

WHERE YOU FIND IT

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CHAPTER ONE

Jennifer Smallwood stood on the crowded platform with the cool, damp March wind whipping her all-weather coat around her legs. She drew the collar of her coat closer around her neck and sighed in annoyance as the long, dark train finally came into view. She glanced at her watch. The train was fifteen minutes late and pulling two cars instead of three.

To think she'd decided to take the train today because she didn't trust her car not to break down and make her late. Some days she just couldn't win.

As the train slowed, she found herself swept forward by the people behind her on the platform. The train came to a stop, with the doors of the second car several feet away.

The trainman stepped down. Urged forward by the swell of people at her back, Jennifer hurried toward the train. Clutching her briefcase in her left hand, she pulled herself up the steps and into the train with her right hand.

Standing in the juncture between two cars, she quickly glanced to her left and right. Both cars seemed relatively full, but there appeared to be a few seats in the car to her left, near the back.

She walked down the long aisle scanning the seats on both sides of her for an empty seat. If she were lucky, she'd just make it to the office in time for the staff meeting. Which meant she

needed at least ten minutes on the train to review her notes before she arrived.

Just as she was thinking she'd have to stand, she spotted an empty space on a three-seater bench between two men, near the end of the car. The men were sitting one on each end of the seat with a space in the middle. Not exactly her first choice for a seat, but it would beat standing. She stopped near the seat.

The man on the aisle side looked up from the paper he was reading. Jennifer swallowed several times as she found herself gazing down into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Not that she'd had occasion to gaze down into many white men's eyes. Certainly not any who looked as if they'd stepped off the cover of GQ. His tie was silk; his suit looked

Tailor-made. She hated to think how much he'd paid for his haircut. Although he was clean-shaven, he was George Clooney sexy.

"Excuse me."

"Of course." He flashed her a brief smile, folded his paper, and got to his feet. She resisted the urge to look him up and down. He was tall--she guessed about six two or three--and well built without being muscle bound. The train was crowded, which meant she had to brush past him to get into the seat. Her heart thumped as she caught a whiff of his cologne, subtle, yet sexy--like the man himself.

When she was seated, he slipped onto the seat next to her. It was a tight squeeze. Too tight. She could feel his thigh pressed right against hers. She tried to draw her leg away, but there was no room.

Placing her briefcase on her knees, she began glancing through the financial statements she needed for the meeting. But she couldn't concentrate. Not sitting next to this man whose mere presence was playing havoc with her breathing and heartbeat.

All right, Jenn. Get it together, girl. He's just a man. A white man, who doesn't know you're alive. You'll never see him again. Forget him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the man now had the paper on his lap and he was glancing in her direction. She turned her head slightly and found him smiling at her.

"You wouldn't have the time, would you?" He had a warm, deep voice. The kind that would make a woman tingle in anticipation when he whispered ... anything in her ear.

"Ah ... yes ... " She cleared her throat and lifted her arm to look at her watch. As she did, she saw an expensive looking silver watch on his left wrist below the white cuff of his shirt.

She nodded toward it. "Is that broken?"

"No." He flashed that dimpled smile at her again.

If his watch wasn't broken ... he was coming onto her! "It's ... eight-forty." She forced her gaze back to the open briefcase. Okay, Jenn. Get it in gear. He's probably bored and having a little fun at your expense. Or worst, he was looking for someone with whom to have a brief, meaningless affair.

It was difficult, but she kept her gaze on her reports for the next fifteen minutes. She was aware that the man beside her cast several glances

in her direction, although he didn't speak to her again.

When the train pulled into her stop, she turned to find him looking at her. "Excuse me."

Smiling, he rose. The train wasn't as crowded now, having made two stops since she'd boarded. So there was no reason for him to stand so close to the seat, making it almost impossible for her to step into the aisle without brushing against him.

The train lurched unexpectedly and she was thrown forward. Her briefcase flew from her hand. She threw out her arms to break the fall she knew was coming. Suddenly, a strong arm wrapped around her waist, not only keeping her on her feet, but also pulling her back against a very solid, very male body.

"It's all right. I've got you."

The lights blinked out as she turned to face her rescuer; still, she knew whose arms she was in; whose deep voice whispered softly against her ear, making her tingle.

The lights flickered back on and she found herself leaning against his chest, staring up into his blue eyes again. Oh, God, but he was breathtaking. She couldn't look away from him. She couldn't move. She could barely breathe.

Her gaze settled on his lips. They were firm, chiseled, and sensuous. Her own lips parted, her head tilted back. The breath caught in her throat when his mouth opened slightly and he bent his head.

"Sorry for the momentary inconvenience, folks. Market East Station. All out for Market East."

The conductor's voice, sounding from the speakers, startled her. She glanced around, saw

the other passengers staring. She'd lost her mind. She was in the middle of the aisle, clinging to a strange white man--waiting for him to kiss her!

The blood rushed to her cheeks and she scrambled out of his arms. "Thank you. Thank you."

She bent to retrieve her briefcase, but he'd already scooped it up from the floor. He silently handed it to her. Their fingers brushed when she took the case. An electric current sizzled up her arm at the contact. Their gazes met and briefly locked. The unmistakable look of desire in his eyes made her heart beat quicken. Just for a moment, she allowed herself the sweet luxury of delighting in the knowledge that she could turn such an attractive man on. Then she began backing away from him. "Ah, ... thank you."

His lips parted and he reached out a hand, as if he intended to touch her again.

She shook her head, turned and hurried down the aisle, and off the train. She ran across the platform to the double glass doors leading to the escalators, her heart thumping wildly. She was at the top of the escalator before she began breathing normally again.

Just for a moment, she'd been afraid he would follow her. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder and her heart began to pound again. He was standing on the platform just beyond the escalator doors, looking up at her.

Overwhelmed by the feelings coursing through her as she briefly contemplated what it would be like to get to know him, she couldn't move. Sanity quickly returned and she realized that if she stood there, staring expectedly down at him, he'd think she wanted him to follow her. Breathing

quickly and unevenly, she turned into an underground passage. It was well lit and lined with stores on both sides. It would eventually lead to the basement entrance of the building where she worked.

All the while, she thought of the man from the train. She wouldn't admit that part of her was sorry he hadn't followed her from the platform. She sternly reminded herself that he was white and if his clothes were any indication, they were from two very different economic circles.

They weren't likely to meet again. And that was a good thing because just sitting next to him had filled her with lustful thoughts that shamed her. Forget the havoc being pressed against him in the aisle had caused.

"Mommy, do you like men?"

"Huh?" Jennifer finished loading the washing machine with the final load of clothes. Only then did she turn to look at the small child sprawled on her stomach on the washroom floor.

It had been a long day and an even longer week. Not much had gone right. The refurbished dryer she'd bought a year ago had died, her car battery was threatening to do the same, and she'd been notified that her real estate taxes were being increased for the second time in two years. To make matters worst, she couldn't stop thinking about the George Clooney look alike she'd met on the train earlier that week.

She glanced at the newly strung lines stretching across the length of the basement. Her plan for the night was simple. First she'd finish washing, slap the last two loads of clothes on the

line, put Tia to bed, and settle down with a good love story. Preferably, a steamy one that she could lose herself in--with a black--a very black hero.

"Mommy! You're not listening to me!"

"I'm sorry." She blinked and pulled her gaze from the oak-paneled basement wall and focused on Tia's face. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you liked men?"

"Yes," she said, reaching for the laundry basket on the table next to the washer.

"All men?"

She hesitated, studying her daughter. Tia had Jim's dark brown eyes and beautiful chocolate complexion. She was as pretty as he was handsome. And just as relentless.

"Ah, ... why do you ask?"

"Do you, Mommy?"

Her liking of men was part of her problem. Her life would run a lot smoother if she didn't long for a broad shoulder to lean on when life became difficult. And the last fourteen months had been rough. Still, if nothing else, the rough times had taught her the importance of self-reliance.

"Well, ... yes ... mostly."

"Even white men?"

She turned back to the washing machine so Tia wouldn't see how the question dismayed her. Before that incident on the train, her answer would have been a resounding no. She'd never even thought about dating a white man. As her mother was fond of saying, white men were for white women. Not for single, black women who needed more emotionally than most black men could provide. Forget a white one.

But she couldn't say any of that to five-year-old Tia, who missed her out-of-state daddy so much she'd taken to trying to fix Jennifer up with any and every eligible male in sight. Three weeks earlier, she'd invited her kindergarten teacher to dinner. Although he was nice enough, he was fresh out of college and five years younger than Jennifer; definitely not her type. Just last week, she'd fended off an attempt of Tia's to get her and the roofer together. But at least both men were black.

"Mommy?! Are you listening?"

"Yes." She turned to face Tia. "People are people."

"That's not what Granny and Auntie Linda say."

"Well, it's what I say."

Tia frowned. "Then why doesn't Auntie Linda want me to play with the white girls at the park?"

That was one of the drawbacks of having her mother's best friend, Linda Johnson, baby-sit Tia. Although she was devoted both to Jennifer and Tia, at sixty-five, she was very much a product of the old south. As far as she was concerned, that meant blacks and whites were equal, but should remain in their own separate social circles. It was a view Jennifer's own mother, now living in Florida with her second husband, was inclined to share.

"People are people," she said firmly. "Granny and Aunt Linda are entitled to their views, but you and I don't share them. Right?"

"Right!" Tia replied with satisfying promptness. "We like all kinds of people."

"Right. All kinds."

"So, Mommy, you want to meet a white one?"

She shook her head. She'd already met one white man too many. Granted she and the man on the train hadn't actually "met," but she knew he'd be haunting her thoughts for weeks to come. "Come on, sweetiekins. I know you miss your daddy, but I'm not ready to start dating again."

"But Daddy's been gone for years!"

Jennifer hoisted herself onto the washing machine top and smiled down at Tia. "Now, sweetiekins, you know that's not true. I know fourteen months seems like a long time, but--"

"He's very nice and big and cute and he's not married!" Tia said in a rush. "I know you'll like him."

Jennifer decided to try a different approach. "Who is he?"

Tia's dark brown eyes lit up and she smiled. "His name is Daniel Michael Reilly. He's really big, Mommy. And he's sooo nice."

"And just where did you meet this really big, nice man?"

"In the park. He's there most days when Auntie Linda takes me there after school."

So this big, nice man must be unemployed if he spent his afternoons idling in the park. She hopped off the washing machine and went to lounge on the cool tiled floor next to Tia.

She touched Tia's cheek. "Sweetiekins, I thought you understood about talking to strangers."

"I do, Mommy!" Tia protested indignantly. "But he's not a stranger. I used to see him at the center when he came to pick up his little girl. Only she doesn't come there any more."

"His little girl? I thought you said he wasn't married."

Tia looked up at her, her dark eyes wide with surprise. "He's not."

"You said he has a little girl."

"He does ... he did, but Daddy has me and he's not married to you."

Jennifer blushed. "I know. Ah, you were telling me how you knew it was okay to talk to this ... Michael Daniel Reilly," she reminded Tia. The last thing she wanted was to get on the subject of why she and Jim weren't married. And now never would be.

"It's Daniel Michael, Mommy and he used to come to the center. I told you that. So when he started coming to the park, I knew it was okay to talk to him. He has nice eyes. They're blue like the sky and they twinkle when he smiles and his hair is mostly dark, but some of it's white too."

Great. So he was white, unemployed, and old. Perfect.

"He smiles a lot. You'll like him, Mommy."

"Maybe, but right now I think it's time for all pretty little girls to be in bed." She sat up, drew Tia into her arms, and kissed her cheek.

Tia giggled and wrapped her arms around Jennifer's neck. "Okay, Mommy, but first promise you'll meet him."

She wasn't tired enough to make a rash promise like that. Clasping Tia to her, she stood up.

"We'll see."

In the meantime she'd better have a talk with Aunt Linda--just to make sure this Daniel Michael Reilly was harmless.

It was rather cool and cloudy, but Mick was sitting in his favorite spot in Fairmount Park. He told Hal and the other guys at the office that he came to the park because the fresh air helped him think, enhancing his work. That had been his original reason for his afternoon treks to the park.

He glanced up from his laptop P C and looked around the park. There were several young children playing on the sliding boards and chasing each other around; the air was filled with their excited cries.

He enjoyed the sounds of happy children. But something was missing. One particular face that was the reason he continued to come here.

He looked at his watch. It was nearly four o'clock. He sighed. She probably wasn't coming today. Again. Oh, well. There was always tomorrow.

His lips curved into a self-deprecating smile. Hal was right. He did need a life outside of the office. But not a woman. Not yet anyway. He allowed himself to think briefly of his encounter with the woman on the train.

It still amazed him how one casual glance up into her liquid brown eyes had started him thinking about slow dancing in the moonlight. He was sorry now that he hadn't at least asked her name.

He remembered the way she'd practically ran away from him and grimaced. He'd had about as much chance of getting her name as he had of playing in the Super Bowl.

They weren't likely to meet again since he normally drove to work. Of course he could ride the train for a while, hoping to see her again,

but that way lay trouble. She'd looked to be in her early twenties. She'd probably thought he was just a dirty old white guy lusting after a sweet, young thing.

For now he was content to put all his energies into the firm. He wasn't particularly happy, but then he didn't really expect to be happy for a very long time. If at all. He was content. It was enough for now.

Tia was waiting at the front door for Jennifer Monday night. She took one look at Tia's face and knew she was upset. "Hi, sweetiekins." She bent to kiss her cheek.

"There you are at last, Mommy! I thought you were never coming!"

Jennifer transferred the light jacket she'd worn to her left hand where she was carrying her briefcase and took Tia's hand in her right one. She glanced at the clock over the living room mantel. It was seven-thirty. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but I had to work a little later tonight. How was your day, sweetiekins?"

"Long and boring and sooo sad."

She stifled a smile. Tia was clearly feeling dramatic.

"Jenn, is that you?"

"Yes," she called at the sound of Aunt Linda's voice coming from the kitchen, but she kept her eyes on Tia's face. Tugging gently, she led Tia over to the big, dark blue sofa along one wall in the living room. Tossing her briefcase and jacket in one corner, she sank down in the other, pulling Tia onto her lap.

She slipped her arms around Tia and pressed her cheek against the top of her head. "What's the matter, sweetiekins?"

"Auntie Linda wouldn't take me to the park after school. She said it was too cold."

"It was kind of cool today."

Tia pulled away from her and turned to stare up into her face. "But Mick was there and I missed him, Mommy!"

She blinked in surprise. "Mick? Who's Mick?"

"You know. Daniel Michael. His friends call him Mick. And I'm his friend, so I call him Mick too."

"Oh."

"Auntie Linda should have taken me to see him. He must be wondering where I am. I'll bet he thinks I don't like him any more, but I do!"

Jennifer paused. Although Aunt Linda had immediately and enthusiastically agreed, it had been her decision to keep Tia away from the park and away from Daniel Michael Reilly. At least until she had a chance to decide how to handle her daughter's growing fondness for him.

"It was my decision not Aunt Linda's, Tia," she said.

"But why, Mommy?"

"Honey, I have to be sure it's all right for you to go on seeing him."

"But Mommy, I--"

She carefully placed two fingers against Tia's mouth. "It's my decision, Tia. I know you're not happy with it, but you are my own, precious sweetiekins and I have to be sure. Please try to understand."

"But he would never do anything to hurt me, Mommy."

"I know you think you're sure of that and you might be right. But I'm not."

"You would be if you met him. Please meet him, Mommy? Please?"

About to refuse, she hesitated. Tia was right. The only way to know if the man posed any threat to Tia was to meet him and judge for herself.

"Okay."

Tia's face lit up and she threw her arms around Jennifer's neck. "Oh, Mommy! Thank you." She pulled back and looked up at her. "When can he come?"

"Ah, well, ... " She sighed. "Maybe in a week or two, I'll get off work early and meet you and Aunt Linda and him in the park--"

"A week or two! Oh, Mommy! Not that long! I have to see him before then."

Smiling, Jennifer kicked off her heels, pressed back into the sofa, and folded her legs underneath her. "Sweetie, you don't have to see him. You want to see him. There's a difference."

"No, there isn't, Mommy. I have to see him," Tia insisted.

"Okay. Okay," She acknowledged, giving up that battle. "How about Saturday?"

"This Saturday?"

"Yes. This coming Saturday."

"Good. Mommy, can I see him tomorrow? To tell him?"

She wanted to talk to Aunt Linda about him first. "Let's make it Wednesday. Okay?"

"This Wednesday?"

"Yes. This Wednesday."

"Thanks, Mommy!" Tia kissed her cheek, hopped off her lap, and charged from the room. Jennifer heard her singing her favorite song, Around The Mulberry Bush as she stomped up the uncarpeted stairs.

Smiling, Jennifer walked into the kitchen where Aunt Linda was just turning off the oven.

"Hi, Aunt Linda." She kissed the older woman's cheek. She sniffed the air. "Something smells finger-licking good. How was your day?"

Linda Johnson turned to face her. She shook her head. "That child, Jenn. What are you going to do with her? It was all I could do to keep her away from the park and that man who's bewitched her."

Jennifer sank down onto one of the stools at the breakfast nook. "You make it sound as if he's some kind of Piped Piper. Do you think he's dangerous?"

"Well, ... no. Not dangerous. I don't think he would do anything to hurt her. He's very gentle with her and he seems nice enough ... well, you know, for a ... a ... "

"For a white man?"

Looking indignant, Aunt Linda drew herself up to her full height of five feet. "I didn't say that."

But Jennifer knew she'd meant it. "So you think it's all right for me to allow their friendship to continue?"

"I didn't say that either," she said quickly, turning to lift the top off one of the pots on the stove. She gave the contents several rapid, over vigorous stirs. "The vegetables and baked potatoes are ready."

"So he is dangerous?"

"No! You only have to see the way he looks at her to know that he would never hurt her."

"Then why do you object to her seeing him?"

"It's your decision, Jennifer, not mine."

Jennifer. She was annoyed. "Aunt Linda. Please. Just look at me."

The older woman turned reluctantly to face her, her face creased with lines of disapproval.

"You know how grateful I am that you agreed to look after Tia when Mom moved to Florida. Tia and I know you love us and we love you. Your opinion is important to us. Is your only objection to him based on his skin color?"

"Everyone has his proper place, Jennifer. Life works best when we all stick to it."

She took Aunt Linda's answer as an affirmation of her own suspicions regarding Aunt Linda's motivation. "Tia really likes him a lot. I've agreed to meet him. We're going to invite him for dinner on Saturday so I'd appreciate it if you'd take Tia to the park on Wednesday so she can see him and tell him."

"You're inviting him here? To dinner?"

She nodded. "Yes, unless you object?"

Aunt Linda shrugged. "It's your decision. You do what you think best, Jennifer." She sniffed and turned away. "I'd better get ready to go. I'll see you in the morning."

CHAPTER TWO

"Mick! Mick!"

Mick Reilly looked up from the notebook computer he was working on. He saw the small, pretty child running toward him down the park lane; despite the efforts of her sitter to hold onto her hand. He grinned.

He looked down long enough to save the program he'd been working on, shut off his laptop, and put it in the case at his feet. Then the child was throwing herself into his lap.

"Mick! Hello."

"Hello, yourself." He smiled at her before looking into the disapproving face of the older woman standing several feet away. He couldn't blame her. She had no way of knowing what his motives were in befriending the child.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Johnson," he said pleasantly.

"Mr. Reilly," she replied coolly; her expression unyielding.

Oh, well, he'd tried. He looked down at Tia and smiled again. "How are you today, pretty lady?"

"Better now. I missed you."

"I missed you too. I've been sitting here hoping you'd come for the last three days."

"I knew it!" She frowned. "But I'm here now."

"And I can't tell you how happy I am to see you."

"Guess what?"

"What?"

"Guess."

"Hmm. Okay." He studied her small face. She was smiling and her eyes were bright. So it was something good. "You're going to spend the weekend with your daddy."

Her smile vanished. He'd guess wrong.

"No. That's not for another two weeks," she said, frowning again. After a moment, she smiled. "Guess again."

"You're going to Sesame Place."

"No! Give up?"

"Okay," he agreed. "I give up."

"I knew you'd never guess," she said, a satisfied smile on her face.

"Okay, you were right," he said, smiling. "So are you going to tell me or keep me guessing?"

"You'll never guess! I told Mommy about you!"

"Oh." He wasn't sure if that were good or bad. "And?"

"She wants to meet you! Isn't that great?"

He kept his smile in place with difficulty. While he understood why Tia's mother wanted to meet him, he knew Tia well enough to know she was hoping he and her mother would become romantically involved.

"Yes, but there's something you should understand first, Tia."

She smiled up at him. "What?"

"Well, ... you are I are friends and I hope we always will be, but your mother and I aren't likely to be."

"Why not? Because she's black?"

That was part of it, but he wasn't about to try to explain that to Tia. Not that he understood

his feelings himself. He just had a feeling that, his former passion for Helen notwithstanding, his taste in women hadn't really changed. The incident on the train the week before had confirmed that. "I'm not looking for a girlfriend just yet," he said carefully.

A vision of a smooth, nut-brown face with full lips, beautiful brown eyes, and long, flowing dark hair danced in his head. He ruthlessly dismissed the image. He'd allowed her to get away, so there was no point in constantly thinking about her.

"That's all right because Mommy says she's not looking for a boyfriend. Does that mean you two can't be friends?"

"Ah, ... no. No, I guess not, but--"

"Then you'll come meet her?"

"Well, I--"

"Please. You just have to come, Mick."

He looked down into the child's pleading eyes and acquiesced. Since neither of them were interested in dating, he decided there was no harm in meeting Tia's mother. Besides, it was time he met her, if for no other reason than she had a right to know the man who spent at least three hours a week with her child.

"Okay, sure. Just tell me when."

She screamed in delight and threw her thin arms around his neck. As he returned her embrace, he was aware that Linda Johnson's wasn't the only disapproving stare directed his way. He received several from other women there with their children-black and white. He stared back.

Jennifer couldn't remember the last time she'd been so annoyed with herself. She glanced at the clock over the kitchen door. Five-fifty. She groaned. In about ten minutes she'd come face to face with Tia's nice, big, cute, old white man.

She checked the pots on the stove. The rice was nearly ready. The vegetables were simmering. The baked chicken was a golden brown. Everything was ready. Except her. How could she have let herself be talked into inviting him to dinner? Since Aunt Linda had assured her he was okay, she could have arranged to meet him in the park. There was really no need to have invited him to dinner; except to please Tia.

"Mommy, how do I look?"

She turned to see Tia standing in the doorway and smiled. Tia, a tomboy, usually lived in jeans and tee shirts with her long, thick hair hanging in a ponytail to her shoulders. But tonight she was wearing a pretty, cream-colored dress and had insisted that Jennifer braid her hair in an elaborate chignon of braids that had taken hours.

She must really like this Daniel Michael Reilly. She never wore a dress for anyone except Jim.

"You look beautiful, sweetiekins."

Tia's smile turned to a frown. "It's almost time for Mick to come. When are you changing, Mommy?"

She was wearing what she usually wore on Saturday evenings spent at home: baggy jeans and an oversized tee shirt. She wasn't about to dress up for Tia's unemployed big, cute friend.

"What you see is what he'll get." She took Tia's hand and headed toward the living room just as the doorbell sounded.

Tia held back. "But Mommy, he'll think you don't really want to meet him."

And he would be right. "I'm not changing, Tia," she said and moved to the door. The peephole had somehow become dislodged so she couldn't see who was on the other side of the door.

"Who is it?"

A deep, male voice answered. "Michael Reilly."

"It's him, Mommy! Open the door. Let him in!"

She smiled at Tia's enthusiasm. "All right, already. I'm letting him in." She opened the door and found herself staring up into a pair of vivid blue eyes. They were as blue as those of the man on the train. Her gaze swept over his face. She sucked in her breath. It was the man from the train! He couldn't be Tia's big, cute "old" man.

Although his thick, dark hair was beginning to silver at the temples, she guessed he was no more than thirty-five or forty years old. He had a deep dimple down his left cheek that she knew was enchanting when he smiled. He'd smiled enough at her that day on the train for her to know that.

For a moment she was speechless, unable to look away, aware that she would give a week's salary to be better dressed. What would he think of her dressed the way she was? Her next thought was that Tia had been wrong. There was no way this big, gorgeous man didn't have some lucky woman sharing his bed.

"Mommy."

When she felt Tia tugging at her hand, she dragged her gaze away from him and looked down at her. "Yes?"

"This is Mick, Mommy."

"Oh." She glanced back up at him, waiting for the light of recognition to reach his eyes. "I'm ... Jennifer Smallwood."

He nodded, smiling slightly. "Michael Reilly." He extended his hand. When she followed suit, he held her hand briefly, as if he weren't any more eager for the contact than she was. It was difficult to tell what he was thinking or feeling. His expression was pleasant, but not particularly interested. His present manner was so far removed from the smiling, flirting man from the train that she realized that he didn't even remember her. Unforgettable she clearly was not.

"Please. Come in." She stepped back from the door, thinking how much smaller the light blue living room would be with him filling it. It wasn't just his physical size, there was a ... masculine aura surrounding him that was as breathtaking and overwhelming as it was sexy.

"Thank you."

He brought his left hand from behind his back to reveal two mixed bouquets of flowers. The smaller one he held out to Tia with a warm smile. "For you, pretty lady."

Tia giggled happily and clutched the flowers to her. "Thank you, Mick."

"You're welcome." He held the larger bouquet out to Jennifer, his gaze briefly locking with hers. "And these are for you. I hope you like them."

Despite herself, Jennifer was impressed. At twenty-seven, she had her first flowers from a man. She was careful not to touch his fingers as she accepted the flowers. "They're beautiful. Thank you, Mr. Reilly."

A brief smile turned the corners of his mouth up. "You're welcome."

"It's Mick, Mommy," Tia interrupted. "Call him Mick."

She sighed. With Tia running interference, it was going to be a long night. She glanced at him. "Do you mind?"

"No." He sounded amused. "It is my name. Well, one of them. Some people call me Dan or Mike, but I prefer Mick."

"Ah. Right. Well." She motioned to the sofa. "Mick it is. Come in. Have a seat. I'll ... and call me Jennifer."

"But Mommy, all your friends call you Jenn!"

She glanced at Mick in time to see him wiping a hand across his lower face, as if he were trying to hide a smile. "Call me Jenn. If you like," she offered in a voice that indicated she hoped he wouldn't like.

"Why don't we wait until we're both comfortable with that?" he suggested.

She nodded slowly and relaxed. Maybe the night wouldn't be so bad; that is if she could get through it without staring at him. "Would you like a drink before dinner?"

"No, thanks."

"Okay. Then I'll put the flowers in water and we'll have dinner."

He nodded, smiling. "Fine."

Tia slipped her hand into his. "I'll keep Mick company, Mommy."

"Thank you, pretty lady."

She took Tia's flowers. "I'll be back in a moment." She gestured toward the sofa again. "Make yourself comfortable."

As she moved to the kitchen to put water in the vases, she could hear the muted voices of Tia and Mick Reilly coming from the living room. Tia was giggling and he was laughing. On the way back to the living room, she resisted the urge to go upstairs and slip into something a little more flattering. Why do you want to impress him? He doesn't even remember you, for crying out loud! She returned to the living room to find him and Tia sitting on the uncarpeted living room floor playing jacks.

He'd removed the jacket of his expensive dark blue suit and she had an excellent view of his shoulder and chest muscles outlined under a shirt that fit so well, it might have been made just for him.

She watched as he threw the small, rubber ball into the air, scooped several of the tiny jacks into his big palm while catching the ball before it could hit the floor. She moved into the room.

"Nicely done."

He smiled up at her. "Thanks."

"We're playing jacks, Mommy," Tia told her happily.

