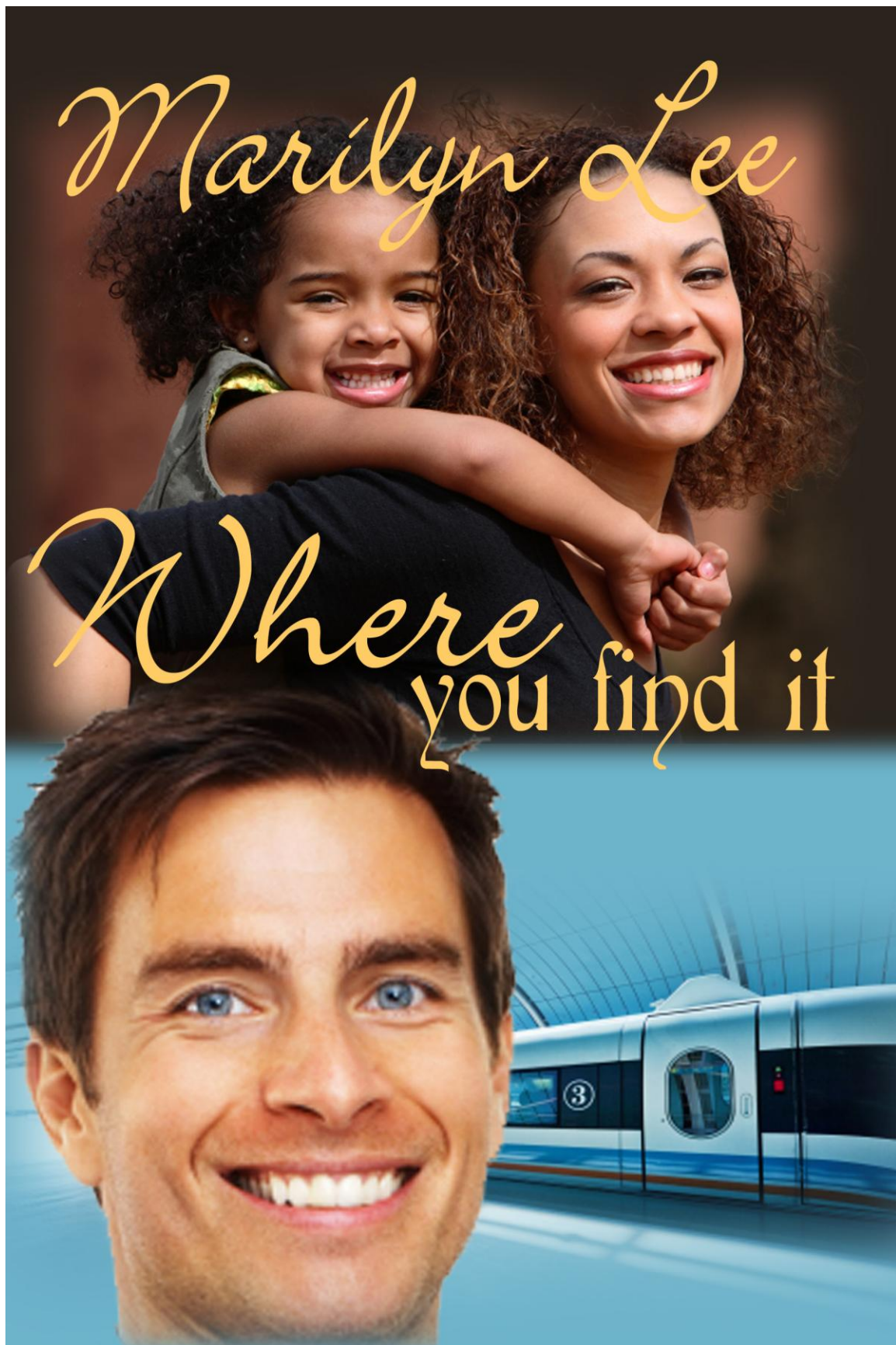


Marilyn Lee

Where
you find it



Marilyn Lee Unleashed Presents

Where You Find It

By

Marilyn Lee

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Jennifer Smallwood stood on the crowded platform with the cool, damp late 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.

So much for taking the train because she didn't trust her car not to break down, making her late for her staff meeting. 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 conductor stepped down onto the platform. 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 onto the train with her right hand.

Standing in the juncture between the two cars, she quickly glanced to her left and right. The car to her left seemed less full. She walked down the long aisle hoping to find an empty seat. If she were lucky, she'd just make it to the office in time for a cup of coffee before the meeting. That meant she needed at least ten minutes on the train to review her notes before she arrived. For that, she needed a seat.

She spotted an empty space on a three-seater bench occupied by two men near the end of the car. The men sat on either end 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 and his suit looked tailor-made. She hated to think how much he'd paid for his haircut. He was clean-shaven and George Clooney sexy.

She nodded towards the empty space to his left. "Excuse me."

"Of course." He flashed a brief smile, folded his paper, and rose.

She resisted the urge to look him up and down. He was about six two or three and well built with wide shoulders. 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.

Once she sat, he slipped onto the seat next to her. It was a tight squeeze. Too tight. She could feel his thigh pressed tight against hers. She tried to draw her leg away, but there was no room. She swallowed. The aroma of his cologne intoxicated her senses and made ignoring him harder.

Placing her briefcase on her knees, Jennifer opened it and looked through the financial statements she needed for the meeting. But she couldn't concentrate. Not sitting next to this man whose mere presence played havoc with her breathing and heartbeat.

All right, Jen. 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. Don't start daydreaming.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the man now had the paper on his lap. He was looking at her. She turned her head slightly and found him smiling at her. His smile was charming and warm. It filled his gaze and turned the corners of his sensual lips upward in an irresistible and appealing way.

"Do you have the time?" He had a warm, deep voice. The kind that would make a woman tingle in anticipation of a long night of love making when he whispered anything in her ear. Love making? Who was she kidding? He was the kind of man who made a woman dream of being fucked senseless all night long.

"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 glanced at his watch. "Battery died on you?"

"It's solar powered. It runs perfectly." 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, Jen. Get it in gear. He's probably bored and*

having a little fun at your expense. Or more likely, he was looking for someone with whom to have a brief, meaningless affair.

Her pussy convulsed at the thought of the forbidden delight of a fuck with this handsome man. She glanced at his hands. They were big and would feel wonderful on her bare breasts, tweaking her nipples as he thrust his cock into her aching pussy.

Stop it, Jen. 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 coming fall. 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, and whose cock stirred against her, sending heat and moisture into her thong.

The lights flickered back on and she found herself pressed against his chest, staring up into his blue eyes again. He was so handsome and sexy. She swallowed slowly, resisting the insane urge to grind herself against his hardening cock. She couldn't look away from him. Couldn't move. She could barely breathe.

Her gaze settled on his lips. They were firm, chiseled, and sensuous. She parted her own lips and tilted her head. 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. Jennifer glanced around and saw the other passengers staring. Oh, no. Had she 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 heartbeat quicken. Just for a moment, she allowed herself the sweet luxury of delighting in the knowledge that she could arouse such an attractive man.

Reality quickly set in. She backed 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. At the top of the escalator, her breathing slowed.

She cast a quick glance over her shoulder. Her heartbeat raced.

He stood on the platform just beyond the escalator doors, looking up at her.

Jennifer stood still, staring down at him. What would it be like to get to know him? If she stood there long enough, he'd surely follow her up the escalator and ask her out. Maybe he'd hold her close as they slow danced together. At the end of the evening, he would kiss her and —

"Excuse me." A woman stepping off the escalator interrupted her thoughts.

