack suddenly reached out and held her. "All this and you didn't tell anyone or get help? Jen. Oh, Jen."

"This time was more intense than any I can remember. But what kind of help can anyone be? I don't want a shrink or drugs. I just—want to get it over with." Jen shut her eyes. "I'm sick of feeling shattered. I'm not fragile."

*Oh, but you are, darling. More fragile than I knew. And hurting even more than I guessed. What can you do to solve that, Logan? So far your solution has been to get hard, get laid and ignore what must be churning in her gut. Is it because you're stupid or because you just don't want to see how much she still wants Victor?*

Gently, as if she was made of glass, he kissed her.

"You're the toughest girl I know." He had an odd tone to his voice. "Aren't you, Slugger?"

Jen let out a brief laugh at her old nickname, the one she had taken on when she had thought boyish nicknames might let her male buddies forget she was a girl.

*Why the hell wouldn't she still want Victor? He was the strongest, the smartest, the best looking. What the hell would she want with you if he was still around? Why wouldn't it kill her to not have him any more? Victor had always had everything he didn't, except this time he wasn't lucky enough to still be alive.*

*No, Logan. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. What about Jen? She needs a little less sex and a little more tenderness. She needs care. You have to handle her. You have to act a little more sensitive, pretend you aren't the damned animal you keep turning into whenever she says she wants you. She doesn't, really. Or if she does, it isn't what she needs. Look at what happened when you jumped her. She got nightmares. She needs something you aren't, Logan. She needs a gentleman. Well, damn it. You've played that role before. For her, you can play it forever. What's the alternative? Her tears, her memories of Victor. Her leaving your ass, Logan. Once she finally gets over the whole situation that has left her vulnerable for the last few years she'll*

*figure out what you are and decide she doesn't need it. Oh, hell, yes. You can play it her way. The alternative isn't acceptable.*

"Honey, let me hold you for a little while longer. You had a really bad time of it just now." He reached out to her and she held up her hand and then shook her head.

"Jack, I can't sleep. I feel so wired and edgy—I guess the tension of everything is just too much for me." Jen reached out tentatively. "I want more than holding. Help me sleep. Make love with me again."

He kissed her with shiveringly exquisite care and slid his hands down to her breasts. His touch was soft. She felt as though she might float away from the bed, with the joy bursting up inside her.

"Whatever you want, hon," he told her. "However you want it."

He picked her up off the bed and took her into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and gently led her into the stall. She sighed, the tension gradually uncurling through her legs, her arms, and her back.

Nothing had ever felt so right. Her head listed to the side as relaxation replaced tension. Jack helped her into the shower stall and held her with the water running over them both.

"I'm not sure how much I can...participate here," Jen managed to get the words out. "But don't stop. Please."

"I won't," he assured her. "You like it too much, don't you, Jen?"

He slicked her down with soap, murmuring endearments as he did it, then he wiped her off with long, lingering strokes. Between the water's spray and his massage, Jen almost fell asleep standing up. He knelt down in front of her, still using his hands to stroke her.

She almost didn't feel his tongue enter her, it seemed so much a part of the showering water and his gentle touch, until she realized the warmth inside her matched

the warmth of the water on the outside. It felt so good, so clean, after the hurt and sweaty fear of the day.

His gentleness was so tender, the lovemaking so careful that Jen could feel tears start again. These were good tears, though.

When she leaned against him and climaxed, almost surprised and shaking from her release, he held her tightly. She sighed as he dried her.

"What about you?" she managed, on a huge yawn.

"I can wait this time. Think of it as payback for earlier when I didn't."

"There isn't any...debt between us...Jack."

"It's not an obligation, sweetheart. It is just pure pleasure."

He settled her into the bed and pulled up the covers. She curled up against him like a sleepy cat, ready for warmth and cuddling. She smiled as she felt him, obviously aroused, next to her.

"Sure...you want to...wait?"

"Go to sleep, sweetheart. Watch out for me in the morning when you will be ready to take me on."

She laughed and then yawned.

"I love you," she mumbled as she began to drift off to sleep. "You chase the dreams away, Jack. I don't want them any more. I'm so tired of feeling that way. What I want is you."

"And I want you, Jen. Always."

He kept holding her even after he was sure she had fallen into a deep, untroubled sleep. She had a smile on her face. He kept looking at her face as she slept, breathing deeply, seemingly calm.

*Oh yeah, Logan. This is the first time she has said she loves you. So what if she was half-asleep and scared out of her mind from everything? She said it. It's working. You can do this. It wasn't so difficult this time, was it? It was easy to be gentle, easy to show her some tenderness.*

*And it was good. Almost as good for you as for her. Jen deserves this. You can keep this up. If you can just hold back a little, this will work. Don't scare her, for God's sake. Be a damned Boy Scout, Logan. It might just work. What you want just might happen.*

If he was going to be a Boy Scout he needed to do something more. Something he should have done for her and for himself and Victor, long before this. He didn't know why he hadn't. Maybe it was because he could accept Victor was dead. He hadn't realized that Jen had to have proof before she could accept it, too.

Jack didn't waste time on preliminaries once he got his phone call through.

"What would be the right amount for a bribe to get information on whether a man is alive or dead in Colombia?"

"Who has the information?" George Instone asked. He never wasted much time either. That was what made him such a damn good private investigator.

"I don't know. Maybe no one. Maybe drug smugglers. Maybe some poor peon out in the back of beyond. Maybe no one does yet and you'll find out for me before anyone else."

"That covers a lot of territory. How much are you willing to pay?"

Jack thought. If it cost more than he could handle, he could call his father and get a loan. That was something he'd never done in his life and never wanted to do. But this wasn't for him.

"Whatever it takes. I'm willing to pay more if I hear he is alive, of course."

"You'll have to tell me more. If the guy isn't involved in the drug trade, the rebel army or terrorism, let's try twenty thousand dead. Fifty thousand alive. We can keep the price negotiable. A Colombian drug smuggler would sneer. But he might negotiate. Anyone else would think about accepting. Think about it real hard."

"The price is very negotiable," Jack told him, crisply. "I need to know. Are you willing to check things out yourself?"

"If the price is negotiable." Instone was thoughtful. "Expenses need to be covered, of course. Who the hell do you want to find?"

"Victor Ruiz," Jack answered. "You may remember him—"

"The hotshot newspaper photographer who went down—well, God knows where he went down. He was investigating the drug smuggling going on near the rain forests, wasn't he? Christ, Jack, that has been well over a year and a half ago."

"Twenty months ago. Almost exactly."

"He's probably dead."

"Probably. I need to know if he is."

"So you say. Any reason?"

"He was—is—a friend. It's something I need to do for him."

"I can't guarantee a damn thing on this one. The trail is probably cold and there isn't anyone alive to co-operate with me."

"Do your best, Instone. Do your best. That's why I contacted you. Your best is usually pretty damned good."

Jack gave him names to call, filled in what facts he did know and, grumbling, the private investigator promised to check in periodically.

"How long do you want me to try to find out anything? I can promise you I won't turn up anything right away," Instone said.

"Until you are satisfied, completely satisfied, that you have done everything there is to do on this."

After he hung up, he went back to the bedroom and stared at the sleeping woman there for a long time.

*He pulled himself up. The dream had been really vivid this time. He knew he had deliberately prolonged it, intensified it. He hadn't dreamed about her for so long he had become vaguely uneasy. Despite the sadness in the dream, he felt connected to Jen whenever he conjured*

*it up. When it stopped coming the way it had, he started to wonder about how close the real connection was now. He'd been away for far too long.*

*His memory was almost completely back now. Knowing his name had been useful. That knowledge let him take a gamble on getting transportation. When he contacted Ramón, with his uneasy host's help, he knew Ramón would know his name.*

*Ramón was the only one in the area who had the contacts to get him out and enough knowledge of the outside world to realize what helping a semi-famous norteamericano might mean for him. Since he was also the local drug lord and probably dabbled in arms smuggling for the highest dollar, Victor knew that there was the distinct possibility he would be held for ransom or disposed of if there was more profit in that. At the time he had his conference with Ramón, he almost didn't care. Ransom might get him out. And if he died, that would at least end the long exile from home.*

*He had watched Ramon's face weighing the advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps Ramón had needed some favors from some officials that bringing him in would achieve. Victor didn't know or care why the decision had been made. Whatever the reason, Victor found himself borne in a sling to Ramon's tiny airstrip, which was usually used for other types of flights. Being carried in a sling was like an old movie—but it was also the only way he could be moved. His leg had long since ceased to be of any use for more than a few hobbling yards.*

*He didn't know how long it would take the tiny plane to fly him to someplace closer to civilization, but at least he was on his way. The long wait in limbo was over.*

*He had been so sure he could just finish up his one last dangerous, bewitching assignment and sweep back home to take care of everything. He'd be the hero.*

*Some damned hero. He was flat on his back, dependent on a drug smuggler to get him home. He just hoped that Jen would be able to forgive his arrogance and tardiness.*

*Victor's eyes shut again. He imagined touching Jen's face. It was going to happen. It had taken longer than either of them thought for him to get back to her but it was going to happen.*

Jen opened her eyes. For a moment she was startled to see Jack there. She sucked in her breath. She had just been held and made love to by a man after horrible nightmares and she woke, expecting to see Victor. What was *wrong* with her?

This dream had been different, too. She could imagine Victor making her dream. She hadn't wanted to, not again, especially after the horrible one just a little while before. But this hadn't been frightening. Not really. Victor was coming back.

Then Jen shook her head. She was in bed with Jack. How could she be dreaming of having Victor come home? She was so confused. She had told herself before that the dreams meant she wasn't ready for a new man in her life. But she did want Jack in her life. Or she had thought she did until these dreams began again.

No. She wouldn't think that way. She was involved with Jack and she liked it. She didn't want to back off if that meant leaving Jack and what they were beginning to share. She wasn't sure what the dreams meant, but Jack was too important to give up because of her nighttime imagination.

## Chapter Five

"Jack, Jack! I have news." Jen came running toward him as he drove into his driveway late the next evening.

"So do I, Jen. Bad news," Jack told her.

"What?" Jen's throat clutched up. "Not your father—?"

"No, no, honey, it's not an emergency. I've been called away to work on the Titus account tomorrow. The records are a disaster and someone has to sort them out. We're not even sure what Titus has in his office."

Jen put her arm around his waist as they walked into his house. "And you got volunteered?"

"More or less," Jack said.

He wasn't going to admit that he had volunteered himself. It had occurred to him that if he kept himself at a little more distance—in this case about five hundred miles of distance—it would be a lot easier to behave like a gentleman. Not being able to touch or taste—He stepped back slightly. Yes, that would be the best thing if he wanted to keep his resolution.

"Oh," Jen's voice wobbled and then strengthened again. "Well, then, we'll have to enjoy ourselves tonight, won't we?"

She slid herself against him and saw Jack's eyes take on a now familiar gleam. She stretched her neck up to nip his jaw. His hands moved toward her shirt buttons. She obligingly unbuttoned the first one.

*He'd restrain himself later. God, if he did what he wanted to do he'd have to keep away from her for at least a day or two to get back on track. Three days. God, maybe four—but just now he*



*had to sink into her, hard and fast, biting and sucking. He'd pay his dues later. He promised he would. Later. What the hell was he thinking? No!*

Jack jerked away from her like a dog being yanked on a leash.

"What's wrong with you, Jack Logan? Do I have bad breath? Am I such a rotten kisser? What?"

"No," he breathed out. "I—this is just like what happened after Jamieson jumped you. I felt like I had finished up the job for him after I attacked you in my own damned house."

"Did I complain?"

"You don't complain, Jen." Jack looked unhappy. "Not enough. You just have nightmares."

"I had nightmares before we ever got together," Jen pointed out. "You didn't cause them. Why are you acting so strangely? I love whatever we do together, Jack. But now you act like there's something wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you." Jack deliberately gentled his voice. "It's me. I keep forgetting to behave myself."

"I don't want you to behave yourself." Jen began to feel an irrational desire to hit him. "Oh, damn it. Maybe *I'm* busy tonight. I'll see if Molly wants to go out with me instead. Or maybe I'll call some guy who is interested."

"Jen!"

She turned and stalked away, boiling. He didn't follow after her or call to stop. Jack had known her long enough to know when to stay away from her.

Jen slammed the door of the house shut and Molly watched while Jen stomped over to the telephone.

"What's up, Jen?" Molly asked. "Lover's spat?"