"So I see." She sank down into the floor beside Tia, directly across from Mick Reilly. With an effort, she kept her gaze on the game that he clearly allowed Tia to win.

"I won! I won, Mommy!"

She leaned down to kiss Tia's cheek. "Good. Now, go wash your hands so we can go into dinner."

"Okay, Mommy." Tia sprang to her feet and grabbed at Mick's right hand. "Come wash your hands too, Mick."

"Yes, ma'am."

She busied herself gathering the ball and jacks so she wouldn't be tempted to watch him walk away.

He and Tia returned from the powder room and they went into the dining room where she'd set the table.

"So, how long have you and Tia known each other?"

He paused in the process of lifting a forkful of vegetables to his mouth. "Ah, let's see. I used to see her when I picked up my niece at the daycare a year ago."

"Your niece? Not your daughter?" She interrupted.

He nodded. "My niece. One of my younger brother's widow's has since moved to Ireland so I don't have to go to the daycare any more to pick up my niece. I didn't see Tia again until I started seeing her in the park a couple of times a week about six months ago."

He put his fork down and looked at Tia. "But it wasn't until about two months ago that we decided we liked each other."

"A lot," Tia put in.

"A lot," he repeated, smiling.

She watched in alarm as Tia seemed to blossom under his smile. "Well, you've made quite a hit with her."

He glanced briefly at her before grinning at Tia, who grinned back at him. "And she with me."

"So have you had any success?"

He sipped his lemonade. "Any success at what?"

Oh, no! She'd put her foot in it. He probably didn't want her to now he was out of work.

Although his unemployment must be very recent because he still apparently had the ability to dress well. "I'm sure it'll work out after a while," she said quickly. "Just don't give up."

"Don't give up on what? What are we talking about here?"

She shrugged. "Well, you know."

He shook his head. "Actually, no, I don't."

"Well, ... I'm sure you haven't been looking long."

He propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his palms, his blue eyes fixed on her face. "For what?"

She rolled her eyes. He just wasn't going to allow her to be tactful. "For work. I know you're out of work."

He seemed surprised, but not embarrassed. "You do? How?"

"Oh, come on." She smiled at him to lighten the mood and was momentarily stunned into staring when he smiled back. "You don't have to be embarrassed. It happens to everyone sooner or later."

"Does it?" He turned to Tia. "Honey, what have you been telling your mommy about me?"

"Nothing, except that you're big, nice, and cute."

His lips twitched. "Cute?"

"Yeah." Tia grinned. "I like that thing in your cheek when you smile. You're real cute."

He laughed. He had a warm, deep laugh that Jennifer liked. "So are you." When he turned back to face her, he was clearly amused. "I may be real cute with a thing in my cheek that Tia likes, but I am not unemployed."

"You have a job?"

"Yes. Why did you think I didn't?"

"Oh. Well." She glanced at Tia.

"I didn't say Mick didn't have a job, Mommy," she said indignantly.

And she hadn't. "I know you didn't, sweetiekins, but you did say that you saw him in the park nearly every day."

"So?" Tia challenged.

Jennifer shrugged. "So ... I thought ... "

"That I must be out of work if I spent my afternoons in the park?" he suggested, sounding amused.

"Well, I did think ... "

"Let me reassure you. I do have a job. I'm a civil engineer and a partner in an engineering firm. Our office is just a few blocks from the park. I think better if I get outside for an hour or so every day."

Talk about opening your mouth and putting a big foot in it. "Oh. Well. Oh. Good."

His lips twitched and she watched him trying not to smile. "Were you afraid that I might have come tonight looking for a handout or a loan?"

"Of course not!"

His smile conveyed his disbelief. "Are you sure?"

She felt the blood warming her face. "Of course I am."

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to know about me? I know you're probably not thrilled by my association with Tia, but--"

"No. That's not true." And it wasn't. "Okay. I admit that at first I wasn't crazy about the idea, but she looks forward to seeing you and she really likes you."

"I like her too." He ran a hand through his hair. Jennifer watched and wondered what his hair would feel like under her fingers. It looked thick and silky.

"Seeing Tia fills a void in my life."

"A void?"

"Mick had a little girl, Mommy, but she died in a car crash when I was just one."

Her gaze flew to his face in time to see his jaw clenching. "Oh no! I'm so ... so sorry."

"Thanks." He blew out a slow, deep breath. "It ... it doesn't stop hurting. I guess it never will, but ... " He looked at Tia and smiled. "This beautiful, little girl makes it more bearable."

Tia jumped out of her chair and ran to throw herself at him. He lifted her onto his lap and hugged her. He glanced at Jennifer over Tia's head. "Thanks for sharing her with me, even for a little while."

She watched them, surprised at how natural Tia's soft, ebony cheek looked pressed against his much lighter one.

"Was there?"

"Was there what?" Her gaze shifted to his lips. They looked firm and unusually full.

"Was there anything you wanted to know about me?"

"Oh." She dragged her gaze from his mouth and settled it on Tia's head, which was resting against his chest. Now there was a sight of which Jim would definitely not approve. "Yes."

Almost as if he knew what she was thinking, he gently lifted Tia from his lap and set her on her feet. Both Jennifer and he watched as the child reluctantly returned to her seat. Only then did he turn to face Jennifer again. "Shoot," he said.

"You're Irish?"

"Yes."

"Born in Ireland?"

"Yes. Dublin."

"You don't seem to have much of an ... actually, there doesn't seem to be any trace of the renowned brogue in your speech."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, lass," he said, lapsing into an exaggerated brogue. "Me mom and my three brothers have lived in the United States since I was fifteen. This lad has had plenty of time to learn how to turn it off or at least mute it."

"But what a shame."

"Oh?"

She shrugged. "It's just ... it's sort of ... well, I like the sound of Irish brogue."

His blue eyes lingered on her face. "Do you?"

She looked away. "Ah, did you say you have brothers or sisters?"

"No sisters, but I have two surviving brothers. Both younger and ... " He grinned at her. "Gainfully employed."

Her lips twitched. "Point taken. Tia tells me you're not married."

"No. I'm divorced."

"How long?"

"It became official a little over a year ago, but we both knew it was over when Kelly died."

Something in his voice told her of his pain.

"Can you talk about her?"

"Who? Helen ... or Kelly?"

Again his tone told her that Kelly had been his daughter. "Kelly. Can you talk about her?"

The muscles in his jaw clenched and he sighed. "She was the sweetest, most beautiful little girl in the world. She was warm, friendly, loving, and ... her smile was always enough to lift my spirits, no matter how down I was. She was the light of my life; the center of all my hopes and plans for the future. I wanted to give her everything. Helen felt the same way. So once Kelly was gone, there was nothing left between us. We went on pretending that there was until Helen threw in the towel two years ago. She filed for divorce shortly after she left me."

She wondered about the woman who had left him after being his wife. After making love with him. After tasting his lips. Feeling his hands on her body. After—

Oh, Jenn, girl! Get a grip!

"That must have been very hard on you."

He shrugged. "The divorce? Not really. Helen and I ... we weren't in love any more, but we're not enemies. Our divorce was amiable enough. After losing Kelly, everything else was a breeze."

She sensed he didn't want to talk about Kelly any more. "Are you seeing anyone now?"

His gaze caught and held hers. And just for a moment, she wondered if he did remember her. But there was nothing in his gaze to suggest a sudden flash of memory had struck him. "You mean do I have a special woman in my life?"

"Yes. I only ask because if there is, she might object to your seeing Tia," she said quickly. She didn't want him thinking she had any personal interest in him. "If that's so, I'd like to know it now."

"It's not." He glanced at Tia. "This pretty lady is the only special woman in my life at the moment."

Tia grinned. "He thinks I'm pretty, Mommy."

She nodded. "You are pretty, sweetiekins."

"I know," Tia said with a complete lack of modesty.

Jennifer and Mick glanced at each other and smiled like proud parents. Proud parents indeed. Man but she was tripping. She looked away and stood up. "Ah, I'll just go check on the coffee." She glanced at Tia. "Sweetiekins, why don't you take him into the living room?"

"Okay, Mommy."

She was in the kitchen, putting the coffee pot, some hot water for Tia's hot chocolate, and three cups on a tray to carry to the living room when she heard a tap on the door behind her. Mick's deep voice quickly followed the tap.

"Excuse me."

She turned to find him standing in the doorway. "Yes?"

He glanced quickly over his shoulder. "I just wanted to have a word with you in private."

Finally! Finally he remembered their encounter on the train. He wanted to tell her he was attracted to her. Surely he would ask her out! And when he did, how could she possibly accept? How could--

She put the brakes on her run away thoughts. "What about?"

"I wanted your permission to give Tia my phone number and maybe get yours."

"Exchange phone numbers?" With Tia, not her. She hoped her disappointment didn't show. "I don't know. I thought you two were happy meeting in the park."

"We are, when we meet." He shrugged. "Sometimes I'm there and she's not and vice versa. Sometimes my job takes me away. I was hoping we could keep in touch when we can't see each other."

"Oh. Ah. Okay. Fine." She nodded. "Tia would like that."

His blue gaze was piercing. "But you wouldn't?"

She didn't look away from him. It was just as well that they understood each other. "Not particularly, no."

"Any particular reason?"

One long look into those blue eyes of his and she knew what he was thinking. That it was just because he was white. "There are several reasons, but let's just say I'm not too sure it's a good idea for her to become any more attached to you than she already is. Any day you might meet someone who would object to your friendship with her. Where would that leave her?"

"I don't allow anyone, no manner what the relationship, to dictate who my friends are. I will not let her down, Ms. Smallwood. I promise."

"Good. I'm going to hold you to that promise." She turned away to pick up the tray.

"Here, allow me." She heard him move and then froze as she saw his hand moving around her body to reach for the tray; although he was careful not to touch her. She stared down at his hand for a moment. It was big and powerful looking. She licked her lips, wondering what his hands would feel like on her skin. Stroking her. Arousing her. Making-

"No." Setting the tray back on the counter, she turned to face him, staring directly into his eyes until he took several steps away from her. "I can take care of it myself. Thank you." On the off chance that he did remember their encounter on the train, she wanted it clearly understood that she was now in full possession of her common sense again.

He stared down at her for a long moment before he spoke. "I see."

"Do you?"

He sighed and nodded. "Yes."

"Good." They understood each other all right.

CHAPTER THREE

"Mommy, did you like, Mick?"

Jennifer tucked the light sheet under Tia's chin and bent to kiss her cheek. "He seemed very nice," she said cautiously.

"Isn't he cute, Mommy?"

Cute didn't begin to accurately describe him. He was gorgeous; stunning. "Yes, he is, but sweetiekins, I'm not interested in going out with him." Not that he'd shown any wish to go out with her.

"Oh, I know, Mommy." Tia sounded disappointed. "It just seems a shame."

She sat on the side of Tia's bed. "What's a shame?"

"Don't you think he's too nice and cute not to have a regular girlfriend to come home to, Mommy?"

"I think that's the way he wants it, Tia."

She frowned. "That's what he says too, but it sure would be nice to have him around the house a lot. Wouldn't it, Mommy? He's big and nice to be next to. He always smells so good."

Jennifer shook her head. Her allowing Mick Reilly to come again would only encourage Tia to think there was a hope of he and Jennifer becoming involved with each other. And there was absolutely no hope of that.

"You know your daddy wouldn't like the idea of him being around you." Hopefully, Tia's love for her father would be enough to kill any silly ideas

she had about Jennifer and Mick Reilly becoming romantically involved.

"Then why doesn't Daddy come around himself?" Tia demanded, her dark eyes sparking with temper. "I hardly ever see him any more! If Daddy won't come, why should he care that Mick comes?"

Jennifer bit her lip. This was a touchy subject. She had been devastated when Jim called off their wedding, moved out of the house they shared, and finally left Pennsylvania. Still, she did her best not to allow her bitterness and pain to color Tia's opinion of her father.

"He has his reasons."

"And I have mine for wanting Mick around!" Tia shot back.

She sighed. Tia had her father's quick temper. She stroked a hand down Tia's face and bent to kiss her cheek. "I know you do, sweetiekins, but for now, I think it's best if you continue to see him at the park."

"But sometimes he doesn't come!"

"I know, and that's why you have his phone number and he has ours. That how it has to be for now."

"Why?" Tia wailed.

She touched Tia's angry face. "Because I need you to work with me on this. I know you like him a lot, but it has to be this way for a while. Okay?"

Tia turned her face into her pillow, away from her. "If you say so."

Jennifer bent to kiss Tia's cheek, pretending not to notice how the child drew away from her touch. She sighed and straightened. At the door, she turned to look back into the room. Tia's

slender body was curled into a small, tight knot of resentment.

Mick sank down into the warm water of the Jacuzzi, with his eyes closed. Thinking of Tia. And her mother. The woman from the train. A woman he'd never expected to meet again; a woman he had difficulty forgetting. And yet he had to forget her. Earlier that evening she'd seemed even less inclined to welcome any romantic overtures from him than she'd been on the train.

He'd wanted to explain and apologize for his behavior that morning. Let her know that he didn't usually try to force an acquaintance with unwilling women. Until he realized that she didn't even recognize him. He clearly had not made a lasting impression.

When he was doing his best to resist his natural inclination, usually to please everyone but himself, he was into blondes with blue eyes and long legs. That preference should have, but didn't leave Jennifer Smallwood out of his thoughts.

Aside from her being over ten years too young, she'd made it plain that she didn't like him. And while he wanted to continue to see Tia, he wasn't sure he liked her mother much. She certainly didn't have Tia's sweet disposition. Which, on second thought, was probably just as well. There would be very little danger of him falling for her against his will.

"So forget her, lad," he said softly.

"So how did it go?"

Mick looked up from the blueprints he'd been studying as a tall, slightly-built black man stuck his head around the door of his office on Monday morning. Hal Ward was the managing partner.

He sat back in his seat. "How'd what go?"

"Your date."

"My date? What date?"

Hal grinned. "With your little girlfriend's mother."

"Oh."

"Well, how did it go?"

"Not as well as I'd hoped."

"Oh?" Hal eased himself into the room and sank down into one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"Her mother had already made up her mind not to like me before I arrived."

Hal's dark eyes widened. "That must have been a new experience for you."

He frowned. "Meaning what?"

Hal shrugged. "Meaning most women would kill to get a date with you. As you very well know."

He narrowed his eyes. He and Hal had been best friends since senior high and generally could talk about almost anything. Nevertheless, Hal had always resented the ease with which Mick attracted women; both black and white.

"I don't know any such thing and I didn't go there to wow her."

Hal didn't look convinced. "So you're saying you're not interested in her?"

"She's not my type."

"Not your type, you say? She is black, isn't she?"

Mick straightened his shoulders. "How many times do I have to tell you to stay out of my personal life, Hal?"

"I'm only trying to be a pal."

"Then find us a new accountant. We have less than a month before we have to file the firm's quarterly taxes or file for an extension."

Hal looked irritated. "I know that, Mike, but it's not my fault Mort had a heart attack," he said of the accountant that had handled the firm's taxes for the last five years.

"I know, I just think things would run a lot smoother around here if you concentrated on business and allowed me to handle my private life."

"That's part of the problem. You don't have a private life. It's been too long since you've been with a woman. That sort of abstinence makes a man edgy. Mike, my man, what you need is a lot of loving."

He gave up all efforts to be diplomatic. "The only thing that makes me edgy is your refusal to stay out of my personal life."

"That's what friends are for," Hal said, getting to his feet. "Don't forget you're coming to my place on Friday night. Marge and I have someone we want you to meet," he said of his wife.

On the verge of telling Hal he had other plans, he hesitated. Since his divorce from Helen had become final, he'd only been out a couple of times. None of the women had made a lasting impression and he hadn't asked any of them out again. Meeting one more woman wouldn't make much difference.

"Who is this someone?"

Hal paused at the door and grinned. "Trust me. You'll like her."

He was in no mood to spend a long, boring evening with a woman he had nothing in common with just to please Hal. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Janet Walker."

"And?"

"Come on, Mike, you'll take all the mystery out of Friday. She's a friend of Marge's."

"And?" he insisted. This wouldn't be the first time Hal had tried to fix him up. He knew from past experience that he probably wouldn't be overly impressed with this Janet Walker. Not that Marge didn't have his best interest at heart. He knew Hal was the one pushing for him to start dating. Not unlike his mother, Hal had very firm ideas about the do's and don'ts of dating; who was an appropriate date and who wasn't.

"And she's tall, blonde, and nicely built. The type you say you prefer."

He ignored the obvious emphasis Hal had put on the word say. "You left out her most important attribute, didn't you?"

Hal tried to pretend that he didn't know what he meant. "I beg your pardon?"

He stared at him until Hal nodded. "Okay. Yeah. She's white. But I hope you'll still give her a chance."

He shook his head. "You know, Hal, your attitude about my supposed preference in women is getting real old real quick. You make it sound as if I have something against white women."

"Don't you?"

"In case you've forgotten, Helen is white."

"She was a fluke."

"And, as you say, I like blue-eyed blondes."

"So you say. But come on, Mike. This is me. Man, don't you think it's time you admitted the truth? You can't deal with your ... problem until it's out in the open."

"There's no problem to deal with," he said wearily. "In the eighteen years we've know each other, I've dated one black woman and numerous white ones."

"Yeah? Well, let's face it, man. If your mother hadn't been so against it, there would have been a lot of other black women and very few white women gracing your social calendar."

"So you say."

Hal shrugged. "Hey, that's fine if that's the way you want to play it," he said quickly, correctly interpreting the angry look on Mick's face. "Just say you'll be at our place on Friday night and I'm out of here."

"Fine. I'll be there."

"Great." Hal pulled the door open. "I'm expecting several calls from accounting agencies this morning. Hopefully we'll have a new accountant by the end of the week."

"Great. Don't let the door hit you in the back on your way out."

Hal laughed and quietly closed the door behind him.

The small cafe where Jennifer and her friend, Tasha, were having lunch two days later was crowded. They were practically squeezed into a small corner table, whose only virtue was the view it offered of the park a block away. The same park where Tia saw Daniel Michael Reilly.

"You look distracted, Jenn. What's the matter? Jim being a jerk again?"

She swallowed a mouthful of tuna salad before answering. "It has nothing to do with him," she said wearily. As her best friend, Tasha had taken Jim's desertion almost as hard as had Jennifer and Tia. And she was inclined to blame Jim for everything from a stopped up toilet to the Gulf War.

"No?" She sounded disappointed.

Jenn smiled. "Or at least very little. I told you about Tia's friend?" And when Tasha nodded, "Well, we had him over for dinner on Saturday."

Tasha's pretty face became attentive. "Tell me everything, but first tell me how he looks? Was he as bad as we thought?"

She had a sudden vision of blue eyes, thick, dark hair, and a killer smile. "Not exactly, no."

"You mean he's not an old, balding, white guy?"

She shook her head. "He's definitely not balding and he doesn't look any more than thirty-five or forty."

"I'm here to tell you that forty isn't exactly my idea of a young stud," Tasha, who was three months older than Jennifer, said. "But what does he look like?"

"He has these incredible blue eyes and he's ... drop-dead gorgeous," she admitted. "He almost takes your breath away."

Tasha put down her fork and sat back in her seat, her eyes on Jennifer's face. "Say what? Details. I need details, girl."

She shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "He has dark hair, and a nice smile. And he's ... physically ... impressive."

"Physically impressive, huh? That can cover a lot of territory. Impressive how? Is he tall, well-built, nice buns? Bedroom eyes? What?"

"Actually, he's ... he pretty much has all of those things."

Tasha sighed. "He sounds as delicious as the guy from the train."

"Ah ... actually, ... he is the guy from the train."

Tasha's eyes widened. "No stuff!! When are you seeing him again?"

"What?"

"What? Read my lips, Jenn. Oh, wait. What does he do for a living? Is he financially solvent?"

"I suppose so. He's a partner in an engineering firm."

"He has his own business?" Tasha lifted a menu and fanned herself in dramatic fashion. "I'm hot just hearing about him. Oh, Jenn, you've finally hit the jackpot! If you need me to babysit Tia while you see him again, let me know."

She stared at Tasha in surprise. "What? What are you talking about? I'm not going out with him!"

Tasha dropped the menu and leaned forward across the table. "You're kidding, right? I mean, Jenn, he's the guy you flipped over on the train! Let's face it: it's fate. It's obvious you two are meant for each other. I mean what are the odds of Tia's friend turning out to be that gorgeous hunk who flirted with you on the train? Huh? What are

the odds? No question: you have to go out with him."

She shook her head. "You know I don't believe in fate and you are not listening to me. I have no intentions of seeing him again. Why should I? Tia's the one who's in love with him, not me."

Tasha took a small bite of her sandwich before answering. "You were pretty hot under the collar yourself when you told me about meeting him on the train, but okay. Let's leave that for the moment. Why are you upset?" Because Tia likes him so much?"

"Yes. She's already so attached to him that she'd be devastated should his work take him away for more than a few days."

"Is that very likely?"

She frowned, shrugging. "I don't know."

Tasha nodded. "All the more reason to see more of him so you can find out. Right?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Just maybe?"

"Yes, maybe." She wasn't going to allow Tia or Tasha to fox her into seeing Daniel Michael Reilly again.

Tasha laughed and took another bite of her sandwich. "Hmm."

She grimaced. "I know that hmm of yours. Just don't think I'm interested in him."

Tasha feigned surprise. "Why would I think that? Oh, could it be because the man just has it going on?" She put her head to one side and studied Jennifer. "Is it because he's white?"

"That's not the only reason, but it's reason enough."

"No, it's not, Jenn. Come on, girl. Life can be hard."

"Yes, it can. I don't see how becoming involved with a white man is going to make it any easier."

"See, Jenn, you're looking at it all wrong. Don't worry that he's white."

"That's a pretty big worry to ignore, don't you think?"

"What I think is that love can be blissfully wonderful or it can tear you into little, devastated pieces. It may come along only once in a lifetime, if you're lucky; or not at all. So when it does come along, you have to be willing to take a chance and reach out and grab it with both hands. You can not let it slip through your fingers just because he's white. You have to take love where you find it, Jenn. Take the risk and see what happens."

Jennifer blinked. "Wow that's a very pretty speech."

Tasha grinned. "Yeah. I thought so myself. Kind of effective, huh?"

"Yes, except for one thing. If you really believe that, why haven't I ever seen you with a white guy?" she challenged. "You're a great one for giving out advice you don't take yourself."

Tasha's pretty face brightened. "That's not true. At the moment, there are too many fine brothers beating a path to my door, but if I met a white guy who rang my chimes, I'd go with the flow, girl. In a New York minute and later for anyone who didn't approve."

Jennifer had no doubt that Michael Reilly could ring almost any women's chimes he choose to,

including Tasha's. Not that she was going to admit that.

She glanced at her watch and pushed her plate away. "I have to get out of here. I'm going out to a new client this afternoon."

"Fine, Jenn. Change the subject, but think about what I said. Don't hold him at arms length just because he's white."

As far as Jennifer was concerned that was the strongest reason not to let herself even think of Mick Reilly as anything other than Tia's "cute" friend who smiled a lot.

"You're overlooking one very important fact, Tash," she pointed out as they stood in line to pay for their lunch.

"And that would be?"

"He hasn't asked me to go out with him."

"Oh. Bummer."

Mick looked up from his computer as the secretary he shared with Hal, tapped on his half open door and looked into his office. "Mike, I can't locate Hal and the new accountant is here."

He glanced at his watch. It was after two. As far as he knew Hal should be in the office somewhere. "Thanks, Bess. Put him in the conference room and I'll be there in a moment."

Bess smiled, a mischievous look in her dark brown eyes. "Okay. Only he's a her," she said and withdrew her head.

Grinning at his own groundless assumptions, Mick got to his feet, donned his suit jacket, straightened his tie, and walked across the floor to open the door in the far side of the room.

He stepped into the conference room and froze. The woman sitting with her back toward him, looked very different from the last time he'd seen her. Today she was wearing a dark suit that ended just above her knees. She had nice legs. The rest of her wasn't bad either, but he wasn't pleased to see her.

Of all the accountants in Philadelphia, Hal had to pick the one woman he could quite happily live without ever seeing again. "Ms. Smallwood," he said, doing his best to sound pleasant.

Her head jerked up and she stared at him, her eyes widening; her full lips parting in surprise and unmistakable dismay. She stood up slowly. "Mr. Reilly!"

Mick felt his lips twitch with suppressed amusement. She was as unpleasantly surprised as was he.

He extended his hand and moved toward her. "This is a surprise."

"Yes." After a noticeable hesitation, she placed her hand briefly in his.

But maybe he was jumping to conclusions again. Maybe she wasn't the new accountant. "I suppose you are our new accountant?" Even as he spoke, he glanced behind her to the conference room table where her briefcase and calculator lay.

"Yes. I'm with Johnstone Associates. I'm here to see a Hal Ward."

He had a difficult time suppressing his amusement. She sounded as if she was hoping she was in the wrong place. "You're in the right place," he told her.

"Oh." She flashed an empty smile at him. "Good." Her shoulders practically sagged in defeat

and he allowed himself a quick smile. "Hal is the managing partner. He's not available right now, but if you'll come with me, I'll show you where you'll be working."

"I had no idea that Design Associates was your firm," she said as he showed her into a small room at the back of the office.

He turned to face her, smiling openly. "Or you wouldn't have come?"

She seemed surprised by the question. "Of course I would have come," she said, her tone neutral. "It's my job. I go where I'm needed and I do my job, Mr. Reilly; efficiently and well."

Put in his place. And rightly so. He wiped the smile off his face. "Look, we've sort of got off on the wrong foot. And as I'm madly in love with your daughter, that won't do."

He extended his hand and smiled at her. "What do you say we start over, lass?" he asked, lapsing into a thick brogue.

He was rewarded by her slow smile as she allowed him to take her hand in his.

He gazed down at her, fascinated by the way her eyes sparkled when she really smiled ... with her eyes as well as her lips. Like now. The effect was stunning.

"So, you're Tia's mother," he heard himself say, just as if they really were meeting for the first time. "Jennifer."

"Yes. And you're Tia's big, nice, cute friend, Daniel Michael."

"Her very cute friend," he reminded her, his gaze on her lips.

"Oh, yes. Very cute," she repeated, in a slightly breathless voice.

He was aware of a sudden, almost irrepressible desire to kiss her. The desire seemed to encompass and overwhelm him, filling his thoughts and heart with the need. He couldn't remember wanting to kiss a woman so much for a long time. Except for her ... that day on the train. A day she didn't remember.

She didn't remember. He needed to keep reminding himself of that fact. He wasn't aware that he was still holding her hand until she began tugging at it.

"So, I ... I should probably get started."

The breathless quality of her voice excited him. But then everything about her turned him on. "Oh, right," he said, but retained her hand. He liked the feel of her soft fingers cradled in his.

"Now. I ... I should get started now."

The door opened behind them. He glanced over her shoulder to see Hal standing in the doorway.

He reluctantly released her hand. "Hal, there you are. Come meet Jennifer Smallwood."

Hal advanced into the room, casting a weary look in his direction.

"Jennifer, this is Hal Ward," he said. "Hal, Jennifer is the CPA from Johnstone Associates."

"Oh."

Amused, he watched Hal's face clear. He glanced at Jennifer and saw with disappointment that the sparkle was gone from her eyes. She was wearing her professional face again. "I'll leave you in Hal's capable hands."

He looked for some sign that she regretted Hal's untimely interruption and saw none. This woman was definitely not interested in him.

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Reilly."
She spoke quietly; not meeting his gaze.

Mr. Reilly. Great. They were back where they'd started. "It was my pleasure, Ms. Smallwood." He nodded and left the room.