"Sorry," she muttered. Breathing quickly and unevenly, she turned away. She walked into an underground passage. It was well lit and lined with stores on both sides. It eventually led to the basement entrance of the building where she worked.

As she followed the familiar path, her thoughts remained on the man from the train. Why hadn't he followed her? He'd clearly been interested or he wouldn't have stood at the bottom of the escalator staring up at her like that. She shook her head. It was just as well he hadn't followed her. If he had, God only knew what she would have done to disgrace herself with a man whose color, clothes and expensive haircut placed him well outside her league. To ensure they didn't meet again, she would avoid that particular train for the next few weeks.

* * * * *

"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 worse, 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 stretched across the length of the basement. Her plan for the night was simple. She'd finish washing, slap the last two loads of clothes on the line, put Tia to bed, and settle down with a good, erotic romance. The book she'd been longing to read boasted a sexy, larger-than-life hero who was black. Not white and blue-eyed.

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

"I'm sorry." Jennifer 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."

She reached for the laundry basket on the table next to the washer. "Yes."

"All men?"

She hesitated, studying her daughter. Tia had her father 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 spend so much time fantasizing about a handsome, ebony knight on whose shoulder she could lean when life became difficult. The last fourteen months had been rough. Still, if nothing else, the rough times had taught her the importance of self-reliance.

“Yes...mostly.”

“Even white men?”

Jennifer turned back to the washing machine to conceal her expression. 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.

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. 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 to both 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?"

Jennifer 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 feared she'd had to resist the temptation to weave erotic dreams around him 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. Jennifer hopped off the washing machine and went to lounge on the cool tiled floor next to Tia.

She touched Tia's cheek. "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 anymore."

"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's cheeks burned. "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.

"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."

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. Claspings Tia to her, Jennifer stood up. "We'll see."

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

* * * * *

It was rather cool and cloudy, but Mick sat in his favorite spot in Fairmount Park. He told his friends Trey and Hal that he went to the park to help clear his head and keep his thoughts focused on work. Trey, a very happily married father of a delightful

nine-month old little girl he doted on, felt something more than fresh air drew Mick to the park. Having met and married the woman he considered his soul mate, Trey almost made Mick believe his soul mate awaited him in this park.

Mick glanced up from his laptop and looked around the park. There were several young children playing on the slide and chasing each other. They filled the air with sounds of their excited cries. Although he enjoyed watching them play, there was not a single woman among those accompanying them who might qualify as his soul mate in sight.

One particular small, pretty face was absent. 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 and sex 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. But damn, he'd like to get to know her. He grimaced, remembering the feel of her breasts against his chest.

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 trouble lay that way. 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 brown nymph.

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. And if his lust got out of hand, there was always Erinae. She was the best friend of his best friend's wife. They'd had a brief affair that

had ended with them on good terms. He knew she'd sleep with him if he asked, but he was reluctant to treat her like a booty call.

* * * * *

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

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

Jennifer transferred the light jacket she'd worn to her left hand where she carried 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, 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.

"Jen, 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 anymore, 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, Jennifer hesitated. Tia was right. The only way to know if the man posed any threat to Tia was to meet him. Once she had, she would 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.

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, Jen. 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 island. "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..."

"For a white man?" Jennifer prompted.

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," the older woman said quickly, turning to lift the top off one of the pots on the stove. She gave the contents several rapid, vigorous stirs. "The vegetables and baked potatoes are ready."

"So he is dangerous?"

"To her? Oh 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. "Please, look at me, Aunt Linda."

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."

That night Jennifer lay in bed with her pajama top open and her hands on her breasts as she imagined the man from the train lying between her legs, sucking her breasts and thrusting his cock slowly into her. In her dreams, the size and thickness of his shaft didn't compare favorably to Jim's but he was a sweet lover and at the end of their love making, she had lain in his arms with a nice buzz as he slept. She hadn't come, but she didn't mind because he had been so considerate of her. And just maybe climaxes were overrated.

Or maybe she'd become too used to settling. She clutched her pillow against her body, rolled onto her side, and finally fell asleep.

Chapter Two

"Mick! Mick!"

Mick Reilly looked up from the laptop he worked on. He saw a 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, Tia." 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." Mick studied her small face. Tia 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.

Way to go, Reilly. He'd guessed 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?"

"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 and 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 knew that, his former passion for his ex, Helen notwithstanding, his taste in women hadn't really changed. His fling with Erinae and 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 was 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."

Tia screamed in delight and threw her thin arms around his neck.

As he returned her embrace, Mick was aware that Linda Johnson's disapproving stare wasn't the only one 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 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?"

Jennifer turned to see Tia standing in the doorway and smiled. Tia, a tomboy, usually lived in jeans and T-shirts with her long, thick hair hanging in a ponytail to her shoulders. But now she wore 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?"

Jennifer wore her usual Saturday evening outfit: baggy jeans and an oversized T-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."

Michael? Not Daniel Michael Reilly?

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

Jennifer 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 in 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 Jennifer was speechless, unable to look away, aware that she would give a week's salary to be wearing a knockout outfit that would make him sweep her off her feet, carry her up to bed to make passionate love to her. Granted, she would

probably need to use her trusty vibrator after he was asleep, but it would be worth it just to lay under him and have him kiss her senseless.

What would he think of her dressed this way? 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, Jennifer dragged her gaze away from his 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 her. 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." Jennifer 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."

Jennifer sucked in a breath. It had only taken nearly twenty-eight years for a man to send her flowers. She was careful not to touch his fingers as she accepted the bouquet.

"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. "He likes to be called Mick."

She sighed. With Tia running interference, it was going to be a long night. Jennifer 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 Jen!"

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 Jen. 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 lustfully 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."

Jennifer watched him smile down at Tia. "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 heard the muted voices of Tia and Mick Reilly coming from the living room. Tia giggled. He laughed. On the way back to the living room, Jennifer resisted the urge to go upstairs and slip into something that would showcase her cleavage and emphasize her butt.

Why should she want to impress him? He didn't even remember her! Sighing with regret, 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 shoulders and chest muscles outlined under a shirt that fit so well it might have been made just for him.

Jennifer watched as he threw the small, rubber ball into the air, and then 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."

Mick smiled up at her. "Thanks."

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

"So I see." Jennifer sank down onto 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."

Jennifer 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?" She asked after they were seated and served.

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. The widow of one of my younger brothers has since moved to Ireland so I don't have to go to the daycare anymore 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."

Mick 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.

Jennifer watched in alarm as Tia seemed to blossom under his smile. "Well, you've made quite an impression on her."

He glanced briefly at her before grinning at Tia, who grinned back at him. "And she on 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," Jennifer said quickly. "Just don't give up."

"Don't give up on what? What are we discussing?"

She shrugged. "Well, you know."

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

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

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

She suppressed a sigh. 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." Jennifer 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 Jennifer 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." Even if he had and she'd been so inclined, she was in no financial position to help anyone.

"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." Mick 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."

"Avoid?"

"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. "Seeing this beautiful little girl makes it more bearable."

Tia jumped out of her chair and ran to throw herself at him.

Mick 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."

Jennifer 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 very kissable.

"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 Jim would definitely not approve of.

"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 a...actually, there doesn't seem to be any trace of the renowned brogue in your speech."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, lass," Mick said, lapsing into an exaggerated brogue. "Me mom and me three brothers moved to the United States when 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?"