"I wouldn't call it a spat," Jennifer said. "Mrs. Jessup? Would you be able to mind Vicky tonight? I thought I might go out with my sisters, if it's OK with you. Really? Perfect. We'll see you then."

"We're going out?" Molly asked. "Jen, if you recall, Cee Cee is already out. She's taken on a new hobby this month—she and some friends have started a group. She does lounge singing."

"I forgot," Jen frowned. "I guess Cee Cee did mention it. But it's hard to remember what nutty thing she is doing from one day to the next."

"She isn't bad, actually," Molly told her. "In fact they got a gig at this bar in D.C. after just a few rehearsals. Of course one of the musicians is kind of hooking up with the bar owner, which helped a lot."

"A bar, huh? Perfect. I'm in the mood for a bar. Let's go and get ready, Molly."

"Whew!" Molly exclaimed. "Jack must have really put his foot in his mouth."

"Jack Logan is—is an asshole," Jen spat out. "And I could stand a drink. Maybe more than one drink. I'm going to put on that outfit that Cee Cee picked out for me on my birthday and we're going to get rowdy."

"Jen, I'll get carded," Molly protested. "Well, I should be carded, anyhow."

"Fine. We'll make sure you dress so you look old enough to be in a bar, too." Jen kept going.

"My God, who are you and what have you done to my older sister? Or what has Jack done to her?"

"I'm not saying you should go drink. I just want to go out and have some girl talk, be a little silly. Is that OK with you?"

"But, Jen—"

"Shut up and get ready. I'm just dying to hear Cecilia's act."

"And the worst thing isn't that he treated me like some fragile little blossom, too stupid to know what she wants." Jen brooded over her beer. "The worst thing is that I didn't even get to tell him my good news."

"Which is?" Cee Cee had sat down between her set, flirting with the patrons, the bar owner and the bartender, who was slipping her free beers. As far as Jen could tell, Molly seemed to be conscientiously sticking to ginger ale. Of course Jen was on her third beer—and she hated beer—so she wasn't really sure.

"You know. Oh, yeah. I didn't tell you guys either. I won the contest."

"You did it?" Molly sounded thrilled, then spoiled it with a little hiccup. "Congrats, Jen."

"You're going to be a guest columnist with the paper?" Cee Cee smiled at her big sister. "Dad would have been proud."

Jen smiled a little, too. She had told her sisters and Jack once the deadline had gotten closer. She would have burst otherwise.

"I didn't tell anyone who I was. I didn't hide it or anything, but Turner is a common name and I figured no one would guess. Actually the editor was a little peeved when he figured it out. He was afraid someone would cry nepotism or favoritism or something. But I won the chance to guest write one column in the newspaper fair and square. They really liked what I wrote and they want to print my article next week."

"I think this calls for more beer." Cee Cee looked for the bartender.

"Not for you," Jen was firm. "You still have to sing. You're really great, by the way. Did I tell you that before? I can't believe you've never taken lessons seriously or anything. I had no idea you could."

"You said all of that about four times already." Cee Cee shook her head. "I think you're getting a little buzzed, Sis."

"Right now it's good to feel buzzed. It's a lousy bar, though. And if you keep flirting with the owner, I think there is going to be big trouble between you and his girlfriend," Jen pointed out.

"Well, she wants to break up the group anyhow and she can't play the piano decently," Cee Cee shrugged. "I might as well make it fun while it lasts."

"Oops. I feel sick," Molly said, ominously.

"Molly, you didn't!" Jen exclaimed.

"Well, I did just a little."

"You can't drink. At all. I don't know why you even tried," Cee Cee told her. "By the way, don't run to the ladies room. That really will make you sick. It's disgusting in there. Go on out in the alley."

Molly fled outside.

"Cee Cee, do you suppose it's because of the nightmares?" Jen asked.

"Huh?"

"The reason Jack won't touch me. It started after I had my usual nightmare."

"How should I know?" Cee Cee muttered. "I didn't even know you had nightmares until you just told us tonight."

"I wish they would stop. All of this makes me feel so guilty, you know? I keep thinking and wondering what I could have done differently and it all seems so hopeless, but I can't stop."

"Get over it, Jen." Cee Cee acted as if the words were forced out of her. "It wasn't you. You did the right thing. It was Victor's fault."

"Huh?"

"It probably didn't seem like a big thing at the time to him but it was. He made the choice to go without you. You wanted to have all the responsibility for things going bad but guess what? You had no choice. You aren't God. You did what you had to do but

you don't want to blame Victor. Well, it was Victor's fault as much as anybody else's that he's gone now. You weren't in control of his choice. He was."

As she spoke, Cee Cee almost absent-mindedly blew the bar owner a kiss.

"It was Victor's—" Jen stared at her sister. "Yes, I suppose if it was anyone's fault or anyone's choice, it was Victor's."

At the same moment the pianist, who had been quarreling softly with what looked to soon be her ex-boyfriend, let out a scream and hit the man over the head with a beer bottle.

"Oh, man!" Cee Cee said, with some delight.

In the next minute all hell broke loose. Marcie, the girlfriend, went for Cee Cee next. Cee Cee calmly threw some beer in her face. Several other male patrons stopped the bar owner, who was going for Marcie. Or maybe he was going after Cee Cee. Jen lost track of what was going on—probably because she had to duck under the table.

As she heard various chairs and bottles crashing above her, Jen prayed that Molly would stay outside. Then she prayed that she would get out of this mess before anyone notified the police—

Just then she heard the siren's wail and her heart sank. She heard Cecilia giggling somewhere above her and wondered just why she had thought a girls' night out would be therapeutic.

Jack sat quietly in his living room with just a reading light on. His beer was in one hand and the small box in the other. Absently he tossed the box up and caught it with one hand.

He knew what the old man wanted from him now that he'd opened the box. But what did *he* want? All right, what did he want besides Jen? That want had been with him all his life but he had her now. Maybe.

*I'm handling things wrong with her. What should I do? What if I just ask Jen to marry me?  
What if she said no?*

*What if she said yes?*

God knows it shouldn't matter so much to him if she did marry him and things didn't work out. That was a pattern he was used to with his parents. But he didn't want to go into something thinking failure was a possibility. Besides, Jen would suffer if it didn't work. She expected more. She deserved more.

He'd thought of asking her before Vicky was born. A baby needed a father and even now there was a certain stigma attached to not having one around. But he had known that Jen would say no. If she'd said yes, he wasn't so sure he could have married her knowing she was doing it for her daughter's sake.

That wasn't his idea of marriage. Maybe he really did think marriage should happen because you were in love.

Did he love her then?

He'd been careful not to tell her that particular lie. He felt more for her than anyone he knew. But was that love?

Whatever his feelings were, it was important to have her with him. Maybe marriage was the way he should handle it. Somehow he had messed things up—hell, what could she think if he acted like a sex maniac one day and tried to be a choir boy the next? She had a right to be mad and confused.

She just couldn't stay mad. He couldn't stand it if that happened. Marriage was the honorable thing to do and, in this case, the honorable thing might also get her back.

But what about the future? What if he hurt her even more than he had tonight?

*What if she hurt him again the way she had tonight?*

God, had he been backing away from her, not just for her sake but for his own?

He'd always had her around, one way or another, all his life. If this didn't work, they could never go back to friendship. The bleakness of life without Jen was unimaginable. She was the only thing that had kept him going sometimes.

She and her family would be gone if this didn't work. She and what was now his family. All or nothing.

For an instant he remembered Victor laughing at him back in high school and saying those words in his easiest, most dangerous voice.

He and Victor had met just recently back then and were testing each other's moves on the basketball court before the basketball tryouts. They had been about the same height even then, but Victor knew how to make his legs and arms work to his advantage. Jack hadn't played the American game of basketball in his European boarding schools and still hadn't really gotten the hang of it. But he wasn't going to let the new kid show him up.

There were some seniors at the other end of the basketball court, ones who had already made the basketball team, hooting a little and offering rude suggestions. Both he and Victor had ignored them until Jen came in. She was a freshman, a little uncertain as to whether she belonged among the older boys. She walked up to Jack, who paused in the game. Truthfully, he had been glad of the excuse to catch his breath. Victor made you work for your points.

"Hi, Jack." Jen greeted him in a soft voice. She glanced over at Victor and quickly glanced back at Jack. "I have a favor to ask. Could I get a ride back with you from school? I have some stuff to do for the yearbook. Would that be OK?"

Jack put his skinny body between her and the catcalling seniors who had fallen silent for an ominous minute while they looked at her.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "You know where the car is. I'll wait if you aren't there."

"Thanks." Jen looked quickly at Victor again. "Hey, you're looking good. Both of you. Hope you make the team."

She strolled out. Even then she had looked sexy in blue jeans. Her face got a little red at some of the calls from the older boys, but she ignored them until one reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Hey, don't waste your time with them, little girl," he leered. "With a body like that, who needs little boys? Why don't you try hanging out with a real man?"

Jen tried to jerk her arm away. Jack's head snapped up. He would have rather died than admit it, but his stomach knotted in fear. Most of the seniors weren't too much taller than he was, but they had a lot more muscle and weight. Still, he knew what he had to do, especially when the senior wouldn't let her go.

"Leave her alone, Williams." Jack was grateful that his voice didn't crack.

"Oh? Why?"

"Or I'll make you leave her alone." Jack prayed that his years of karate would actually work for him.

"Oh, this is terrifying. Euro trash boy is going to hurt me!" the senior said in a falsetto voice.

Victor, without a word, pulled on his black leather jacket and placed himself next to Jack. Jen pulled away as the seniors, sensing more interesting prey, moved toward the two boys. Jack swallowed. He had been laughed at, shoved around some, and generally been given a hard time since he had started school here. He knew he didn't fit in. But if he backed down now, his life would be hell.

More importantly, he knew he'd never be able to look Jennifer in the eyes again.

"Hey, bean-eater, this isn't your fight. Why don't you run back on home?" one of the seniors yelled.

"This isn't about you, Ruiz." Jack tried to sound firm. "I can handle it alone."

*Yeah. Right.*

"All or nothing, Logan. I'm in. Are you?"



The two of them didn't do too badly. They managed to mark up a few of the older guys and not get their butts whipped before Jen found a coach to break it up. They'd had a huge lecture in the principal's office but the seniors were briefly banned from basketball practice.

After that Jack had decided he wouldn't be on the same team with those guys even if he was paid to do it. Victor, being Victor, preferred to make the other guys pay. He went ahead and joined and then proceeded to hustle his way into being made the most valuable player on the team.

He missed Victor.

Someone knocked tentatively at the door. It was too late at night for it to be anyone but Jennifer. Jack jumped out of the easy chair and shoved the box in his pocket.

But when he opened the door, he saw a rather rumped, queasy-looking Molly. A surly man stood on the porch behind her, with his arms crossed.

She looked pleadingly at him. "I'm sorry, Jack. Could you pay for the cab? I left my purse in the bar and I was afraid to go back in when I saw the police coming in—"

"What?" Jack's hand automatically went to his back pocket where his wallet was.

"I expect you'll be getting a call from the police station soon," Molly told him in a subdued voice. "I'm pretty sure they arrested Jen and Cee Cee—I saw Cee Cee slap one officer as they hustled them out and he handcuffed her."

"*What?*" He paid the driver.

"But look on the bright side, Jack. If I hadn't been throwing up beer outside, I would've been arrested and there would be all kinds of trouble for giving beer to a minor."

On cue, the telephone rang. Jack marched to the phone. This should be a very interesting explanation.

"Jeez, Jen, I think we solved your problem for you," Molly whispered in Jennifer's ear from the back seat. "Jack doesn't seem too remote now. He looks ready to murder all of us. But he looks a little different with you. I think he's ready to take you to bed first and then murder you."

"Oh God, I hope he didn't hear that," Jen said.

Jack turned sharply and stared at them both before giving a mirthless laugh. He slammed the car door shut as he climbed into the driver's seat. Jen knew that as overjoyed as she had been when Jack arrived to pick them up from the police station, her happiness might have been premature.

"I plan to spank her first, then take her to bed and, after I get my energy back, murder all of you," he told them. "Or maybe I should just spank all of you."

"Spank *me* first," Cee Cee murmured, still a little drunk and very amused, from the back seat. "Molly and I never get any fun, Daddy."

Jen covered her face with her hands.

"It's a wonder your parents lived long enough to see you all into puberty. Cee Cee, you are aware that resisting arrest upped your bail considerably? I'm just hoping that I can talk to enough people, including the bar owner, to get the charges dropped."