Back in his office, he sat behind his desk, turned on his computer and made a determined effort not to think about Jennifer Smallwood or her amazing smile. There were other women in the world with amazing smiles who might actually be interested in him. Some of them might even be black.

He let the thought linger. He savored and embraced it; finding it to his liking. Although he didn't agree with Hal that his preference in women was a problem, Hal had been right about one thing: it was time he admitted to his true feelings. He decided suddenly, wearily to stop fighting what his mother had once called his "unnatural obsession." His father had been philosophical, saying these things sometimes happened.

His mother, on the other hand, had begged him to be strong and not give in to his "unnatural urges." He'd tried hard to please his mother, but he was and always had been strongly attracted to black women.

He didn't understand his preference. He never had. He just knew he preferred black women to all other women. And he was tired of pretending otherwise just to please other people at the risk of his own happiness. It was time he pleased himself. If that displeased other people, so be it.

Half an hour later, there was a tap on his door. "Come in," he said, sitting back in his chair.

The door opened. Hal came in and sat down in the chair in front of his desk. "You have to do us a favor, Mike."

He studied Hal's face. It was devoid of its usual amusement. Business then. "Sure; if I can."

"Oh, you can. And it's simple too."

He knew that tone. He wanted to know what he was committing himself to. "I'll be the judge of that. What's the favor?"

"Stay away from her, Mike. We don't have time to go looking for another accountant."

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Don't overreact, Hal. I was only there because Bess couldn't find you."

"Overreact? Mike, you were about to kiss her!"

"I was not going to kiss her," he denied. He'd wanted to, but he'd had no intentions of giving in to the urge. "We got off to a bad start. So we were shaking hands and starting over again. That's all."

"A bad start? You were only with her for a couple of minutes."

But what a couple of minutes. They'd almost been as potent as their meeting on the train. He nodded. "I know, but we've met before."

"Where?"

"She's Tia's mother."

Hal seemed surprised. "Tia? That's the little girl from the park?"

"Right."

"Ms. Smallwood is her mother? The one you said didn't like you?"

"Yes," he said, smiling. "Tia only has one mother, you know."

Hal narrowed his gaze. "Okay, wise guy, but she's obviously changed her opinion of you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you will never be able to convince me that she wouldn't have welcomed your kiss. She seemed on the verge of throwing herself into your arms when I walked into the room."

He stared at Hal in a stunned silence.

"So do us both a favor and stay away from her?"

On the verge of acquiescing, he found himself shaking his head instead. "I'll see whomever I like, Hal. Whenever I like," he said coolly. "Just as you did before you married Marge."

"Mike--"

"Don't Mike me, Hal." He stood up and walked over to the door and held it open. "End of discussion."

"Fine. I hope you know what you're doing."

After Hal had left, he sat back in his chair, frowning. Hal had overreacted, as he usually did when it came to Mick and black women. Jennifer Smallwood had not changed her mind about him. She had not wanted him to kiss her. Had she?

CHAPTER FOUR

Jennifer spent the entire thirty minute drive home, trying not to think about that afternoon. And her unexpected reaction to Mick Reilly. She grimaced. Not really unexpected. She'd felt the same attraction at his office as she'd felt that day on the train. Still, she'd thought she was "over" that train nonsense. Apparently she wasn't. What had she been thinking to allow him to hold her hand like that? For one wild moment she'd thought he was going to kiss her. And she had wanted him to. Just as she had wanted him to on the train.

She stopped the car in her front driveway and looked down at her hands. She was surprised to see they were shaking. And her insides were quivering. All because she'd been thinking about Mick Reilly kissing her.

Tasha was right. It was way pass time she got herself a man. But definitely not Mick Reilly. While she admired women who dared all for love, she wasn't prepared to deal with all the difficulties interracial couples faced. So Mick Reilly would remain off limits. She gathered her briefcase and trench coat and slipped out of the car.

Tia waited at the open front door. "Mommy!"

She smiled and kneeling, she kissed and hugged Tia. "Hello, sweetiekins."

"How was your day, Mommy?"

"Fine, sweetiekins," she said in a surprised voice. She couldn't remember Tia ever asking about her day. "Thanks for asking. How was yours?"

"Okay, Mommy." She picked up Jennifer's briefcase. "Come in and take a load off, Mommy."

She glanced over Tia's head to Aunt Linda, for some hint to Tia's good mood. But Aunt Linda shrugged and shook her head.

Ten minutes later, she was changing from the dark business suit into sweats. "Mommy, what are we doing tonight?"

She knew that tone. She pulled the sweat top over her head before turning to face Tia, sprawled across the bottom of her bed. "What would you like to do?"

"Mick wasn't at the park today, Mommy."

She hesitated, wondering if she should tell Tia she was working in his office. She decided against it. Then worried that he would. But surely he wouldn't.

She turned away and slipped her feet into her slippers. "Oh."

"So I was wondering. Can I call him, Mommy?"

"Well, ... okay, but don't keep him long. He might be tired or busy."

"Okay ... but can he?"

"Can he what?"

"Come to dinner."

"No!" She spoke more sharply than she'd intended. She turned in time to see the hurt look on Tia's face. "Sweetiekins, I'm sorry," she said quickly. She bent to kiss Tia's cheek. "But we just had him to dinner on Saturday."

"That was ages ago, Mommy. I talked to him earlier and he said he didn't have anything to do. Can he?"

"Tia, Aunt Linda wasn't expecting him. There's probably not enough food."

"He can have part of mine."

The thought of a man of Mick Reilly's size being satisfied with part of Tia's food, brought a smile to her lips. "Tia! Sweetiekins, he's a big man. He's not going to be satisfied with part of your food."

"Please, Mommy. Can he come? I'll bet he's not greedy."

Jennifer, who'd had no intentions of agreeing, found herself nodding. She wanted to see him again. In her house; filling the rooms with his smile and virility. "Okay, you can call him and ask."

Tia hopped off the bed and picked up the phone on the nightstand.

The phone was ringing when Mick walked into his condo. He put down his brief and laptop cases and picked it up. "Hello."

"Surprise!"

He smiled at the sound of the childish voice. "Tia! What a nice surprise."

"You know it's me?"

His smile widened as he loosened his tie and sat down on the chair near the phone. "Yes. I know it's you, pretty lady."

"What are you doing, Mick?"

"I'm talking to you."

"Oh. Well, how much food do you eat?"

"What?"

"Mommy said you're a big man and you need lots of food. Are you greedy?"

"I suppose I do have a big appetite," he said slowly. "Is it important?"

"I want you to come over for dinner tonight because I haven't seen you in ages and Mommy said there wasn't enough food. So I said I'd share mine with you, but she said it wouldn't be enough. Would it, Mick?"

He was fairly certain that Jennifer didn't want him to come, but he wanted to see her again; if only to see if Hal had been right. "I could bring pizza or Chinese food with me," he said.

"Bring pizza. Cheese! Bye!" she said happily and hung up.

He quickly showered and changed into a pair of jeans and a long sleeved pullover. He called in an order for a large cheese pizza, buffalo wings, and fries before he left the condo.

By the time he pulled up in front of the Smallwood house, thirty minutes later, he'd had time to regret not having asked to speak to Jennifer before agreeing to come over. Showing up at her house when he knew she didn't want him there wasn't exactly the way to score points with her.

But before he could decide what to do about it, the front door of the two-storied single house opened and Tia stood there with a big smile on her face.

He slipped out of the car, picked up the food and started toward the door where Tia wrapped herself around his legs. "Mick! You came!"

He smiled. "Of course I came. I said I would."

"I know, but that's what Daddy says sometimes, but then he doesn't come. He calls to explain why he doesn't come, but he doesn't always come."

He wasn't going to touch that one. He glanced toward the open front door. "Where's your mommy?"

"She's inside, waiting for you." She tugged at his leg. "Come on in, Mick."

Jennifer came into the living room just as he and Tia stepped inside. She was wearing a pair of sweats that hid her figure so effectively, it was difficult to remember that she had a rather lithe, shapely body. Her hair, worn up earlier, hung around her face in a thick, dark cloud.

One look at her face and he decided she was more than a little annoyed with him. And he couldn't blame her. "I apologize for not checking with you to see if it was okay to come over," he said quickly, only just resisting the urge to lapse into an exaggerated brogue in the hopes of coaching a smile from her.

To his surprise, all signs of displeasure left her face and she shrugged. "You came to see Tia. Right?"

Even as he nodded, he wondered how she'd react if he told her that was only part of his reason for coming.

"Then there's no problem. She's all yours, but you'll have to excuse me because I brought some work home with me." Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "Have fun you two."

Feeling thoroughly deflated, he watched her walk up the stairs. Hal had been wrong. Jennifer Smallwood had not changed her mind about him. She still didn't like him.

"Mick?"

He smiled and looked down at Tia as she slipped her small hand into his. "Yes?"

"Do you like her?"

"Who?"

"My mommy. Do you?"

He was attracted to her. Intrigued by her smile; the warm, rich color of her skin. But like her as a person? He wasn't sure about that. But he could hardly admit that to Tia.

"I don't really know her," he began slowly.

"Not like I do you. But she seems ... "

Tia stared up at him. "What? Nice? Pretty? Do you think she's pretty?"

"I ... yes." Although she wasn't. Not really. But she was attractive. She did attract him.

"Good because she thinks you're cute and nice to be around."

"How do you know that?" he asked, as he began unpacking the food.

"She said so." She clutched his free hand in hers; smiling up at him. "Maybe you and Mommy will decide to like each other and go out on a date sometime."

"Tia." He released her hand and knelt in front of her. "We already talked about that."

She shrugged. "I know, but things change sometimes. Don't they?"

"Yes, but that's not going to change."

"Why not? First Daddy was going to marry Mommy, then he wasn't. Mommy used to cry a lot, but she doesn't any more. That changed."

He felt like grinding his teeth. So Tia's father had let both her and her mother down. He touched her cheek. "I'm glad that your mommy doesn't cry any more, but I want you to understand

that your mommy and I aren't going to be going out."

"But once you and Mommy get to know each other, you'll want to go out together, Mick. You'll see. Mommy's very nice and she has very sweet lips. Once you kiss them you won't want to stop."

He sighed. He didn't doubt that Jennifer's lips were as sweet as they looked. And he was already attracted to her, but he knew she wasn't interested. Still, he would have to talk to her about Tia's expectations.

He smiled. "I think that pizza's getting cold. Who likes cold pizza?"

"Not me!" Tia giggled and dashed toward the table. "Come on, Mick."

Jennifer stared at the countless scraps of paper piled into several small mounds in front of her and sighed. She glanced around the small, cramped room. Thanks to the disorganized array of Mick Reilly and his partners' records, she was going to be spending more time in this room than she wanted. Computerizing their records would mean spending even more time here.

And she wanted to avoid that because that would make it almost impossible not to run into Mick Reilly; handsome, white, blue-eyed Mick Reilly.

She shook her head and reached for the first pile of slips. She was there to work, not fantasize about a man she didn't have a hope of ever winning. Even if she could get him, what was she supposed to do with him?

She sighed again and glanced at her watch. Eleven-forty. She'd break for lunch around twelve and meet Tasha. When she got back, she'd really dig into this mess.

There was a tap on the door and she looked up. It was probably Hal Ward, coming to make sure she had everything she needed. "Come in."

She felt a sudden rush of pleasure when Mick Reilly's handsome head appeared around the door opening.

He smiled. "Hi."

She cast a brief smile in his direction. "Hello, Mr. Reilly."

He glanced at the desk in front of her before meeting her gaze again. "I know you're busy, but I need to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Can I come in?"

She shrugged. "It's your office."

He opened the door further and stepped into the room, immediately dwarfing it. He was such a big, handsome man. To keep from staring at him, she looked down at the pile of papers on the desk.

He sat down on the only other chair in the small room. "It's about Tia."

She looked up quickly. "What about her?"

"I ... " he ran a hand through his hair. "About the other night."

"What about it?"

"She seems to think that you and I ... I tried to explain to her that there's no chance of ... " he trailed off and looked hopefully at her.

And she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. "Oh. Well, I told her that we ... that is, I ... I knew this wasn't a good idea."

"What?"

"Having you over for dinner."

He smiled suddenly and her heart beat increased. "Why not? Were my table manners that bad?"

She found herself returning his smile. "No. Of course not."

"Then? I enjoyed the evening. I was kind of hoping you had too."

It was difficult to maintain his intense gaze. "Well, I ... that is Tia and I did, but now she's going to think that we ... and there's no chance of that. I tried --"

"Why is that?" he asked abruptly.

She gave him a blank stare. "Why is what?"

He hesitated for so long that she thought he wasn't going to answer. "Why are you so sure there's no chance of her getting her wish?"

Her lips parted in surprise. "What?"

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair again. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"What?"

"A man? A lover? Are you looking for one or do you already have one?"

The heat rose to her cheeks again. She found she couldn't look away from him. Those blue eyes of his wouldn't let her. "That's ... that's none of your business."

He shrugged. "I didn't say it was."

"Then why are you looking at me as if you expect to stare the answer out of me?"

He laughed suddenly and finally she felt able to look away from him. "Was I doing that? Sorry." He stood up and moved to the door. He started to

pull it open, changed his mind, and turned to look at her. "Are you free for dinner tonight?"

"No, I am not!"

"If not tonight, some other time."

She shook her head. "I already have plans for my Friday night, Mr--"

"Mick. My name is Mick."

"It seems I need to remind you of something, Mr. Reilly. I'm here for one reason: to get your taxes prepared," she said, ignoring his interruption.

"And I'm sure you'll do it very efficiently, but have you ever dated a white man?"

"No."

"Would you consider going out with a slightly older, divorced, Irish engineer?"

She stared at him, her mouth formed into a small, silent circle.

"I'll take that as a maybe," he said and walked out.

She sat staring at the closed door. Her heart pounded and her hands shook. He was very definitely interested in her. But she couldn't afford to be interested in him.

"So why don't you give it a chance, Jenn? Who's it gonna hurt?" Tasha asked as they sat over lunch at the little cafe twenty minutes later.

"Tasha!"

"What?" Tasha shook her head. "Look, Jenn, he's a good looking, financially solvent, unattached man who wants to be attached to you. He and Tia are crazy about each other and you kind of like him too."

She nearly choked on the cherry seven-up she was sipping. "I never said that!"

Tasha grinned. "Oh, yes you did. I knew you liked him on Wednesday when you told me he was drop-dead gorgeous. Not handsome or good looking, but drop-dead gorgeous." Tasha pointed her salad fork in her direction. "That's not a description I've ever heard you use."

"It's doesn't mean anything, Tash."

"Then why are you blushing? Look, girl, you deserve a little fun. Why not give it a shot? What have you got to lose? He's a good looking, older man with money who can afford to take you nice places and help you make ends meet. Let him be your sugar daddy."

"Tasha!" She stared disapprovingly at her friend. "He's not that much older than me, and I can take care of myself."

"Hey, I know you can, Jenn, but let's face it, when you bought your house, you weren't expecting to be footing all the bills alone."

That was true. It was supposed to be the house where she, Jim, and, Tia lived happily ever after. After she and Jim married.

"I manage," she mumbled.

"I know, but why just manage when Tia's friend wants to be your friend too?"

She shook her head and held her hands up. "That's enough, Tasha. We've been friends since fifth grade. You know I am not going to go out with him just so he can ... help me financially."

"Okay." Tasha's voice softened. "I know. Just go out with him because you both want it. And don't worry about what your mother will say."

"My mother is not prejudiced!" she said defensively.

Tasha raised her dark, perfectly arched eyebrows. "Say what?"

"She's not," she insisted.

"Hey, you know I love the woman like a second mom, but let's be real, Jenn. She is prejudiced."

"She's not, Tash. She just thinks interracial dating and marriage is not such ... a good thing."

"Yeah." Tasha rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Forget what your mother and the world might think and give him a chance, Jenn. Give yourself a chance. You could really go for him."

"Tasha, I--"

"Don't bother trying to deny it. I can see it in your eyes when you talk about him."

A wave of shock radiated through her. If her interest in Mick Reilly was that clear, had he seen it too? Was that why he'd asked her out? Come to that, was that why he'd flirted with her on the train? Had she unconsciously given off come hither vibes?

"If it helps any, look at it this way. You two were meant to be together."

"Tasha!"

"No, no. Really. Look at the facts. First you meet him on the train, then he turns out to be Tia's friend, and now he's a partner in the firm where you'll be working! Come on, Jenn! Surely that's too much coincidence even for you."

"He's the one, Jenn."

She shook her head stubbornly, but couldn't vanquish a mental picture of Mick Reilly's smiling face.

When the phone rang at seven o'clock that night, Jennifer got a chill. She knew it was Jim. And that meant trouble. He should be knocking on the door, not calling on the phone.

"Mommy, the phone's ringing," Tia bellowed from the dining room, where she was coloring at the table.

"Thanks, sweetiekins," she called and reached out to answer it. "Hello."

"Hey, Jenn."

She gave a silent groan. "Jim, what are you doing calling?" she asked quietly, not wanting Tia to hear. "It's seven o'clock. Tia's bag is packed and she's waiting for you."

"I know that, babe, but something's come up."

She pressed her lips tightly together before she answered. "Again? How late are you going to be?"

"Hey, don't get an attitude with me, Jenn," he said angrily, his voice losing the soft quality she used to adore. "Things, happen, okay?"

"Fine," she said through her teeth. "How late are you going to be?"

"I can't make it at all, baby."

"What?!" She clamped a hand over her mouth and bit her bottom lip in an effort to hold onto her temper. "You'd better make it. She's been dressed and waiting for you for an hour and a half! And she's been looking forward to this weekend since the last time you couldn't make it! If--"

"I can't talk to you when you're like this," he said cutting her off. "Tell my baby I'll talk to her tomorrow."

"Don't you hang up on me, Jim!" she cried angrily as she heard a click and then a dial tone.

"Mommy?"

With the phone still clenched in her hand, she turned to see Tia standing in the doorway. The anxious look on her pretty face, wrung at Jennifer's heart. She put the phone down and forced herself to smile. "Yes, sweetiekins?"

"That was my daddy."

"Yes."

Tia clasped her hands together. "Is he coming late?"

She shook her head.

"He's not coming at all?"

"No," she whispered and waited for the angry tears to start. But although Tia's eyes were dark, furious pools, she didn't cry. She looked down at the pretty dress she was wearing. The same one she'd worn for Mick Reilly's first visit. "Then I'll go change."

"Tia, I'm sorry," she said and reached out to hug her. She was shocked when Tia pulled away, glaring at her. "Tia!"

"It's all your fault, Mommy!" the child suddenly screamed. "You shouldn't have made me with him! He doesn't want you any more and now it's rubbing off on me!"

"Tia!" she cried, shocked and hurt. "That's not true."

"It is! This is all your fault, Mommy!"

Jennifer's eyes filled with tears. She heard Tia run up the stairs to her room. A door slammed and she sunk down onto the chair next to the phone, shaking.

She let the tears flow freely down her cheeks. What was she going to do? How could she make this up to Tia? How could she make her understand about

Jim when she didn't understand herself? Darn Jim! She picked up the phone and angrily punched out his phone number. It rang five times before it was answered.

"Hello."

A woman's voice. She wiped her hand across her cheeks. "I'd like to speak to Jim, please."

"Who's calling?"

"I'd like to speak to him," she said again. "Is he there or not?"

"Look, honey," the woman began, sounding irritated. "You're the one calling here. Now either you tell me who you are or you don't get to speak to him."

She hung up without answering. She felt fresh tears fill her eyes. So now he had his latest woman running interference for him.

She allowed herself a minute to cry before she washed her face in the powder room and went up to Tia's bedroom. She tapped lightly on the door and then went in.

Tia slept with the phone clutched in her hand, dried tears on her cheeks. She'd tried to call Jim. Jennifer put the phone on the hook, took off Tia's shoes, and began to pull the cover over her.

That's when she noticed a crumbled business card in Tia's other hand and bit her lip. It was Mick Reilly's business card. She sincerely hoped that Tia had been talking to Jim rather than him. She didn't want Mick Reilly involved in her personal life.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Did I steer you wrong, Michael me lad?"

With two drinks in his hands, Mick turned from the bar to find Hal grinning at him.

He glanced quickly across the room crowded with dancing, laughing people to the terrace. Janet Walker sat there, waiting for him to return with her drink. She was everything Hal had promised: tall, blonde, blue eyed, and beautiful; with a grace and charm he knew most men would find irresistible.

"No. She's gorgeous," he admitted.

"Yeah?" Hal asked, grinning, as if he were responsible for her beauty. "Like what you see, do you?"

"What man wouldn't?"

Hal slapped him on the back so hard that he nearly spilled the drinks. "Then don't let me keep you, lad."

He nodded and hurried back to the table. "Here you are," he said, setting her drink in front of her before reclaiming his seat across from her.

"Thanks, Mike," she said and took a sip.

She smiled at him and he smiled back. Janet Walker might be just what he needed right now. She'd come along at the perfect time to keep him from falling for Jennifer Smallwood, who was so clearly not interested in going out with him.

He didn't know if it were white men in general Jennifer Smallwood didn't date or if she just didn't like him in particular. Or if the age

difference bothered her or if she just wasn't interested in dating. Whatever the reason for her lack of interest, he needed someone to take his mind off her. Janet Walker looked more than equal to the task.

"Are you busy tomorrow night?"

She smiled. "As a matter of fact, I'm not. I'm free if you'd like to see me."

He hesitated, thinking briefly of Jennifer. But that was a waste of time. He smiled. "I would like to see you. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

Her smile warmed him. "I would love to have dinner with you, Mike."

Jennifer felt a pair of soft lips touching her mouth and opened her eyes to find Tia standing over her bed in the early morning light.

"Hi, Mommy."

Her eyes filled with tears and she pulled the child onto the bed and into her arms. "Hi, sweetiekins."

"I didn't mean it, Mommy!" Tia whispered, kissing her neck. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!"

"Oh, I know you didn't."

"I'm sorry I made you cry, Mommy!"

"It's okay, sweetiekins," she said and held Tia away from her. She was wearing the same dress she'd fallen asleep in the night before. "It's forgotten. Okay?"

"Are you sure, Mommy?"

She stroked the child's cheek. "Yes. I'm sure." She kissed Tia and glanced at her bedside clock. It was just six 'o'clock. Thank God it was

Saturday. "What say you take that dress off and we go back to sleep for another hour or two?"

Tia slipped off the dress and pressed into her arms. "Mommy. I love you."

"Oh, I love you too, sweetiekins."

The phone woke Jennifer an hour later. Being careful not to disturb Tia, she rested her back against her pillows and the headboard before lifting the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

"Jennifer?"

She sat up straight, sleep vanquishing at the sound of Mick Reilly's voice. "Yes."

"This is Michael Reilly."

"Yes?"

"Jennifer, is everything all right?"

"Yes," she said quickly, wondering what Tia had said to him. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"I just woke up and I found a message from Tia from last night. She was crying. Is she all right? Are you all right?"

"We're both fine. Thanks for calling," she said and prepared to hang up.

"Wait a minute," he said quickly. "Is she there? Can I speak to her?"

"She's asleep, but I'll tell her you called."

"So she's not spending the weekend with her father?"

"Apparently not or she wouldn't be here. Asleep!" she snapped. Knowing that she had no right to take her mood out on him, she quickly apologized. "I'm sorry."

He was silent for a long moment. "I'm not your enemy, Jennifer. I know things must be difficult for you, but you don't always have to keep the

wall between us so high and so fortified. I am not looking to hurt you."

His voice was so tender that she knew she'd have wanted to lay her head against his shoulder if he'd been there. She immediately dismissed the thought as ridiculous. "I said I was sorry. I didn't exactly have a very good night."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said softly and she knew he meant it. "Is there anything I can do? For either of you?"

Something in his voice left her feeling breathless. "Well, I'm fine, but Tia might like to see you sometime today. If you have time."

"She was telling me she wanted to see Babe II. So I bought a copy. Maybe I could bring it over."

"Oh. Okay. What time would you like to come?"

"I'm free all day."

She mentally ran through a quick list of things she needed to do. Chief among the things she needed to do was to go food shopping, but that would have to wait until she got paid. "Would you like to come for lunch? Around twelve?"

"Fine."

"Before you agree, you should know you'll have to take your chances with lunch."

"No problem. Ah, but if you like, I could bring something--" he began.

"That won't be necessary," she said quickly.

"Okay. I'll see you at twelve."

"We'll see you then and ... Mick?"

"Yes, Jennifer?"

"Thank you," she said quietly and hung up before she could say something she'd regret.

It took a real effort on Jennifer's part not to dress up for lunch. Mick knew how she dressed at home, so if she wore anything other than sweats, he'd know it was to impress him. And she sure didn't want him to know how much she'd like to wow him.

He arrived just before twelve, wearing a short sleeved pull over and a pair of old jeans that clung to his long legs and hugged his lean hips.

She had to force herself not to stare at him. There was nothing sexier than a long-legged, lean-hipped man in a pair of tight, bun-hugging, thigh-molding jeans.

"Mick!" Tia screamed in delight and wrapped herself around his legs.

"Hi," he said softly to Jennifer, handed her the two bouquets of flowers he held. He kneeled in front of Tia, kissed her cheek, and hugged her. "Hi, honey!" Tia wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on both cheeks.

Jennifer watched, stifling a jealous urge to do the same.

"My daddy didn't come after all, Mick," Tia said in a sad voice that almost brought tears to Jennifer's eyes.

He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek. "I'm sorry, sweetie."

"Why? It's not your fault he doesn't love me any more."

"Oh, sweetie!" He cupped her face between his hands and looked into her eyes. "That can't be true. Of course he loves you."

"No, he doesn't," she said stubbornly.

"Tia!" Jennifer began. "Of course your father loves--"

Tia swung around to face her. "Well, he doesn't and you know it, Mommy!"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Mick said, and turned her back to face him. "What kind of nonsense is this? If I love you and I'm not your father, how could he not love you?"

Tia's small mouth parted and she stared up at him. "You do? Really?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Really."

"Do you think it's okay?"

"Do I think what's okay?"

"For me and you to love each other? Is it all right?"

Jennifer stood clutching the flowers against her chest as he looked up at her. "I don't see anything wrong with it. Do you, Jennifer?"

Tia turned a shining face up to await her answer and she made the only response she could. "No."

"There." He smiled at Tia. "You see?"

She kissed his cheeks again.

Over Tia's head, he looked up at her with the same expression she'd seen in his eyes that day on the train. She bore his gaze for as long as she could, before she looked away, feeling breathless. Then she made herself look at him again. "I'll put these in water."

He smiled silently and she hurried away, taking long, deep breaths to calm her pounding heart. Why did she tingle all over every time he looked at her? More to the point, why did he look at her with that ... warm intimate look in his eyes?

She was in the kitchen, putting the flowers in water when she felt a tingling sensation along the

back of her neck. She turned to find Mick standing in the doorway, watching her.

"Thanks for coming," she said quickly, before he could speak. "Having you here will help make up for her not being with her father."

He nodded and smiled slightly. "Has she been giving you a hard time?"

"About what?"

"Her father ... and you ... not being married. Why aren't you married?"

Her cheeks burned. She turned back to the sink and put a hand over her lips. She wanted to be angry with him for daring to ask her something so personal, but she was more embarrassed than anything else. And mortified by what he must think of her.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," he said quickly.

She bit her lip and swung around to face him as he moved into the kitchen. "I really don't care how you meant it. You have no right to ask such a personal question and I have no intentions of discussing my personal life with you."

"I wasn't passing any type of judgment," he said, trying to catch her gaze.

"Weren't you?"

"No," he said firmly. "I wasn't."

"Then why were you asking?" she challenged.

"Because I want to know."

"Why?"

"Because I want to know everything about you." He spoke softly and ran the tip of his tongue over his lips in a manner that she found incredibly erotic.