Jennifer 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."

"I'm divorced."

What woman had let him slip through her fingers? "How long?"

"It became official about two years 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 three years ago. She filed for divorce shortly after she left me."

Jennifer 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, Jen, girl! Get a grip!

"That must have been very hard on you."

He shrugged. "The divorce? Not really. Helen and I 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 Mick 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 —

Jennifer put the brakes on her runaway 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."

What happens when you start dating someone who objects to your friendship with her? Where would that leave her?"

"I don't allow anyone, no matter what the relationship is, 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. Caressing her breasts. Stroking her pussy. Finger fucking her —

"No." Setting the tray back on the counter, Jennifer 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. Sort of.

Mick 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.

"So, I suppose a good night kiss is out of the question, huh?"

She stared at him. "A good night kiss? What?"

He moved closer.

She swallowed quickly. ■

"A good night kiss. You know, a man likes to get one from a pretty woman whenever he can."

"Does he? Well, you suppose right. It's out of the question."

"Really? Let's put it back into consideration." Mick reached out and took one of her hands in his and brushed it against his lips.

Jennifer couldn't conceal the shiver that ran through her.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly.

She looked up into his eyes and was lost. "I...I...I don't think..."

"Good. Don't think. Just feel." Holding her hand against his chest, he cupped the other palm against her cheek, bent his head, and brushed his mouth against hers.

She made a small, helpless sound.

He nibbled at her mouth before he settled his lips on hers, pressed his lower body tight against hers, and rained slow, heated kisses on her eager lips.

She sighed softly and slipped her free arm around his neck.

He kissed her again, and again, and each time she returned the warm, sweet pressure of his mouth. And when he gripped her hips and pulled her closer, she moaned and ground herself against the growing bulge between his legs.

Her pussy creamed and her heart thumped wildly. It had been so long since she'd been with a man she felt almost lightheaded. She made no protest when one big hand sneaked between their bodies to cup her breasts.

Keeping his lips against hers, he slipped his hand under her top and plucked her nipples from her bra. The breath caught in her throat when he lifted his mouth from hers and pushed up her top, revealing her breasts.

Their gazes met and locked, and she felt as if she would explode and die when he bent his head and kissed first one nipple and then the other. His tongue darted out and he played with her nipples until they were hard, then he closed his lips over her right breast and sucked it hard.

"Oh, God!" she moaned, holding his head close to her chest. "Oh, God!"

"Mommy what are you and Mick doing in the kitchen together?"

At the sound of Tia's voice, they broke apart and pressed one hand to her lips, the other against her breasts. ■

He cast a quick look in her direction that made her burn with need and then left the kitchen. Moments later, as she was scrambling to get her breasts back in her bra, she heard Tia giggle as the sound of their voices moved back towards the living room.

Oh, God! Trembling, Jennifer sank back against the island, breathing slowly and deeply, trying to still the pounding of her heart. She was so wound up, she felt ready to explode with need and lust. She needed to be laid, quickly and repeatedly. But not by Daniel Michael Reilly. Now if only she could convince her lustful libido of that.

She gave herself a mental shake and went to join him and Tia in the living room. He looked up at her as she entered the room and their gazes met and locked. She looked away and avoided his gaze for the rest of the night.

When he rose to leave, Jennifer reluctantly accompanied him to the door with Tia.

"I'm glad you came, Mick," Tia told him.

"I'm glad you asked me to come, pretty lady." He kneeled in front of Tia and kissed her cheek.

Tia tossed her arms around his neck. They exchanged a quick hug before he rose to face Jennifer.

She averted her gaze and offered him her hand.

"Kiss mommy too, Mick," Tia invited.

Jennifer's face burned. "Tia!"

"Thanks, I will." He took the hand she had extended and drew her close to him. Without giving her time to protest, he bent his head and pressed a slow, languid kiss against her lips that made her go damp. When she parted her lips, he sucked the tip of her tongue, sending a tingle of desire through her she felt all the way down to her toes.

Her heart thundered in her chest and her panties were wet by the time he lifted his head. Instead of releasing her immediately, he nibbled at the tips of her fingers, sending a rush of heat through her.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Jennifer," he said softly.

"I...ah...goodbye," she whispered.

He stood staring down at her and she knew he wanted to kiss her again. She wanted him to kiss her and more. They both glanced at Tia, staring wide-eyed up at them and moved away from each other.

"Not goodbye. I hope to see you again...very soon."

She wanted the same thing. She closed the door and knew she was going to have an extremely hard time keeping her desire for him in check. Unless she made sure their paths didn't cross again.

Chapter Three

"Mommy, did you like Mick?"

Jennifer tucked the light sheet under Tia's chin and bent to kiss her cheek. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she relived those moments in the kitchen. Like was not quite the word. "He seemed very nice," she said cautiously.

"Isn't he cute, Mommy?"

Cute didn't begin to accurately describe him. He was gorgeous. "Yes, he is, but sweetiekins, I'm not interested in going out with him." No. She was just interested in letting him fondle her like some five-dollar crack addict in a back alley.

"Then why did you let him kiss you?"

"I...I was being polite. Some people shake hands when they leave. Some kiss." He kissed. Lord, did he kiss.

"Are you going to kiss him again, Mommy?"

"No!"

"Why not? Didn't you like kissing him?"

"I...we'd better think about bed, sweetiekins."

Tia frowned. "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 too cute not to have a regular girlfriend to come home to and kiss, 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."

He felt pretty good too. Especially his arms and his cock. Jennifer shook her head. Her allowing Mick to come again would only encourage Tia to think there was a hope of him and Jennifer becoming involved with each other. And her little kitchen madness notwithstanding, 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 becoming romantically involved.

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

Jennifer bit her lip. Jim's absence was a touchy subject. She had been devastated when he 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's not enough."

"That's 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 then she'd been on the train. He doubted what had happened in the kitchen would change that.

He had followed her to the kitchen to apologize for his behavior on the train. He'd wanted her to 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. But instead of apologizing, he had moved in for the kill like a buzzard, kissing her sweet lips, groping at her breasts, and grinding his cock against her like some hormone crazy teenager who couldn't control himself.

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 but did not leave Jennifer Smallwood out of his erotic longings.

Aside from her being over ten years too young, she'd made it plain that she didn't like him. Although she sent his lust meter spinning off the scale and while he wanted to continue to see Tia, Mick wasn't used to allowing his passions to rule him. Despite her response to his kisses, he got the distinct impression that she didn't like or approve of him.

The feeling might be mutual. She certainly didn't have Tia's sweet disposition. Given his response to her, that was probably just as well. There would be very little danger of him falling for her while she gave off stay-the-hell-away-from-me vibes.

"So forget her, lad," Mick said softly. "Forget the taste of her sweet lips...her full, suckable breasts, and her round ass. And don't even torture yourself by thinking about what her pussy would feel like convulsing around your cock." He fell asleep fantasizing about sinking balls-deep inside her while he sucked on her large, natural breasts.

* * * * *

"So how did it go?"

Mick looked up from the blueprints he'd been studying when a tall, slender black man stuck his head around the door of his office on Monday morning. Hal Ward was the managing partner of their firm and a long time friend.

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?"

Mick sighed, recalling they'd been interrupted before he could slip his hands into her jeans. He shook his head. "Not as well as I'd hoped."

"Oh?" Hal eased himself into the office 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 good friends since senior high and generally could talk about almost anything. Nevertheless, Hal had always resented the ease with which Mick attracted women from various cultures and backgrounds.