"Jim—that's the bar owner—likes me," Cee Cee was unconcerned. "I can talk to him if you want. He'll probably forget the whole thing if you pay him for the damages."

"If *Jack* pays—" Jen began.

"Well, I don't have the money." Cee Cee now sounded very reasonable. "None of the rest of us has that kind of money."

"Of course, assaulting the police will make it that much more difficult." Jack continued as if Cecilia hadn't spoken. "I may have to start using my father's old friendship with the police chief. I would really hate to have to do that."

"But that—uh—that policeman was rude," Cee Cee said. "Stop sounding like a lawyer, Jack. Not that I don't appreciate the help and all."

"We all appreciate it," Jen gave it her best I-am-the-big-sister-and-I-am-in-charge voice. "I'm sorry we had to drag you out at night like this. It—it has been quite an evening."

The rest of the drive was ominously quiet. Once they got home, Jack opened the door for them all.

"Girls, take a couple of aspirin and drink some water before you pass out. It may help with the hangover tomorrow. I speak from past, sad experience. And girls, pay Mrs. Jessup. Here's some cash. The poor woman must be exhausted. Jen, you and I have a little something to finish."

"Thanks." Cee Cee gave him a kiss on the cheek before she strolled into the house. Molly followed behind, still looking a little green.

Jack turned to Jennifer.

"Jack, please. I really don't feel well," Jen got out. "I'm not used to drinking as much as I did—or being held in jail waiting for a lawyer."

"Are you feeling a little less mad at me?" Jack asked.

"I'm feeling more grateful to you and embarrassed about my own behavior than mad," Jen swallowed hard. "I'll have to talk to the girls, especially Molly. I don't know what made me drag her into it. That was tremendously irresponsible of me. I was just so hurt and angry and I needed to talk, to do something crazy for a change—"

"Hey, I think you were crazy enough to make up for at least a couple of years of being a good girl." Jack smoothed some hair from her face. "I guess I had something to do with it. I know I made you mad. Shall we split the blame and start over?"

For an answer, Jen put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"You really are there for me, aren't you?" she asked. "Even when you want to wring my neck, you stand by me."

"I'll try to always do that," he said. "But I won't be there for you tomorrow—no, early this morning. Since I won't be getting enough sleep anyhow, d'you want to come

home with me and make sure I don't get any before I leave? Maybe you'll let me spank you after all?"

They walked back to the house arm in arm.

When they got inside, Jack scooped her up.

"What?" Jen asked.

She was placed over Jack's lap. His hand swept up her tiny skirt.

"It really is a nice butt." Jen shivered as his hand stroked her. "Round, tempting."

"Are you going to spank me, Jack?" Jen wasn't sure what she thought about the idea. As his hand stroked her again, lingering against her crotch, she shivered again. Maybe she liked it.

The phone's ring made them both jump. Jack's finger didn't stop as it pressed against her clit. Jen shifted her weight, knowing he was staring at her butt and everything else she had exposed.

The phone rang again.

"Fuck off. Why doesn't the damn machine pick it up?" Jack muttered as he pinched her butt cheeks.

Jen jumped and then very deliberately squirmed against him. His erection was already poking at her.

"Are you going to do it or not, Jack?" she taunted. She wasn't sure which answer she wanted, but she could feel herself getting wet.

"Logan?" A crisp male voice sounded through the voice message machine.

Jack's hand stopped.

"Damn!" Jack muttered. "I was enjoying this."

*Me, too.*

But Jack slid her gently away before he went to answer the call. Jen sniffed. He might dismiss her, but she was going to rattle his cage a little.

"I might be even naughtier later," Jen whispered. "You probably should spank me. I deserve it."

His eyes turned hot as he stood, his ear to the receiver. He opened his mouth. Then she saw his face set as he listened.

"Go ahead, Jen," he told her. "I'll be there shortly."

"I thought this couldn't wait until morning," George Instone said.

"You found something?"

"Someone found something. I have a source who says they want seventy thousand dollars for information."

"What information?"

"The source won't say. But, as I said, they have something. I have a jacket of his, the one you had described to me. Beat up black leather bomber. It has blood on it. The tests say it's Ruiz's blood."

"Seventy thousand wasn't our original deal. Is that for him alive or dead?"

"I don't know. We had to pay a few thousand for the jacket. We're still discussing what more we get for our money. Besides, it's getting a little more complicated than that. I hear the military is interested. You know that Ruiz was getting close to some story about drug smuggling before the 'copter crashed. The military would like to know more, too. They can be damned secretive. I think they may be blocking the flow of information."

"You know I'll pay it if we can find out more."

"I thought I knew that. And I'll find out more. I decided you'd want to know this much anyhow."

"Yes. Thanks."

Jack hung up and glanced upstairs. What the hell should he tell Jen? He thought about her, a little buzzed and mortified still, but ready to kiss and make up. He had

nothing useful to tell her and he wasn't sure he could right now. Her reaction would be the icing on a very bad day.

Probably that made him a coward. He took the first step up the stairs. When they knew more—knew anything besides a jacket of Vic's still existed—he would tell her. Victor was probably dead. Instone would know more soon and then he would say something. But not tonight.

He felt the box in his coat pocket. It was just as well he had put off the idea of a proposal, too. Victor was probably gone forever but—what if he wasn't?

Jack took the second step up the stairs. Yeah, he was a weak coward, no doubt about it. But he was going to be with Jen now.

On the third step, Jack paused. He owed Jen and Victor both.

"Jen," he began, softly. "Jen, I have something I need to tell you about that phone call. I want you to brace yourself."

*He'd known something was up when the military closed in on him. At least it was U.S. military, or looked to be. The Indians and the pilot who had gotten him out of the jungle had long since gone. They had seen he was "escorted," if that was the term, to the Brazilian capital and then dumped in a house with guards. That had puzzled him. It looked like the choice between ransom and death might be coming around again, just when he thought he was safe.*

*At least he had been in Brazil rather than Colombia. That seemed marginally safer.*

*As he learned soon after, Ramón hadn't been slick enough for the U.S. government. Someone had warned the powers that be that he might be alive and that the call to the embassy about a reward for his return could be expected.*

*What he hadn't expected was to be interrogated afterwards by the military that was involved in joint anti-drug operations with the Colombian government. The U.S. soldiers were close-mouthed, but they were obviously interested in what he knew about the drug trade, even if he had been out of touch for over a year. Maybe they thought he had staged the crash and was in on what was going on with the smugglers. Maybe they were just fishing for information. The*

*military sure seemed to imply that it wasn't an accident the helicopter had crashed. He didn't doubt it, but he still couldn't remember much from just before the accident, when he hit his head. The medical personnel who checked him over assured him that was a normal problem.*

*Unfortunately, folks didn't want to believe that was why he couldn't tell them much about what he had seen. When the military was done, the DEA wanted a turn to ask questions. He figured the CIA and maybe some other acronymed agencies would give it a try next.*

*Even on the plane going back to a hospital in the States, Victor realized he was being guarded. Sure, he had managed to keep the last few rolls of film he had shot before going down, and he had managed to get them out with him. They'd show some interesting sights once they were developed. He wasn't sure that was reason enough to keep him locked up and unable to communicate with anyone. So far no one seemed too anxious to let him use a telephone. He knew at some point the military and all the other official types, who kept trying to pry names and places of drug caches he had seen, would have to give up. It was all old news.*

*The faces in the photos must be what they found so interesting. Well, they were welcome to them if they'd just let him loose.*

*On the other hand, he wasn't sure he wanted to communicate with anyone. He had a seriously injured leg, one that might not be worth keeping. If that happened, maybe it also wasn't worth telling anyone he was actually still alive.*

*Most particularly, maybe it wasn't worth telling Jen. He wanted to be a complete man when he saw her again. He didn't need her to stay with him so she could wait on him and pity him for the rest of his life. He wanted things as they always had been. He would be the one in control of the situation.*

*All or nothing.*

*There was only one problem with that attitude. The possibility of nothing kept him awake at night, sweating. He couldn't sleep at night any more, much less dream.*

Jen sat up, rubbing her head. Maybe she was crazy. Maybe she needed to talk to a shrink. She didn't want these dreams. She was over Vic. She'd made up her mind. Vic was gone, dead, no longer part of her life.

It must have been Jack telling her about the found jacket that had started things up again.

Damn it! Why'd Jack told her? Even if that was what had triggered the new dream, why did she have to keep having these new and strange dreams? This one had been less vivid, less intense, but still there.

If she couldn't stop dreaming this, she'd do the next best thing. She would lie to Jack, to anyone if she had to. She'd tell them it had stopped.

The dreams meant nothing to her any more. Nothing. She was sick of them! The new dreams, the old dreams—they had to end.

She'd half-encouraged them in the past, trying to hold on to Victor. Not any more. She'd take drugs to make her sleep, she'd try hypnosis. She'd will them to stop bothering her. Please. Please let it be that she would will them away.



## Chapter Six

The day didn't start out well. Jen woke up to discover that Jack had not only changed Vicky and given her a bottle, but he'd turned off the alarm clock. Vicky had settled back in for a snooze and let her mother sleep late.

"Damn," Jen yelped. "This makes the second time in two weeks he's done this to me. Laura will catch me coming in later than usual if I don't hurry. All I need is for her to start talking about how Jack doesn't fuss if I come in late—"

She jammed her feet into the black pumps she hadn't taken home from the night before. She had taken to leaving clothes at Jack's, but her selection of work wear was limited.

"I will not wear the same clothes I wore yesterday," Jen muttered. "I can imagine what Laura would say to that!"

She found a skirt in the closet and then a halfway presentable shirt. She hastily buttoned it. She would have to grab a blazer when she dropped Vicky off next door. Lipstick would have to go on while she drove in to work and waited at a red light.

Why had she slept so late?

"It wasn't as if he wore me out last night and I had to sleep," Jen muttered to herself and scowled more.

In fact, that bothered her more than Jack's general protective attitude lately. Not only did he seem to want her to do less at work, he seemed to want her to do a lot less after work, too. After wanting her night and day, suddenly he seemed—well, restrained. Constrained. They'd made love last night and it was gentle and sweet but—

"A steady diet of sweet can give you indigestion," Jen said aloud. "Does he think I'm afraid of him?"

Clutching Vicky, who was blinking, half-asleep and ready to protest, Jen sprinted for the front door—only to almost crash into Mrs. Beale, who was just entering.

"Oh, Lord, I am late!" Jen exclaimed.

"Don't worry. I came in a little early today," Mrs. Beale responded, calmly. "And how are you this morning, Jennifer?"

Jen blushed. Somehow it seemed a little like having her mother catch her in a man's house in the morning. She had known Mrs. Beale almost as long as she had known her mother after all. It wasn't as if Mrs. Beale couldn't figure out what had been going on, but she had never caught Jen, well, so clearly sleeping at Jack's house. Jen hoped that Mrs. Beale didn't mind. Both she and Jack respected her and she knew Mrs. Beale was a church-going woman.

"Please excuse me," Jen managed. "I just need to get Vicky home before I dash off to work."

"I'd be happy to mind the little mite until your sisters are ready," Mrs. Beale said. "I didn't see any lights on at their place this morning, either."

"I guess Vicky is the one who wakes them up, too," Jen realized, ruefully. "She slept in today."

Vicky snuggled into Mrs. Beale's arms, obviously remembering the many cookies she had received from Jack's housekeeper, and proceeded to snooze.

"Jennifer, I have a question," Mrs. Beale continued, undeterred. "It won't take but a minute."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"What are you doing to that boy of mine?"

"Ma'am?"

"When you two first started courting he was a happy man. I never saw him happier in my life. You seemed real happy yourself. Now he looks like a mean old junkyard dog when you're not around and when you are—he's quiet around you. Subdued. What is going on?"

"I don't know." Jen wanted to wail. "I've been wondering about it myself. I can't figure it out. He acts afraid of me."

"It's none of my business, of course," Mrs. Beale said. "Maybe I sized up the situation wrong."

"You figured it out right—shoot, you've known both of us for most of our lives." Jen put her hand on the older woman's arm. "It's just that I'm not to blame on this one."

"Should've known. He's the man, after all. Well, you find out what foolishness that boy has in his head and get rid of it." She let a trace of annoyance show. "I think the two of you are real nice together. And I've gotten used to having him smiling and whistling."

"As soon as I figure it out, I'll take care of it." Jen gave the other woman a kiss on the cheek before running out. "Thanks for your concern."

It nagged at Jen all day. That and the lack of humming anticipation when she and Jack were near. There were no more sidelong glances on his part. They were just a competent, efficient working team.