She felt the muscles in her stomach contract. She leaned back against the counter, unable to look away from him. "Okay, I'll bite. Why should my life interest you?"

He shrugged. "I've thought about you frequently since that morning."

"That morning? What morning?" But even as she asked the question, she knew he was referring to the day they'd met on the train.

"On the train."

She bit her lip. "The train ..."

He nodded. "Yes, the train. The moment I looked into your eyes, I was hooked."

As was she. Still, she didn't dare admit it. "This is a really crazy conversation."

"Why?"

"Why?! Isn't it obvious?"

He shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head. "Not to me."

"It's too soon for you to be talking like this," she said, trying not to lose herself in his blue gaze. "It's only been two weeks. And we--"

He spoke in a quiet voice. "I know exactly how long it's been."

"Well, then you know this is crazy. I mean--"

"And I know how I feel."

How he felt? That didn't sound as if he were just talking about sex. "Well, I don't want to know, so keep it to yourself." She pushed away from the counter and started pass him.

He swung around and caught her arm, sending a tingle of desire through her that she felt down to her toes. Easily overcoming her insincere resistance, he drew her body against his. He kept her close with an arm around her waist.

She gasped. She wasn't sure if the sound was shock at the contact with his body or at the desire she saw in the deep, beautiful eyes looking down into hers.

"Don't you?" he asked softly, brushing the tips of his fingers against her lips. "Are you sure about that? Aren't you even a little interested? That day on the train when we were in the aisle, I could almost have sworn--"

She trembled and attempted to pull away. "I don't want to talk about that! I wasn't myself that day!"

He arched a brow in obvious disbelief, smiling. "Really? Who were you? Maybe you can introduce me to the woman you were that day. I'd like to see her again."

She stared up at him. She had to say something ... anything to stop him from pulling her any closer. "Don't ... Tia might walk in."

"I told her I needed to talk to you alone. She promised not to interrupt." He bent his head.

"She--she doesn't always keep her promises!" she said wildly, knowing he was about to kiss her. Part of her wanted him to. Another part knew that there would be no turning back once he did.

"I do so, Mommy!"

At the sound of Tia's indignant voice behind them, she struggled to be free of his arms. To her relief, he laughed without any embarrassment, and released her.

"Then what are you doing in the doorway, you peeking Tia?" He crossed the room and swung Tia up into his arms.

Tia giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You were taking too long," she complained. "Besides I thought you came to see me, not Mommy."

"So I did, sweetie." Without looking at her again, he carried the giggling Tia out of the kitchen.

She stumbled back against the counter, shaking. He was too much for her. It was only going to be a matter of time before she found it impossible to resist him. Maybe Tasha was right. Maybe she should let it happen. It was so clearly what he wanted. And so did she.

She knew all the reasons she shouldn't, but they weren't going to make much sense when he was kissing and touching her. Maybe what she needed was to just get him out of her system. Have a hot, sleazy affair with him and forget it once their desire for each other was sated.

The idea would have shocked her just a week earlier. But now, all she could think of was him. And want him. Was it so wrong to want him like this just because he wasn't black? She knew her mother and Aunt Linda would think so. She also knew she was very close to not caring what they thought.

She expected the rest of the day to be heavy going with him trying to get her alone every chance he got. Although she frequently found him watching her instead of the movie, he made no effort to touch her or get her alone.

After the movie the three of them sprawled out on the living room floor to play Tia's favorite game, Candy Land.

"Mommy and Daddy always make sure I win," she warned Mick.

He laughed and tapped her on her nose. "Oh, yeah? Well, I'm not Mommy or Daddy and if you want to win, you'll have to do it fair and square, me lassie."

To Jennifer's surprise, Tia giggled and grabbed the dice. "Okay, me lad," she said in an awful attempt at an Irish accent. She paused and looked eagerly at Mick. "How was that?"

"Beautiful," he assured her, straight-faced.

As she watched her daughter practically glowing under his praise, Jennifer knew he had conquered both their hearts. She could only hope that he took better care of them than Jim had.

"How long are you staying after dinner, Mick?" Tia asked as she took her turn.

"Actually, I have to leave before dinner."

Jennifer, who'd also expected him to stay for dinner, looked up from the board. Hadn't he said he was free all day? She frowned. He hadn't said anything about the night.

"Why?" Tia asked.

He shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "I have an ... appointment."

"What he means is he has a date."

She wasn't aware that she'd spoken her thoughts aloud, until she found both Tia and Mick staring at her. She bit her lip and looked away.

"Is that what you mean, Mick?" Tia asked.

"Yes."

"With who?"

"Tia!" She felt obligated to protest, even though she wanted to know the answer to the question far more than Tia did.

"No, it's all right," he said. "Her name is Janet. I met her at a party."

"When? Is she pretty?"

"Last night and yes, she's pretty."

"And you like her?"

"I ... don't really know her. That's why I'm going out with her."

"Does she have blue eyes too?"

If he were annoyed by all Tia's questions, Jennifer could find no evidence of it in his voice or expression.

"As a matter of fact, she does."

"Mommy's eyes aren't blue," Tia said, as if she were sharing a secret with him. "But if you really like blue eyes, she can get blue contact lenses or something."

"Tia!" she cried, horrified. "No, I will not!"

He laughed, shaking his head. "Your mommy's eyes are fine just the way they are," he said. "I like brown eyes much better than blue anyway."

Tia smiled, clearly relieved. "Good because Mommy's eyes are brown."

He smiled. "Oh, your mommy's eyes are very brown."

"So you won't really like Janet? Will you?"

He didn't answer immediately and Jennifer turned to find him watching her. She stared back, almost holding her breath.

"I know someone I like a whole lot more," he finally said.

She caught her breath and waited for Tia to move in for the kill. To her dismay, Tia seemed satisfied with that answer.

"It's your turn, Mommy," she said.

She glanced at Mick and found him watching her with an amused look in his eyes. She had the

uncomfortable impression that he might know what she was thinking.

She lifted her chin and gave him a later-for-you-buster look. His smile widened and he arched a brow at her.

An hour later, he got up to leave. He kissed Tia on her cheek. "Do you mind if I had a private word with your Mommy?"

Tia giggled. "Can I listen?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He ran his hand over her hair. "Because it wouldn't be private if you listened."

"Oh, all right. Will you call me later?"

"No. I'll call you tomorrow or you can call me. Now make yourself scarce."

Tia kissed him on the cheek and picking up her game, she headed to her room.

Jennifer rose. "I'd better go start dinner. Will you see yourself out?"

"Will you have dinner with me tomorrow, Jennifer?"

She shook her head. She felt so envious of the woman he was about to spend the evening and possibly the night with, that she couldn't trust herself to speak.

"How about lunch?"

"No. Not lunch, not dinner. Nothing," she said, but made no move to pass him. She was afraid that if she did, he'd touch her.

"I can't cancel this date," he said, his voice softening.

Twin flames of embarrassment flushed her cheeks. He knew she was jealous! "Who asked you to?" she demanded.

"That's what you want me to do, isn't it?"

"No!"

"Good. Because I have no intentions of canceling it."

She shrugged.

"I'll probably see you at the office on Monday." He nodded and turned away.

She reacted instinctively. "Wait!"

He turned back, his gaze cool and impersonal. "What?"

She sighed. He was going to make her admit she was jealous. "Why can't you cancel?" Her voice was low and she didn't meet his gaze.

"Because I made such a big deal about asking her last night. I can't just call two hours before I'm supposed to arrive and say I have something better to do."

She turned to face him. "Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be very considerate of me and I wouldn't do it to you."

"Fine. Go enjoy yourself." She turned her back to him.

She felt the tingling sensation and knew he was just behind her. "I won't," he said gently. "I'd rather stay here."

She swung around to face him. He was so close that her breasts brushed against his chest. They both sucked in their breaths at the contact. Being so close to him, robbed her of her common sense. Without giving herself time to think it through, she put a hand on his arm. "Please. Stay."

For several moments they stared at each other in silence. Then, with a soft sigh, he bent his head and brushed his mouth lightly against her

lips. The brief contact of his lips against hers sent an electric like shock all through her.

"Are you sure you're ready for the consequences of my staying?"

She wasn't. It was crazy and impossible, but she couldn't bear the idea of him spending the evening with another woman. Even if he didn't enjoy himself. She made a small helpless sound and melted into him. His arms went around her and she pressed her face against his shoulder. She closed her eyes and clung to him. "Please. Stay."

CHAPTER SIX

Jennifer lay in her bed in the early morning light with her pillow clutched to her chest. She kept her eyes closed in an effort not to think about her behavior with Mick Reilly the night before.

Allowing him to kiss her had been crazy enough, but she hadn't been satisfied with that. She had insisted he cancel his date and stay with her. Then she had kept him at arm's length, refusing to even allow him to kiss her good night when he finally left just after ten o'clock.

She touched a finger to her lips. He hadn't really kissed her. Just sort of brushed his mouth against hers. No tongues or open lips. No wandering hands. He had been a gentleman. He had given her no reason to be afraid of him. But she was afraid because she knew how easily she could fall for him.

She needed to talk. She rolled over onto her side and looked at her bedside clock. It was just after six-thirty. Tasha would probably still be sleeping. And not alone.

She wouldn't be pleased, but Jennifer needed to talk.

A man answered on the fourth ring. "What?"

"Is Tasha there?"

"She's sleeping. Like I was."

"I'm sorry. Would you tell her it's Jennifer, please?"

"Lady ... Jennifer, it's Sunday. It's early."

"It's important."

A disgruntled Tasha arrived forty minutes later. Her long, dark hair was caught up in a careless ponytail and she was wearing a silk sweat suit and sneakers.

"Girl, this had better be good." She gave Jennifer a brief hug before heading for the kitchen. After two cups of coffee, they settled on the big blue living room sofa to talk.

"Look, Jenn, call me slow, but I really don't see a problem. You want him, he wants you. Go for it."

She shook her head. "It's not that simple, Tasha. I'm scared."

"Why?"

"Because ... I think I might be falling in love with him," she admitted. "It's crazy and scary. I don't really even know him, but I know I could love him."

Tasha smiled. "Being in love is a little scary, but it's also exciting."

"No. I can't be in love with this man. I can't sleep with him."

Tasha blinked at her. "Excuse me? Who said anything about sleeping with him?"

She blushed. "I want to," she said. "I look at him and I feel all hot and ... hungry ... it's been a long time."

"Then let him light your fire, girl."

She shook her head. "Oh, no. Not without marriage. Not again."

"Here we go again!" Tasha rolled her eyes. "Jenn, get real. You don't really think this guy is going to marry you before he gets you in bed. Do you? It doesn't work that way any more. You

have to give up the goods first. Then, if you're big time lucky, he might still want you enough to marry you later."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I tried it that way with Jim and look where it got me. I'm practically raising Tia alone and he's in another state about to marry some woman who said no to sleeping with him. I am not going to sleep with Mick."

"Jenn, the man is newly divorced. He's going to be even more afraid of marriage than a guy who's never been married. Don't get your hopes up. If you want him, be prepared to sleep with him." She shrugged. "Maybe live with him."

"Live with him! Never! I am never going to live with another man without marriage. I can't do that again."

"Great. Fine." Tasha threw up her hands. "But whatever you do, just be careful. Okay?" When she nodded, Tasha smiled. "I have an idea. Why don't I take Tia for the rest of the day? Better yet, pack her school stuff and she can stay overnight. I'll take her to school tomorrow before heading into work."

"Thanks, but that's not necessary."

"Of course it is," Tasha insisted. "That'll give you and your big drop-dead gorgeous Irish hunk the whole day and night alone."

She felt the hot blood rushing up her cheeks. "What about the guy you were with?"

"Paul? He'll be gone by the time we get back."

"I'm sorry!"

Tasha waved a hand in dismissal. "Don't sweat it, girl. He was heading out of town this afternoon anyway. And face it, Jenn, you need a

little loving. The man wants you, I say, let him love you."

"I can't sleep with him."

Tasha smiled. "Whatever. Tell me that after you've spend a day and night alone with him."

Mick was stepping out of the shower when he heard the phone ringing in his bedroom. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he padded into the bedroom and picked up the phone. "Hello."

"Mick?"

He smiled and sat on the edge of his big bed. "Jennifer! Hi! What a nice surprise. How are you?"

"I'm ... fine ... good."

She sounded so shy. His smile widened. He was pleased, but surprised to hear from her. He'd been sure that he would have to wear her down before she'd agree to see him again.

"I was wondering if you'd like to have brunch with me."

"Today?"

"Yes. If you're not busy."

Even if he'd had a date with Vanessa Williams, he'd have canceled it. Still he hesitated, aware that he was about to go beyond the point of no return with her.

"You are busy," she said, sounding disappointed.

"No," he said, immediately making up his mind. He didn't know how he'd come to feel so strongly about her in such a short time, but he couldn't deny that he did feel strongly about her. "I'm not busy, but why don't you let me take you and Tia out instead? We could go down to the Chart House at Penn's Landing."

"Tia's spending the day with a friend."

"Really? Then I'll have you all to myself," he said slowly and waited for her response. If she was going to run away every time he showed his feelings, he wanted to know now. Not that it would change anything. He was willing to wait until she trusted him enough not to run.

"Yes ... I guess you will."

"Lucky me."

"You ... mean that?"

"You bet your beautiful brown eyes I do."

"Oh."

"I'll pick you up in an hour."

"Okay. I'll see you then."

Jennifer took great care with her appearance, carefully applying a light foundation, lipstick, and blusher. Knowing that she looked good in pastel colors, she put on a pink, silk pantsuit that clung to her breasts and hips. She slipped on matching low heels, added a pair of silver earrings and a silver watch.

She studied her reflection and decided she would do very nicely. From the look in Mick's eyes when he arrived, he seemed to feel the same way.

"These are for you," he said, holding out yet another banquet of flowers. Roses this time. Red.

She smiled up at him. "Thank you, but you don't always have to bring flowers."

"You don't like them?"

"Of course I do! I just mean they're expensive."

"And you think I can't afford them?"

Judging by how well his firm was doing, she knew he could. But he did have an ex-wife that he

was probably paying alimony to. "No! That's not what I meant. I meant... well ... roses ... especially red ones ... are special."

His blue gaze flicked slowly over her face. "So you are."

"Oh," she said breathlessly.

He dipped his head and kissed her gently on the cheek. "You look beautiful."

"Oh," she said again, staring up at him. "We, ah ... we should go. We're here alone."

He laughed and kissed her again. This time, on the corner of her mouth, making her knees knock. "Lead the way."

Once in the car, he asked her what kind of music she liked. "Rhythm and blues," she said.

"How about Jazz?"

She shrugged. "Not really. I like to sing along with my music."

"Nothing wrong with that." He gestured toward the car stereo. "You choose stations."

She did and moments later the car was filled with the mellow voice of Babyface. She glanced at his profile as he merged into traffic. "Do you mind?"

"No," he said so promptly that she suspected he did.

"I could change stations," she offered.

"Not necessary. I don't want you to change a thing about yourself to please me." He threw her a lightning fast sideways glance. "You're perfect. Just as you are."

Unable to do a thing about the big smile spreading across her face, she relaxed against the soft leather seat and closed her eyes. "I hope you

don't mind if I doze. I didn't sleep very well last night."

"Neither did I," he said with such feeling, that she smiled. That must be his way of telling her that he'd spent the better part of the night thinking about her. Just as she had about him.

She was surprised at how comfortable she felt with him. The last time she'd been out on a date nine months earlier, she'd been too nervous to eat and her knees had kept shaking.

They didn't really talk until they were sitting over coffee. "Tell me about you and Tia's father," he said.

She sighed. Talking about what had gone wrong for her and Jim, wasn't exactly her favorite topic of conversation. "Jim and I met in junior high and fell in love. We dated all through senior high and attended the University of Pennsylvania so we could stay together."

She shook her head, remembering how much in love they'd been. "We couldn't get enough of each other."

"Were you lovers?"

She stifled a sigh. The man had a lamentable talent for asking awkward and embarrassing questions. "No. Not then. We went all the way through college, content with heavy petting. We didn't make love for the first time until after we graduated. It was our present to each other." Her lack of embarrassment amazed her.

"Did you plan on having Tia?"

"No. Yes. No. Well, not right away, but we always talked about marriage and a family. But kids were going to come after we both got established. Jim's a CPA too. Anyway, once we

became lovers, we were careful. The one time, we got careless, I got pregnant."

"And he was angry?"

She took a sip of her cooling coffee.

"Actually, he was pleased. I don't want you to get the wrong idea about him. He loves Tia. And he supports her financially. He's not a deadbeat dad."

"I'm glad to hear it. What happened between you and him?"

She shrugged. "Everything was fine at first. We got an apartment together and waited for Tia to be born."

His eyes searched her face. "You were okay with that? Living with him?"

She remembered her hurt surprise when Jim had first suggested they live together instead of getting married. "Not really, but he wasn't ready to get married. So I settled for living with him. For awhile, everything was fine. Tia was healthy, both Jim and I were doing well in our jobs, and I started to think about the future. I told him it was time we thought about getting married."

"And?" he prompted when she paused.

"He said okay." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I was so happy. I really thought the three of us would live happily ever after. So we decided to put things right. Tia and I moved into the house where we live now. He was going to stay in the apartment until after we were married. Only that never happened."

"Why not?"

"He said he was starting to feel tied down. Like I had his life all neatly planned and plotted out. First he called off the wedding and then he

moved out of state. He's getting married soon ... to a ... a girl ... a woman who said no and continued to say no. Like I should have."

She looked away, aware that her bitterness and pain was right out in the open for him to see.

He reached across the table and covered her clenched fist with his large hand. "Not all men are like that, Jenny," he said softly.

She slowly brought her gaze back to his. "Aren't they?"

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm not."

She wasn't sure what to make of that statement. She shrugged and pushed the sad memories away. "Tell me about your ex-wife."

It was his turn to sigh. "Helen and I met in college. We dated casually on and off, but graduated without any real commitment between us. We both went on to see other people. When we met a couple of years later, we started dating exclusively. Two years later, we got married. Fifteen months later, Kelly was born."

He stopped abruptly, released her hand, and looked away. She saw the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching. Tears stung her eyes at his obvious pain.

"Mick? It's okay if you can't talk about her."

He shook his head and turned back to face her. "It's okay. It's just that it ... it never seems to stop hurting. It's an ache that's always there ... sometimes just under the surface ... sometimes it's like an open wound that's as painful and raw as it was when she first died."

"I ... I'm so sorry for you."

"Ah! Would you like to see a picture of her?"

She nodded. "I'd love to."

He pulled out his wallet and passed a small snapshot across the table to her. She found herself looking down into the smiling face of a pretty blonde child with wide sparkling gray eyes.

"She's beautiful, Mick. She must have given you a lot of joy and many happy memories."

"She was everything to me."

She handed the picture back and met his gaze. "Is that why you and your wife broke up?"

"We didn't break up. Helen left me because ... Hal and I had gone into partnership just after Kelly was born. So we both worked long, hard hours trying to make the firm a success.

"That didn't leave much time for Helen and Kelly. And Helen resented it. She said I was missing the best part of Kelly's life. I didn't agree because she was so young and by the time she was eight or nine, the business would be flourishing and I'd have all the time I wanted to spend with her.

"I didn't know she was going to be taken away from me before I got the chance to show her how much ... I loved her." He clenched his hand into a fist and hit it against the table. "Anyway, Helen found it difficult to live with me after that. She felt that I'd neglected her and Kelly. And she was right."

"But you had a good reason for doing it."

He shook his head. "It didn't seem so good once Kelly was killed and I knew I'd never have the chance to atone for all the nights I wasn't there to tuck her in bed." He took a deep breath. "She was always afraid of the dark. She liked me to be there to make sure there were no monsters under her bed before she went to sleep. And most

of the time I wasn't. I'd call at her bedtime, but it just wasn't the same. I ... let her down."

"Oh, Mick! I'm so sorry."

He ran a hand through his head. "Thanks." He glanced out the window. "Feel like a walk along the pier?"

So they walked along Penn's Landing. Sometimes holding hands; sometimes with his arm around her shoulder. It was mid April and cool, but there were still a lot of people on the pier. Some walking as they were, some sitting in the grass listening to music, some sitting along the outcropping with their legs dangling over the waters of the Delaware River several feet below.

Later that afternoon, they decided to see a movie. They chose a movie theater that specialized in showing older movies. The current attraction was Corona, Corina, a love story about a black woman who falls in love with a white widower with a young daughter.

Jennifer was very conscious of how closely the theme of the movie mirrored her relationship with Mick. Especially when the couple on the screen began dancing as Louis Armstrong sang, You Go To My Head in the background.

That's when Mick put his arm around her. She half turned to him and he kissed her for the first time. Really kissed her. Full on her mouth. With his lips and his tongue, warm and sweet, caressing and tasting hers. "You go to my head, Jenny," he breathed the words into her mouth.

In response, she leaned closer and kissed him with all the passion and desire she'd been fighting since the first time she saw him.

They didn't talk much after they left the movie. They walked along Penn's Landing again, had dinner at a small bistro across the pier, then he drove her home.

"Would you like to come in for coffee?" she asked.

He nodded and followed her inside. "What time will Tia be home?"

"She's spending the night out," she said. She nodded toward the sofa. "Have a seat and I'll bring the coffee."

"I'll keep you company," he said and followed her into the kitchen.

Recalling their earlier embraces left her feeling weak. Her hands shook as she opened the cabinet. "I hope you don't mind instant. Decaf."

"No," he said in that neutral voice that she knew meant just the opposite of what he was saying.

Being alone with him in the house so unnerved her, that she dropped the coffee jar. It didn't break, but when she scooped it up off the floor, the lid wouldn't budge. She struggled to open it, a curse forming on her lips.

"Let me give you a hand," he offered.

That would mean his coming closer to her. "No! I can open it."

But he was already standing behind her, reaching to take the jar out of her nerveless fingers. Instead of loosening the lid, he set the jar on the counter top. "You know, I don't really want any coffee."

"Oh." She stared up at him. "What do you want?"

"This." He brushed the tips of his fingers gently against her lips, then he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. His lips moved slowly, sweetly over hers. Again and again. Teasing hers apart. Then tasting her warmth. His arm around her waist held her body close to his.

Standing on her toes to return his kisses, she knew exactly when he began to get aroused. She felt him hardening against her and the muscles in her stomach churned with anticipation, leaving her almost lightheaded.

All thoughts of not sleeping with another man without marriage were washed away under the warm tide of his kisses. She pressed against his hardness, ready and eager to give herself to him.

It had been too long since she'd felt a man's hands on her body, caressing and loving her. She needed him to make her forget all the lonely nights she'd suffered through over the last two years.

She was dismayed when she suddenly felt his hands on her shoulders, gently, but firmly pushing her away from him. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked at him in confusion. "Mick?"

He took a deep breath and wiped the back of one hand across his mouth, as if he were trying to wipe the taste of her lips away. "I'd better go now or you'll have a heck of a time trying to keep me out of your bed," he said in a low, husky voice.

"Who says I want to keep you out? I--"

He pressed a finger against his lips to silence her. "Do you have a condom?"

The blood rushed up her neck into her cheeks. She averted her gaze and shook her head.

"Neither do I."

She brought her gaze back to his. "You don't?"

"No, I don't. Why do you sound so surprised? I don't sleep around and I'm not one of those men who walk around with a condom in their wallets."

His thoughtfulness touched her. "Thank you, Mick."

"For what?"

"For not bringing one with you as if you thought I might be ... easy."

"Why would I think that? You're twenty-seven and you've had one lover. That's not easy. Any even if you'd had several more, it wouldn't be my place to judge you."

He bent his head and kissed her lightly on the corner of her lips. "Walk me to the door before I forget my good intentions."

But at the door, he swept her into his arms and pressed a warm, lingering kiss against her mouth. She tingled with desire as she felt the telltale bulge pressing against her. With her arms wrapped around him, she deliberately rubbed her lower body against his.

"God, Jenny, don't do that!" He shuddered, and then before she could repeat the offense, he was pushing her away again. He held her at arm's length with his hands on her shoulders.

"Let go," she begged softly, wanting nothing more than to rush back into his arms so she could feel the evidence of his desire for her.

"No," he said in a ragged voice. "When we make love, I want it to be as perfect as possible. I don't want you to look back and feel that all I was interested in was getting you into bed."

"But that's all I'm interested in now!" she was horrified to hear herself admit.

He stared at her for a moment, clearly surprised. Then he laughed softly and gently kissed her cheek. "Sweet dreams, Jenny."

Restless dreams were more like it, she thought as she got ready for bed. She lay awake for a long time, just thinking about him. There was a lot to think about: his smile, his walk, the sound of his voice, and the feel of his arms around her. She fell asleep wishing he were there with her.

The ringing of the phone woke Mick from a deep sleep. Groaning and rolling onto his side, he reached for the phone without opening his eyes. "What?"

"Mike."

"What is it, Hal?" he asked irritably. He opened his eyes and glanced at his bedroom window. It was still dark. He glanced at his clock. No wonder he felt lousy. It was only four a.m.

"There was a tire fire under the Passyunk Avenue bridge a couple of hours ago. The fire's been contained, but the bridge is closed and PennDot wants us to consult with them on possible structural damages."

"When?"

"In about an hour. Can you pick up Dale and meet the PennDot representative at the field office they've set up just off Passyunk?"

Dale Hardy was an engineering major working in the office on a co-op program. "Fine. That's what I get paid the big bucks for," he said, throwing the covers off. "What's the name of this PennDot person?"

"You've already met her, Mike."

Something in Hal's tone, made him pause in the act of sitting up. "Who?"

"Janet Walker."

Just great. "Fine," he said and hung up. He wasn't in the mood for any of Hal's lectures. And he didn't know what he was going to say to Janet Walker. How was he going to explain his sudden and complete lack of interest in her?

In the shower, he stood with his eyes closed, thinking of Jennifer. He knew it was early days yet, at least for her. But he had a feeling he'd found everything he needed. In Tia he had a surrogate daughter he could shower all the time and attention he hadn't showered on Kelly. And he knew Jennifer was a woman he could love to distraction, assuming she could get pass his skin color.

"Mike!"

The moment Mick saw Janet walking toward him with an open smile of welcome, he knew it was going to be a long, unpleasant day.

"Mike! It's good to see you again so soon." Still smiling warmly, she extended both hands.

His own smile felt forced. "Janet." He briefly enclosed her hands in his. "This is a surprise."

"A very nice one, I hope, Mike."

He nodded and introduced Dale. "So, what do we have here, Janet?"

She smiled at him. "Right to business?"

He hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "That's why Dale and I are here."

"Is it?" Her smile wavered. She nodded toward a big, beige trailer several yards behind them.

"Let's go into the trailer and have a cup of coffee before we get started."

Great. Showdown time. "Okay. Fine."

She glanced at Dale. "Ah, Dale, do you mind if I have a word with Mike?"

"No." Dale glanced at him. "I'll be out here looking the girders over if you want me, Mike."

He nodded and followed Janet.

Just inside the trailer, she turned to face him. "I was hoping you'd call me." He nodded and watched her pour two cups of coffee.

"I ... " he ran a hand through his hair, and took a deep breath. "I would have."

She handed him a cup. "Except? Friday, you told me you weren't seeing anyone."

"I wasn't."

"But you are now?" When he'd nodded, she went on. "Come on, Mike, today is only Monday. You were with me until two a.m. on Friday. When did you meet this person?"

Enough beating around the bush. "Actually, I already knew her when I met you."

"What?"

He told her about Jennifer.

She was silent for a moment. "Well. Is it ... serious? I mean maybe we could still see each other?" She put her hands on her hips and smiled provocatively at him. "It's not my usual style, but I like you. I guess I made that plain Friday."

He remained silent.