"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 who has the time and expertise to automate our finances. We can't keep going on as we are and I have a feeling it's going to take a few months to get it done properly."

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 had a decent fuck. And don't bring up Erinae. That brief fling doesn't count. The sort of abstinence you're putting yourself through makes a man edgy. Mike, my man, what you need is to sink your cock into some willing pussy."

Mick was so damned horny just the word *pussy* caused a stir in his cock. Worse, the knowing look on Hal's face irritated the hell out of him. 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 rose. "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 fling with Erinae had ended, he'd only been out twice. Although each date had ended with him sleeping with the woman in question, neither had made a lasting impression. As a result, he hadn't asked either 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 interests 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. We both know you're into black women, Mike."

"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. You'll like her. I think she'll take one look at you and offer you all the pussy you can handle."

"I need a fuck," he admitted.

"A fuck?"

"Okay. Several fucks. I'm horny as hell. I can handle a lot of pussy."

Hal nodded. "I know, man. Trust me. She'll offer you a fuck all right."

"If she's all you say she is, I'll take it...all night long."

Grinning, 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."

"Hey! Is that any way to treat the guy who just arranged a great fuck for you?"

He shrugged. "I can get my own women, Hal."

"Yeah, I know, but this one's hot. She'll make your dick wilt."

He stared at Hal. "Please don't tell me you've been cheating with her!"

Hal looked offended. "Hell, no! Man, you know I don't cheat and if I were going to, it certainly wouldn't be with a white woman."

"I'm glad to hear that. Marge is still crazy about you. Why? I have no idea."

"I'm crazy about her. Always will be. I happen to know Janet is hot because Marge told me she's worn her last two lovers out. So watch yourself." 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 across the square where Tia saw Daniel Michael Reilly.

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

Jennifer 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 Jennifer and Tia. And she was inclined to blame Jim for everything from a stopped up toilet to the lack of universal world peace.

At first Jennifer had been okay with that. After she got over the pain of losing the only man she'd ever loved, she'd decided he'd done her a favor. She now knew how important it was for her to be independent and to stand on her own two feet. Depending on a man for anything other than physical pleasure exposed a woman to a world of pain.

"No?" Tasha sounded disappointed.

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

Tasha's pretty face became attentive. "Tell me everything. Was he as homely as she thought or worse?"

She had a sudden vision of blue eyes, thick, dark hair, and a killer smile. And warm, demanding lips, big, hot hands fondling her breasts, and a hard cock pressed against her body. She swallowed and ran her tongue over her lips. "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." And he felt so good.

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

"He has these incredible blue eyes and he's pretty much drop-dead gorgeous," she admitted. "He almost takes your breath away." Especially when he kissed and caressed her.

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? Hey, mama, I-gotta-have-some-of-that-fine-pussy-of-yours voice? What?"

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

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

"He is the guy from the train."

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

"What?"

"What? Read my lips, Jen. 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, Jen, 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 in her chair. "You're kidding, right? I mean, Jen, 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." She was just in lust with him.

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."

Jennifer grimaced. "I know that hmm of yours. I don't want you thinking 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, Jen. 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, Jen, 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't let it slip through your fingers just because he's white. You have to take love where you find it, Jen. 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? 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 in a New York minute and later for anyone who didn't approve."

Jennifer had no doubt that he could ring almost any woman's chimes he chose 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's this afternoon."

"Fine, Jen. Change the subject, but think about what I said. Don't hold him at arm's 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 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 she," she said and withdrew her head.

Grinning at his groundless assumption, 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 wore 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. Even if he could feel his cock stirring at the sight of 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 rose slowly. "Mr. Reilly!"

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

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

"Yes." After a noticeable hesitation, Jennifer 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.

Mick 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 answered in a neutral tone. "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. His cock came alive big time as he looked into her eyes. Damn, but he wanted to fuck her. Then and there.

"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.

"Her big, cute, horny as hell friend," he added.

He watched her face. Although he saw a hint of rose rise in her cheeks, there was no look of outrage in her eyes. Just desire.

He was aware of a sudden, almost irrepressible desire to kiss her again. 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 tugged at it.

But he remembered that day and the afternoon in her kitchen. And that sweet interlude when they'd said good night at her front door. She had been so warm and

soft in his arms, accepting his kisses, and seeming eager for more. She had pressed against his cock and cradled his head against her breasts as he'd sucked those dark, luscious mounds. Damn, but she aroused him.

She tugged at her hand again. "I should probably get started."

The breathless quality of her voice excited him. But then everything about her turned him on. He nodded at the door. "We're alone and that can lock."

She moistened her lips. "Why would that interest me?"

"Oh, I think you know what I'm thinking, Jennifer...what I want from you...now."

"Now? Here?"

He nodded. "Yes. Please."

She shook her head and tugged at her hand. "No."

"Why not?" he asked, retaining her hand. He liked the feel of her soft fingers cradled in his. He gave a tug at her hand. When she didn't protest, he led her across the room, and pressed her back against the wall near the door. He reached out and locked the door.

She stared up at him, her eyes dark and beguiling. "I...I should get started now."

"Yes," he whispered, cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. Her lips were soft, warm, and responsive. He kissed her slowly and deeply, all the while, grinding his lower body against hers so she could feel his cock hardening against her. He wanted her to know how much he desired her.

She trembled in his arms and gasped against his lips. Then to his surprise, she slipped a hand between their bodies. She fumbled with his zipper before sliding it down and pushing her hand in his pants and his briefs to palm his cock.

He groaned against her lips and fought hard not to explode against her hand.

"Oh, damn! I need a fuck," he whispered.

She stiffened.

He swore silently, realizing he'd erred big time. Using the word fuck was probably a turn off. She pushed at his shoulders and he reluctantly stepped away from her, silently cursing himself. To his amazement, she unzipped her skirt and quickly

stepped out of it. She kicked off her shoes and pulled her pantyhose down, exposing her pussy. It was covered with a mass of dark curls.

Staring at it, his cock came to immediate attention. Knowing they might be interrupted at any moment, he quickly drew his fully aroused cock out of his pants and moved against her. She slipped her arms around his neck and offered him her lips. He pressed slowly forward and closed his eyes as the head of his cock pierced her pussy. He kissed her sweet, warm lips and continued pressing forward.

She made a small, gasping sound and he looked down at her, afraid he was hurting her. Instead of any indication of pain, he saw a look of rapture on her face as she looked up at him. He cupped his hands over her rounded butt and drove his cock balls deep in her.

"Ooooh!" She moaned.

She felt so hot and tight, her pussy closing around his cock like a soft yet firm vice. It fit around his aching cock as if it had been designed especially to cradle and massage him. He groaned, withdrew all but the head of his shaft and then slowly thrust it all the way back into her, spearing her sweet pussy. Oh, damn, that felt so good.

Still moaning, she clutched at his ass and ground her hips against him.

A bolt of unmitigated lust thundered through his balls and down to his hard cock. Groaning with pleasure, he thrust into her hard and fast, shuddering with delight as he fought to pull his shaft, now deliciously coated with her juices, out of her, only to plunge back into her again and again. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had such good pussy or tasted such sweet lips.

Mick wanted to linger in her and give her a long, sweet fuck, but there wasn't time for that. So they clung to each other, kissing hungrily and fucking with a heated passion that sent them both quickly spinning out of control towards a fiery, gut wrenching orgasm. He knew he should pull out of her, but the thought of coming in what he thought was her unprotected pussy was too much. He clutched her close and sucking at her tongue, stabbed his cock into her with a mounting hunger and passion he made no effort to control.