It nagged at Jen at dinner that evening—a dinner she had with her sisters, since Jack had explained he wouldn't be home until late. He was dining with one of the partners and a potential client tonight. That was what he said. She wasn't sure what to believe. He'd been spending a lot of time away lately.

Jen wondered if Jack knew she had been having dreams of Vic again. Had she said something in her sleep? If she had, no wonder Jack was distant.

After dinner, Jen sprawled in a kitchen chair, frowning, and everyone was silent until Cee Cee slammed her cup of coffee down.

"What's eating you, Sis?" Jen asked her.

For a minute she looked at her sisters' concerned faces looking at her. She hadn't really been aware of them for too long now. She had shut them aside like pesky kids, but they were becoming adults. And they were worried for her instead of the other way around. The way it always had been before.

"It doesn't matter." Cee Cee shook her head. "What matters right now is what's eating you."

Molly snapped, "Well, that's obvious. What is going wrong with you and Jack? I thought that got taken care of when we had our little spree. But you look as bad as when—as bad as when Mom and Dad died."

*And when Victor left. But I don't think it was this bad. If it was, how did I live through it?*

"I don't know," Jen said finally. "I wish I did. For a little while after he got us out of jail, everything was fine. It was like it was before. Before he—he literally swept me off my feet, Molly. I spent weeks in a daze, a complete daze. We made love constantly."

"Lucky you." Cee Cee looked knowing.

"Spare us." Molly looked heavenward.

Jen blushed but went on. "Now suddenly he is putting up walls and being polite in a way he has never been. I don't know how to describe it. He compliments me on my hair, my outfits..."

"Oh, that *is* awful." Molly gave an insincere sigh.

"But very polite, considering your outfits," Cee Cee added.

Jen hit her closest sister with the morning's rolled up newspaper and then became serious again.

"I'm not explaining myself very well. He's never done that in his life. He doesn't kid with me anymore, doesn't joke with me. We go out to eat, he has me over to his house and then he kisses me goodnight and sends me home. It's like we're strangers and he has to impress me. Or placate me. I mean this is Jack! We've known him forever. He's

never distant, never cold—but he told me his relationships never last long. Do you think he's decided the thrill is gone?"

"Jen, where are your brains?" Cee Cee asked. "You're still taking Jack for granted—or seeing him like you did when you were fifteen. Jack was born distant. Don't be fooled by his boy next door act. He's different around us than other people, sure. We're his family. In fact, we're better than his family. Think about it."

"What do you mean?" Jen didn't understand.

"Aren't you exaggerating, Cee Cee?" Molly broke in. "Jack is a sweetheart—"

"Jack may be a sweetheart but Jack's a stray dog. Jen, you must know that. You have a fondness for strays. First it was Victor, now Jack."

"You're exaggerating—" Jen stopped. "I think."

"Jack grew up in as broken a home as Victor did. It was just a wealthier home, " Cee Cee said. "His parents got divorced when he was, what, seven? The big custody battle was over who had to take him, not who wanted to. The housekeepers watched him at his place. He spent more time over here on vacations and holidays than he did with either of his parents. Don't you think that might affect someone's viewpoint?"

"But Jack isn't aloof. He's a people person—he's so kind to everyone, he always has something to say to anyone on the street..." Jen began. "I suppose you're going to disagree with me?"

"Jack doesn't care about anyone on the street." Cee Cee was impatient. "The only people I've ever seen him really give a damn about are us, Victor, and maybe some of his clients. He must be scared, Jen. If he wants you the way he told you he did, he must wonder what he is letting himself in for. At best, he has no idea how love works. At worst he figures it hurts. And he knows he's second choice."

"No—" Jen's voice caught.

"No?" Cee Cee looked at her. "Have you ever told him Victor is over with? If Victor came in tomorrow, what would you do?"

Molly and Cee Cee both looked at her. Jen's grip tightened on the coffee cup.

"I—don't know."

"Then neither does Jack," Molly said slowly.

"I'm sorry to sound like a pop psychiatrist, but Jack lost out before with his parents. Why should he think a woman, even one of his best friends in the whole world before he started sleeping with her, would be different?" Cee Cee used her softest voice. "You have your family. Why do you need him? He needs you and Vicky and us a lot more than we need him. And he isn't one of us."

Jen shut her eyes.

"This is still so new to me." She was defensive. "I have to think about myself, too. And Vicky—"

"Jack knows that but I bet he's starting to wonder where he belongs in all this, especially if you are closing up on him. Jen, you can't be that stupid." Cee Cee frowned at her. "Everyone could see Jack looked out for you more than he watched out for the rest of us. Everyone could see you liked and trusted him when you wouldn't tell us what was going on."

"You were kids. How could I tell you all the stuff that happened?" Jen protested.

"That was then. We're OK now, Jen. Get your own life," Cee Cee said.

"I wouldn't put it like that exactly," Molly started slowly. "But—Jen, you deserve your time off for good behavior. We love you. Jack is crazy about you. I don't know if he loves you exactly—maybe Cee Cee is right and he doesn't know much about love—but he's a good man. He sure acts in love with you. Maybe this comes down to deciding what you want, Jen. Cee Cee and I are old enough to live with what you decide. Jack'd kill himself before he got between you and what you want. You get the choice, Jen. Go for it."

"You just may be right." Jen gave in. "Hey, you guys are smart. How did you two manage to grow up and get so smart?"

"Well," Molly looked at her. "We have a pretty smart big sister. At least she's smart most of the time."

"Now me, I'm getting tired of being the smart one all the time," Cee Cee complained.

For a minute Jen thought she saw a glitter of tears in her sister's eyes before Cee Cee smiled. "It gets old having to tell you the obvious. Go take care of Jack and then you won't be moping around here asking for advice. I'm not Ann Landers!"

All the next day Jen worked next to Jack in the office without saying much. She tried to think about her life, her choices, what was best for her. But she would look over at him on the telephone or staring at the computer and her insides would clench with longing. She finally gave up in despair. She couldn't think clearly. Her brain just wouldn't work.

When he'd told her about what he had done to search for Victor and what had been found so far, she hadn't known what she thought then either. Jack had looked at her and she tried to think of what to say. All she could think about was how much Jack had cared for her. He must do so much to recover a jacket. It meant nothing beyond that. All that time and effort and there was only a jacket.

Victor was as gone as he ever had been. Jack meant something to her, though. Right now she could only think about being with Jack the way it had been when they were first lovers and how she wanted it to be forever.

Jen's hands stopped on the keyboard. Forever. Well, that would solve any so-called insecurities about her that Jack had, wouldn't it? It had a good, solid feel to it, too. Was that what she wanted?

It was as if some of the dazzled haze she had managed to keep around herself for all these weeks now blazed away. What an idiot. She hadn't wanted to see what was going on, even though it ought to have been plain to her. She loved him. Of course she did. She loved him enough and was old enough to want marriage with him...the whole

thing with the ring, the promises, the license that legally allowed them to stay together forever.

Jack hadn't said anything to her about forever in those terms, but he had promised he would always be there, always want her. Well, damn it, wasn't that what marriage was supposed to commit you to? He had told her that six months was the longest relationship he had ever managed before this. But he was different with her than he was with any of his former women. She would have to just convince him that marriage was the way to go.

For a moment she considered the dreams she had been having, the ones that refused to go away. But they were just dreams. They had become less and less meaningful to her. In fact, when they did come, they were now more annoyances than anything else. There had been a time not too long ago that she had been convinced she needed professional help to cope with them. She was sure now that she didn't. She was ready to go back and live a life. Even more importantly, she knew she wanted that life to be with Jack.

She turned to look at her lover carefully. How would she manage this one? And how difficult would he be to convince?

Jen grinned. She could think of a few ways. A few stealthy wiggles and twists of her hips was all she needed to set her plan in motion.

Jack was bent over his desk, scowling at the computer. His hair was a bit ruffled, his scowl was thoughtful. Jen licked her lips. He really was so delicious.

At that moment he looked up and caught her stare.

"Problem, Jen?" he asked.

"Nooo." Jen was thoughtful. "No, I don't think there is."

*OK, no problem. This was working. The fact that he felt perpetually hard and perpetually desperate for her and that he thought he might kick his office down if he had to hold on to his restraint more than another second had nothing to do with it. God, he could ram himself in her*



*now, on her desk. But that would only scare her and he would be just as hard and hot for her two minutes after he was finished.*

"I'd like to have dinner with you tonight, Jack."

She was very sweet. Maybe too sweet to be believed.

"Of course." He was careful as he spoke. What was going on? "I'll try to finish up early."

"I want to stay with you tonight, too," she cajoled.

"Are you sure, hon? I might have to go back to work later," he said.

"Oh, I am sure, Jack." Jen sounded sure. "Please."

"Well then—of course," Jack got out. "How could I refuse?"

She thought he looked as if he did want to refuse, though. In fact, except for his good manners making him say the right thing, she would say he didn't look altogether happy about it at all. Jen shut her eyes. What if she was wrong about all this? She opened them again. She couldn't be. She wouldn't let herself be. And she smiled slowly as she decided just how she would make sure that he wouldn't be sorry about it, either.

Jack observed the smile come and go and his eyes narrowed. She was planning something. He used to be able to read her mind, but ever since they had slept together that ability had seemed to vanish. Maybe it was because he was keeping himself hidden from her.

Then Jen deliberately broke one of their big unwritten rules of behavior in the office. She walked to him very slowly, standing close enough for them to touch. Close enough to taste and smell and...

Shit. He was going to start shaking in another minute.

"You know what else, Jack?" she asked, gently. "I'm not wearing any panties under my skirt right now. I know you can't—check—at the moment, but I'll let you take a look later. If you're good."

Her smile broadened just a bit when she saw Jack's eyes turn dark. Yes, there was a reason for those unwritten rules. Neither of them would be thinking about work for the rest of the day. But if she had to play a little dirty, that would be OK with her. In the end Jack would thank her, too.

She would enjoy having him thank her.

Jen winked as she pushed her discarded panties into his hands.

"How was dinner, Jack?" Jen asked sweetly.

"Great."

*Particularly watching you nibble at the artichokes and then licking the butter off your lips. Watching while you tasted the champagne. It was great and it was torture.*

Jen was up to something. He hoped he didn't turn into a babbling idiot before she sprang her little surprise. All day he had been hard, just looking at her and her skirt, imagining. God, he'd wanted to turn her over his desk and—

She had said she'd planned to be naughty. That he ought to spank her.

His hands itched to touch that tempting ass. His hands itched to part those legs, encased in those black stockings and heels, then slide the stocking down, hobbling her as he pushed his cock in hard.

He just itched for her, any way, every way.

He'd been a good boy for a long time now. He wanted to be bad. Real fucking bad.

She was urging him to do that with every little twitch of that sweet butt, with every slow, sidelong smile. Her panties had been damp when she handed them to him. He bet she was wet now.

Jen smiled as she turned on the CD player. Yes, Frank Sinatra would definitely do the trick. She loved the way Jack looked nervously at her smile. He knew her well enough to be nervous.

"Why don't we dance tonight?" she asked. "We didn't get to for my birthday, you remember."

Without a word, Jack took her in his arms. They swayed together. Jen moved just a millimeter of an inch closer to him.

Was this working? She felt his erection, pulsing hard against her, and she knew things were working just fine.

*Damn, she knew just what to do. That was the disadvantage of having someone you love know you all your life. She knew all your weaknesses. She was pushing every button.*

She even knew what music always got him weak at the knees. The music switched to Billie Holliday. Jen's soft kisses at his throat were getting him a little stronger in other places. God help him. He'd wanted her to do this since forever.

"Are you seducing me, Jen?" Jack murmured.

"Is it working?"

"Of course. But did you think it necessary?"

"Maybe." Jen bit his chin lightly. "Mmm, still clean-shaven at the end of the day. How do you manage that, Jack?"

Jack took a deep breath and let it out. "Oh, to hell with it. I'm easy. Let's go to bed."

"I think that is an excellent idea." Jen agreed. "Come on."

In the bedroom he was surprised and a little amused by his formerly quiet Jen suddenly starting to take off his clothes. He liked the way she did it—as if she had a right to put her hands on any part of his body. Hell, he loved the way she did it.

As she unbuttoned his shirt, she told him, "You know, Jack, I finally had a rush of sense to the brain. I think I've figured several things out about you and me."

"Have you?"

"I've been so mad and confused the past few weeks when it seemed to me you were losing interest, or treating me like a toy that might get broken too easily—"

"What?"