"I'd really like to see you, Mike. I can handle knowing you're seeing someone else if she can."

He could imagine Jennifer's reaction to such a proposition. He shook his head. "That's definitely not her style or mine. I'm a one woman man."

Her eyes narrowed and her lips tightened. "And you've found your one woman?"

"Yes. Look, I know I probably came on a little strong and mislead you. I'm sorry if I ... "

"Hey, don't sweat it, buster," she said, suddenly brusque. "You're not the only unattached man in Philadelphia. I'll just have to find myself another. Now. Ready to get to work?"

He felt like a heel. He had intended to use her. He might even have hurt her; the last thing he wanted to do. It was going to be a long, long day, he thought, following her fast disappearing back from the trailer.

Jennifer spent the morning in the little office at Design Associates, trying not to think of Mick. At the same time, she expected him to walk into the office at any moment; carrying roses and kissing her into submission. She smiled at the thought. During the night she'd come to terms with herself. Things hadn't worked out with Jim. She wasn't sure why, but it wasn't going to stop her from making love with Mick. Nothing was going to stop her from becoming his lover.

She didn't deluge herself into thinking that she and Mick could or would have a serious relationship. She just knew she wanted him in her life and in her bed. The knowledge that she was willing to sleep with him without a real commitment on either of their part, made her feel sleazy.

She'd feel better about her decision once she saw him. But Hal Ward was the only one to stop in. He came just before twelve.

"I came to see if you have everything you need," he said.

Something in his manner let her know that wasn't quite true. That nameless something kept her from asking him where Mick was.

She glanced at the small pile of receipts in front of her and knew she had a valid, built-in excuse. She could always claim that she needed to talk to Mick about some of his expenses. Somehow, she didn't think Hal would believe her.

"I have everything I need, thanks," she said, turning her professional smile on him.

"Good." He started towards the door and then turned to look at her. "By the way, how was your weekend?"

One look at his face told her he knew about her budding relationship with Mick--and didn't approve. Not that she was surprised. She reminded herself that no one she knew would approve, except Tasha. Probably none of Mick's friends would approve either. A relationship with Mick was going to create all kinds of problems for both of them.

"My weekend was just fine, Mr. Ward," she said in an expressionless voice that didn't invite him to ask any more questions. "Thank you for asking."

"No problem. Look, I know that Mike and your daughter are friends."

She nodded and waited.

"I also know that Mike ... well, I'm sure you know how Mike feels. If there's anything you need to talk about, feel free to come see me, Ms. Smallwood. Anything at all."

She softened towards him. He seemed sincere. "I appreciate the offer, Mr. Ward, but I can handle my private life without any help."

He spread his hands and shrugged. "Just thought I'd offer."

After he left, she worked on for another hour in the hope that Mick would come and ask her out to lunch. When he didn't, she went to meet Tasha at the little cafe where they had lunch at least twice a week.

"I can't believe you!" Tasha shook her head as she took a bite out of her ham sandwich. "Here I put that luscious hunk Paul out and take Tia for the day and night. At the very least I expected to hear sordid, erotic accounts of hot, endless raw sex. What do I get instead? Tame tales of old movies, boring meals, and chaste kisses. How could you let him get away without fanning those not so dormant fires of yours into flames?"

"It wasn't for lack of trying," she admitted. "But I think I tried too hard." She bit her lip. "Oh, Tasha! What am I going to do? I haven't seen him all day. I think maybe I scared him off."

"Don't go there, Jenn," Tasha said. "If he wasn't scared off by Tia's insistence that he meet you, he's not likely to be bothered by a little aggressive sexual behavior on your part."

"Then why haven't I seen him all day? Last week, he was constantly finding reasons to come into the room where I'm working. Or he'd be in the reception area whenever I walked by or he'd be meeting me in the parking lot. Now, after I came on so strong, he's avoiding me."

"Jenn, get a grip. It's very simple. You go back to the office and you tell the secretary you

need to see him. She tells you where he is. You see him and find out what the deal is. I guarantee he is not going to say he doesn't want to see you any more because you came on too strong."

She shook her head suddenly. "Oh, wow! I'm unbelievable."

Tasha smiled. "I hear a big, handsome Irishman thinks so."

"No, really. I'm sorry."

"About what?"

"I've been so selfish lately. Almost every time we meet, I've talked about myself and my problems." She reached out and touched Tasha's hand. "Tell me what's going on in your life."

Tasha grinned. "You sure you want to know? The details are sizzling, girl."

She laughed. "Tell me everything," she said. "I can handle it."

"All right, but don't say you weren't warned."

After a satisfying and tawdry gossip with Tasha, Jennifer headed back to Design Associates. She gave up expecting Mick to appear by three-thirty. At four o'clock, she was packing up her briefcase with work she wanted to take home when the phone rang, startling her.

"Design Associates."

"Jennifer. Hi."

"Mick!"

"Glad to hear from me?"

"No! Where've you been?"

"Who wants to know?" He sounded amused. "Jenny or Ms. Smallwood?"

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

He laughed softly. "That would be Jealous Jenny asking."

"Mick!"

"Okay. Okay. Don't take my head off. Did you hear about that fire under the Passyunk Avenue bridge on the news?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"PennDot called us in to check the structural integrity of the supporting girders. I've been out here since a little after five this morning."

She sat back in her chair, feeling as if the proverbial weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "You must be tired."

"Not too tired to see you and Tia. How about dinner tonight? We could drive up to The Burger Palace. You think Tia would like that?"

"She'd love it, but that's too long a drive. You're tired. We could stay home."

"No. I want to take you both out."

"We'd love that--another time when you're not so tired. How about we just have pizza out and come back?"

"Okay. I have to go home to shower and change."

"We'll be waiting, Mick."

"See you soon, Jenny."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The phone was ringing when Jennifer, Tia, and Mick returned from the pizza parlor later that night. "It's probably my daddy!" Tia pushed past Jennifer and Mick to dash into the house.

Jennifer glanced up at Mick as she followed Tia inside. Mick's hand on her shoulder, paused her in mid-stride. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Well, it's just that ... he's not going to be pleased," she said.

"About what?"

"You ... Tia ... me."

He shrugged, dropped his hand, and she went into the living room in time to hear Tia answer a question.

"We were out for pizza ... no ... with Mick ... " she glanced at Jennifer and giggled before answering. "He's mommy new boyfriend!"

"Tia!" She dashed across the room in an attempt to take the cordless phone from the child, who danced out of her way and went on talking.

"He's real nice, Daddy ... big and white ... you know ... white ... no, daddy ... white."

She groaned silently and watched the happy smile vanish from Tia's face. "But ... but ... yes, Daddy." Tia turned and held the phone out to her. "Daddy wants to talk to you, Mommy."

Jennifer glanced at Mick, a silent appeal in her eyes. He stared at her for a moment before he turned to smile at Tia. "Honey, why don't you show me how well you can color ... in the dining room."

"Okay," she said in a dispirited voice.

Jennifer watched him pick Tia up and carry her out of the room before she lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello, Jim."

"Jenn, what is going on up there? My baby just told me you're going out with some big, white dude. He's not white. He's just light skinned. Right?"

"No. He's not just light skinned ... he is white."

"He's white? Did I hear you right?"

"Yes, you did. He's white."

"Why?!"

"Why? Why what?" But she knew what he was asking. He just didn't deserve an answer.

"Your own kind not good enough for you any more, baby?"

"Don't you call me baby!" she hissed into the phone. "And anyway, what kind is my kind? The kind, like you, who says he loves me, wants to marry me and spend the rest of his life with me and then slyly goes off with another woman? No, Jim, that kind's not good enough for me."

"It didn't happen that way!" he said angrily. "And you know it! I didn't meet Jetta until I left Philly. And what makes you think it'll be any different with your white boy? I hope you're not fooling yourself into thinking that white dude's going to marry you. All he wants is to get in your panties!"

"Well, they're my panties and I'll decide who gets in them. Not you!"

"Oh, yeah? Fine. You do that, Jenn. You go right ahead and let that white boy use you. But

you listen good. I am not having a white boy around my baby. You'd better dump him. Do you--"

"He's not a damned boy!" she said angrily, cutting him off. "And you have no say over who I see. So don't you dare try to dictate to me."

"Listen to this Jenn, and listen good. Tia is my daughter and I am not going to have some white dude hanging around her. I'll do whatever I need to, to make sure of that."

"What's that supposed to mean? Is that a threat? Are you threatening to take her away from me?!"

"I will drag you and your white dude boyfriend through the mud before I'll allow you to have him around her. I'm her father and I have rights."

"Oh, yeah, your rights! I remember now. You assert them whenever it suits you and ignore them when it doesn't. What about other people's rights? What about when you leave her sitting and waiting for you?! And you never come? What about her right not to be disappointed? And what about my right to see who the hell I like?!"

"She's my daughter, Jenn! Mine! Don't push me on this! You tell that white dude he'd better get to stepping away from my baby girl or you'll both be sorry!"

"You buzz off, Jim!" she snapped and slammed the phone down.

She was sitting on the sofa with her hands clenched into fists when Tia and Mick came back into the room.

Tia ran to her and wound her arms around her neck. "Mommy, I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have told Daddy about Mick. Should I?"

She hugged Tia. "It's all right, sweetiekins. He had to know sooner or later."

"But he was so mad. He didn't give me a chance to tell him how nice Mick is. Did you tell him, Mommy?"

"No, but I will when I get a chance."

She was aware of Mick studying her face before he turned to look at Tia. "Sweetie, can I talk to your Mommy for a moment?"

"All right." Tia kissed her cheek and skipped out of the room.

"Jennifer?"

He wanted to talk. They did need to talk, but not yet. Not while she was so upset. She shook her head, got up, and started across the room, away from him. "Yes, but right now, I need to be alone. Can I talk to you tomorrow?"

He followed her and took her hand in his. "I'm here now, Jennifer. Talk to me now. What did he say to you?"

She shook her head, not looking at him.

"Nothing important."

"Ah, Jenny, don't tell me that. I want to know what he said to you to make you look so scared," he said, slipping his arms around her.

She pushed against his shoulders. "Mick, don't. Tia might come back into the room."

"Then let her come."

"Mick!" She tried unsuccessfully to hold him off. "If she comes in--"

"She'll see me with my arms around you. What's so bad about that?" He pulled her against him. After a moment of resistance, she lay her head against his shoulder.

"Oh, Mick! He doesn't want you around us."

"Too damn bad!"

"Mick!" She stared up at him in surprise.

"What? I'm supposed to back off because of what he doesn't want? I will. When Hell freezes over. If he wanted to have a say in what goes on in your life, he should have stayed with you."

Then, realizing what he'd said, he stopped and briefly hugged her to him. "But oh, Jenny, I'm so glad he didn't."

"Mick?"

"I know we haven't known each other long, but I've got to tell you how I feel. I want to be your man and I want you to be my woman, Jenny," he said softly. "I want you to look to me to fulfill your every need. If you need a shoulder to cry on, I want it to be mine. When you're lonely or upset, I want to keep you company and comfort you. When you want to make love, I want mine to be the body on yours, me inside of you."

"I'm sorry if he doesn't want me around, but that's too bad. Because I'm going to be around. For both you and Tia. Whatever he said to you ... we can face it together. Okay?"

She looked up into his eyes. The warmth and tenderness she saw there gave her an incredible feeling of belonging. She didn't need to face everything life had to throw at her alone any more. Now she had someone to help her. She had Mick. If only she dared give up her independence to rely on him as he was asking her.

"Oh, Mick!"

"I want to be there for you and Tia, Jenny."

She pressed her head against his shoulder.

"Oh, Mick."

He kissed the top of her head, took her hand in his, and led her back to the sofa. "Tell me what he said to you."

Taking a deep breath, she told him.

He didn't speak until she fell silent. "He's full of hot air. What can he do? Neither of us is married. He can't file for divorce and he can't take Tia away from you."

She pulled away from him. "And how do you know that? He makes more money than I do. He can hire a lawyer who can twist the facts and make me look like a bad mother," she said wildly.

He stroked a hand down her cheek. "And I can hire one to prove just the opposite."

"You think I want your money?!"

His eyes widened. "Did I say or imply that you did?"

She bit her lip. "No ... no. I'm sorry. I'm just a little ... edgy."

He nodded. "I know, but, I need you to trust me, Jenny."

"I do!"

"But?"

"Well, it's just that before you go making financial promises, don't you think you should consult your ex?"

He seemed surprised by the question. He pulled her back down next to him on the sofa. "Why should I? Helen is a successful corporate lawyer. She doesn't need or want any financial support from me. Everything I have, I'd gladly share with you and Tia."

His offer reminded her of Tasha's suggestion that she let him be her sugar daddy. "I don't want your money, Mick."

"Okay. Fine. It's not that important, but I just want you to know that it's there for you if you need it. But enough about money. Let's talk about my body," he said, grinning at her. "Please don't tell me you don't want that either because I sure want yours."

She felt an undeniable tingle at the look of need she saw in his blue gaze. "Oh, I want your body all right!" she admitted.

His eyes gleamed with satisfaction and she blushed. His touch against her face was tender. "Jenny, you're as sweet as you are pretty."

"And you're full of blarney," she said without heat. "I'm not pretty, Mick."

"I beg to differ with you. I think you're breathtaking." He glanced toward the dining room where they could hear Tia singing as she colored. "You want to make a date to get better acquainted?"

The look in his eyes left no doubt about what he was asking. Her answer should have been an unequivocal no. Once they took that step, there'd be no going back. "Oh ... Mick, ... yes."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, her heart thumping. "Oh, yeah, Mick."

He leaned forward and kissed her. "I can hardly wait," he said against her lips.

Neither could she.

She invited Tasha to dinner the next night. After Tia went to bed, she and Tasha sat in the living room, listening to CD's.

They listened to Whitney Houston in silence for a while, before she gathered her courage. "I need a favor, Tasha."

"Name it."

"I know you had Tia last Sunday and I really appreciate it."

"Yeah?" Tasha encouraged, without looking up from the CD's in her hands.

"Could you ... do you think you could let her sleep over on Friday or Saturday night? I'd ask Aunt Linda, except ... " She'd have to tell her she wanted to spend an illicit night with Mick. And she knew how well that would go over with Aunt Linda. Tasha looked up quickly. Jennifer waited for the barrage of questions and suggestions.

After the smallest hesitation, Tasha nodded and went back to the CD's. "Sure. Paul's going to be away for the weekend. Tell you what, I'll take a half-day off and pick Tia up from school on Friday and take her home with me. Give Aunt Linda a break. We'll make a weekend of it. Just pack enough clothes for the weekend and school on Monday."

"Thanks, but that would spoil your weekend. One night would be great."

"Hey, I've had plenty of very nice weekends and I'll have plenty more. It's time you had one, Jenn. No more roadblocks. You just leave Tia to me. We'll have a great time. You go, girl. Okay?"

"Thanks, Tasha."

She shrugged. "You'd do the same for me. Right?"

"Right."

If she thought asking Tasha to baby-sit Tia was bad, it was nothing compared to trying to tell Tia she'd be spending the entire weekend away from her. She gladly accepted when Mick volunteered to tell Tia with her.

To her surprise, Tia seemed to resent the idea. "The whole weekend? I have to spend the whole weekend with Auntie Tasha? So you can be with Mick?"

She hesitated. She didn't like to lie to Tia, but if she didn't, how could she later tell her to hold out for marriage before sleeping with a man?

She decided to tell the truth. "Yes."

Tia frowned. "Why?"

"Well ... we'd like to get to know each other a little better."

"Why can't you get to know each other with me around? What are you going to be doing?" She turned a frown on Mick. "Is it because you want to sleep in the same bed with Mommy like Daddy used to? Is that why?"

Jennifer's face felt like a fiery furnace. She couldn't look at Mick.

"I do want to make love to her," she was horrified to hear him admit. "But if it makes you unhappy, we don't have to do it."

Tia stared up at him, as if she wasn't sure if he was being straight with her. "Okay," she said finally. "You'll be nice to her, Mick, won't you? You're awfully big. You won't hurt my mommy or make her cry. Will you?"

"No, sweetie. I won't hurt her."

"Well ... all right, then. I guess you can go then, Mommy."

"Thank you, sweetiekins," she muttered.

Mick looked at her hot face and laughed. She glared at him. Heartless brute!

"What do you think?"

Jennifer turned from her consideration of the big, plush, room to face Mick, who was standing behind her in the living room of his center city condo.

"It's very nice," she said stiffly. His whole condo was like something out of a lifestyles of the rich magazine. She loved the spiral staircase that lead up to the huge master bedroom. It was there, in the big oak bed that dominated the room that he expected to make love to her.

The other amenities included a Jacuzzi, a whirlpool bath, a custom built fireplace, and a gourmet kitchen.

She turned to face him. "More than nice."

He gestured to a big sofa in the middle of the room. "Have a seat," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Would you like a drink?"

"Ah, no!" She wiggled out from his arm and turned to face him.

He studied her face for a moment in silence, then shook his head. "You're not ready for this, are you?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you're not ready, are you? If this is a problem for you, it's okay, Jennifer. We don't have to do this if you're not ready for it."

She looked up at him. "What do you mean? I'm not going to pull out on you now."

He shook his head, waving a hand in dismissal. "This isn't just about me, Jennifer. It's about us. If you're not ready for this, it really is okay."

"Oh, yeah? What about you? Are you ready?"

He smiled slightly. "I've been ready since the moment I looked up into your beautiful brown eyes that day on the train."

She smiled and relaxed slightly. "So now my eyes are beautiful too?"

"Oh yeah. I could spend the rest of my life happily gazing into them."

"Oh, Mick, you say the sweetest things."

"I mean what I say to you, Jennifer. Nevertheless, I am not some untried boy who can't control his emotions. If you're not comfortable with this weekend, I can wait until you are."

"I am ready, Mick. I am comfortable. It's just that ... you're only the second man I've ever been with. I don't sleep around. I ... loved Jim."

She saw his eyes narrow. "Is that your way of telling me that you're not in love with me, Jennifer?"

"No! That's not what I meant! But it's not as if you're really ser ... "

"As if what? As if I'm serious about you?"

She half turned away from him. "It's too early to talk about how serious we are or aren't about each other."

He gently turned her back to face him. "Ah, Jenny! Give me a break! I told you I am not some untried boy. I can control my passions if you're not ready for this weekend. And I know ... when I'm in love."

She stared at him, her heart pounding. "What?"

"I know, sweetheart."

Her eyes filled with tears that quickly spilled down her cheeks. "In love? With me? Oh, Mick!"

His eyes darkened as he looked down at her. "What does that mean, Jenny? Does that mean you are ready for this weekend?"

She meant a lot more than that, but she nodded wordlessly.

"Are you really sure? Because I meant it when I said I can wait until you are. We can spend the weekend together without making love. We can spend the time getting to know each other. I want you, but I want you to want me too--with no reservations. I need you to be very sure."

She reached up to touch his cheek. "Oh, Mick! You are the sweetest, most considerate man I've ever met. And I am sure. I want you too."

His gaze locked with hers. "No doubts?"

None strong enough to keep her out of his arms. "No."

"Good." He cupped her face in his hands and touched his mouth gently to her forehead, her closed lids, her nose, and finally to her waiting mouth.

With a happy murmur, she wound her arms around his neck, pressing into his hard warmth. It just felt so good to let herself go and let him feel her desire for him.

He spent several long, sweet moments kissing her; tasting her lips, gently sucking her tongue. Just as her legs began to buckle, he picked her up and carried her to his bedroom. He undressed her slowly, stopping to tenderly kiss each part of her body thus exposed; leaving molten need in the wake of his touch. He lingered a long time over her breasts, his mouth and tongue sucking and kissing her until her nipples were hard, aching peaks.

When she was completely nude, he stared at her with a look of adoration in his eyes.

"My beautiful, brown girl," he whispered. "Oh, Jenny! You are so beautiful. Every sweet, beautiful brown inch of you."

Standing before him, she felt beautiful and desirable. And surprisingly unashamed. "Why don't you show me how beautiful you are?" she urged, reaching for him. She was eager to see what she'd only felt throbbing against her.

He nodded and quickly shed his clothes. He was as beautiful as he had declared her to be. His broad shoulders tapered down to lean hips and long legs. To her shame, her gaze centered on the patch of dark hair between his thighs. She licked her lips, unable to look away from him. All she could think of was how much she wanted to feel him inside her.

"Oh ... Mick ... " she whispered, feeling a rush of dampness as she gazed hungrily at the exquisite symmetry of his big body.

She might have stood staring at him forever, but, he took her in his arms, bringing their naked bodies close together. She shuddered as she felt his arousal pressing against her; the hot, heavy feel of it, made her pulse with desire.

She had wanted him since that day on the train when she'd seen her own desire mirrored in his blue gaze. The thought that she was now about to have her greatest fantasy realized filled her with a sense of wonderful delight. "Mick, I want it!" she gasped, cupping him in her eager hands.

"You're going to get it, my brown beauty," he promised and kissed her gently, then hungrily. It was a kiss different from any they'd shared

before. Hot, hard, demanding her complete and total surrender. She offered it willingly. She felt his hands gently parting her trembling thighs, his big palm caressing her feminine core. She trembled, damp and slick with the heat of her need for him.

He made a low, guttural sound and she knew the feel of her against his hand fueled his passion. "I'm going to fill you up, my sweet, brown lass," he growled, lapsing into a thick brogue that only added to her excitement.

The next instant, he lifted her off her feet and lay her on the bed. She reached out for him. "Mick." He responded immediately. Within moments, she felt the full weight of his big body on top of hers. After allowing her a moment to adjust to his weight, he pushed forward against her. She closed her eyes; to more fully savor the incredible joy of being slowly, relentlessly filled to the point of bursting with his hard, pulsing warmth.

"Oh!" she gasped, clinging to him. "Oh! Oh, God! Mick!" Having him inside her was sweet. Ecstatic. Maddening. Sending her into an immediate and involuntary climax. The intensity of her feelings sent the tears spilling down her cheeks.

He paused to hold her close. "Please don't cry, sweetheart. It's all right. I love you. I love you. I love you. More than anything and anyone. I love you."

His heartfelt declaration brought on another bout of tears. He kissed them tenderly away; not continuing until she had calmed down. Then he began a series of long, slow, steady movements that sent delicious waves of desire all through every nerve ending in her body. She gasped and

shuddered, teetering on the edge of an impossibly high cliff.

He kept kissing, caressing, and stroking her fires until, with yet another series of deep, rhythmic thrusts, he pushed her over the precipice into a wild, exhilarating free fall.

"Oh ... Mick!" She clung to him, awash in luscious waves of mindless bliss. "Mick! Oh, God, Mick!"

Only then did he follow her into the sweet oblivion that belongs exclusively to sated lovers.

It seemed an eternity before her brain could function sufficiently for her to be aware of anything other than his damp body lying under hers, cradling her. "Mick?"

He lifted a lazy hand and ran his fingers over her hair. "Hmm?"

He sounded completely satisfied. She smiled and gently moved her lips against the dark, silky hair on his chest. "Why did you keep calling me brown this and brown that?"

"You are brown," he murmured.

"I know that."

His hand stilled on her hair. "Did it bother you?"

"It depends."

She felt him tense under her. "Oh what?"

"On what you meant. Do you wish I were ... not so black ... maybe ... white?"

"No!" The word exploded out of him and he bolted into a sitting position. His abrupt movement sent her spilling onto her side, clutching the blanket that had covered them against her breasts.

She scrambled to sit back against the headboard and squint at him in the dark room. "Are you sure?"

"Am I sure? Of course I am!" He reached over and turned the bedside lamp on low before turning to face her. "Ah, Jenny, let me tell you about me. Something I've never admitted to anyone else. I've rarely met a white woman, no matter how attractive, without thinking that she would be even more so if only her skin were darker."

He reached out to brush his fingers against her cheek. "If her nose wasn't so narrow, if her lips were fuller. Her hair kinkier." His hand moved, pulling the sheet from her clenching grasp, exposed her breasts to his gaze. "Her legs," he said softly, gently touching them. "were bigger, her hips wider. Her butt rounder, bigger."

"There isn't anything about a black woman that doesn't turn me on. I prefer black women, Jenny, in general. I always have. I love you in particular. I meant it when I said you were perfect just as you are."

She couldn't seem to stop crying. Her eyes filled with tears yet again. "Mick? Are you sure?"

"Oh, yeah, baby," he said softly. He turned off the light, pulled her into his arms, and slid them both back onto the rumpled sheet. "I'm very sure."

Her breasts crushed against his chest and he dipped his head to kiss her. The sweet, insistent pressure from his mouth parted her lips, allowing him to gently suck on her tongue. A fresh surge of heat engulfed her. "Mick, ... " she slipped her arms around his neck.

"Make love to me again."

"That's the plan, my beautiful brown lass!" he whispered, rolling his body on top of hers. Seconds later, he was filling her.

He kissed her deeply and began moving slowly inside her. He was tender and gentle. She knew he wanted to make slow sweet love to her. But making love with him was still so new, so delicious that she was impatient. She wrapped her legs around his waist, clenched his tensed buns in her hands, and lifted her hips.

"Mick ... ah ... yes ... yes ... more ... more. Oh ... " she pleaded. "Please."

"I love you," he whispered and quickened his pace. Long, satisfying minutes later, the world began titling on its axis again. Moaning and clinging to him, she splintered into a million happy pieces.

Later, when he was asleep, she propped herself on her elbow and watched him. He was the most beautiful man she'd never met. She loved everything about him: the way his dark hair curled on his neck, his laugh, his smile, the way he walked, the taste of his lips. Most of all, she loved the way he made her feel when he made love to her; as if she were the most beautiful, desirable woman in the world.

If only their relationship could grow beyond the purely physical and become something more. Something she didn't have to be ashamed of; something about which she could proudly tell her mother.

Jennifer couldn't get enough of Mick. She would have been content to spend the entire weekend in bed, making love, but Mick insisted on

taking her out every night even though they received several stares; some curious, others hostile.

When she noticed several Caucasian women looking at her with amazement in their eyes, she couldn't help feeling that they were wondering what Mick could possibly see in her. But the stares of black men bothered her most. She cringed when she thought they must be thinking that she was allowing Mick to use her.

The attention they received when they were out together unnerved Jennifer, but not Mick. "If some small minded people have nothing better to do than stare, let them. I don't care. I have spent the majority of my adult life denying what I want and how I feel. No more. I'm not going to hide you away. Or have you think sex is all I want from you," he told her late Sunday afternoon after he'd awoken her. He grinned down at her and held her off as she attempted to pull him back into bed. "Even if it is all you're interested in," he said wickedly.

"Beast!" she cried in frustration. "Come back to bed and make love to me."

"Later. Right now, its time for you to get up and shower. Alone," he added as he saw her eyes gleam in anticipation of another shower with him. "I want to wine and dine you before we come back here and spend the night making love."

She scrambled to her knees and leaned up to kiss him. "Sounds wonderful. Let's share an appetizer first."

"God, I love you!" He kissed her back, then tumbled on the bed with her. They rolled over. They came to rest with her on her back with him

lying on top of her; her legs parted by his hard thighs.

She ached with wanting him. She kissed his shoulders, making small circles on his skin with her tongue. "It would be criminal to waste such a ... a delicious position," she told him in a soft voice.

"Okay. You twisted my arm." He reached for a condom and a moment later, he kissed her deeply as he slipped slowly inside her. She clutched him to her, lifting her hips and practically purring with delight. His big hands cupped her buns and lifted her hips as he pushed deep into her damp warmth. "Oh, God!" he groaned. Then, Satisfied, my darlin' brown lass?"