Determined not to come until he had satisfied her, he rotated his hips and alternated between short, hard strokes and long, slow ones until her pussy began to convulse around him. Knowing that she was as close to coming as he was, he allowed himself to let go and exploded.

Gasping with the force and unexpected bliss of his release, he pumped his seed deep into her pussy, grinding against her so she could feel every inch of his discharging cock.

Jennifer moaned softly and shuddered through her climax, her pussy clasp and massaging his cock, squeezing the last drop of seed from him. He gladly deposited it in her pussy and then lifted her face to press a soft kiss against her warm, full lips.

"Oooh," she moaned again, raking her nails down his back as she strained against him, keeping her pussy tightly clasped around his cock. Lying against her, still locked inside her, he felt a sense of delight, bliss, and an overwhelming desire to protect and cherish her.

Although he had come, the quickie left him wanting a longer, more tender fuck. He wanted to lie on a big bed on top of her and spend the night making love to her. He slipped his arms around her and hugged her. Feeling his semi-hard shaft still inside her now cum-filled pussy kept him aroused. Oh, damn, she felt good full of his seed.

"Oh, Jennifer, sweetheart, you feel so good," he whispered.

She clutched his ass and ground her pussy around his cock as she pressed an open mouth kiss against his lips. "Good...yes..." she moaned. "So good."

"Let's do it again."

To his surprise, she flushed and shoved against his shoulders. "No!"

"Why not?"

"That should be obvious. You got what you wanted. Now we'd better get decent again."

"I got what I wanted?" He bit back the urge to remind her she was the one who had unzipped his pants and taken off her skirt, baring her pussy. And she had made no protest when he'd first thrust into her. Instead, she had already been wet and ready

for him without any foreplay. So apparently she had needed a fuck too. He decided pointing that out would not be the way to go. Not if he wanted to repeat the offense. And he did.

Biting his tongue, Mick eased out of her and looked around for something to clean them up with. He saw a box of tissues on the desk and went to retrieve it. He cleaned his cock and slipped it back into his briefs. She Jennifer stood at the door, her face still flushed, not quite meeting his gaze.

He gave her the tissues. As she cleaned herself, he fought off the urge to drop to his knees and offer to clean her pussy out with his mouth and tongue. After she pulled up her pantyhose and slipped on her skirt, he kneeled and held her shoes out. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she slipped her feet into her shoes.

He rose and went to open the one window in the room. After he unlocked the door, he took her hand in his. "We need to talk."

She shook her head. "There's nothing to say. We just did something that was crazy and totally irresponsible. Nothing we can say will change that."

Why did women have to analyze every damned thing to death? "It was good, Jennifer. Beyond good and I want to do it again."

"So do I, but it's not going to happen."

Damn! Stealing a last quick kiss, he allowed her to push him away. Breathing deeply, he moved across the room and raked a hand through his hair.

They stood staring silently at each other.

The door opened behind them.

He glanced over her shoulder. Hal stood in the doorway.

"Hal, there you are." He nodded towards her. "Come meet Jennifer Smallwood."

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

Mick tensed, hoping no trace of the smell of sex lingered in the air. Damn! He'd been an irresponsible fool to touch her there. And if Hal knew what was good for him he would pretend he had no idea what had just happened. "Jennifer, this is Hal Ward," he said. "Hal, Jennifer is the CPA from Johnstone Associates."

“Oh.” Hal visibly relaxed.

Relieved, 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 don't-even-think-about-making-another-pass-at-me-again face. He would have to work at cultivating a relationship with her. “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 on any meaningful level. He knew he could arouse her physically, but he would have to sell his soul for the opportunity to make love to her. Hell, he'd be lucky if he got another chance to have sex with her.

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

Mr. Reilly. Great. They were definitely 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, her amazing smile, or how much he had enjoyed coming inside her. Admittedly sex without a condom was sheer lunacy, but damn it had been years since he'd fucked without protection.

He had forgotten how good it felt to shoot his seed deep in a warm, willing pussy. Still, there were other women in the world with amazing smiles and warm, willing pussies who might actually be interested in cultivating a satisfying physical relationship with him. Some of them might even be black.

Black. He let the thought of making love on a regular basis to a black woman linger. He savored and embraced it, finding it to his liking. Visions of a bare brown body with a rounded ass, big breasts and legs, and warm, full lips made his cock hard.

Damn, but there was nothing more exquisite than a sexy, black woman. Although Mick 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. The thought of a long night of fucking Jennifer's hot, tight sweet pussy made his cock ache.

He didn't understand his preference, but he'd always 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, too damn bad.

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

Hal entered 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!”

Which meant Hal didn't realize what had actually happened. “I was not going to kiss her,” he denied. “We got off to a bad start. So we were shaking hands and starting over again.”

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

“We've met before.”

"Where?"

"She's Tia's mother."

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

"Yes."

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

"Yes." He smiled. "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 gave Hal a wary look. Did Hal know what had happened after all?

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

On the verge of acquiescing, he found himself shaking his head instead. He'd had a taste of her passion and nothing short of her absolute refusal to see him again would faze him. "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 left, Mick sat back in his chair, frowning. Did he know what he was doing? He wasn't sure of anything except that he was no longer going to ignore his natural inclinations. And he regretted exposing Jennifer to Hal's possible scorn. What kind of impression had he left her with by behaving like a lustful teenager unable to control himself at work?

How could he change her opinion of him? Would flowers help or make things worse? Damn. What the hell had possessed him to touch her at work when there were

more appropriate places to get to know her in the biblical sense? He closed his eyes and considered the numerous places he could touch her in the coming weeks.

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. Her face flushed and her heart thundered as she recalled the first delicious feel of his cock sliding inside her. It had been such a long since she'd felt anything other than her fingers inside her body that she had probably made more of that quickie than was warranted.

Even allowing for the fact that she had imagined his cock was bigger than it actually was and he was probably only an average lover, she *had* enjoyed their standing fuck and longed to do it again. While her surrender to lust wasn't unforgivable, succumbing to it at work was. What if someone had walked in on them? He would have been lauded as a lover while she was excoriated and possibly fired for unprofessional behavior.

Jennifer sighed, feeling herself go damp at the memory of him clutching her butt and grinding against her as he came. Reality chased the rosy glow away. Even though she was on the pill, allowing him to come inside her had been totally irresponsible. Yet she couldn't quite regret it. Just the knowledge that his seed was still in her body made her hot for him.

Nevertheless, her behavior that afternoon had been shocking. What must he think of her? She knew he wanted another fuck. Still, sleeping with men without marriage just never worked out for her. She stopped the car in her front driveway and looked down at her hands. They shook. Her insides quivered. All because she wanted another opportunity to behave wantonly with the handsome and exciting Mick Reilly.

Tasha had it right. It was way past time Jennifer got herself a man. But definitely not Mick Reilly. While she admired women who dared all for love, she wasn't sure she was prepared to deal with all the difficulties interracial couples still encountered. So Mick Reilly would remain off limits. Mick Reilly? She sighed. Thinking of him as Mick Reilly now and not just Mick was ridiculous.

She gathered her briefcase and trench coat and slipped out of the car.

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

She smiled, kissing and hugging 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, Tia watched as she changed from the dark business suit into sweats. "Mommy, what are we doing tonight?"

Jennifer knew that tone. She pulled the sweat top over her head before turning to face Tia, who lay 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. Would he tell Tia? Jennifer sighed and pushed her feet into slippers. "Oh."