"Hush. Let me just take care of this." She gently stroked his nipple as she pulled the shirt off. "But, like I said, I finally figured it out. All this withdrawn behavior of yours started after my nightmare. Now you could have been mad that I was dreaming of Victor—but that wasn't the problem, was it?"

"Jen—"

"I think it was that you thought you were scaring me and you needed to back off. Backing off, for you, including backing off in bed. Right?"

"Sort of."

"It didn't work because then I got mad because of how you acted toward me." Jen knelt before him and pulled off his shoes and socks. "For your information, I love what we do in bed together. I think I've figured out how we can avoid these little messy emotional misunderstandings, Jack. All you have to do is follow my lead. Don't try to guess what I want from you when you make love to me. If you aren't sure, just let me show you."

"That simple, huh?" Jack tried to smile through the sudden rush of excitement.

"Mmmm." She very deliberately stroked him as she pulled down his zipper. "I don't mean all the time. That could get dull. But if you are ever, ever concerned about how I might feel, just let me show you. Consider yourself my own personal sex toy. I might use you a little roughly, but I promise I won't actually break you. Don't you think you'd like it?"

"I do so far."

He particularly liked the part where she firmly pushed him so that he sprawled backwards onto the bed and she rested herself between his thighs. She leaned over him, almost touching his chest and did nothing for a moment.

Then she kissed his cheek.

"I have plans for us tonight, darling," Jen whispered to him. "Are you up for them?"

"I think I'm gettin' just about there," he drawled, and they both knew from the slur in his voice that he was entirely serious.

"Do you trust me, Jack? " she purred. "I want you to stay still. I thought about tying you up, but I think you can handle it. No matter what, I don't want you to move your arms or legs. I think you are tough enough. Enough for this—"

She began slowly, deliberately to put his arm under his head. He licked his lips as she got close.

"My fantasies are more the opposite of this, babe. I was hopin' it would be more like where I get to tie you up but..." His breath caught as she leaned over him to start pushing on the other arm and her breast brushed him. "You could try persuading me."

"You can handle it, right? A big strong guy like you?" she asked. "Yes? Well, then—" she began to strip, slowly. His breath sounded harsher but he said nothing. She knew he was watching, though, as she peeled off the dress and showed the bra with no pants to match. "Maybe I'll just stay like this for while. What do you think, Jack? Do you like it?"

His indrawn breath rasping was answer enough.

She was going to handle this. The sudden rush of confidence and lust was better than the champagne or the music before. Just what would arouse Jack the most? Jen eyed that body and caught her breath.

Hers. All hers. Now to begin.

She straddled him and began to slowly use her mouth and hands, always just almost satisfying before skittering to a new erogenous zone. She felt him buck under her as she licked his thigh. His one arm moved, but only to let his hand clutch the bedpost. He was playing the game.

Jen smiled. Well, she thought she smiled, but she also wanted to use her tongue just there—His penis tip was already wet. God knows she felt pretty wet herself.

She teased the head of his cock, pressed her tongue against the small hole there.

"Jen, you may just make me give up...a lifelong promise to myself not to ever...oh, God...ever beg—" Jen swallowed his cock and he seemed to swallow his tongue at the same time. At least Jack didn't give her any more words. Strangled sounds didn't count as an objection. Mmmm. She could have her dessert right here.

The words "*lifelong promise*" recalled a little of her sanity and her plan came back to her. But it was so delicious to suck Jack into mindlessness that she had to struggle to stop. She gave him one more tongue stroke and was delighted to hear a groan and feel him buck under her again.

"Now that I have your complete attention, sir, and I do have your attention, right? No, I don't see any polite barriers at all right now—" she mounted him, felt his cock slide securely inside, and sat still. She felt him quivering but he still said nothing. "John Edmund Logan, I want to ask you something and you have to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the tr—no, I'm in charge, no moving, no, mmm—let me do this right."

His cock stroked her clit just slightly in response. She shut her lips tight to keep from crying out. She was serious, damn it! Jen refused to respond, sitting so quietly that he finally stopped his play. His eyes were locked on hers, calculating his next move, his chest pumping up and down, his breath coming out harsh and shallow.

They both knew he was going to do something soon.

She rushed the words. "I love you. Jack, will you marry me?"

She saw his realization of what she said hit a split second after he had grabbed her arms and flipped her under him. Still not saying anything, his hand reached out, blindly, to the drawer where the condoms were kept. For an instant she felt despair. Was that his only response?

He came out with a box. A small box. The same hand flipped it open.

"Yes." He thrust up into her at the same time, half-laughing. There was no withdrawn expression on his face now. The happiness made her light up, too. "But why don't you wear this instead of me?"

"You had a ring all this time?"

"Yes and no. My father gave it to me during our visit. It was my grandmother's engagement ring."

"Jack—" Jen knew she was crying from joy, from the sexual tension he was starting in her, from pure relief. "You had this waiting here? You meant to do this?"

"God, yes, but Jen, don't talk now. I can't stop—Jen—" The bed rocked dangerously. "One more second and I would have come without you, you witch. Where the *hell* did you learn to do all that?"

Not Victor. Not really.

"From watching you. I'm learning everything that you like, bucko. Then I just made it—*up*. Jack!"

A little while later, with her heartbeat still slowing down, she felt his hands stroking her gently. His touch was so tentative she almost wanted to cry. The feelings she had had just now were so strong and powerful and good. Weren't his?

Jennifer studied his face. Jack's smile was gentle now, not like the last few weeks, with the desperation behind the gentleness. This was gentle in the way it had been sometimes just after the funerals. There was sadness there. How could he feel sad now? She touched his mouth.

"What could be wrong, Jack?"

"Jen, I don't know if I'll be a good husband to you or a good father to Vicky," he said, softly. "It doesn't seem to run in the genes. But I want to be. You tell me what you want and I'll try."

"You'll be wonderful, Jack." She was sure. "You've always been wonderful with me and with Vicky. Sometimes I see you with her and I forget that she isn't yours."

"No, honey, don't fool yourself. I know she isn't mine," Jack said. "That doesn't bother me, you know. I look at her and I see you and Victor. The two best people in the world. I'd be afraid if she was my kid. I—I don't know about what I'd pass on in a kid of mine. But you and Victor, that's different."

"Jack—"

"I don't know what happened to him. I don't wish it had turned out differently, mind you. How the hell could I give this up? But something went very wrong, Jen. I can't understand why he didn't come back. He was a great guy. How could Vicky go wrong with parents like you?"

"Wait a minute," Jen sat up. "I love Vicky. She is the most wonderful girl in the world, but Jack, don't be so humble. You have so much to offer any woman, any child. I'm lucky. Vicky is lucky. And our children will be lucky, too."

"Jen, are you preg—?"

"No. This time my little lapse in judgment didn't boomerang in my face. Maybe that's just as well. Vicky is still pretty young and I don't want you to ever think I asked you for that reason. But that doesn't mean I wouldn't like more children, Jack. I want your children very much. I want them to look like you and be like you because you're so special."

The smile on Jack's face was so tender that her insides twisted. He kissed her so sweetly, even while she knew he didn't believe a word of what she so desperately wanted him to believe.

"Jen, that ring was the thing my father wanted me to have before we left," Jack whispered. "I loved my grandmother. She was the only one in my family who gave a



damn about me. She had a long, happy marriage to my grandfather and she told me once her only regret in marrying my grandfather was that she outlived him by twenty years. Maybe it's a good omen. At any rate, Dad meant something when he gave me this ring. Maybe he just wants me to settle down. But for what it's worth, I think the old man approves of you."

With a sigh she put her lips quietly to his. It might take time to convince him she knew every word she said was true. This marriage thing ought to do the trick, if anything could. She had a lifetime to prove it to him. She'd be patient.

*The hell she would.* She pushed herself away and glared at him.

"Jack, how dare you give me that old 'I know I'm second best to Victor routine' after all this!" Jen snarled. "How can you act like you aren't worthy to marry me!"

"Honey?"

"You can stop that humbleness right now. I have a feeling there's a little more here than you feeling as if Victor is special and you somehow are not. You know, my sisters asked me something once and I'll ask you the same thing. If Victor came through that door right now and he wanted me, would you just hand me over to him?"

"Hell, no."

"Even though you've been looking for him for me and even though he is such a wonderful guy and so much better than you?"

"That has nothing to do with it." Jack began to look dangerous. "You're going to marry me. No one else gets between you and me now. I'd kill them first. You knew from the start that I'm a very possessive guy when it comes to you."

"Do you think I'd change my mind?" Jen asked.

"Jen, I pray you won't. You knew that Victor might—just might—be out there somewhere when you chose me," Jack said. "If you changed your mind again—I guess I'd just have to convince you that I'm the one you are going to stay with for the rest of our lives."

"Sounds to me like you love me." Jen waited. Maybe she shouldn't push this, even though she knew it had to be true.

There was a long moment then Jack moved to kiss her again, gently and quietly. When he lifted his head she waited for the words. The ones she wanted.

"Jen, I don't know what that means." He sighed. "I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone in my life. I want to be with you. I don't know if that is enough. If I said I care about you and leave it at that for now, will that make you change your mind about marrying me?"

"No. It won't. I'll just have to change yours."

"I'm sorry, Jen. You should have someone better than me. Someone who can say the right things to you. Someone who is a gentleman."

"I don't know. You aren't precisely a gentle man, though you can be. But you're a truly good one. That's what I want. I hope I deserve it."

"I do care about you, Jen. Tremendously."

"I love you, Jack," Jen whispered, past the huge lump in her throat. "I think, deep down, you know you can trust me with your love or you wouldn't have agreed to marry me. There, Counselor. The defense rests."

"I knew you should have gone to law school." He tried to laugh and then stopped. "God, this feels good, Jen. I feel good. Peaceful. I still want the hell out of you, of course, but it all feels right now, not desperate. Just—right. You're right for me."

"I'm no dummy, Mr. Logan," Jen said. "I'd only marry the man who is just right for me. And I'd have to be the one who is right for him. I guess that's why they call it settling down. We're sure of each other."

## Chapter Seven

"Jennifer, I'm simply so excited that you are engaged to my boy." The modulated, faintly petulant voice of Jack's mother was distinctive. "I remember you when you were just a child. So sweet and big-eyed—"

Jen remembered the slim, husky-voiced woman from her childhood. She'd been dazzled by the woman's charm, her beautiful clothes, her interest in the little girl next door. Jack's mother might have little to offer but her looks and her ability to charm people, but she made the most of them. Some remnants of that dazzle remained for Jen, no matter how badly the woman had treated her son.

"She still is, Mother," Jack told her on the other extension.

"There are so many plans to be made for the wedding. Have you sent your engagement notice in to the Post?"

"Uh—no." Jennifer almost panicked. "Honestly, we just decided a few days ago to get married. We haven't made any definite plans about anything."

"We won't be bothering to send in any notices to any newspapers, Mother," Jack said. "We're planning a very short engagement. Very."

"But Jack!" His mother was horrified. "How can you plan a proper wedding if you don't—"

"No society wedding, Mother," Jack went on. Jen longed to look at his face while he spoke. Or better yet, have him take a look at hers while he gave out his commands. "Jen's brother will be in town for Thanksgiving. We'll probably get married at home then, with just family."

"What about, well, you know, legal arrangements? I'm sure you must have decided about a prenuptial agreement—"

"Mother, there won't be one. End of discussion."

Jack clicked the telephone off.

It was Jack at his most high-handed. They hadn't even discussed this yet and here he had the date, the wedding guests and the place picked out without consulting her. It was so arrogant of him. It was so—perfect. Jen relaxed. Jack had decided on just exactly what she wanted.

She heard him come clattering down the stairs. He glanced sidewise at her, looking so guilty, Jen bit her cheek to keep from laughing. She folded her arms across her chest and looked at him.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Mr. Logan?"

"I'm sorry, Jen." He looked uneasy. "I wanted to talk it over with you but with my mother you need to act in control or you'll end up doing exactly what she wants, when she wants it. If you don't want to get married in three weeks, we don't have to. We'll do it just the way you want."

"You mean the June wedding with the five hundred guests that I always, always wanted?" Jen asked. "Of course it might not be this June since it will more than a year to plan it all out to the last detail. We could make it the year after. If we hurry."

She saw him wince as he muttered, "I can handle it. Mother would love that kind of wedding."

"I wouldn't." Jen let out her laugh. "Jack, do you really think that I 'd want to do that? Your idea is just right. Not that you shouldn't have talked it over with me before anyone else."