The incredible feeling of having him fully seated in her was so totally delicious, she couldn't speak. She nodded happily, closed her eyes, and gave in to the sheer delight of making love with Daniel Michael Reilly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Jennifer and Mick left his condo together on Monday morning, she felt like she was walking on air. It had been a fantasy weekend with dancing and dinner in expensive restaurants, an abundance of flowers, and exquisite love making. She came crashing down to earth when her car wouldn't start. She kept turning the key in the ignition, but it didn't help. Finally, Mick, who had been sitting in his car behind her with his engine running, got out and walked over to hers.

She rolled the window down and he leaned in. "What's the matter?"

She hit the steering wheel with her balled fists. "I think it's the battery. I bought it second hand and it's already had two charges. Now I think it's just dead!"

She lifted a clenched fist to hit the wheel again, but he reached into the car and caught it in his hand. "It's not a problem, Jennifer. I have cables in my car. I'll give you a jump."

"But you'll be late."

"I can be late if I need to," he told her, smiling. "I don't have a boss to answer to."

"Well, I do and he expects me to show up for work on time."

"Okay. What do you suggest? Calling your auto club? That'll take even longer."

"I don't have an auto club to call." She waited for him to say that anyone who drove an eight-year-old car should never be without an auto

club membership. Then she would have to tell him that she'd used the money she intended to renew her auto club membership on an unexpected roofing bill.

"Then give me your car keys and come with me. I'll drive you to the office on my way to my appointment. I'll get one of our interns to come back here, take care of your car, and drive it to the office for you later."

She opened her mouth to protest, but closed it at the narrowing of his eyes.

"Don't be difficult, Jennifer," he said shortly. "What good would I be to you if I couldn't take care of you?"

"I can take care of myself. Thank you very much!" she said angrily, responding both to his tone and the suggestion that she needed help taking care of her needs.

"I know you can," he said, his voice softening. "But I hope that doesn't mean you won't let me help you. I want more from our relationship than just sex. I want to be a part of every facet of your life. If you're not interested in that kind of a deal, now's the time to say so."

"I didn't mean that," she said quickly, giving him the key.

"Good." He bent and kissed her quickly on her mouth.

"It's just that I won't have any money to pay for repairs to the car until I get--"

He pressed a finger against her lips to silence her. "I have money. And what I have, you have."

That's what Jim had said. Right up to the time he left her. She shook her head stubbornly. "That's not what I want, Mick."

"Oh, Jenny, honey, let's not go there again."

"Okay," she agreed. She did need her car.

"but I'll pay you back when I get paid."

He stared down at her in surprise, shaking his head. "You'll pay me back? There'll be nothing to pay back. This isn't a loan, Jennifer."

"Yes, Mick, it is."

He stared down at her, his eyes cold. "Would you have expected to pay Jim back in similar circumstances?"

"That was different."

"Different. Really? Okay. I'll bite. Different how?"

"It just ... is ... was ... "

"But how? Why? Because your relationship with him meant more to you than yours with me does? Is that what you're telling me that I don't count like he did? That I don't fit?!"

Surprised at the anger and blatant jealousy in his voice, she stared at him. The difference was that Jim had promised and she had expected him to marry her. And although she believed Mick when he said he loved her, she was under no illusions about his intentions.

Jim had been right about one thing at least. Mick was not going to marry her. She knew if she allowed it, he would provide her and Tia with many luxuries that she couldn't afford. But without the benefit of marriage. Because when it came right down to it, even if he did prefer black women, he had married and fathered a child with a white one.

"How can you ask me that?" she demanded. "If I felt that way, I wouldn't have spent the weekend with you! So what are you saying?"

"I'm asking if I'm going to be made to pay for what he did to you?"

She recoiled. "That's not fair!"

"Isn't it? I'm not aware of having done anything to justify your lack of faith and trust."

"I do trust you! Do you think I would have spent the weekend with you if I didn't?"

"If you trust me, as you say, why are we having this conversation?"

"What?"

"Why should I have to make amends for what he did?"

"What?! What are you talking about?!" She hit her fist against the steering wheel. "I don't have time for this, Mick!"

"Make time!"

She shook her head. "Fine. What?"

"Are you refusing to let me really be a part of your life because he was too stupid to appreciate what he had when he had you?"

"No! That's not the way it is! You're making me sound like a--"

"Then you'll let me do this for you. My only motive is that I love you. I won't be leaving you for another woman. So please, Jenny, give me a break?"

Her resistance dissolved. "Mick, I didn't mean to ... you're making me sound like ... okay! Fine. Pay for the darn battery!"

He tilted her chin so he could kiss her slowly, warmly on her mouth. "Thank you," he said

quietly, as if she were doing him a favor instead of the other way around.

"Frankly, Jenn, I think you're losing it. No. You've already lost it. Take it from me, it's gone, girl."

Jennifer turned her head to look at Tasha, who was sitting next to her on the park bench.

"Why? Because I want to retain my independence?"

"No. Because you're not thinking straight."

"Excuse me? You say that based on what?"

Tasha looked surprised by the question.

"Based on what?" She glanced around herself. "Let me count the ways, sugar. First. We're here in this cold park instead of at our favorite, warm place for lunch. That's number one."

She nodded slowly. "I know it's a little chilly, but I didn't feel like being at Downy's today. It's too small. Made me feel sort of ... trapped."

"Second. Let's get back to your weekend with Mick. It was nice. Yes? He was nice to be with? Yes? A good lover? Yes? You love him? Yes?"

"Yes, to all those questions. He was ... I love him."

"Here's where I have my problem. You need your car but you don't have the money to fix it. And I don't have the money to lend you. But he does. There's nothing wrong with letting him pay for the repairs. He is your lover."

She bit her lip. "I wish you wouldn't keep calling him my lover."

"Why?" Tasha stared at her. "You mean the two of you didn't ... you didn't sleep with him?"

She felt the blood burning her cheeks. "I didn't say that, but it was just a weekend. I have no plans to become ... his woman."

"Why not? If you love him and it was nice being with him? Unless ... oh, I get it." Tasha gave her hand a sympathetic pat. "He has white man's disease, huh? I knew he sounded too good to be true."

"What?"

"You know," Tasha said, nudging her in the ribs. "Either his ... equipment is too small or it's just average and he doesn't know how to use it or worst yet, he suffers from both failures."

Jennifer felt the heat rising up her neck as she remembered just how satisfying she'd found Mick and his "equipment." She looked away. "Mick is a ... I don't have any complaints."

"Then exactly what is your problem, girl?"

"I don't have a problem. I'm just not interested in being his woman."

"Inquiring minds want to know why not? I mean he's big and gorgeous, financially solvent, a satisfying lover, who loves you, and he wants to make life easier for you and Tia. Please enlighten me, Jenn. What am I missing? Why wouldn't you want to be his woman?"

"Because that would mean giving up my independence."

Tasha laughed, shaking her head. "So? You know I've always thought independence was way overrated."

"So?! So my independence is important to me. You know that. Friday he said what he had, I had. Today he wants to fix my car. What is he going to want to do next?"

Tasha rolled her eyes and shivered. "Maybe he'll want to pay your house off. Does it matter?"

"Yes! I let myself really trust and depend on Jim. I'm not going to make the same mistake with Mick."

Tasha squeezed her hand. "Hey, you know I know how much Jim hurt you. But, he's not Jim. So how do you know trusting him would be a mistake?"

"Because Jim was right about one thing."

"Jim has never been right about anything!" Tasha snapped.

"He was about this," she insisted. "Mick is not interested in marriage. Not to me."

"He's in love with you. How do you know he won't eventually want to marry you?"

She shook her head, refusing to allow herself to get lost in the sweet fantasy of Mick ever wanting to marry her. "Jim was in love with me too, but look where it got me."

Tasha squeezed her hand again in silent empathy.

She sighed. "I don't know what I was thinking, Tash! The whole weekend with Mick was a mistake. I shouldn't have slept with him."

"Oh, Jenn! Don't overreact. I can't fault him for wanting to make things easy for you."

"I don't fault him for that either, Tasha. But I hardly know him. I should not have slept with him."

"Did you tell him that?"

"No. I haven't seen him since this morning. I'll tell him the next time we see each other."

"Jenn, are you sure about that? Maybe you should wait awhile."

"And drag it out? Why?"

"Why? Hel--low. To make sure. You're not thinking straight just now."

"I'm thinking as straight as I'm ever going to with him. If I don't tell him right away, he'll expect me to sleep with him again. And if I do, I'll just fall more deeply in love with him. I have to tell him and get it over with."

"You're not going to see him at all?"

"No."

Tasha blinked. "Oh, Jenn. You love the guy. He loves you. Are you really sure?"

She took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded.

"Okay. You're sure. What about Tia?"

She shivered, casting a quick glance around the nearly deserted park. "They can still see each other if they want to, but I'm not going to see him."

"Why not? I know you want to."

"I do, but I can't. Not again. I slept with a man I've only known for a couple of weeks. What kind of example is that for Tia? How can I tell her later that she should hold out for marriage when all I've been doing is sleeping with men who aren't interested in marrying me?"

"Oh, Jenn! Don't be so hard on yourself. Sleeping with two men you love does not constitute sleeping around. Besides, girl, you have a right to grab happiness where you can."

She shook her head. "Not if it'll make things harder for Tia later on."

"Later on, she'll be old enough to understand how it is when a woman loves a man. Jenn, don't be so quick on the draw. Give it a few days. If you

tell him you don't want to see him again and he takes you seriously, then what?"

"Then nothing. I shouldn't have slept with him! Tasha, I don't really know anything about him."

"You know he loves you and you love him. That's enough to start with."

But it wasn't. She needed to know Mick cared enough to be willing to risk marriage with her; even if everyone he knew and loved disapproved. And she didn't see that happening.

Back in the office, Jennifer found it difficult to concentrate on work. She kept expecting Mick to call or walk into the office. But she worked undistributed until four o'clock when someone knocked on the office door.

Her heart beat quicken and she licked her lips. She'd been gearing herself up to confront Mick all morning, but now that the moment was here, she felt so nervous that she wasn't sure she could go through with her decision. "Come in," she said.

She didn't recognize the young man who came into the room.

"Ms. Smallwood, I'm Dale Mulligan." He held out her car keys. "Your car is parked in the lot just under the window."

"Thank you," she said awkwardly. Looking at him, she couldn't decide if he knew she and Mick were lovers. She hesitated, then reached for her handbag.

"No. That's not necessary," he said, shaking his head and backing away. At the door he turned

to look at her. "Oh, the brakes are a little stiff, but they'll be fine in a few days."

"The brakes? It was ... the battery that was supposed to be replaced."

He nodded. "It was, but the brakes were shot too." He smiled. "Well, see you."

"Thanks." She sat back in her chair, frowning. So Mick had taken it upon himself to have the brakes repaired or replaced. What else had he had fixed or replaced?

She felt the difference in the car the moment she started it. The sluggishness was gone. He'd probably had a tune up done.

Tia met her at the door with a big hug and a kiss. "Hi, Mommy!"

"Hi, sweetiekins," she said, walking into the house with her. She smiled at Aunt Linda. "How was your day?"

"Fine," she said. She stared up at Jennifer. "How are you?"

Jennifer flushed and looked away. She hated to think what the older woman must be thinking of her after finding out she'd spent the weekend with Mick. "Fine. Thanks."

"You sure about that? That ... man is ... big ... did he ... "

"I'm fine, Aunt Linda! Really! Please." She bit her lip. "I'm fine."

"Then I'm going to a play tonight, so I'm going to head on home now."

"Thanks." She kissed Aunt Linda's cheek before she thankfully closed the door behind her.

"Did you have fun with Mick, Mommy?" Tia asked as Jennifer changed clothes in her bedroom.

What she'd felt with Mick had been eons beyond fun. It had been wonderfully devastating. Completely satisfying. Deliciously wicked. "I ... yes." She turned to look at Tia. "I'm sorry to have spent the whole weekend away from you. It wasn't right."

Tia nodded. "Yeah because I missed you."

"I missed you too, sweetiekins. Tell you what. No more weekends away for us, unless you're with your daddy. Okay?"

"Okay, Mommy." Tia slipped her arms around Jennifer's neck. "Was he nice to you? Did you like sleeping with him?"

Her face burned. "I ... well, I ... "

Tia studied her face for a moment, then frowned. "You don't want to talk about it, Mommy?"

"Well, it's not that. It's just ... it's sort of ... "

"Not nice to talk about?"

She nodded. "Well, it's just that it's ... sort of ... embarrassing."

"Why? I'm your little girl. You can tell me anything, Mommy."

"Well, yes, sweetiekins. Yes, I know that, but ... well, ... you're very young and some ... things are just too embarrassing to talk about."

"Oh. Then I'll ask Mick. He says I can ask him anything. He'll tell me."

"No! Honey, no! Don't. Please. I need you to trust me on this. This isn't something you should ask Mick about. Okay?"

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" she asked, suddenly looking angry. "He promised me he wouldn't."

"And he didn't. Tia ... please. This is something you'll understand once you're older."

The phone rang and Tia pulled away. "I'll get it!"

Jennifer sank down onto the side of the bed as Tia picked up the phone.

"Hello ... hi, Mick! Mommy and me were just talking about you ... " She giggled. "Mommy said she had fun with you this weekend. Did you have fun with her? What? I did ask her. She said it was too embarrassing to talk about." She glanced over her shoulder at Jennifer. "Yes. She's here. You want to talk to her?"

She held the phone out. "Mick wants to talk to you, Mommy."

Jennifer nodded and took the phone. "Hello."

"Jenny. Hi."

His voice was warm, reminding her of their weekend together. She felt herself blushing again.

"Are you busy, Jenny?"

"Why?"

"Why?" Some of the warmth left his voice. "If you don't have any plans, I was hoping I could stop by for awhile."

"When?"

"Tonight. Now. I need to see you."

"Need, Mick, or want?"

"Both."

"After a whole day of silence? Where've you been all day? I thought you'd call."

"I've been busy."

"Too busy to pick up the phone for a few minutes?"

"No, not that busy. I should have called."

"Why didn't you?"

"I thought you'd be angry about the car."

"I see."

She heard him take a deep breath. "You are angry. I know we agreed that I'd only have the battery replaced, but the brakes were shot, Jenny. It wasn't safe for you to keep driving around with them."

"That should have been my choice, Mick. Not yours. What else did you have done to my car?"

He sighed. "Nothing of any consequence."

"Translated that means?"

"Jennifer--"

"I want to know."

"Just an oil and lube ... tires rotated, pressure checked. Nothing of any consequence."

"How much--"

"Jenny, please!" he said suddenly, sounding angry. "Please explain to me why it's so wrong for me to want to help you? Wouldn't you help me if our roles were reversed?"

"That's different, Mick!"

"How?! Why?!"

"Because it is," she said, making an effort to keep her voice level. Tia was sitting on the carpet by the bed, watching and listening.

"It's only different because you're making it different."

"That's my choice too, Mick."

"Your choice? Why does everything boil down to you and what you choose to do? Didn't anyone ever tell you that all successful relationships are built on the needs, wants, and choices of both partners?!"

"I'm not going to get into that! I want to know how much the repairs to the car cost."

"And if I don't tell you?"

"You're going to tell me."

"Fine. Have it your way, Jennifer. I'll bring the bill with me."

"Tomorrow. You can give it to me tomorrow ... at your office."

A tense silence ensued. "Meaning you don't want to see me tonight?"

"Exactly."

"Okay. Fine. What about tomorrow night?"

"What about it?"

"May I see you then?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't have to give you a reason."

"What?!"

She glanced at Tia and held the phone against her chest. "Sweetiekins, I need to talk to Mick in private."

"You're fighting with him, Mommy!" she accused. "Why?"

"Tia! Please. Just give me a few minutes. Okay?"

"But, Mommy!"

"Tia! Now!"

Shooting an angry look at her, Tia stomped out of the room. A moment later she heard Tia's bedroom door slam. She put the phone back to her ear. "Mick, ... about this weekend."

"What about it?"

"We shouldn't have ... " She trailed off.

"We shouldn't have what, Jennifer?"

She bit her lip and took several deep breaths, staring at the floral print of her bedroom wallpaper. Continuing would change their

relationship forever. And she didn't really want to, but she had to. "We shouldn't have slept together."

"We didn't sleep together. We made love."

"Whatever you choose to call it, Mick, ... it was a mistake."

"Oh, God, Jennifer! What are you trying to do to me?! I repeatedly told you that we could wait if you weren't ready! You said you were. Now you want to hold it against me?!"

"I didn't say that! I know what you asked and I know how I responded."

"Then why are we having this conversation?"

"Don't misunderstand me, Mick. I'm not saying it was your fault or your mistake. I'm just saying it was a mistake."

"The hell it was!"

"Yes! It was! I ... don't sleep around."

"Dammit! Neither do I! You're the first ... the only woman I've made love to since my divorce."

"I didn't mean it like that, Mick. I only meant that we shouldn't have started this ... I'm not going to sleep with you again."

"I don't recall asking you to!"

He sounded angry and she knew he had reason to be. "It's all right with me if you still want to see Tia."

"What?! If I still want to see Tia? What's that supposed to mean, Jennifer? What are you telling me? That you don't want to see me any more?"

She nodded silently, biting her lip.

"Jennifer?"

"Yes." She whispered the word, every part of her being hurting with the voicing of it.

"Why? Because of a few repairs to some damned car?! Don't you think you're blowing this way out of proportion?"

"No, I don't! I asked you not to make those repairs!" she snapped back. "It was my car! My choice! I make my own choices, Mick!"

"Fine, Jennifer! Make them. I apologize for caring that you might either get hurt or killed driving around with bad brakes! Now, can we please move on?"

"You're not getting it, are you? There isn't going to be any moving on for us."

"Jennifer. Oh, Jennifer. Do you know what you're saying?"

Her chest felt heavy with despair. "Yes."

"You can't mean this."

"I do ... "

"I'm in love with you. You know that!"

"But I don't ... "

"You don't love me? Fine! I can ... fine. But love had very little to do with this weekend, did it?"

"I was ... lonely and I needed ... "

"You were lonely and you needed what? A male body! Is that all our weekend together meant to you?"

It had meant so much more. Nevertheless, admitting that would mean admitting she loved him. If she did that, he'd expect to become her lover. But not her husband. Never her husband.

"Is it, Jennifer?"

"Yes."

"Oh, damn, Jennifer!" The next sound she heard was his receiver being slammed on its cradle.

She replaced her own receiver and angrily swiped at the tears that spilled down her cheeks.

CHAPTER NINE

"I told you it wouldn't work, Mike."

Mick and Hal were in the conference room the next morning. A planning session with the staff had just ended and they were still seated at the conference room table.

He closed the folder he'd been scanning and looked at Hal across the conference room table. "What?"

"You and Jennifer Smallwood. I knew it wouldn't work."

"What are you talking about?"

"Last weekend you were both walking around like you'd won the lottery. Today you're both looking like you've been kicked to the curb. You slept with her, didn't you? And now you're both sorry, right?"

He stood up abruptly, shoving his chair so hard that it slammed into the wall behind him. He walked around the table to where Hal sat and glared down at him. "I am telling you this for the last time, Hal: unless you wanted to be knocked on your behind, stay the hell out of my face and my personal life!"

Looking shocked, Hal lifted a hand to touch his arm. "Hey, Mike, come on. I--"

He batted the hand angrily away. "I mean it, Hal. Mind your own damned business!" he snapped, retrieved his folders and briefcase, and stalked out of the room.

He made his way back to his office, not looking toward the small office where Jennifer was working. He knew she was in there because the light was on, but he hadn't actually seen her. Which was just as well. The desire to storm into the room and beg her to reconsider seeing him was almost too strong to resist. But he couldn't give in to it. It wouldn't do any good and he wasn't going to make an even bigger fool of himself by asking for something that she was unable and unwilling to give him.

There was just the problem of Tia. He couldn't just stop seeing her, but he couldn't see her at home again. Looks like they were back to the park.

He ran a hand through his hair and leaned his head back against his chair. "Oh, God, Jennifer!" he said softly and closed his eyes on a sudden desire to give way to tears. Whoever said men didn't cry had never been hurt in love.

There was a brief tap on his door quickly followed by Hal walking into the room. Hal held up a hand before he could speak. "Hear me out before you get your dander up again."

He sank back against his chair and watched as Hal walked across the room to stand behind his chair. A moment later, he felt Hal's hand on his shoulder. "Look, Mike, I didn't know how much you ... how strongly you felt about her. I'm sorry, man."

He took a deep, aching breath. "I don't want to talk about her, Hal."

"Okay. I just wanted you to know that ... I'm behind you, Mike. No matter what happens ... how things work out. Whatever makes you happy is fine with me. If you want a black woman and she wants

you, fine. Who am I to put stumbling blocks in your way? I'm fine with whatever makes you happy, man."

He slowly turned to look up at Hal. He'd never expected Hal to give his approval of his dating a black woman. "That's very magnanimous of you, Hal, considering she's kicked me to the curb and you know it."

Hal shrugged. "So get up and dust your sorry behind off. Smell the roses man. I know you ... have a thing for her, but she is not the only woman in the city ... the place in full of black women."

But there was only one Jennifer, who he wanted so much he ached with the need for her. "Maybe I'll go get myself one," he said, just wanting Hal to get lost.

Hal shook his head and sighed. "Man oh, man, but you've got it bad." Hal's hand tightened on his shoulder. "If there's anything I can do to help ..."

He nodded. "Thanks, but I just need to be alone right now."

Hal nodded, squeezed his shoulder again and left him alone with his thoughts.

Jennifer was tired. All she wanted was to put Tia to bed before crawling into her own bed to have a good cry.

But she saw a dark blue Honda Accord parked at the curb and sighed. After spending a miserable week trying to avoid running into Mick, and trying to defend her decision not to see him again to herself and Tasha, she wasn't up to a battle with Jim. Especially now that

Mick was out of the picture.

It would be so nice just to restart the car and drive away; but she'd have to face Jim and the situation she had created by sleeping with Mick sooner or later.

Jim barely allowed her to get in the front door, before he was sending a rebellious Tia to her room. "Baby, go to your room. I need to talk to your mommy."

"Daddy, you be nice to my mommy. She can like Mick if she wants to. I like him too. He's nice to her and he doesn't make her cry like you always did!"

"Tia! Go to your room. Now!" Jim said firmly.

Jennifer smiled at Tia and watched her stomp up the stairs to her room before she turned to face Jim. "Where's Aunt Linda?"

"I sent her home."

"You had no right--"

"So where is this white boy of yours, Jenn?" he asked, cutting her off. "I want to talk to him. Man to boy."

She dropped her briefcase on to the sofa and sank down beside it. "He's not a boy and he's not here. He's busy."

"Too busy to face me? Or too afraid?"

"He's not afraid of you, Jim! Why should he be?"

"Then bring him on, Jenn! I have a right to meet this boy you're letting hang around my baby girl."

"She's mine too, Jim! And you don't need to sound as if he's some ... pervert!"

"How do I know he's not?!"

"I know he's not! He'd never hurt her!"

"So you say. But you're sleeping with him and that means you're not thinking with your brains, woman."

"What?! Who--who told you that?"

"Nobody told me. No one had to. You weren't here all last weekend. You were with him, weren't you?"

"What do you want from me, Jim?"

"I want to see your white boyfriend, Jenn and I'm not leaving until I see him."

"Then you'd better make yourself comfortable because I have no intentions of calling him just to please you."

He frowned, looking shaken. "Oh, Jenn. No. He got what he wanted and he dumped you already?!"

"He did not dump me!" she said angrily.

"Then where is he?"

She rose. "I'm going to change. Why don't you see yourself out?"

"Don't count on it. I'm going to be right here when you get back! So you'd better get him over here."

She left the living room without answering. She was on her way back down stairs ten minutes later when the doorbell rang. "Yes?"

"It's Mick."

For a moment, she felt a sense of panic at the thought of Mick and Jim meeting. Neither one of them was in a good mood. But there was no point in worrying about that now. He was here. She took a deep breath and opened the door a few inches.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at him. "I told you I didn't want to--"

"I know what you told me," he said coolly. "I was in my car on the way home when Tia called me."

She said her father was here. Angry. Demanding to see me. So here I am."

She glanced quickly over her shoulder. "She shouldn't have called you."

He pushed against the door and she reluctantly stepped back, allowing the door to open wider.

"You're right."

She glanced at him, her eyes wide. "I am?"

"Yes, you are. She shouldn't have called me. You should have."

"No, I shouldn't. You're not needed here."

"He's not here demanding to see me?"

"Yes, but I don't need your help. I can--"

"I know the drill. Spare me the lecture. You can handle him by yourself. You can handle everything by yourself. I'm surprised you still need a man when you want sex," he said bitterly.

Without conscious thought, her hand swung up toward his face.

He caught her hand in his before it could strike his cheek, her intended target. To her surprise, he brushed his lips against her fingers and clasped her hand under his, against his chest. "In addition to breaking my heart, you want to slap me too?" he asked softly.

She blinked back tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you did. You have."

"I'm ... sorry."

"I don't want or need your sorrow, Jennifer. I want you."

"Mick, I--"

"Never mind." He released her hand and looked passed her in the hallway. "Where is he?"

She hesitated a moment longer, then stepped back. She closed the door and turned to look at him. "He's not going to be very pleased to meet you, Mick."

He shrugged. "Tough."

"You won't let him egg you into a ... a ... "

"A fist fight?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He shrugged again. "That's not in my game plan, but I have no intentions of backing down if that's what he wants." He smirked at her. "The choice will be his."

She gripped his lapels. "Don't you hit him! He's shorter and lighter than you. Mick, please. He's Tia's father. She won't forgive you if you hurt him!"

He pushed her gently but firmly away. "I have no intentions of hitting him, Jennifer."

Unless of course he hits me. If he does, he'd better be able to finish anything he starts."

"Mick!"

"Relax, Jennifer." He grinned at her suddenly, brushing his fingers against her cheeks. "Where is he?"

She turned and headed for the living room and he followed.

She paused in the doorway. Jim was standing by the fire place, looking at the many pictures of Tia adorning the top.

She took a deep breath. "Jim."

He turned to face her.

"Jim, this is ... "

"Michael Reilly." Mick moved passed her to extend his hand to Jim. "I understand you wanted to see me."

She saw the surprise on Jim's face. She wasn't sure what surprised him more; Mick's age, his size, or the designer suit he wore.

"You're ... " Jim shook his head and turned to look at her. "This is your ... "

"My white boy," she said sweetly. "He's a big, well-dressed white boy, isn't he?"

Jim glared at her and turned back to Mick, who was still holding his hand out. He shook it quickly, briefly. "Jim Henderson. Tia's father. Yes. I want to talk to you." He turned to look at Jennifer again. "Alone."

"Forget it," she said. "She's my daughter too. I'm not going to let you two shut me out while you get caught up in some he-man ego trip."

Mick glanced at her. "Leave us alone, Jennifer."

"This is my house, Mick. I'm not going anywhere."

He shrugged, looking at Jim. "There's nothing to stop us from going outside to talk."

Jim nodded. "All right," he said and started across the room toward the door.

She panicked. Outside, it would be more difficult to monitor the situation and intervene if necessary. "Wait! Fine. Put me out of my own living room," she said and walked across the room.

At the door she turned and gave Mick a beseeching look. "Mick, ... "

"You're still here?" He arched a brow at her, which did nothing to reassure her.

In the kitchen she uncovered the pans Aunt Linda had left on the stove. Baked macaroni, greens, cornbread, and southern fried chicken.

She slammed the lids back onto the pots and sat at the counter with her face buried in her arms. Waiting for the sound of angry voices. She waited for what felt like an eternity.

She felt a sudden tingling sensation along her neck and jerked her head up to find Mick standing in the doorway, watching her.

She stared back at him. Looking for some signs of anger on his face. Or worse. Signs that he and Jim had taken a few swings at each other. But there was none. She sighed. "I didn't hear any pushing or shoving or shouting."