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

"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 bent to kiss Tia's cheek. "He was just here 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's size being satisfied with part of Tia's food, brought a smile to her lips. "He's a big man sweetiekins. 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. Despite the dictates of commonsense, she wanted to see him again. In her house. Filling the rooms with his smile and virility. And maybe filling her with hard cock. Face burning, she averted her gaze. "Okay, you can call him and ask."

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

* * * * *

The phone rang as Mick walked into his condo. He put down his brief and laptop case 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. She probably regretted having allowed him to touch her, but he wanted to see her again. If he were lucky, he might even get to improve the bad impression he'd made. If he were lucky enough to get another chance at intimacy with her, he would make love to her and show her he didn't always pop his cork so quickly and with so little attention to arousing and pleasing his partner.

"I could bring pizza or Chinese food with me," he offered.

"Bring pizza with lots of cheese! Bye!" Tia said happily and hung up.

He showered quickly 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. And if they were to have a chance at a relationship, he was going to have to score points.

But before he could decide if he should call her, the front door of the two-story single-family home 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 down at her. "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 pant leg. "Come on in, Mick."

Jennifer came into the living room as he and Tia stepped inside. She wore 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. He'd love to bury his face in her hair as he made love to her.

One look at her face and he decided she was definitely not glad to see him. She clearly regretted having allowed him to make love to her that afternoon. Or maybe she just didn't like him. Whatever her reason, his disappointment at her cool reception was high.

"Hi."

She inclined her head slightly. "Hi."

Mick heaved an inward sigh. A smile would have been nice. "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. Not that he could admit he'd come hoping for another chance to at least kiss her.

"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. Fine. So they probably would not have a real relationship. He recalled her response to him that afternoon. He'd never been big on mindless sex, but he decided he wanted her any way he could get her. Perhaps they could have a purely physical relationship until she was ready for more.

"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 found her physically attractive. Her smile and the warm, rich color of her skin intrigued him. Did he 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?"

"Yes." His brow furrowed. Jennifer probably wasn't really pretty in the conventional sense, but even in baggy sweats she was sexy as hell. And he intended to have her.

"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." Tia 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, and then he wasn't. Mommy used to cry a lot, but she doesn't any more. That changed."

Mick 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 smiled at Tia. "I think that pizza's getting cold. Who likes cold pizza?"

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

He cast a final, regretful look up the stairs before following Tia into the dining room. When he left an hour later, Jennifer gave him a cool smile that didn't reach her eyes and seemed eager to close the door on him. On the way home, he sent her roses.

* * * * *

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 office. 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 handsome, blue-eyed Mick. Recalling the roses that had arrived before she left for work, she sighed. The only writing on the card was his initials.

She shook her head and reached for the first pile of slips. She was here to work, not fantasize about a man she didn't have a hope of ever having a real relationship with. Even if she landed him, what was she supposed to do with him? She could imagine her mother's and Jim's reaction to 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.

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 and desire when Mick's handsome head appeared around the door.

He smiled. "Hi."

"Mr. Reilly." She gave him a lightning fast smile. "Good morning."

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

About that insane office sex? Her face burned. "What about?"

"Can I come in?"

She nodded.

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 and remembering the feel of his hands on her bare bottom, Jennifer 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 afternoon."

She swallowed slowly and forced herself not to look away. She couldn't change what had happened and she wasn't going to beat herself up over it. "What about it?"

"Do you regret it?"

"Of course I do. I don't go around allowing strange men to do me in offices."

He shook his head. "I don't usually behave that way either. But there's something about you I find irresistible."

She moistened her lips. "You said you wanted to discuss Tia."

"We can't just pretend it didn't happen, Jennifer."

"Okay. It happened. It doesn't mean we have to analyze it to death."

"Don't you want to explore why it happened?"

"We were both horny."

"You think that's all there was to it?"

She shrugged. "All I know for sure is that it can't happen again."

"Jennifer —"

"Please. I'm here to work and you said you wanted to discuss Tia."

He sighed. "She seems to think that you and I...I tried to explain to her that there's no chance of..." he trailed off, starting at her.

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

"What?"

"Having you over for dinner." *And having sex with you – anywhere.*

He smiled suddenly and her heartbeat 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."

"Why not?"

Jennifer blinked. "Why not what?"

He Mick 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 mouth parted in surprise. "What?"

He shrugged. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"What?"

"A man? A lover? Are you looking for one or do you already have one that Tia doesn't know about?"

She felt her cheeks heating up again. She wanted to, but couldn't look away from him. Those blue eyes of his wouldn't let her. "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?"

"Sorry. I'm not."

"What about tomorrow night?"

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?"

Couldn't he take no for an answer? "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. "Are you interested in a date or just...sex?"

Damn. What would he have to do to live that down? Or maybe he shouldn't even try. Maybe he should concentrate on sweeping her off her feet.

Mick crossed the room and leaned over the desk to pepper her lips with several quick, warm kisses.

Her soft lips parted under his and he felt a rush of desire. Trying to control it, he sucked gently at her tongue before he trailed his mouth along her cheek to her ear. "I'm sure you know I want to sleep with you again, Jennifer. But I also want to romance you."

She sat back in her chair, pressing a hand against his shoulder. "Thanks for saying that, but that's not going to happen again."

The hell it wasn't. He straightened and slipped his hands into his trouser pockets. She was going to take some work, but he knew she was going to be well worth the effort. He shrugged. "I wouldn't count on that, if I were you."

She shook her head. "What?"

"I generally get what I want, Jennifer. And I want you."

He watched her swallow several times before she shook her head. He suspected she wanted to be romanced and swept off her feet but was unwilling to admit it. She wanted to be chased? He would prefer not to have to chase her, but chase and catch her he would.

He leaned over the desk again, giving her plenty of time to protest or object. When she did neither, he brushed his lips slowly across hers before allowing them to linger on her warm lips. Damn, but her lips were sweet and so kissable.

He felt the tip of her tongue against his mouth and parted his lips. Their tongues touched and a wave of passion washed over him. Resisting the urge to surrender to his hunger for her, he kissed the tip of her nose and straightened. "I'll take that as a maybe."

She sucked in a breath and stared up at him with a confused and frightened look in her dark eyes.

Recalling Tia's remarks about Jennifer crying, he reminded himself she'd been hurt by her ex-fiancé. Romancing and winning her would require patience. Although he wasn't known for that virtue, he felt sure any effort he expended on her would be worth it once he won the prize — her heart and a permanent place in her bed.

"I'll let you get back to work." Mick pressed a quick kiss against her lips and left her alone.

* * * * *

"So why don't you give him a chance, Jen? Who's it going to hurt?" Tasha asked as they sat over lunch at the little café twenty minutes later.

"I can't."

"Why not? Look, Jen, 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."

Jennifer nearly choked on the cherry soda 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." She pointed her salad fork in Jennifer's direction. "That's not a description I've heard you use very often."

"It doesn't mean anything, Tash."

"Then why are you blushing?"

Jennifer hesitated then told Tasha things had gotten a little heated between her and Mick in his office. She couldn't bring herself to admit they'd actually had sex. At least

not then. The full confession to Tasha would come later when she'd had time to process it fully.

Tasha shrugged. "So?"

"So? What if someone had walked in?"

"No one walked in. Horny people take the kinks out in offices across the world at any given moment. So get over it, girl."

"Tasha —"

"Get over it, Jen! Look, you deserve a little fun. Why not give it a shot? How often do you meet a good looking white guy with a cock worth getting wet over?"