"I'm sorry." He sounded both relieved and sincere. "I just—I just want to be married to you. If I didn't like your family so much I'd have said we should get the blood tests

over with and get married as soon as we can. But I'd like to have them there. I think your sisters would make dynamite bridesmaids."

"They were born to be my bridesmaids. At least I'm sure they think so," Jen agreed, in a dry tone. "Let's hope Cee Cee doesn't wear something too outrageous at the wedding."

"There's work, too," Jack reminded her. "You know the policy on married couples working together. It's the same as the policy on dating. We're lucky we haven't been caught before this. It won't matter after we get married."

"I don't want to make a big deal out of it," Jen shrugged. "Shall I give them my two week notice as soon as we hire a replacement?"

"Whatever you want, dear," Jack agreed, with an insincere meekness. "Unless you think I should resign instead...? I'd hate for you to think I expect you to give up your work."

"I suppose you would stay at home and be a househusband? I bet. No, Jack, I have a new job offer," Jen said. "I wanted to talk to you about it before but it slipped my mind with everything else going on. It won't pay much, but I got an offer to write a semi-regular column. At least that means I won't have to count on the prenuptial agreement to support me when we get divorced, huh?"

"Bite your tongue, girl. Or bite mine instead. I dare you."

"Stop that. I want to tell you about my new job. The response to my guest column was pretty positive. I think between settling Vicky and me into your house and making love to you at all odd hours, that I could make a good start at picking up my old freelancing. And Jack—I might just consider law school."

"It sounds good," Jack hesitated. "Jen, I have something I've wanted to talk to you about for a while, even though I haven't really worked it all out. What if I told you I might not stay on at the firm for much longer?"

"I don't believe they don't want to keep you on," Jen was stunned. "You have partnership track written all over you."

"No. Well, at least I don't think it's that I won't get an offer. It's me that doesn't necessarily want to be kept on."

"You're tired of it?" Jen asked.

"I'm tired of being someone else's boy," Jack admitted. "Even if I make partner—"

"Even when you make partner—"

"I won't be allowed to make all the decisions. I don't know how much of a team player I want to be. If I decide to go on my own, that could be a lot more risky financially and I may have to put in a lot more hours at work." He tested the idea out loud. "I'm not saying we'd be broke. I haven't ever touched any of my father's or mother's money but you know I have investments and a trust fund from my grandparents. Still we might not be as comfortable as a partner would be."

"You probably make too much money now anyhow. I know we'd do fine either way." Jen was reassuring. "I want you to do what you want, Jack. I could come and work for you if you decide you need to spend too much time in the office. Unless I might distract you too much. Then I would *definitely* come and work for you. I love distracting you, Jack."

"God, I remember what you told me that day in the office, you tease. I'm not sure I could survive too much of that, but it would be fun to try. Now before you do distract me, just remember I haven't decided anything yet. Let's get married and then we'll see what's best." He kissed her.

"In the meantime I guess I better put away my beautiful ring." Jen reluctantly pushed it off her finger. "I don't want to have to announce anything at work until we're ready to. I am glad we got that phone call to your mother over with. Shall we tell Lisa and your father tonight? We really can't put it off much longer."

"I suppose we should. Damn, I hate having that off your finger." Jack frowned. "It looks good there. Speaking of looking good—whatever you want to do with my house, do it. I'm tired of looking at it the way it is anyhow. That is, if you want to stay at the house. We can do what you want."

"I love your house, Jack. You did the right thing when you bought it from your folks. You really didn't need to change anything, did you? Your mother has lovely taste." Jen hesitated.

"In interior design, maybe." Jack's voice was dry. "But the place is just a showpiece. I spend all my time in the library or at your house as it is. You fix it up so Vicky will be able to live in it comfortably. God knows I wasn't allowed to run around in the house when I was a kid. I'd like to enjoy it."

It was true that the only place Jack seemed to stay was the library. That was a hodgepodge of stereo equipment, computers and heaps of books. She wouldn't dare change anything there.

But elsewhere she would love to strip off the fussy wallpaper, modernize the kitchen—a place Jack's mother never entered in her life—and get rid of some of the knickknacks that had no meaning to Jack. Well, maybe dump some of the more delicate pieces of antique furniture that she was afraid to use, much less touch, and put in some more modern, sturdy things—

"I'd like to try it," Jen told him abruptly. "You'd tell me if there is anything you want to keep or would hate to have brought in. Oh, my God."

"What?"

"Jack, it's starting to sink in. We really are going to get married!"

"I suppose you'll be trying to change my wardrobe next. Isn't that what wives do?"

"I suppose, seeing as you're the one with the impeccable taste, you should change mine instead. Oh, Jack, can you really believe this?"

"Better believe it, baby." He grinned. "Maybe I'll have to try something in bed to convince you.""

"Do married people do that sort of thing? Never mind. I think you should."

Cecilia's reaction to their announcement had been as troubling in its way as Jack's mother's. While Molly had shown nothing but joy, Cee Cee's face shut down for a moment. During that time Jen wondered if her younger sister had some lingering desire for Jack that was now extinguished. She had looked so bleak and so much older that Jen's heart constricted with fear.

"Don't you wish us well, Sis?" Jen tried not sound afraid or horrified.

She didn't know what she would do if Cecilia kept looking like that. She really didn't. She couldn't give Jack up now but if it was going to hurt Cecilia this badly—

"Of course." Cee Cee began to look more herself. "You and Jack belong together. It's just that—it just means that Victor really seems gone now. I remember when you told us that you were going to marry him."

"Victor is just as dead whether Jen marries Jack or not," Molly broke in. "I would much rather see Jen happy and in love with Jack than pining after a ghost."

"No, pining doesn't do any good," Cecilia agreed, in a strange voice before she returned to her old enigmatic self. "Well, this means the family is going to be leaving the old homestead in droves. First Kevin, then Jen and Vicky—"

"For heaven's sake, we'll be right next door!" Jen protested.

"It won't be the same." Cecilia was sure. "You'll probably stay home with Vicky all day. You'll be hosting dinner parties for Jack and his clients—oh, don't deny it, Jen, you know you'll end up being the perfect hostess if that is what Jack wants or needs. No more nights in jail for you! I hope it doesn't bother you to have a lounge singer for a baby sister."

"Huh?"

"I've been offered a contract." Cee Cee tried not too sound too excited but it wasn't working. "A friend of a friend heard me and thought I have enough potential to sign up. I think I'll take some more voice lessons this semester before the recording session—too bad I didn't major in voice and take some business courses on the side. That would be a



lot more useful than what I did do. Oh well, it isn't like having a stage presence hurts when you tour."

"Tour?"

"If I do well enough. I expect I will," Cee Cee added. "So I guess it will just be little Molly left at home. I suppose we could always sell the place and Molly could come and live with you."

Molly gaped at her.

"Wait a minute! You don't have to plan my life out and spring it on me, even if you want to do that for your own—" Molly began, hotly.

Wedding plans and Cee Cee's moment of hurt were forgotten as Jen began the familiar task of soothing her bickering sisters.

Laura made her announcement as soon as Jen stepped into the office that day.

"Mr. Richards wants to see me?" she asked. "Me, not Jack?"

Mr. Richards, Jr. was the son of one of the name partners in the firm. The real name partners had died years ago, but Mr. Richards was the managing partner. Jen wouldn't have been sure before this moment that he even knew she was alive.

"You," Laura said.

"Why?" Jen looked at her.

"I'm supposed to know? Don't you?"

"I don't know why. How do I look?" Jennifer asked.

"Pretty good if you don't count looking scared to death." Laura was not trying to be reassuring. "He said he wants to see you as soon as possible. Better hurry. Good luck."

Jen felt her engagement ring hanging underneath her silk blouse. Had Mr. Richards heard something about their engagement? Why else could he have called for her?

When she entered the large office, Jen kept her back as straight as possible and tried not to shake with nerves. Whatever the partner had to say to her couldn't be particularly welcome news but it would be worse if she broke down when he said it.

"Ms. Turner." The older man with the crop of white hair looked over at her from behind his desk. He didn't stand up.

"Sir."

"I've heard good reports about your work over the past few years, Ms. Turner," the man said. "Read your father's columns daily until his untimely death, too."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll come to the point. I've heard more disturbing things recently. I got a phone call from Mrs. Logan recently. Congressman Logan's wife. Now I'm a fair man. I thought it wise to speak to you first rather than act hastily on her words."

"I—think I see."

"Mrs. Logan pointed out a situation that had escaped our notice concerning you and an attorney working here. Your boss." The man looked at her. "No one in the office had seen or thought of any problem until now. I wanted to hear your view of the situation."

"If you mean to ask whether I traveled with Mr. Logan—with Jack Logan—to his family's home in Texas, well, yes I did," Jen hedged. What should she say? What would Jack want her to say? "He asked me to do so when his father had an unexpected heart attack."

"Congressman Logan, yes. Mrs. Logan told us. I heard that travel was not the only thing involved."

"I don't know how to answer you, sir."

"Ms. Turner, Jack Logan is one of our finest associates. He has a keen legal mind, he works hard and he has a great many political connections. His stepmother reminded us that we all expect to see him in a future political career of his own some day. The firm

intends to make him a partnership offer in another year or two. However, no one wants to see any innuendo or scandal attached to his dealings with the firm."

"Have you spoken to Mr. Logan about this?"

"My associate, Mr. King, is speaking with Jack right now. I thought it best to speak with you at the same time."

"Well then, after you've spoken to Jack, you'll understand there is no scandal involved here," Jen said, as calmly as she could.

"Mrs. Logan hinted otherwise. I would hate to remind you that a young single woman with very few connections and a young child is in a far more vulnerable position than a rising young lawyer."

"But I will have connections soon, Mr. Richards. Let me tell you that I hope Mr. King didn't put things that way to Jack, since he's very protective of my good name." Jen wondered if she sounded too Victorian. But Mr. Richards was something of a Victorian himself. A rather nasty one. She didn't like the knowing look in his eyes. "We haven't yet spoken to Jack's father, so I'm sure that's why Mrs. Logan misunderstood and passed that misinformation on to you. I intend to leave the firm very soon."

"I am very glad to hear it. In that case we would be happy to give you an excellent reference—"

"I don't think I'll need one, sir, although I do thank you." Jen's mouth firmed. "I don't plan to work as a paralegal in the future. You see, I'll be marrying Jack by the end of this month."

She stood and forced herself to walk steadily out of the office. She heard Mr. Richards' murmuring apologies, explanations, but she couldn't stop to listen. She had to leave before she either burst into tears—whether they would be of embarrassment, rage or both, she wasn't sure.

When she got back to her office, she turned to her co-worker. "Laura, I've been holding out on you."

"I thought so." Laura nodded. "Have you and Jack been having an affair? It's the only explanation I could come up with."

"Jack and I have been having an engagement," Jen responded.

"And we want you to be at the wedding." Jack was behind her, gripping Jen's shoulders a moment. "I hope you see it as an honor, Laura. You'll be the only one invited from this damned firm."

Jen turned and let Jack hold her.

"I'm glad to see you," Jen sighed.

"I'm damned glad you decided to stick around. Almost as glad as I am that you're marrying me." Jack kissed her. Hard. In front of Laura.

Jen's officemate looked truly amazed for the first time since they met.

"Wow. He does love you," Laura gasped. "I didn't believe he could manage it—"

Laura turned red but, fortunately, Jack ignored her. He was too busy looking at Jen.

"Laura, hold down the fort. We'll be taking a long lunch today," Jack said. "Jen and I need to talk."

Jack walked with her to the nearest diner. It was early, so early that no one they knew had arrived for lunch yet. They ordered some coffee. Jen relaxed marginally as they waited.

At least the place was empty. She didn't want the whole firm to know what Jack was going to say. She could tell from the remoteness on his white face that he was furious.

"Jack, I told Mr. Richards." She tried not to sound apologetic. "I had to. His insinuations were—"

"I know," Jack told her. "I can imagine, anyhow. I got an earful from King. Damn my stepmother, and damn those old men for trying to hustle you out the door. I'm to blame, too, for being stupid enough to try to respect their damned rules and keeping our relationship a secret. In fact—excuse me for a moment, darling."

He flipped open his cell phone and dialed.

"Mother? Yes, I've reconsidered. I know you'd know just how to word an engagement announcement to the newspaper. See if you can get one in as soon as possible. I'd appreciate it."

"Jack—" Jen started and he held his hand out to stop her

"Thanks. 'Bye." Then he turned to her. "Shall we call and let my dear stepmother know the good news right now?"