"That's because there wasn't any."

"I was afraid you would ... you're all right?"

He nodded.

She glanced passed him. "And Jim? He's all right too?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't he be?"

She shrugged and stood up. "Where is he?"

"He went to talk to Tia."

"Oh." She looked away from him. "Well, I'll ... I'll show you out."

"But I have no intentions of leaving just yet. At least not without a kiss or two."

She shook her head and pressed back against the counter as he started toward her. "Mick ... don't."

He ignored her and put his arms around her. She shoved at his shoulders, but his arms tightened and he buried his face against her neck. "Jenny, my love. Don't do this to me."

She trembled as she felt the warm, nibbling kisses he pressed against her skin. "Mick! Oh, Mick! Please. Don't!"

His lips moved up her neck to her cheek. Slowly, sweetly, his mouth continued its warm path to her already parted lips. "Mick! Don't! Tia or Jim might come in and--"

"Since both of them know I'm in love with you, neither one of them should be surprised to find me kissing you," he whispered and kissed her slowly on her mouth.

Every particle of her being came alive at the touch of his warm, insistent mouth. She'd never known a man's lips could feel so soft or taste so sweet. She allowed herself the heady luxury of leaning into him. She linked her arms around his neck and greedily returned his kisses.

It took several minutes for his words to register. When they did, she stiffened in his arms and dragged her mouth away from his. "Both of them? Jim knows? You told him about ... us? Why?"

He released her slowly and moved slightly away from her. "Because he asked. Aside from wanting to make sure that I wasn't some pervert intent on harming Tia, he wanted to find out what my intentions regarding you were."

That surprised her. "Me? Why?"

He brushed a finger down her cheek. "He wanted to make sure that I wasn't just intending to sleep with you then discard you. He was concerned about you."

"He has a right to worry about Tia, but I can take care of myself. I don't need his concern or his help."

His eyes narrowed. "Oh, Jenny, is there anything you can't handle by yourself?"

"I can handle him and I can handle you, Mick," she said coolly.

To her surprise, he caught her arm and stared down at her. "You think so? It's time you understood, Jennifer, that I am not some boy you can use and discard when you want. The world does not revolve around you and what you want or need. There are other people in this world. Like me for instance. I have wants and needs too. And I have no intentions of being handled by you or any other woman. Nor do I intend to go quietly into the night just because you want and expect it of me."

"And what about you, Mick? What's your excuse for telling Tia you ... love me? Do you have any idea how impossible she'll be now? Demanding to know if I love you and if not, why not? And ... and--"

"And do you?"

The need to tell him the truth was almost more than she could stand. "Do I what?"

"Do you love me?"

Part of her wanted to say no, but another, more basic part wouldn't allow it. She said nothing, knowing he would misconstrue her silence as a definite no.

They stood staring at each other for several moments, before he released her arm and walked out of the kitchen. Several moments later, she heard the front door open and close.

Jim came into the room five minutes later, as she was setting the table.

"You've done well for yourself, Jenn. A successful, older man with his own business who adores you. When are you two getting married?"

The question surprised her. Jim never ceased to amaze her. He went from thinking Mick was a pervert that he didn't want any where near Tia to

assuming she and Mick were on the verge of getting married. "He hasn't asked me."

"When he does?"

"When? Don't you mean, if?"

He shook his head decisively. "No. I mean when. He told me he's in love with you. Why shouldn't he want to marry you?"

She stared at him. "That's a strange question coming from you."

"Why?"

"You loved me once or so you said."

"I didn't just say it. I did love you."

"Fine. You loved me once, but--"

He ran a hand around the collar of his colored shirt and averted his gaze. "Let's not go there again, Jenn. We were both very young and ... I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. Ever."

She nodded, feeling the bitterness and pain she'd harbored towards him dissipating. "I know. I think I've always known that. It just hurt to ... give up all the dreams we talked about."

He met her gaze. "Who says you have to give them up? Maybe we just weren't meant to share them with each other. Maybe he's your Mr. Right."

"What happened to white boy?"

He shrugged. "I was out of line with that kind of talk. I really didn't mean it, Jenn. You know I have no problem with people of other races. I was just ... surprised." He grinned. "I didn't know you went in for big white boys."

She shook her head. "I don't!"

"Jenn, news flash. He's very big and very white."

She considered telling him she wasn't going to see Mick any more, but discarded the idea. Her

personal life was none of his concern. She smiled slightly. "I guess he is."

"He seems like an ... okay guy."

She nodded. "He is."

"He promised me that he wouldn't try to turn Tia against me."

"He wouldn't. And even if he tried, she loves you too much to ever let anyone come between you two."

"He told me about his daughter."

"He loved her as much as you love Tia."

"I'm glad you know that I do love her, Jenn."

"Jim! I never doubted that. I know you love her."

"Good. So ... we can be friends again?"

She smiled suddenly. "Again? We were never really friends, Jim. And that was part of the problem, wasn't it?"

"Maybe, but I really want to see you be happy."

Well, he'd have to wait a little longer, because she wasn't going to be happy with Mick. She smiled. "Thanks. I want the same for you."

"Good. Then you'll consider coming to the wedding."

She wasn't sure she was ready for that yet. "We'll see," she said cautiously.

"I'll come to yours if you'll come to mine."

Her smile vanished. "I'm not engaged. Mick and I have only known each other for a few weeks. And anyway, he hasn't asked me to marry him."

"He loves you," he said simply. "And if you slept with him, I know you must love him too."

"Which doesn't mean that I want to marry him."

He nodded, smiling. "Of course it means that," he said. "I know you, Jenn. If you slept with a man, you love him enough to want to marry him."

She shrugged. "I really don't want to talk about him."

"Okay. Look, I know it's not my weekend, but I'd like to come get Tia on Friday."

She stiffened. "Have you told her already?"

"Yes. Why?"

She groaned aloud. "I wished you hadn't told her without checking with me first."

"Why not? Do you two have plans?"

"No, but are you sure you're coming? You have no idea what I have to go through with her when you don't show up. She's--"

"I do know, Jenn, and I'm sorry."

She stared at him. "You know. How?"

He grinned at her. "Your big white boy told me. I didn't realize what a rough position I was putting you in. No matter what you might think, Jenn, I never canceled my time with her lightly. She's my baby girl and I love her."

"I know you do."

"I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Oh. Well, okay. I'll have her ready my seven."

"I'm only working half a day Friday so I'd like to pick her up right after school. I want to make the most of this weekend. Just the two of us."

Thoughts of Tia's joy at having Jim to herself for a whole weekend, had her smiling. "Oh, Jim. She's going to love that."

"So am I."

After a long, sleepless night, Jennifer woke up to find that there was a steady leak in the hot water faucets in the bathroom sink and tub. Ignoring the urge to sit down and have a good cry, she checked the utility drawer in the kitchen. At least something was going right.

The pack of washers was still there. The last thing she needed was a plumbing bill. She'd have a go at installing new washers after work. She was a little leery all day, expecting Mick to walk into the office and kiss her. Expected and wanted. But she headed home at five o'clock without having seen him at all.

Instead of being reassured, she felt annoyed and neglected. Even Tia's excited greeting when she arrived home, wasn't enough to lift her spirits. She changed into her oldest pair of sweats, gave Tia her dinner, and turned the water off. She was still struggling to loosen the screws on both faucets when the doorbell rang ten minutes later.

"Mommy, it's the door!" Tia yelled up the stairs.

She choked back the urge to curse as she lost her grip on the screwdriver and her hand slammed against the faucet. "I'm coming. Finish eating your dinner," she said and ran down the stairs to the door.

"Who is it?"

"Mick."

Her heart beat immediately increased and she leaned her forehead against the closed door. She considered leaving him out there, but discarded the idea. Aside from the certainty that he would

just pound on the door until she opened it, she knew Tia would have a fit if she knew he was on the other side of the door.

She opened the door. "Mick. I didn't expect you."

He glanced down at her and she wished she were wearing something more glamorous. He must have been working in the field, because he was dressed in jeans and safety boots. "May I come in?"

She nodded and he followed her inside. "Now what?"

"What are you doing with that screwdriver?"

"If you must know, I'm changing the washers on the hot water spigots upstairs." She turned away from him. "Tia's in the kitchen. She'll be glad to see you."

She didn't wait for his response before heading back upstairs. Moments later, she heard Tia's delighted laughter and Mick's deeper voice.

Despite her best efforts she couldn't budge the screws. She was sitting on the floor barely holding back tears when Mick walked into the bathroom.

He knelt in front of her, his hand extended. "Let me do that."

"No," she said, stubbornly. "I don't need any help."

"Oh, Jenny. Do me a favor, will you? Save the I-am-woman-don't-need-no-help-from-a-man crap for the next sucker who falls for you. I don't want to hear it any more. Now give me that damned screwdriver."

She didn't object when he took the tool. There wasn't any point. In his present mood, she knew he would just take it from her. She sat on the floor,

angry tears streaming down her cheeks as he loosened the screws, changed the washers on both spigots, and turned the water back on, all in ten minutes.

Then he sat on the floor next to her with his back against the wall, his arm pressed against hers. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I want to!"

He took one of her hands in his and brushed his lips against her knuckles. "You know, I sort of feel like crying myself."

She turned her head to look at him. "I need you to leave me alone, Mick. Please."

He squeezed her hand reassuringly, but shook his head. "No can do, sweetheart."

"I'm not going to see you any more."

"I know," he said softly. "You told me. A couple of times."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Visiting the woman I'm hopelessly in love with." He kissed her fingertips. "I love you, Jenny."

She pulled her hand away, but didn't get to her feet. "I mean it."

"I know you do."

"Then?"

"But I meant what I said too, Jennifer. I'm not going to stay out of your life just because you want me to."

"You don't have any ... " she bit her lip and fell silent.

"Choice? Yes. I know. Only you have choices, Jennifer. What I want, need, or feel doesn't matter in the least to you."

"That's not true!" She clutched his arm. "It's not. I do care about what you want and need, but ..."

"Yes?"

"I don't want to be hurt again."

He brushed his fingers against her cheek. "Why do you assume I'm going to hurt you?"

"That's the only way things can end for us. With me hurt."

"Only if you loved me but I didn't love you. And you've made it plain that you don't love or care a hill of beans about me. It seems I'm the one in danger of being hurt here, Jennifer. So what's the problem?"

She shook her head and got to her feet. "I told you. I do care about you, Mick. I do."

He bounded to his feet. "Great! I care about you. You care about me! That's what makes the world go around. Let's start over. As if we're meeting for the first time."

"We've already done that," she reminded him wearily.

"I know," he said grinning down at her. "We'll keep trying until we get it right."

She stared up at him. The urge to give in and throw herself into his arms was strong. "Mick ..."

"Think about it. While you're thinking about it, remember that I love you." He bent and kissed her very gently on her mouth. "I'll see myself out."

"Mick!" Against her better judgment, she went after him.

He turned at the head of the stairs and retraced his steps. "Yes?"

"What is it that you want from me?"

He tipped her chin up so he could gaze down into her eyes. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you. What else?"

Her heart thumped painfully in her chest. "As what? My lover? My sugar daddy? My boyfriend?"

"I'm not your daddy nor am I a boy, Jennifer."

She hit his shoulder with a clenched fist.

"You know what I mean."

"If you want to know what my long term intentions are, why don't you just ask? I don't bite." He grinned suddenly. "Well, only when driven out of my mind by the taste and feel of you, sweet, Jenny."

A shiver of remembered passion shot through her as her mind flooded her senses with a delicious, vivid memory of his teeth gently sinking onto one of her breasts while they made love.

She lowered her gaze to his Adam's apple.

"Okay. I'm asking."

"Too bad I'm not in the mood to tell you."

"You big jerk!" she said angrily.

He laughed and she watched in disbelief as he ran down the stairs. Moments later, she heard him saying good night to Tia before he left.

CHAPTER TEN

Mick kept his distance for the rest of the week. By the time Jennifer left work on Friday night, she was dreading spending a long, boring weekend alone. With Tia gone and Tasha spending the weekend out of town with Paul, she expected to catch up on her housework and do a little reading.

She had changed into sweats and was reading a mystery on the sofa when the doorbell rang at six-thirty.

She sat up and put the book down on the coffee table. Even before she went to the door, she knew it would be Mick. With Tia gone, there was no reason to let him in, still she opened the door and stood aside when he asked if he could come in.

Her eyes filled with tears at the sight of the red roses he held out to her. After his last few appearances without them, she had thought that part of their relationship was over.

"For you."

"They're beautiful. Thank you." She was careful not to touch him as she took the roses.

"Have a seat while I put these in water."

"I'd rather come with you." He followed her down the hall into the kitchen.

She was very conscious of him watching her as she put the roses into a vase. She slowly turned to face him. "Tia's not here."

"I know. She called me from her father's house."

"What for?"

He grinned. "She wanted me to come and keep you company. As I aim to please, here I am."

"Well, I don't need any company," she said and made the mistake of trying to push past him.

He caught her arm and swung her around to face him. "Well, I do."

"Mick, how many times must I tell you that I am not going to see you any more?"

"Why not?" he asked, staring down at her. "You want to see other men?"

"Why not?" she shot back. "Maybe we both should see other people."

He slipped his arm around her waist and drew her close to him. Despite herself, she shivered at the contact, then stiffened.

"Mick, let me go," she said breathlessly, pushing against his chest.

"You're telling me you don't mind my seeing other women?"

"Why should I?"

His arm around her waist tightened and she trembled with uncontrolled desire as she felt the evidence of his increasing arousal against her.

"Oh, Jenny, don't play games!" he protested. "You expect me to believe you wouldn't mind my feeling this way with another woman? The thought of my making love to another woman doesn't bother you?"

Just the idea made her feel sick. And she couldn't hide it. She gasped and found herself pressing against his hard warmth, as the memory of how wonderful making love with him could be flooded her senses.

"All right!" Giving up the struggle, she slipped her arms around his neck. "I don't want you touching any other woman. Just me."

"There is only you, my beautiful brown girl," he promised and bending his head, he kissed her. At first the touch of his lips was gentle, without passion. But as she responded, his mouth became more demanding.

She tingled all over as she felt his tongue brushing softly along her mouth. She parted her lips in open invitation. A happy sigh escaped her when she felt his tongue slipping between her lips to touch hers. She found it difficult to think after that. She didn't really wanted to.

She just wanted to feel. His lips. His hands. All over her. Loving her. Making her come alive as only he could. Still, when she felt his hands slipping under her top, pushing it up, she began to pull away.

"Mick! No! No. Don't," she whispered, dragging her lips away from his. "Please. Stop."

"Why?" he asked, his voice husky. "I don't just love and want you. I need you." He pressed his lower body against hers, making her shudder. "And even if you don't love me, I know you want me too. Maybe even need me a little?"

He was right. She couldn't deny it. Why should she? Why should she deny herself the pleasure of his body? What was the point of saying no when she wanted so badly to say yes? When her need for him was like an insatiable hunger?

"Oh, Mick! I do want you," she whispered and pulled his head back down to hers.

"How much?" he demanded.

"You talk too much!" she said and pressed her mouth up against his.

Dismay filled her when he abruptly pulled away. "What? What's wrong?" Standing on her toes, she reached up to kiss the corner of his mouth.

He lifted his mouth out of her reach. "Nothing." His blue gaze flicked slowly over her. "Why don't you dress so we can go out?"

She tightened her arms around his neck. "I don't want to go out. I want to stay right here. With you."

He resisted the pressure at the back of his neck and pulled completely away from her. "Maybe later. I know this great Italian restaurant. Go get dressed and we'll try it out."

"I don't like Italian and I'm not getting dressed!" she snapped, shoving angrily at his shoulder. Who did he think he was to stir up her passions and then refuse to satisfy them?

He caught her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. "The last time I listened to you when you said you wanted to make love, I lived to regret it."

She sucked in her breath and snatched her hand away from him. "Then why did you start this?"

He brushed his mouth gently against her cheek. "Because you're irresistible."

She jerked away. "Get out!"

His eyes narrowed. "You know, Jennifer, one of these days, I might decide to take you seriously. Believe it or not, I don't usually have to chase or beg a woman for what I want."

She lifted her chin. "Meaning?"

"Meaning if you're not careful, I just might decide you're not worth all the effort."

She recoiled as if he'd slapped her. "If you think you can ... threaten me, you're dead wrong. Go ahead. Get yourself one of those willing women! See if I care!"

"Fine. I will." He turned and walked away.

She stood where she was until she heard the front door open and close. He'd left. Maybe for good this time. No! Mick! She found herself running toward the front door. "Mick! I didn't mean it. Mick! Oh, Mick, please come back!"

She came to a sudden stop in the foyer. Mick leaned against the closed front door, a triumphant look on his face. "What took you so long?"

"I hate you!"

He laughed and moved away from the door. He took her face in his hands and kissed her slowly. Her lips parted under his and she kissed him back. "Yes, I can tell." He looked down at her, his eyes twinkling.

She was so relieved that she didn't have to run down the sidewalk screaming for him to come back, that she smiled back at him. "Well, maybe hate is too strong a word."

He hugged her, burying his face against her neck. "Will you please come have dinner with me?"

She buried her face against his shoulder. "I don't want dinner. I want you, Mick. Now. Please."

He lifted his head and looked down at her. "I want you now too, but what about Monday?"

"I won't blame you, I pro--"

He pressed a finger against her lips. "Don't make any promises you can't keep. Go get dressed."

"But I don't--"

"I'm not sleeping with you, Jennifer."

"I don't want you to sleep with me. I want you to make love to me."

He shrugged. "Whatever. We tried that once and you didn't like it afterwards. Let's do it right this time."

One look into his eyes and she knew nothing she could say would convince him to make love to her. She bit her lip and sank down onto the sofa. "I already ate."

He pulled her back to her feet. "I haven't. Get dressed, Jennifer. Please."

"Okay, but, ... there are men who want to sleep with me who won't make me beg for it," she said, seething with frustrated desire.

His eyes narrowed into icy blue slits. "Oh, yeah? And you can sleep with as many of them as you like, Jennifer. Over my dead body! Now are you going to get dressed or are you going to continue to sulk?"

She jerked away from him. "I do not sulk!"

He smiled and cupped a big hand against her cheek. "Of course you don't, darlin'."

Darlin'. The word made her feel weak and limp with wanting him. "Don't call me darlin', Mick."

"Why not?"

"It makes me feel ... "

"What? Loved ... cherished ... adored ... desired ... needed?" he suggested softly. "Or all of the above?"

The answer was an unequivocal all of the above. "I ... I'll go get dressed," she whispered.

They danced after a dinner she didn't enjoy. He held her with both hands pressed against her back. She closed her eyes. Enveloped in the warm

cocoon of his arms moving slowly around the dance floor, she knew she was in love with him big time.

"Mick?"

His lips moved gently against her ear. "Yes, darlin'?"

"Will you please ... stay the night with me?"

His arms tightened around her. "Yes."

Smiling, she pressed her face against his shoulder and happily slow danced with him for hours.

When he agreed to spend the night with her, she expected they would end up in bed, making love. And although, they did end up on the living room floor when they returned to her house, he resisted all of her efforts to seduce him.

Finally, she took a quick, cold shower and went to bed. But the knowledge that he was sleeping just two rooms away, wearing nothing more than a pair of boxer shorts kept her awake late into the night. The fact that she apparently no longer excited him only added to her frustration.

He slept over on Saturday night too, but again, refused to do any more than exchange a few kisses with her. His restraint and control annoyed Jennifer, who found herself trembling helplessly in his arms, pleading for the satisfaction he refused to give her.

By the time he left after breakfast on Sunday morning, she was thoroughly convinced that she had lost her appeal.

"Why don't you stay until Tia gets home?" she asked him as they said good-bye at her door.

"I can't."

"Why not? You have a date?"

He nodded and smiled slightly. "As a matter of fact, I do."

Her smile vanished and she stared up at him, looking for some sign that he was joking. She bit her lip when she found none.

"With ... who?"

"A friend, Jennifer."

"What kind of friend? Man? Woman? Old? Young? Pretty? Not pretty? Close? Distant?"

"I'm close to all my friends, Jennifer."

She curled her hand into a fist and hit his shoulder. "You know what I mean, Mick."

"Yes, I do." He removed her hand from his shoulder, kissed the clenched fist, and stepped away from her. "I'll see you later, Jennifer."

"Mick!"

He turned back to face her. "Yes?"

"Is this ... friend of yours someone I should ... worry about?"

His eyes narrowed. "Why should you care who I see, Jennifer? You've made it plain that your feelings for me are strictly physical."

Her face flushed. "I ... I ... how can you ... say that?"

"Very easily. Now I have to go. Bye, Jennifer."

"You always take his side!"

Tasha put down her sandwich and stared across the small cafe table at Jennifer. "Girl, it's Monday and I'm tired. Do we have to go there?"

"Why do you always take his side?"

Tasha sighed. "You have a serious problem, Jenn. I am not taking sides, but what did you expect him to do? Not to put too fine a point on

it, but you did lose it the last time he made love to you."

"I didn't lose it," she denied. "And anyway, whose friend are you? His or mine?"

"Oh, get real, Jenn," Tasha made no effort to hide the disgust in her voice. "I've never even met him, remember? And if you want to know the truth, I'm getting just a teensy bit sick of hearing about him. If he's half as wonderful as you say he is, why don't you do us all a favor and go ahead and marry him?"

"Because he hasn't asked me!"

"Then why don't you ask him?"

"I can't do that."

"Why not? Who says you can't? All he can do is say yes or no. And judging by the way he's been allowing you to jerk him around, I'm betting he'd say yes in a minute."

"Jerking him around? How can you say that? I have not been jerking him around!"

Tasha lifted her eyes ceiling ward. "No? Well, that's what it looks like from where I've been sitting, Jenn. And I'll bet that's how it feels to him too."

"I wouldn't hurt him!"

"Tell him that, girl, not me. Just don't come crying to me, expecting sympathy if he gets tired of waiting and follows through on his threat to see other women."

"He wouldn't." But even as she said it, she had a distinct memory of him telling her he would not be handled by any woman.

"Why not?"

"Because, ... he loves me!"

"Yeah? Well, what if he decides to go find someone who loves him back?"

"I love him!"

"I know that, but he doesn't. Maybe he'll get tired of being in love alone."

Jennifer felt as if she'd been doused with ice water. "Tasha, why are you saying these things?"

"Because I'm your friend. The one who's going to have to pick up the pieces if you blow it with him. Jenn, if you really love him, you'd better stop jerking him around and tell him. If you love him and believe he loves you, tell him the truth and trust him to do the right thing."

"But you were the one who said as a newly divorced man, he'd be afraid of marriage!"

"Well, maybe I was wrong." She grinned. "I know this will shock you, but it happens--on very, very rare occasions. I say let him decide whether or not he's ready to get married again. Maybe he's one of those rare men who actually like being married. Tell him how you feel, Jenn, before you lose him."

After a long morning and afternoon spent at the site of a bridge reconstruction, Mick got back to the office late on Monday afternoon. When he walked into the reception area he was aware of the sudden cessation of conversation.

He glanced around and found Hal, Bess, and Dale looking at him. All smiling. No. Smirking. "What?" He glanced down at himself and frowned. He knew he was dusky and maybe even a little sweaty, but surely not so much so that he was offensive to them from across the room.

Hal's smirk widened. "Nothing. There's been a delivery for you, Mike."

"What kind?"

"It's in your office." Grinning, Hal turned away.

He glanced at Bess and Dale, who also looked away. He shrugged and resisting the urge to stop in and speak to Jennifer, he headed for his office.

As soon as he opened the door, he saw why the others had been in the reception area waiting for him to return to the office. Sitting in the center of his desk was a vase full of red roses.

Ignoring the open laughter behind him, he closed the door and walked over to look at the card.

Red roses are special and so are you.

The card wasn't signed, but he knew they were from Jennifer. He felt as if he'd won a combination of the lottery and the Super Bowl.

He sank down into his chair with a wide grin on his face. Just maybe his little brown beauty wasn't so indifferent after all. And there was obviously something to be said for playing hard to get too.

Maybe that had been the problem. He'd allowed her to be too sure of him too soon. And look where it had gotten him. He decided there would be no more roses, no more honest declarations of love, and no more running after her. Even if it killed him.

He was still sitting, grinning at the roses ten minutes later when the phone rang. "Yes?"

"Hi, Mick."

"Jennifer." Despite himself, he heard his voice softening. "Hi. This is a surprise."

"I ... ah, I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me and Tia."

"I'd love to," he admitted. "When?"

"Tonight."

He nodded and then caught himself. "I'd love to," he said again, "But unfortunately, I made other plans."

"For tonight? Oh."

There was no mistaking the disappointment in her voice and he steeled himself to ignore it.

"Well, ... maybe anoth ... not with ... who do you have these plans with, Mick?"

He smiled. "No one you know. Listen, thanks for the flowers."

"Flowers? They were supposed to be roses. I asked them to send roses. I didn't sign the card because I didn't want--"

"It's all right. I knew they were from you and they did send roses. Red ... for love, Jennifer?"

"Well, ... you know, ... you always bring them to me and I thought you might like to receive some."

So she wasn't willing to admit that she felt anything more than passion for him. He wanted more. "I do. They're very nice. No one's ever sent me roses before. Listen, I have to go home and change. Give my love to Tia, will you? And I'll call you. See--"

"When?"

"When what?"

"When will you call, Mick? Tonight? Tomorrow? Wednesday? When?"

She sounded irritated. It would do her good to see how it felt to be on the receiving end of uncertainty for a change. "When I get time. Bye now," he said and hung up before she could say anything else.

At home he showered, changed, ate cold pizza, and watched a John Wayne western. When the phone rang at eight o'clock, he allowed it to go on the answering machine.

He pushed his recliner into a sitting position when he heard Jennifer's voice, but he didn't pick up the phone.

"Mick, it's Jennifer. I know you're not home and you said you'd call, but I thought, ... Tia and I thought that we'd leave a message and let you know we'd like to have you come over for dinner tomorrow or Wednesday. Or Thursday. Whichever night is good for you. Call us when you get in. I ... we hope you enjoy your ... date. But not too much.

"I hope ... you didn't misunderstand what I said Friday night. There really isn't ... I'm not seeing anyone else, Mick. And I'm not going to. I hope ... I wouldn't like you to either. I ... Bye."

He sank back in the chair, feeling like a heel. He knew it had taken a lot for her to call and leave that message. But that was only the first step. If she wanted him, she was going to have to be willing to prove it to him.

Still, he was determined that Tia not get caught in the middle. He waited an hour then picked up the phone. He sighed in relief when Tia answered. "Hi, Mick!"

"Hi, honey. How are you?"

"I'm good, Mick. Are you?"

"Yes. Is your mommy there?"

"Mommy's in the bathroom. Do you want me to call her?"

"No. Actually, I called to talk to you."

"Oh!" she said happily and giggled. "Are you coming to dinner tomorrow or Wednesday?"

"I can't come either night, but I was hoping you and I could see each other in the park tomorrow or Wednesday."

"Okay, but when are you coming to dinner? Mommy and me are learning how to make Irish Stew for you."

"That sounds great, honey."

"So when are you coming for dinner?"

"I'll have to let you know."

"Oh, okay ... Mommy's coming now. Do you want to talk to her?"

"Yes, but I have to go. Just tell her I said hello and I can't make dinner this week. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good night, honey."

"Good night, Mick."

"Mick, are you mad at my Mommy?"

He had been dreading that question from Tia. He had hoped to avoid answering it, but it was the first thing out of her mouth when they met in the park the next afternoon.

He smiled at her. "No, honey. I'm not mad at her."

"Is she mad at you?"