Jennifer blushed. "You're impossible, Tasha."

"No doubt, but let's discuss you and your Mick. He's a good looking, older man with money who can afford to take you to nice places and to help you make ends meet. Let him be your sugar daddy."

"He's not that much older than me, and I can take care of myself."

"Hey, I know you can, Jen, 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. In a few years, she would be more financially secure. For now, making ends meet was often difficult. "I manage."

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

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

"Okay," Tasha said, softening. "I know. Just go out with him because he has a hard one that makes you wet."

"Tasha."

Tasha laughed. "Okay. Then do it because you both want it. And don't worry about what your mother will say."

"My mother isn't 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, Jen. She is prejudiced."

"Just because she thinks marriage is hard enough without the added complication of a spouse from another race doesn't make her prejudiced."

"Hmm. What does it make her, Jen?"

"Practical."

"Practical? Sure. Tell me another one, Jen."

"Look, Tasha —"

"Okay. I give up. She's not prejudiced. Since she isn't and neither are you, give him a chance, Jen. Give yourself a chance. You could really go for him."

"I—"

"You wouldn't bother denying that if you knew how your eyes light up when you talk about him."

Jennifer sucked in a breath. Is that why he wouldn't take no for an answer? Because he knew she shared his interest? 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."

"How do you arrive at that conclusion, Tasha?"

"Let's look at the facts. After you meet him on the train, he turns out to be Tia's friend and a partner in the firm where you're doing a temp assignment. Surely that's too much coincidence even for you. He's the one, Jen."

She shook her head stubbornly, but couldn't vanquish a mental picture of Mick'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, Jen."

She clenched her hand into a fist. "What are you doing calling, Jim?" she asked in a soft voice, 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."

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

"Hey, don't get an attitude with me, Jen," 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 seconds before she heard a click and then a dial tone.

"Mommy?"

With the phone still clenched in her hand, Jennifer turned. Tia stood 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 wore. It was the same one she'd worn for Mick'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!" Tia suddenly screamed. "You shouldn't have made me with him! He doesn't want you anymore and now it's rubbing off on me!"

For a moment, the vitriol shocked her. "That's not true."

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

Jennifer stared at her, stunned. Tia rushed from the room. Not trusting herself to follow, she sank down onto the chair by the phone, shaking.

She heard Tia's bedroom door slam.

She struggled to keep tears at bay. 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? Damn Jim! She picked up the phone and angrily punched out his phone number. It rang five times before a woman answered.

"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."

Damn him. Now he had his latest woman running interference for him? Jennifer hung up without answering.

She allowed herself a minute to shed a few angry tears 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 Tia had been talking to Jim rather than him. She didn't want Mick 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 grinned, as if he were responsible for her beauty. "Like what you see, do you?"

Mick shrugged. "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."

Mick nodded and made his way 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," Janet said and took a slip. She smiled at him.

Damn. She was even more gorgeous when she smiled. He smiled. The beautiful, chic Janet Walker might have come along at the perfect time to keep him from falling for Jennifer Smallwood. He wouldn't need to beg, plead, or chase Janet to get her into his bed.

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 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 why waste his time trying to romance a woman who didn't want to be romanced? He smiled. "Would you have dinner with me tomorrow night?" *Followed by a night of mindless sex?*

Janet's smile warmed him. "I would love to have dinner with you, Mike."

The intimate look in her eyes promised him more than just dinner.

* * * * *

Jennifer felt a pair of soft lips touching her mouth and opened her eyes. Tia stood 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?"

Jennifer caressed her 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. "I love you, Mommy."

"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's voice. "Yes."

"This is Michael Reilly."

"Yes?"

"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?"

His call touched her. "We're both fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Thanks for checking, Mick," she said and prepared to hang up.

"Wait a minute," he said quickly. "Is Tia there?"

"Yes, but she's asleep. 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."

Mick 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?"

The sincerity in his voice touched her. She sighed. "Well, I'm fine, but Tia might like to see you sometime today if you have time."

"She told me she liked the Shrek movies. I bought all three for her. I'll bring them over and watch one or two with her if that's okay with you."

Jennifer blinked against sudden tears. "She'd really like that. What time are you coming?"

"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'd have to take your chances with lunch."

"If you don't feel like preparing anything, I'll stop on the way. What do you think Tia would like to eat to cheer her up?"

"Your presence should do the trick," she said. "Just bring the movies. Leave lunch to me."

"I'll see you at twelve."

"Thank you," she said quietly and hung up before she could say something she'd regret. Like she wanted to see him as badly as Tia did.

* * * * *

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. *So? Why would it be such a bad thing to impress him?*

He arrived just before twelve, wearing a short-sleeve pullover 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. "Mick..."

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 anymore."

"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 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. "I do. 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."

"See?" He smiled at her.

Tia kissed both his cheeks.

Over Tia's head, he looked up at Jennifer 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.

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 watch her with that warm, intimate look in his eyes that made her think of sex and more sex?

Jennifer 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 frowned. "Has she been giving you a hard time?"

The astute questioned surprised her. "Has Tia been giving me a hard time?"

He nodded.

She stalled for time. "About what?"

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

Feeling her cheeks burn with heat, she turned back to the sink and put a hand over her lips. The question embarrassed her. Did he think she was easy because she was a single mom and had allowed him to fuck her so soon after they met?

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," Mick 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, Jennifer."

"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."

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

"The morning we met on the train. The moment I looked into your eyes, I was lost."

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

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

He shook his head. "Please enlighten 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 answered in a quiet voice. "I know exactly how long it's been."

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

"And I know what 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 past 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 his eyes.

"Don't you?" He Mick brushed the tips of his fingers against her lips. "Are you sure about that? You certainly didn't give that impression when we met in the office."

She looked away.

He cupped a hand over her cheek and made her look at him.

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 had to say something. Anything to stop him from pulling her any closer. "Tia might walk in."

"I told her I needed to talk to you alone. She promised not to interrupt," he said, bending his head towards her.

"She doesn't always keep her promises!" Jennifer 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.

Jennifer 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 didn't 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 him once your desire for each other is 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 and had planned to dress to impress him, 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."

Appointment her ass. "He means 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, frowning.

He treated Jennifer to a cool stare as he answered. "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."

"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.

Jennifer glanced at Mick and found him watching her with an amused look in his eyes. She had the uncomfortable impression that he knew 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 got slowly to her feet. "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 with her." 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 and remaining inhibitions. 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, Jennifer?"

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 against him.

He embraced her.

She pressed her face against his shoulder, closing her eyes. She clung to him. "Please. Stay."

He stroked his hand down her back to her ass. "You want me to stay? Tempt me."

She lifted her face with her lips parted. Seeing the desire in his eyes, she linked her arms around his neck.

When his mouth touched hers, she slipped her fingers in his hair, returning his kiss with a passion that matched his. It was only when they heard Tia calling that they reluctantly separated.

Realizing that her top was pushed up over her breasts, Jennifer yanked it down and wiped a hand across her mouth.

"I'll go intercept her," he told her and left the living room.

Jennifer leaned against the wall, taking slow, deep breaths. How far would things have progressed between them if Tia hadn't been there? Would they have ended up in bed?

She was still leaning against the wall when Mick returned to the living room.

"Are you all right, Jennifer?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek. "Why don't we discover that together?"

She turned her head and kissed his hand. He bent and pressed his mouth against hers. She sucked in a breath, leaning close to him. After a few heated kisses, she pulled away from him. "We can't do this with Tia in the house."