"Jack, you know Mr. Richards did make me think a little bit more about all this. I—do you—Maybe we should take some more time to think this through. Are you sure you want to marry me?"

"What?" Jack's whole body stiffened. Jen's relaxed a little more. Jack seemed very sure. "Are you insane?"

"I mean it, Jack. We haven't talked too much about the differences between us. Your mother talked about a prenuptial agreement and, you know, you have so much more money than I that I can't even imagine what you do have. We do come from very different worlds, Jack. Maybe that it going to be more of a problem than I had really thought about. I feel terrible that I'm going to cause trouble between you and—"

"Now who is giving me their humbleness routine and how she isn't good enough?" Jack visibly calmed himself down and looked at her. "No, sweetheart. I've sweated to get you to this point for too long to give you up now. I don't care about what bull Richards fed you. You and I are getting married. I'm not planning on going into politics or having some kind of lifestyle that wouldn't include you. I'm just sorry we do come from such different families and I'm the one who got stuck with mine. I've wanted to be part of your family all my life. Now, if we choose, the firm will apologize to us both for their stupidity."

"No, I don't want that."

"I don't know if I care enough to let them, either, even though you deserve an apology. You say you love me and want to marry me. You better mean it because I am going to marry you. That's the bottom line."

"Of course." Jen took a deep breath. "Of course. For a minute I was seeing you through the firm's eyes, rather than mine. What an idiot. But, you know, I think I'll give you that two weeks' notice now, if you don't mind."

"Honey, I'm a fierce boss," he said. "If you say you want to leave the job, then I say do whatever needs finishing up today and you can take off. You're fired. That is, as long as you plan to take off and move in with me by tonight."

"I don't know if I can finish up everything today." Jen tried to be practical even as her world seemed to turn over. "But I'll be happy to give it a try."

She stood up from the booth and then hesitated.

"Jack, you didn't tell them you were leaving, did you?" she asked.

"No," he scowled. "But I am. It won't be immediately. I need to make some plans. But they've resolved the issue for me. If I have to choose between them and you, it's very easy. "

He was right. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to face a lot of those people again.

"I don't want to force you into anything, Jack."

"That's something Victor showed me, Jen. Life can be damned short. I won't waste it trying to prove anything to anyone but you. You're the one I stick for."

People were starting to enter the diner. It didn't matter. Jen stooped down to kiss Jack, hard and long.

"I think I've been waiting a long time to hear something like that." Jen blinked away tears. "Thank you, Jack."

*He woke up and stared up over at the lights in the hospital's hall. Yes, he was still here and it wasn't a dream. This morning the doctors were going to check on his leg and see if all the painful resetting of broken bone was worth it.*

*If it worked, after that would come the rounds of physical therapy. Then, maybe then, he could tell if he was whole enough to go looking for Jen.*

*If all it needed was for him to sweat blood for a few weeks, that was nothing. He wasn't sure that was the entire problem, though. Jen was physically closer to him than she had been in a very long time. But he hadn't dreamed of her in weeks. He hadn't since that time he could feel himself forcing himself to dream of her.*

*As soon as the doctors gave him a prognosis and he knew he would be a whole man, then he'd look for her. He shut his eyes again. Jennifer. What was she doing now? And did she think of him at all?*

*Where the hell was she? What was going on?*

She looked up at the ceiling. She didn't want to think of him. It wasn't as if dreaming about another man while she was committed to marrying Jack made her feel happy. But perhaps this dream was good. Victor was getting better in her dreams and, as he did, he was beginning to think she was gone from his life.

More importantly, she had stopped the dream in the middle.

It was the first time she had managed to do that. If she had to dream these dreams, now she could imagine the dream where Victor realized he had to let her go.

There had been fewer and fewer dreams lately. Soon they would be gone entirely. She was sure of it.

## Chapter Eight

Jen laughed at Molly, who kept staring at her bridesmaid's dress in disbelief. She felt the laughter welling under her skin, ready to spring out at the slightest provocation. Wasn't that perfect? Wasn't that the way a bride should feel like? Less than three hours now and she would be married. She didn't feel nervous in the least. She could hardly wait.

"I have to wear that?" Molly protested. "It will fit like—like—"

"Exactly. C'mon, Molly. You saw it before. You didn't object."

"It hadn't been fitted on me then," Molly pointed out. "Fitted on me like skin. I had no idea it would—Jen, you knew. You knew it would be—"

"It will be perfect," Jen assured her. "Cee Cee picked it out. The color is perfect, the fit is perfect. Cee Cee knows her stuff."

"I've never worn anything like it—" Molly looked at the spaghetti straps attached to the bodice. "I can't even wear a bra, Jen! Unless you want me have the look where your bra straps show—"

"You'll look gorgeous no matter what you do, Molly. C'mon, girl. You've lost your baby fat." Jen kissed her, hard, and then twirled her around. "Hey, after wearing that I'll never be able to argue that you're a baby again."

Molly opened her mouth, shut it and smiled. She grabbed her sister in a tight embrace.

"It's your show, Jen. I think I look too fat in it but I'll do what you want." She gave in. "I want you to stay happy like you are now."



"I can't remember being this happy, ever," Jennifer agreed. "Wait until you see my dress. Cee Cee—"

"Picked it out. This should be something." Molly looked and whistled when Jen took it out of the closet. "I hope Jack can make it through the ceremony without fainting. Or something else."

"Molly!"

"Oh, it isn't overtly wild or anything, but it is seeexy..." Molly looked at the slit on the side and the simple lines that concealed only to reveal. "Yummy."

"And I'm going to wear Mom's veil—" Jennifer began.

Loud barking interrupted. They could hear Poppy thumping into furniture as the dog ran in circles, yipping happily at the new intruder. Someone was going to have to shut the dog up in Jack's house before too long.

"Hey, is anyone home?" a deep voice called.

Jen almost dropped her dress on the floor in her hurry down the stairs. Molly paused long enough to hang the dress back up. She'd recognized that voice too, and wasn't quite as anxious to meet up with its owner.

"Kevin!" Jen shrieked and launched herself at him.

She didn't stop to think that she would never have expected him to catch her a few years ago. In that split second before she left the ground she saw the same dirty blond hair that was meant to be unruly, but was currently cut in short military style. She looked into the same laughing eyes. She'd realized the differences, too. Daniel Kevin Turner, Jr. had broadened his shoulders and increased his muscles considerably. It looked like the army had made a man out of her baby brother.

He dropped his duffel bag and caught her easily.

"Jen-nifer!" he managed. "How are you, Slugger?"

"Happy." Jennifer giggled.

"I can tell." Kevin carefully placed her down. "Any food around here?"

His habitual question made her laugh and whap him playfully on the head.

"Go find Jack and play some ball," she ordered. "The man seems a little edgy. I can't imagine why. Maybe some basketball will relax him."

"Babe, the honeymoon will relax me. I don't plan to lose my edge until then." Jack came into the kitchen to take a quick nip at her ear. "How're things, Kevin?"

"OK." Kevin and Jack briefly clasped hands. "Glad to see things are under control here."

"As under control as they ever will be," Jennifer called out as she danced up the stairs again.

"I'm damn glad," Kevin said, steadily. "Thanks, Jack. Thanks for helping to take care of it. I can't imagine anyone who deserves my sister more."

"No one is good enough to deserve your sister." Jack smiled. "I'm just damned lucky she's willing to take me on."

"Listen to me." Kevin swallowed. "I'm going to have to say this to my sisters, too, but I thought I should start with you and get it out of the way. I was wrong to leave. I knew it when I did it but I—I couldn't stay. Now I'm back, I'm older and I'm going to try. I never was the smart one, the responsible one, the good one in the family. Any of my sisters could manage those things better than me. They still can. But my tour is up in a few months and when it is, I'll be here. You and Jen—you enjoy being with each other. Forget about the rest of us for a while. I'll handle the rest."

"Kevin, I'm glad you'll be back to keep an eye on things, but you know Jen couldn't stay away if you locked the door," Jack reassured him. "She loves you guys. She worries about you. Hell, I want to stick around myself. But the enjoying each other part—that sounds pretty good to me."

Kevin looked at Jack's grin and groaned. "No, don't tell me! There are things a brother doesn't need to know."

The familiar thump of a basketball could be heard. Jen hesitated. She should be doing other things. A million other things. She ran out anyhow.

She paused to watch the two most important men in her life sweating and laughing as they fought over a basketball.

Somehow that made everything back to normal in her life. She fought the urge to beg to play, too. Instead she waved and ducked back in.

Priorities. A bride had to have priorities. Watching her fiancé with his shirt off wasn't one of them. At least not yet.

As Jen ran back up the stairs for about the hundredth time that day she heard the murmurs outside the window of the landing and paused. Cee Cee and Molly were outside on the porch, watching the game, too.

"Have you ever wondered how she does it, Molly?" Cecilia asked.

"She doesn't do anything. She just—is," Molly said.

"But she manages to pick the two handsomest guys in high school, snares them from the time she is old enough to wear a training bra and—get this—holds on to them both. Jack nearly fell over the basketball when she showed up just now. Even when she had Victor, she could make Jack sweat. And if Victor was alive today ol' Vic would probably jump his best friend to get her back. She doesn't even have to try. That's the amazing thing."

"Jack and Victor both know a good thing when they see it." Molly was loyal.

"Oh, Jen is a good thing, all right. She must be great in bed, too. You wouldn't think it, since she is such a good little mother to everyone, but you can see the look in Jack's eyes when she goes by. Victor used to look like that sometimes, too. You could feel the sizzle. I don't think they were thinking about her capacity for mothering."

"I think that is a compliment." Molly wasn't completely sure. "You don't look too happy about it, though."

"Hell, I'm jealous of her," Cee Cee admitted. "I have been all my life. If I didn't love her so much myself, I'd probably claw her eyes out. Why don't any of my men sizzle for me?"

"Of course they sizzle. But Cee Cee, I never had the impression that you gave a damn about any of your men," Molly told her. "Jen does."

"No, I don't suppose I have." Cee Cee sounded a little sad. "But Jennifer gets the men you could care about. Then she hangs on to them. We never get a chance. What a selfish little pig she is!"

Jen smiled. It wasn't the usual compliment a bride got on her wedding day, but she would take it just the same.

And, finally, she was ready. She smoothed the ivory gown. As a concession to Jack, she wore her hair long and unbound. She touched her mother's veil. If only Mother could have been here to see this.

She took a deep breath and walked into the living room.

Jack was there. Of course he looked wonderful in his suit. He always looked good in his suits. But his blue eyes looked particularly bright today, his smile had a special curve to it when he saw her. He reached out his hand, wordlessly, and gathered her close.

He looked perfect. How had she managed to get this incredibly physically perfect male to marry her? He made her mouth water. He made her heart hurt, he looked so good.

"My God, you look great in that dress. Did Cee Cee—"

"Pick it out? Yes, of course. You know, I'm starting to feel bad that no one thinks I could find something this sexy on my own."

"You have your talents," Jack told her. "But remind me to kiss Cecilia's feet after the ceremony."

"I will not." They laughed together.

The room looked perfect. The old photographs on the mantel smiled at her. The flowers throughout the room were all her favorites. She had arranged all of them by herself. She and Jack had agreed there would be no procession. They would be there together to greet their guests as they came in. Jen could almost feel herself dancing with joy and impatience. She wanted to get on with it. She was tired of waiting.

"I wish we had made the wedding earlier in the morning," Jen almost sulked. "I'm ready to go now...well, almost. I've gotta put on the makeup."

She blew Jack a quick kiss and dashed up the stairs again and into her bedroom.

She glanced over at the bed where Vicky was sleeping hard. Things were working out perfectly. If Vicky had her nap before the ceremony there would be less likelihood of baby tantrums and hysterics.

Jen began to carefully apply makeup. Cecilia might laugh at her efforts, but she could make an effort for her wedding. Her tongue stuck out just a little in concentration as she worked on the eyeliner.

She heard the door crash open and wondered if Kevin had charged in. He hadn't changed that much, apparently.

"Hello, Jen. Darling."

The brush dropped as Jen stared in the mirror. He still wasn't real. He was a reflection. He was—

She turned.

He looked faintly disreputable, even in his suit. Although he stood almost as straight and almost as gracefully as ever, he held a cane in one hand and his dark eyes pierced into her with more intensity than she remembered him ever having.

Jen felt herself swaying. It felt almost like a dream again, even though she knew it wasn't. Somehow she was sure that this was real. Still, time seemed to move unnaturally as she stared at him.