"I hope not. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I thought I heard her crying last night. After I went to bed. When I asked her about

it this morning, she said I must have been having a bad dream, but her eyes were all red and she looked sad. Like she did when my daddy first went away."

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.
"Tia, I would never willingly hurt your mommy."

She stared up at him, her dark eyes distrustful. "Then why was she crying? She doesn't cry over my daddy any more. That leaves you, Mick! Don't you like her any more?"

"Yes! Of course I do."

"Then why didn't you want to talk to her last night? She looked liked she was going to cry when I told her what you said. She kept asking me if I was sure I'd asked you if you wanted to talk to her. I did ask you!"

He ran his hand through his hair again. There was no way he could expect Tia to understand what was or wasn't happening between him and Jennifer. All she wanted was for her mommy not to cry any more.

"I know you did."

"Then why didn't you talk to her? You used to like to talk to her."

"Honey, I still do."

"Then why does she think you don't?! You must have made her think you didn't!"

He watched as Tia's eyes filled with angry tears. "You've made her start crying again!"

"Oh, honey. You know I love your mommy."

"No, I don't. You don't make people you love, cry! You don't love me and you don't love my mommy! But we don't care because we don't love you either!"

"Tia! Honey!" He extended a hand. She slapped it away and jumped off the bench. "I don't think I like you any more!" she shouted at him and ran over to Linda Johnson. The older woman had been sitting several feet away, watching them.

He tried not to resent the satisfied look on her face as she gathered Tia in her arms; as if the child had barely escaped his clutches.

He watched as they left the park without looking back. He sighed. So much for his plans to make Jennifer admit that she loved him. Tia was right. A man didn't make the woman he loved cry just so he could prove a point. He'd have to find a better way.

Besides, if she really had been crying maybe that told him as much as he could expect ... at least for now. Nevertheless, he needed a little time away from her to think things through.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jennifer pivoted on the balls of her feet. The dark red, sleeveless dress with the plunging neckline hugged her hips and buttocks before ending well above her knees. She turned to look at Tasha, who was sprawling on her stomach on her bed. "How do I look? Do you think these heels are too high?" She touched her cheek. "What about this? Is it too much? And what about this dress? I feel ... half naked ... like I've poured myself into it."

"The heels look great. They really show off your legs. And your makeup's right on. And you did pour yourself in that dress and you are half naked. But girl, you're the bomb. That's the point of the dress; to leave the male populace salivating."

She bit her lip wondering if things would have been different between her and Mick if she'd dressed like this for him.

Tasha studied her face. "You look great, but are you sure you want to do this, Jenn? It's only been--"

"Three weeks since he's been avoiding me. I sent him red roses--twice, even though the money would have been better spent on other things. I've called him several times and practically begged him to call me. He hasn't. I've done everything!"

"Except tell him you love him."

"That doesn't matter now." She bit her lip and sank down onto the side of her bed. "Oh, Tasha! I don't think he wants me any more!"

Tasha sighed and sat up. "Okay, I don't buy that for a moment, but how is going out to a club hoping to meet another man gonna help?"

"What am I supposed to do, sit around waiting for him to notice me again?"

"Why not if he's worth waiting for?"

"Because I'm not going to beg any more! That's why not! If this is the way he wants it, fine." She got to her feet. "Now are you coming or must I go by myself?"

Tasha slid off the bed. "No. I'm coming."

She smiled. "Thanks. I really couldn't go alone."

Tasha gave her a quick hug. "Hey, girl, it's always been me and you against the world. Always will be."

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. "Always."

Tia and Aunt Linda were sitting downstairs in the living room. Jennifer kissed and hugged Tia before turning to face Aunt Linda. "I know Wednesday is your night for bowling, but--"

"Never mind, Jenn. I don't mind."

Because she'd never approved of Jennifer seeing Mick in the first place. She tried not to think of all the grief she'd have saved herself if only she'd listened to Aunt Linda and stayed away from Mick.

"Mommy, what is Mick going to say when he finds out?"

"It's none of his business what I do," she said wearily.

"But if you wait, he'll come and take you out."

"Is that what he told you the last time you saw him at the park?"

"No, but he told me he loved you. So he has to come. Doesn't he?"

Before Jennifer could answer the doorbell sounded. Tasha glanced at her watch and got to her feet. "I'll get it. Paul must be turning over a new leaf. He's early for a change."

Jennifer sat next to Tia on the sofa as Tasha went to the door. Her hands were shaking so hard she could only control them by clasping them together. The thought of appearing in public in the outfit she'd allowed Tasha to talk her into buying, made her cringe.

She heard Tasha open the door, then, "Jenn, I think our plans have changed."

"What? Why? Has Paul changed his mind about escorting us both?"

"Come see," she called back.

Jennifer got up and went into the hall. She stopped abruptly at the sight of Mick in the doorway holding a bouquet of red roses.

Her heartbeat quickened and she had to blink back tears. That he should come the very night she was planning to head to a club, seemed like a sign. A good sign.

"You're Jenn's Irish hunk?" Tasha asked, allowing her eyes to slowly flick over Mick. "Wow! Jenn, was right. You are gorgeous! Hey, are there any more like you at home?"

Jennifer saw Mick's eyes widen in surprise and decided it was time she spoke up. "Tasha, this is

Mick Reilly. Mick, this is my best friend, Tasha Jordan."

He smiled briefly at Tasha before centering his gaze on Jennifer's face. "May I come in?"

She backed away from the door. "Ah ... well, yes."

"Is that Mick?!" Tia came tearing into the hallway. "Mick! You came!"

He knelt on one knee and Tia threw herself against him, sobbing and clinging to him. "I knew you'd come. I told Mommy if she waited you'd come!"

"Hey, hey honey. It's all right," he said softly. He kissed her hair and wiped gently at her wet cheeks. "It's all right."

"Look, why don't Aunt Linda and I get out of here and leave you three alone?" Tasha suggested. "Or do you want me to take Tia for the night?"

"No."

Jennifer and Mick spoke at the same time and their gazes briefly locked.

Tia lifted her face from Mick's shoulder to smile up at Tasha. "They want me with them, Auntie."

"Of course they do, sweetie. And now we're outta here." Tasha kissed Jennifer's cheek and tugged at Aunt Linda's arm. For a moment, the older woman resisted, but finally, after a look at Jennifer, she allowed herself to be drawn out of the house.

"I ... I can take those roses for you."

Mick got to his feet. He was still holding Tia, who'd wrapped her arms around his neck as if she never intended to release him.

He handed Jennifer the roses and followed her to the kitchen.

"I told Mommy she didn't need to go out and meet other men because you would come if she waited a little longer."

Jennifer groaned silently and put the roses in a vase before turning to look at Mick. He stared at her, his blue eyes narrowed as he assessed her outfit.

He kissed Tia's cheek and sat her on her feet. "Sweetheart, I need to talk to your mommy."

Jennifer saw the uncertain look on Tia's face. "You're not going to be mean to her, are you?"

"No, honey."

Tia glanced at her. Jennifer's smile seemed to reassure her. "Well, okay, but if you need me, Mommy, you just call."

"I will, sweetiekins."

The moment Tia left the room, Mick started toward her. "So. You have a date? With another man?"

"No! Not a date exactly."

He came to a stop within inches of her. "Then what exactly?" His gaze moved slowly over the dress before centering on her face. "I've never seen this dress or anything like it."

"Do you ... like it?"

"No," he said shortly.

"Why not?" She shrugged, uncertain of his mood. "Tasha said I was the bomb in this dress."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"That I look ... hot," she said, aware that she sounded more than a little defensive.

"Hot? I guess that's one way of looking at it. Jenny, for crying out loud, you're flaunting everything you have! Your breasts are practically hanging out for every man with a pair of eyes to see and your rump is barely covered."

"You're exaggerating, Mick! This is a perfectly ... respectable dress!"

"You're barely decent and you know it! You meant to go out ... practically naked?"

Heat burned her cheeks. His tone and the look in his eyes made her feel ... common. "Well ... " About to explain, she lifted her chin instead. "I was going to go out, yes."

"Where? With who?"

"To a club. Okay?"

"Looking for a one night stand, Jennifer?"

She bit her lip and resisted the urge to slap his face. She knew he was hurt and angry and was deliberately saying things intended to hurt her. "You really know how to dazzle a woman with charm, Mick."

He sighed and shook his head. "Okay. Okay. I didn't mean that, Jenny. I'm sorry."

"Fine. You're sorry. What brings your sorry behind here tonight?"

He shrugged. "Tia called me and told me that if I didn't want you to go out with other men, I should come. I didn't so I came."

"Why? Why did you come? Are you here as the man who said he loved me, or as the one who wouldn't answer my phone calls, or the one who left me several weeks ago to keep a date with another woman?"

He brushed a hand against her cheek. "I had lunch with Helen that day."

"Helen. Your wife?"

"My ex-wife. Very ex."

"Then why were you having lunch with her, Mick? Does she ... want you back?" The thought frightened her and she whispered the question.

He laughed, shaking his head. "Not in this life. She didn't want me when she had me. She sure doesn't want me now. She just wanted to tell me she's getting married again."

Her eyes searched his face for signs of distress. "And?"

"And nothing. I wished her well and we said our good-byes."

"And who were you with that Monday when I first called?"

"John Wayne."

"What ... who?"

"I went home, ate cold pizza, watched the Sons of Katie Elder, and thought about you."

"You mean you haven't been with another woman at all?"

"That's exactly what I mean." He took her into his arms. "I wanted you to think I was, but I wasn't."

She hit her fists against his shoulders. "Oh, Mick! I thought ... " Her eyes filled with tears. "I thought you were with another woman ... that you didn't want me any more."

"And did that bother you?"

"No!"

"Oh, Jenny! For crying out loud! Tell the truth."

"Well? What do you want me to say?!" she asked, defensively. "That I ... love you?"

He cupped her face and stared down into her eyes. "Do you?"

If she told him the truth, he'd know he had the power to hurt her far more than Jim had. And no matter how good his intentions were, she couldn't see him marrying her. She couldn't maintain his gaze as she spoke. "I ... like you ... you know I do-a lot. More than a lot."

"Like?" He released her and stepped away. "I don't want like. I don't need like. I'm not going to accept 'like.'"

"It's all I have to give."

"Really? Then, give it to somebody else because it's not enough for me any more."

She clutched the lapels of his jacket in her hands. "What are you saying? It has to be enough!"

He gently, but firmly loosened her grip. "It's not. If that's all you have to give, we have nothing to say to each other."

"Wh--what?"

"Good night and good-bye, Jennifer."

"Wait a minute!" She streaked past him, so that he had to stop to avoid walking into her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm not playing your games any more. You don't want a man. You don't need a man. Fine. Consider this man permanently out of your life."

"Mick ... Mick, please. It ... it wasn't ... isn't a game."

"You know something, Jennifer? I don't care any more. I finally get it. We don't want the same thing in a relationship. You want sex with no commitments. I want love with all the messy, little, take-your-chances-you-might-get-hurt

commitments that come with it. I'm leaving, Jennifer, and this time I'm not coming back."

She stared up at him. He was serious. She could see that in the determination in his gaze. If she let him go now, it would be over between them.

She clutched his arm. "Look, Mick, if you could just give me a little time. I--"

"No." He peeled his fingers from his arm. "No more time. No more chances. No more anything. You were right. We never should have started this in the first place. It's over."

"We ... could be friends."

"Friends?"

His gaze flicked over her, lingering on her breasts. The memory of how good his hands felt caressing her breasts caused heat to suffuse her whole body.

He shook his head. "I don't want anything from you, Jennifer, except your permission to occasionally see Tia. You and I have nothing else to say to each other."

She stared at him, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Mick! Wait! Please ... I ... please ... Mick."

"I'd like to do as you want, Jennifer and give us more time, but I can't."

"You mean you won't! There's a difference between can't and won't, Mick. A big difference."

"I know that. I also know when I've had enough." He shook his head. "I can't take any more of this."

"Mick, ... please ... don't say that."

He shook his head again and bent to brush his cheek against hers. "Take care of yourself."

She clutched at his arms. "Mick!"

He pulled away. "Jennifer, tell Tia that I love her, will you?"

"Oh, Mick ... please ... "

He swallowed several times and backed away from her. "I'm sorry I pressured you into this ... relationship. I really thought we could ... " He shrugged. "I'll see you around at the office, Jennifer."

When she heard the front door close, she started shaking, but held back the tears. They would have to wait until Tia was asleep.

When Mick first saw the red roses on his desk, he was aware of a feeling of euphoria sweeping through him. It had taken four weeks and two days, but finally! She'd seen the light. He closed his office door and rushed across the room to read the card. His hopes crumbled with the first word. "Mike." Jennifer never called him Mike.

"Mike,

Hal said you liked roses and you were fancy free again. I'd love it if you gave me a call.

Janet."

Reeling under what felt like a ton of despair, he sank down into his chair. Damn Hal for interfering! Damn Janet for not being Jennifer. Damn Jennifer for not loving him! And damn him for falling in love with a woman who only wanted sex from him.

Well, Jennifer wasn't the only woman in the world. Maybe it was time he faced that fact and considered other women, some of who might actually

want a relationship with him that went beyond the purely physical one Jennifer wanted.

He'd had a long day at the bridge reconstruction site and he was tired. He longed to spend what was left of the day and night with Tia and Jennifer. But he had as much chance of that happening as he had of having Tia forgive him for what she perceived as his hurting her mommy. The last two times he'd called, Tia had refused to speak to him.

What he needed was to be with someone ... a woman who wanted to be with him. Someone like Janet Walker. If she was willing to see him, knowing how he felt about Jennifer, fine. He reached out for the phone just as a tap sounded on his office door. He glanced up, surprised. It was after five. So it must be Hal. "Come in," he said wearily.

The door opened slowly and he felt his heartbeat quicken when Jennifer appeared in the opening. He bit back the urge to rush across the room and sweep her into his arms. He remained seated and silent.

"Ah ... can I ... can I have a word with you?"

He took a slow, deep breath before nodding.

He watched silently as she came into the room and closed the door. She was wearing another of her dark business suits with a narrow skirt that hugged her hips and ended just below her knees. It was hard to imagine she was the same woman he'd last seen outside the office, practically stuffed in a tiny red dress that emphasized every single aspect of her beautiful body. He wondered how many men had seen her in it and if she'd been with any

of them. Had she allowed some lucky man to take her home and to take it off?

He moved his gaze hungrily to her face. During the past four weeks, they'd occasionally passed each other in the reception area or in the parking lot. But neither of them had done any more than nod politely and keep moving. The thought that she might have been with another man, did nothing to mitigate his desire to pull her into his arms and never let her go. His chest ached with the need.

He motioned to one of the chairs in front of his desk.

She met his gaze briefly, then looked away. He saw her gaze settle on the roses. Was that a look of alarm on her face or was it just wishful thinking on his part? "Someone's sent you flowers."

"Yes."

"They're ... nice."

"Yes."

"That's very ... very nice."

"Yes. Very nice, but it's getting late and I'm tired. I doubt you came to talk about them. Or did you?"

"No." She tapped the manila folder she was holding. "Actually, I needed to discuss some of your expense reports with you."

He felt as if she'd ground him into little pieces and she wanted to discuss expense reports? "Fine."

She opened the folder on her lap, stared down at the contents, and then looked up at him. "Ah ... I was wondering if you're not busy ... or if you don't have plans or a ... a date or ... Tia would like to see you."

"Tia would like to see me?" Tia. Not her.

"Yes. She misses you. You probably have no idea how much she ... loves you ... "

"I love her."

She looked expectedly at him. He was fairly certain she was waiting for him to say that he loved her too. But hell would freeze over before he gave her another chance to reject him.

Her gaze rested on the roses before meeting his again. "Would you ... consider coming to see her?"

"When?"

"Tonight ... if you're not busy."

Afraid that his desire and love would shine through in eyes, he rose and stared out the window behind his desk. "Tonight? I'm not sure that's such a good idea. I'm not sure she wants to see me. She doesn't come to the park any more and she refused to speak to me the last two times I called her."

"I know. She told me that, but she also told me she was sorry. She wants to see you."

"Then I'll come ... if you're sure."

"I am."

He turned to face her. "Fine. Anything else?" he asked, when she continued to sit, watching him.

"No." She closed the folder and rose. "So, we'll see you later?"

He nodded.

"Tonight?"

He nodded again.

At the door, she turned to face him. "How ... have you been?"

"All right. You?"

"I ... ah, ... who sent the flowers, Mick?"

"Why do you ask?"

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip. She averted her gaze and looked down at her feet. When she spoke, her voice was so low, it was barely audible. "I want to know."

"Why?"

"You know why."

He shook his head. "I told you I wasn't going to play your games any more, Jennifer. Either you tell me why you want to know or this conversation is over."

She took several deep breaths and slumped back against the door. When she met his gaze again, he saw tears in her eyes. "Why do you have to make this so hard?"

"You know, Jennifer, the last thing I want to do is make anything hard for you. In fact, all I ever wanted was the opportunity to make things easier for you. Of course you being the personification of Super woman, made it abundantly clear all you wanted from me was sex."

"That's not true! Mick, ... how can you say that?"

"Well, let's see. You didn't want any financial assistance, although you so clearly needed some and I so badly wanted to give it to you. You didn't want my moral support when Jim objected to our relationship, such as it was. Hell, Jennifer, you didn't even want me to fix your damned spigots. What does that leave except sex? And the last time I saw you outside the office, you were certainly dressed as if all you had on your mind was sex."

"You're making me sound like a tramp, Mick!"

"No! No, I'm not! I know you don't sleep around." He paused, remembering that dress that had been intended for other men. "What have you been doing with yourself? Who have you been seeing?"

"No one! You think I don't know what you're thinking? Well, I do! I didn't go out that night or the next or the next! I haven't been with anyone. You're a fine one to talk! I'm not the one getting red roses, so don't you stand there acting as if I'm ... common!"

"I never said or thought that!" He spoke quickly. "Even if you had gone out and been with another man, I'd never think that of you! Never! All I'm saying is that we obviously want very different things from a relationship. I want ... I need a commitment, Jennifer. I'm not interested in just being your part time lover."

"That's not all I wanted from you, Mick."

"Isn't it? Tell me, Jennifer, what exactly is it that you want from me? What would you like me to say or do?"

He steeled himself as the tears spilled down her cheeks. He hated to see her cry. "Just that ... I haven't blown it. That you ... that you still love me."

The need to say just that was almost more than he could bear. But he needed some kind of sign from her before baring his heart to her again. He turned and stared out the window. He clenched his jaw and remained silent.

He heard her moving behind him. He ground his teeth together when her fingertips touched his back.

"Mick ... who's sending you red roses? Have ... have you been sleeping with another woman?"
He didn't answer.

"Mick ... ?" Her voice quivered. He felt her hands moving against his back before she slipped them around him. She pressed her cheek against the back of his shoulder. "Please, Mick ... please."

"Please what, Jennifer? What do you want?"

"You." Her arms tightened around him. "You."

"As ... what?" He had to clench his hands into fists to keep from turning in her arms and kissing her until they were both breathless.

"As ... whatever you want. Please Mick."

Her tears dampened his shirt. The pain in her voice cut through him. His control snapped. He turned to face her. The misery in her eyes made him suck in his breath. "Oh, Jenny, honey."

He put his arms around her; holding her close. "Jenny, darlin', please don't cry."

"I ... I ... Mick ... I'm sorry ... I need you ... please."

He brushed her tears away with the backs of his hands. "Need or want?"

She took a deep, gulping breath. "Both ... I ... oh, Mick! I've been so ... so miserable ..."

"Why?"

She stared up at him, her eyes filling with more tears. "You must know how I feel, Mick."

"I know how I want you to feel. That just might not be the same thing, Jenn. Say it, Jenny. Please. Tell me what I need to hear from you." He cupped her face between his palms. "Just three little words. I need to hear you say them."

"I want to, but it's so hard to say them."

He shook his head. "Not if you mean them. It's what I need to hear from you."

"Okay ... okay, ... I love you ... "

He stared at her, almost afraid he'd misunderstood her. "What?"

"I love you." This time her voice was firmer, more convincing.

"Yeah? Are you ... sure?"

She nodded. "Yes! I'm sure."

"You're sure its love and not just a desire for ... sexual intimacy?"

"Oh, Mick!" She hit her clenched fists against his shoulders. "I do want that with you, but I want it so much because I love you! I've been in love with you for weeks ... I was in love with you when we spent that weekend at your place. That's why we spent that weekend together."

"Then why didn't you ever tell me? Why have you let me eat my heart out for you?"

She tried to avert her gaze, but he wouldn't allow it. "Because I don't want to be hurt, Mick! Is that so hard to understand?"

"No, but why do you think I want or mean to hurt you?"

She bit her lip, took a deep breath, and went on in a rush. "If you're so in love with me, why don't you want to marry me?"

"Why don't I want to marry you?" He blinked, shaking his head. "Who said I didn't want to marry you?"

"Who ... ?"

"Yeah. Who? I sure as hell never said it."

"Ah, ... " she licked her lips. "Do ... do you?"

"Yes!"

Her lips parted and she stared at him. "You ... you do? Are you telling me you want to marry me?"

"Oh, yes, Jenny!" He pulled her into his arms and held her, breathing in her scent. There was nothing in the world as exciting as holding her except making love to her.

She buried her face against his shoulder and began to sob uncontrollably. He held her, stroking her shoulders and letting her cry. Until he couldn't stand the sound any more. Then he cupped her face in his hands and began kissing her damp cheeks.

"Oh, honey, please. Please. Don't cry any more. Please."

She lifted her face and stared up at him, her beautiful brown eyes swimming in tears. "I didn't think you loved me and then ... then I thought I'd lost you and ... oh, Mick! I love you!"

For a moment, he felt as if he'd been hit in the stomach with a sledgehammer. His chest felt constricted. He couldn't breathe. His eyes swam with tears. Then rockets seemed to go off behind his eyes.

"Yesssss! Yesssss!" He grabbed her around the waist, kissed her quickly, and swung her around.

Laughing, she clung to him. "Mick! You're making me dizzy!"

Keeping his arms around her, he set her back on her feet and stared down at her. "Oh, Jenny! Jenny! I'd almost given up any hope of ever hearing you say that."

"I'm sorry, Mick! I didn't mean to make you unhappy. I--"

He pressed a finger against her soft lips to silence her. "It doesn't matter. All that matters is that you love me and I love you! And if you'll have me, I'll marry you tomorrow. Hell, forget tomorrow. Let's do it tonight. Let's drive down to Maryland and elope."

She laughed and allowed him to dry her face. "You don't mean that."

"Yes. Yes, I do. I think I knew that day on the train that you were special."

She pulled back and met his gaze. "I think I knew you were special then too. I've never been attracted to a white man before."

"I hope you never will be again. Just to me, Jenny."

"Just to you," she echoed. She paused, bit her lip, and then went on. "Mick, you do understand, don't you? It's not because you're ... white. I don't share your ... preference. I love you because you're you. I'd love you no manner what color you were."

He grinned at her. "Guess what, darlin'? I don't care why you love me. Just knowing you do is good enough for me."

"I do love you."

"You know what? I'd love you no manner what color you were too. I'm thinking you and I were meant for each other."

She thought of the series of coincidences that had brought and kept them together. Maybe Tasha was right about fate. "I think so too, Mick."

"Great. So. What do you say? Will you marry me?"

"Will I marry you?" She wrapped her arms around his neck and stretched up to kiss him. "I'd like to see anyone try and stop me."

He felt as if everything in his world was perfect. "Tonight?"

"No! Not tonight." She smiled and kissed him again. "Oh, but Mick! My darling, Mick, thank you for asking."

He frowned, feeling some of his uncertainty returning. "Why not tonight?"

"I love you and I want to marry you more than you'll ever know, but unlike you, I've never been married. I know it might sound ... silly, but I want ... a little of the trimmings. Is that okay?"

He nodded and held her close. "You can have all the trimmings you like. As long as you marry me."

"Oh, I'm going to marry you all right. I am going to love being Mrs. Daniel Michael Reilly."

He buried his face in her neck. "And I am going to love being Mr. Reilly to your Mrs. Reilly."

She hesitated, her hands moving restlessly against his chest. He lifted his head and looked down at her. "What's wrong, Jenny?"

"Nothing ... "

"Oh, Jenny, please! I know something is wrong. I can feel the tension in your body. We're not going to have much of a marriage, if you're going to go on being Super woman."

"It's not that. It's just that some ... people might not be too ... pleased."

"People you know ... like your mother?"

"No! No! Well ... how did you know? Who ... who told you?"

"Early in our relationship, Tia mentioned that your mother was less than ... thrilled, shall we shall say, with ... interracial socializing."

She stared up at him, an anxious look on her face. "Well ... I don't want you to misunderstand, Mick. She's not ... prejudiced ... exactly."

"No?"

"No! She just ... "

"Yes?"

"Well ... she's just ... she's not prejudiced!"

He brushed his hand against the back of her cheek. "Okay, Jenny, she's not prejudiced."

She sighed. "She's probably not going to be too ... thrilled that you're ... ah ... "

"Because I'm older than you are?" he suggested.

She threw him a grateful look. "Well, yeah ... mostly."

He shrugged. "Fine. Look, I love you and I intend to marry you. If your mother doesn't like me or disapproves of our relationship, that'll be unfortunate, but I can live with that. I hope you can too."

"What ... about your mother ... your family?"

He hugged her. "I have to admit that if my mother were still alive, she probably wouldn't be any more pleased than your mother. But she's dead."

"Oh, Mick! Both your parents. I'm sorry."

He sighed. "My father was a really great guy who accepted us with all our flaws. He died before we came to America, but I still miss him."

She touched his cheek. "And your mom?"

He smiled. "Mom. Wow. She was a great mom. She kept us safe and happy after my father died. But she could never understand my ... preference in woman."

"What about the rest of your family? How will they feel?"

Her voice and gaze was filled with anxiety. "I have two brothers, both of whom are living in Ireland. Both married. I don't foresee any problems with them, Jennifer. We've always been close. They both know how I feel. What I've always wanted in a woman. What about the rest of your family?"

She smiled. "You've already met them: Tasha and Aunt Linda."

"And Tasha will be ... ?"

"Thrilled. She's been urging me to throw myself at you from day one."

"Has she now, the darlin' girl?" He grinned. "I think I'm going to like her."

"You'll love her."

"Hmm. Aunt Linda." He arched a brow at her. "She is not going to be a happy camper."

"You'll grow on her." She smiled up at him, stroking his cheeks. "Once she gets to know you, she'll love you almost as much as Tia and I do."

He doubted that. "Good. Any more concerns or objections we need to talk about?"

"What about your partner?"

"Hal?" He shrugged. "He's my oldest and best friend. When he realizes we were made for each other, he'll be tickled pink for us. Anything else?"

She smiled up at him. "I can't think of a single thing, except ... " She pulled away from

him and looked pointedly at the roses on his desk.
"who's sending you red roses, Mick?"

"They're from Janet."

"Janet. The woman you met at the party several months ago?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"You've been ... seeing her?"

He reached out and pulled her back in his arms. "No, I have not. I haven't seen or been with any one. I knew the moment I saw you that you were the only woman for me. There's nothing between Janet and me and there's never going to be. It's just you and me. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

"Great. Now ... you want to make an appointment to get reacquainted?"

"Oh, Mick!" She pressed close to him and he shivered with delicious anticipation. "I thought you would never ask."

He responded by lifting her in his arms. "You talk entirely too much. I need to kiss you ... to touch you ... to love you."

She slipped her arms around his neck. "Yes ... please."

"I think you are going to need a baby-sitter for the night," he whispered and kissed her with a slow, deliberate passion that took both their breaths away and promised a future of happy bliss.

He knew the road they'd chosen wouldn't be easy. But it was the one with the greatest promise of happiness for them both.

THE END