Victor was back. After all this time, his dark eyes were fixed on her. He was older, tougher-looking, thinned down even more, and he limped his way toward her. But he was alive. Alive.

"Victor!"

"Sweet—?" Victor said, in a low voice.

*Oh my God.* Someone said it aloud. Jen knew it must have been her. She could have sworn nothing could come out of her throat.

She dragged air into her lungs.

"Victor, how? What—" She couldn't form a sentence, couldn't feel anything. She took a step toward Victor. Her movements felt awkward, unreal—just like in the old dream, the one she had hoped was gone forever.

"Jen, I'm sorry. After the last assignment, when the helicopter went down, we landed in some wild country. Some people took me in—the pilot was dead, I never found out about the others. I couldn't remember anything. I had hit my head in the crash—" His hand briefly touched a scar over his eyebrow.

She reached her hand out to touch, snatched it back.

"I dreamed of you, you know," he told her next, very calmly. "I dreamed myself back into remembering your name and mine. You speaking my name in a dream reminded me who I was. I kept seeing you and it was all so real—I could see you as I got out of the jungle. I dreamed of you in my hospital. You were there. And I dreamed you were thinking of me. All this time I felt so close to you. I felt like you were waiting for me."

She couldn't tell him. She couldn't. He would think it meant—that it meant—She didn't know what it meant.

"It took almost two years?" The voice came from behind her, from the man who had just arrived at her bedroom door. It was Jack speaking although she did not quite recognize it as his voice. "You couldn't remember anything for two damn years?"

"Not for a while." Victor was grimmer by the second. "Not for a long while. It came back slowly. But then I found myself near the Amazon. The people who took care of me were brave, but not brave enough to try to smuggle me out. They didn't know who I was anyhow. And my leg wouldn't—it wouldn't carry me far."

Jen's eyes glanced down to the cane he held. He looked like he was in pain, both physical and mental, but Victor held himself steady and his voice was pitched calmly, although there was an edge behind it.

"I managed to get out and get back a few weeks ago."

"Why didn't you tell me then?" Jen wailed.

A few weeks ago. Was it about the time she had first seen Jack as a man and they had gone to bed? When he had fought Jamieson over her? When she had proposed? What would have happened had Victor shown up at any of those times? What would it have meant if she had known her dreams were real? And would she have wanted it to be any different than it was? It was hard to think, talk, breathe.

"I didn't know how my leg would make it—whether I was going to be crippled up. Useless. After I got into a hospital I wanted to wait to be sure." Victor's voice grew harsher. "Then I read the wedding announcement in the paper. I realized I was almost too late. I came because I heard my best friend was getting married to my woman."

"She isn't yours." Jack kept talking in that same even, flat, unnatural voice. "Not any more."

"You bastard!"

Vic limped rapidly toward him and gripped his collar.

"No! Bad!"

Vicky had woken up from her nap and she screamed the words.

She ran to clutch Jack's leg. Victor went absolutely still and loosened his hold on the other man.

A little girl with his eyes and coloring looked back at him, sobbing. Jen saw his hand grip his cane this time until it went white.

His other hand reached out, touched his daughter's hair.

"Who—" Victor looked up at Jennifer.

"She's mine now, too," Jack answered him. "You didn't think about that before you went off, leaving Jen to take care of everything from her parents' death to your baby. Didn't even occur to you there might be some problems for her without you, did it, old buddy?"

"Da, Da!" Vicky screamed and Jack knelt down to scoop her up, his set face a contrast to the soft words he used to soothe her.

*Goddamnit*. He'd spent the last few months fighting what just hit him as he buried his face in Vicky's baby neck. He couldn't lie any more. Love overwhelmed him as he held the little girl, refusing to look at his almost-wife. He'd been so close—so close—

His woman and his little girl were leaving. Somewhere, deep down, he'd believed Jen would never be his. Was that why he had lied to himself that he couldn't love Jen? He'd gone without a family or love before. It hadn't killed him. Stupidly, he'd believed that if he didn't admit he cared this time, it wouldn't hurt if things fell apart.

Things hadn't just fallen apart, they'd smashed into bits. Victor, his now ex-best friend, was about to claim his own. What a fucking stupid time to realize Jennifer was his heart and without her and Vicky, he was lost. Why the *hell* did he have to realize how much he'd had only when he had lost everything?

Vicky stopped sobbing as she relaxed against him, comforted by his presence. He could feel Jen staring at him.

Oh God, Jen. Jen, in that delectable wedding dress that he was dying to peel off. Jen, with her worried face, trying to take on the world's problems. Jen, with her eyes glazed with lust, reaching for him. Jen.



He'd fight for her. He had to fight for her. He might even be able to win against Victor. Jack tried to loosen the knot in his stomach.

There was one big problem.

He couldn't fight against Jen.

Jen could feel her brain hazing over and fought it off. She wouldn't do this in front of the men and definitely not in front of Vicky, who was frightened enough. No fainting.

"Victor—Jack," she whispered. "Let's go to another room. I'll go find someone to take Vicky. Now. We'll settle this in private. I don't need anyone else coming in."

She ran downstairs and thrust Vicky into a startled Molly's arms without saying anything. Then she stumbled into the dining room and heard the two men behind her. She slammed the door and leaned against it once they were inside.

What could she say? The two men were staring at each other like wolves ready to go for the throat at the first opportunity. Jack looked like he had after fighting with Jamieson, drawn and white. Victor was holding Jack's gaze like an angry dog.

Although one was dark and the other fair, one smooth looking in his suit and the other rough, the two of them were almost frighteningly similar in height and build and icy temper. She knew the two of them were ready to kill each other. They probably would do something—unforgivable—to each other unless she did something to stop them. And she didn't know what to do.

In the distance she could hear Cee Cee and Molly greeting their guests at the door and leading them in. Kevin was upstairs, late as always, getting a shave before he came down. She could imagine Molly having dressed Vicky. She could envision Vicky, dressed in her first velvet and lace gown, trying to touch the flowers and babbling at the guests as they came in and sat down. People would be there, smiling, expecting a wedding ceremony.

She thought she could hear the magistrate, who had been a friend of their father's and willing to perform the ceremony at home, speaking to her sister.

Everyone would be gathering in the living room soon. It wasn't as if they were having a large crowd for the wedding. Jack's family had declined to come when his mother and father heard there was the chance both could be there. There was Laura and some neighbors like Mrs. Jessup, Mrs. Beale and her considerable family, one or two of Jack's law school friends and Jen's family. Jack had firmly declined to invite any of the other more noteworthy people his mother had suggested.

Jen hadn't wanted anyone else.

Jen took a deep breath and finally made herself face what was there in the dining room. The two men stood in front of her, almost equidistant from the other, both looking at her.

She almost asked the question she had in her mind but stopped. She couldn't be that cruel to all of three of them. She took another deep breath.

Besides, she already knew the answer.

And because she knew, then it was simple. She knew exactly what she was supposed to do at last. She turned and looked at them both.

"Don't," she said. "You love each other. I love you both. Victor—" She turned to him and felt Jack stiffen beside her as she stepped toward Victor and put her hands in his. "Victor, I loved you so much. But now I love Jack more. I'm going to marry him today. We'll work out something with Vicky, if you want. I wouldn't keep her away from you. But we're over."

"Why? You promised me once you would love me forever. Was it his money? Did he seduce you?" The words sounded tortured. Then Victor turned his back on them both and hid his face.

"No, Victor. I did love you. But when I fell in love with you I fell in love with danger and excitement," Jen said. "You were supposed to protect me while we had adventures. It wasn't your fault you couldn't. It wasn't your fault I had to stay behind

while you had an almost fatal adventure. But while I waited, I grew up and I realized I wanted my life with someone who will always put me first. I was willing to follow you anywhere when I was young. But Jack loves me more than his family, more than his work, more than himself. He's willing to be there for me. I need that. I need him. I love him more."

She saw Jack make a quick gesture and then stop. Neither of the men moved for a moment.

She felt the tears begin to fall on her cheeks. It was over. She had finally said it. No more dreams, no more wondering, no more torturing herself over what could have been, should have been.

Then Victor made a noise in his throat. It hurt to listen to it. Jen was dreadfully afraid it sounded close to that of an animal in pain.

"I should have stayed away then," he rasped out. "This was for nothing."

"No!" Jen put her hand to her throat. "I couldn't bear to think of you missing. Dead. Neither could Jack. Oh, Victor, I am so sorry."

"Vic." Jack stepped forward. "If you want to take it out on me, God knows you're entitled. I probably deserve anything you want to dish out. But Jen doesn't deserve all this. She's too important to us both."

"Do you expect me to say get married with my blessing? Sorry. My limp won't let me dance at your wedding," Victor told them, evenly. "To hell with you both."

Victor was gone then and Jen looked at her fiancé. He stood absolutely still, just as Victor had, but he watched her. Jen put her hands in his this time. His hands stayed quiet a moment, then shifted and gripped hers until she almost felt bones crunch. She knew then that he hadn't been sure of her before. He truly had wondered if she would forget him and choose Victor.

"I had a choice, Jack." Her voice wavered and then grew steady. "I had longed for a choice all this time. Then I got one. This time my choice is you. It will be you forever, from now on. You first, always—"

His lips were on hers and she couldn't say any more. When he let her go, she sighed and held him.

"Now I can ask," Jen said. "If I had said—Jack, I changed my mind. I want Victor after all. What would you have done?"

"Knocked Victor down before he got to you and then have had my way with you on the floor 'til we both killed ourselves from pleasure—or at least until you changed your mind." His response was prompt but the smile in her eyes wasn't reflected in his.

"You can say that now, you beast, but, really, what would you have done?"

"Let you go, I suppose." His face voice turned resentful. "You want it all, right, Jen? OK, here goes. I love you. There's a reason I never wanted to admit that. Now that I've said it I have to admit I'm yours. You pretty much can do what you want to me and I'm still yours. I want you to be happy more than I want to be happy. Damn you. This is humiliating for a grown man to have to say out loud."

Jennifer blinked back tears. He'd said it. It didn't matter that he looked as if it had been tortured out of him. That only made her surer he really meant the words.

"But—"

"What? There's not a but to this. That's the way it is for me. You've got me by the two most vulnerable parts of my body. And the most vulnerable part is my damned heart."

"But you can say that because you know I wouldn't hurt you, Jack. You know me. I want you. Just you. It took me so long to admit it, so long to sit down and think about what I wanted from you, because I didn't want to feel faithless. I didn't want to admit I could love someone other than Victor. I pretended I was blindly in lust with you for weeks. But the truth is that I love you more than I ever did Victor. You love me with everything you have because I love you the same way back. I'm willing to give up things for you, but you won't let me. I wouldn't do it to you, either. Because I'm yours, too."

There was a silence.

"Hell, the marriage vows are going to be simple after this." Jack cleared his throat. "And a lot less embarrassing."

"Then let's go do them." Jen began to smile again.

When she and Jack had come back into the room, Molly told her briefly and quietly that Cee Cee had followed Victor out of the house.

"Jennifer, I didn't know whether to stop her. I decided not to try," Molly whispered. "I don't know what she's going to do with him or how long it will take before she comes back."

Jen said, "She'll make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. But we won't wait for her return. I don't want to wait."

Even though the magistrate had indulgently agreed they could add a bit to the civil ceremony, the wedding was brief. Jen thought she would be distracted, but the words they'd chosen were still meaningful. Jen almost wept when Molly softly gave the one brief reading Jen had picked. The look on Jack's face made her want to cry more—it was both stunned and adoring.

Was this all too perfect?

She looked at the wedding ring Jack slid on her finger and was afraid to touch it. For one horrified moment she wondered if everything that had happened here was a dream—she had had so many before and then awakened.

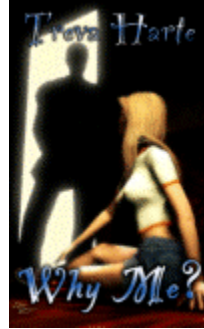
No. Everything felt sharp and in focus and her movements were precise and graceful. She could smell the flowers. She could feel the rings. Jack was kissing her. This wasn't a dream.

"How are you, Jen?" Jack asked, as he pulled back from their first kiss as man and wife.

"Wonderful. I don't have to dream any more, Jack. What I have now is real. You're real. I'm so glad I picked just one reading for the wedding. It was the right one."

*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.*

## Also by Treva Harte



*Perfect*  
*Why Me?*  
*The Deviants*

**Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.**

**[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)**