He nodded. "I know." He leaned against the wall beside her, closing his eyes.

She touched his arm. "Are you still going to stay?"

He blew out a breath. "I'm feeling horny as hell."

She glanced away. "There's not much I can do about that."

"I know." He pushed himself away from the wall and removed his phone from his belt case. He walked into the hall. Moments later, she heard a low-voiced conversation. Would he allow his date to change his mind?

Jennifer couldn't tell what he felt when he returned to the living room. "Mick?"

He sighed. "I'm now dateless and in the doghouse."

She slipped her arm through his. "Not with me and Tia you aren't."

He smiled and leaned down to kiss her.

She danced away. "We can't, Mick."

He sighed. "It's going to be a long, stressful night."

Mick watched more Shrek with Tia while Jennifer prepared dinner. After dinner, she gave Tia a bath and put her to bed. As she returned to the living room where Mick waited, her heart raced. If he pressed her, she wasn't sure she could resist him.

He took one look at her face and laughed. "Relax, Jennifer. I'm going to take my horny ass home, have a few cold ones, and take a very cool shower."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Alone. Walk me to the door?"

She nodded.

At the door, he kissed the corner of her mouth. "Good night."

"Go straight home – alone."

He laughed. "Yes ma'am. Straight home alone. Good night."

"Good night."

He kissed her again and let himself out.

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 drift into a fantasy of having spent the previous night allowing Mick to fuck her senseless.

It didn't work. She touched a finger to her lips. He hadn't really kissed her as they said good night. 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."

"I know but it's important."

A disgruntled Tasha arrived at Jennifer's house forty minutes later. Her long, dark hair was caught up in a careless ponytail and she wore 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, Jen, 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 again."

Tasha gave an exaggerated sigh. "I think you're only fooling yourself if you think that. So let him light your fire, girl."

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

"Here we go again!" Tasha shook her head. "Jen, get real. You don't really think this guy is going to marry you before he gets to sample the goods again several more times, do you? It doesn't work that way anymore. You have to give up the goods first on a regular basis. 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 can't keep making the same mistake, Tash."

"Jen, the man is 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 even live with him."

She shook her head. "I'm 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, Jen: you need a little loving. The man wants you. I say, let him love you."

"I want to, but I can't."

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

"I'm not going to —"

"Do you want me to take Tia or not?"

"Yes."

Tasha smiled, nodding. "Now you're talking. Take it, slow, Jen, but go with the flow."

* * * * *

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."

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. "Good."

"How are you?"

"Better now that you've called."

"Oh. Good."

"What can I do for you? Is everything okay?"

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

Finally. "Today?"

"Yes. If you're not busy."

Even if he'd had a date with Vanessa Williams, he'd have canceled it. Calling Trey and Carlee to tell them he'd need a rain check for dinner wouldn't be a problem. 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 he thought of her constantly. "I'm not busy."

"Did you go straight home alone last night, Mick?"

"Yes ma'am, I did and I have the blue balls to prove it."

"Good."

He laughed. "Spoken like a true ball-buster, Jennifer."

"I can think of better things to do with your balls than bust them."

He arched a brow. "I'm very glad to hear it. 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 is 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. You will."

"Lucky me. I'll pick you up in an hour. Bring your beautiful brown eyes with you."

"I'll see you then."

"Yes, you will, brown eyes."

* * * * *

Jennifer took great care with her appearance, carefully applying a light foundation, lipstick, and blusher. Knowing she looked good in pastel colors, she put on a pink silk pant-suit that clung to her breasts and hips. She slipped on matching three-inch heels,

and then added a pair of silver earrings and a silver watch. It was nice to go out with a man she could wear high heels with.

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 bouquet of flowers. Roses this time. Red roses.

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."

"But?"

"But bringing flowers every time we see each other can get 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. "That's not what I meant."

He caressed her cheek. "What did you mean, brown eyes?"

"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. Why did she feel so gauche in his presence? He clearly liked her—a lot. *Lighten up, Jen. If he bites you, bite him back while you're digging your nails in his ass and fucking him back.* Feeling her cheeks burn at her thoughts, she spoke quickly. "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."

He didn't touch her as they walked to his car but still managed to make her feel as if he had his arm around her in a protective gesture. As he held the passenger door open for her, he made no attempt to brush against or touch her.

Once in his 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 the station."

She did and moments later the car was filled with the mellow voice of her favorite male vocalist. She glanced at Mick's 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. "I happen to think you're perfect just as you are."

Unable to do a thing about the big smile spreading across her face, she relaxed back against the soft leather seat and closed her eyes. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I hope you don't mind if I doze. I didn't sleep very well last night."

"Tell me about it," 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.

Jennifer 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. Each time she looked up, she found Mick's smiling gaze locked on her. Lord, he was so sexy and handsome. What would it be like to wake up in the morning and roll over to burrow into his arms?

Get a grip, woman! She flashed him a quick smile and lifted her wine glass to her lips. 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 with her and Jim wasn't exactly her favorite topic of conversation. But it couldn't be any more painful than talking about his little girl had been for him. "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 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?" Mick prompted when she paused.

"He said okay." Jennifer 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. We searched for the perfect house. When we did, 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."

"And?"

She sighed. "So I didn't know what to do. I'd never loved anyone but him. It was hard to accept that he didn't love me as I did him anymore but I tried to make adjustments. When he called off the wedding, I thought I would die but I didn't. Then he accepted a job that required him to move out of state."

"Go on," Mick encouraged.

"Then the next thing I knew, he called one night and told me he was getting married."

"Damn. Did you know he was dating or seeing someone else when he left?"

"He met her after he moved to Maryland and fell for her right away. He's marrying a woman who said no and continued to say no. Like I should have."

"Oh, Jennifer."

She looked away, uneasily aware that her bitterness and pain was right out in the open for him to see.

He reached across the table to place his hand over her clenched fist. "Sometimes you fall in love when you least expect or want to."

"I think he found her so attractive because she said no. Don't men always want what they can't have?"

Mick squeezed her hand. "Sometimes we want what we've already had, Jenny," he said softly. "Sometimes having it once just makes it...you more appealing than ever."

She slowly brought her gaze back to his. "I feel a little out of my league with you."

"I'll be patient until this feels right for you."

Recalling his date of the previous night, she wondered how long his patience would last. "Who was she?"

"Who was who?"

"The woman you had a date with last night."

He released her hand, sitting back in his chair. "We met at a party Friday."

"And you were so attracted to her you wanted to see her the next night?"

He shrugged. "I was horny."

"So you were going to sleep with her?"

"Probably, but you made sure that didn't happen. Didn't you?"

"If you expect me to apologize, forget it."

He laughed, shaking his head. "And what if I expect you to make amends for sending me to bed filled with sexual frustration?"

"You just promised to be patient."

"If you're going to expect me to keep my word when you're tempting me, we're going to have a slight problem, Jennifer."

She smiled. "Tell me about your ex-wife."

"Okay. What would you like to know?"

"Everything."

"We met in college."

"What's her name?"

"Helen."

"Did you fall in love at first sight?"

"No. 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 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 never seems to stop hurting. It's an ache that's always there. Sometimes just under the surface. Other times it feels like an open wound that's as painful and raw as it was when she first died. There's a scab over the ache, but it doesn't take much to rip it off."

"I'm so sorry, Mick."

He sucked in a breath. "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. "Everything?" Shouldn't his wife have been important to him too?

Almost as if he'd read her thoughts, he shrugged. "Helen left me."

"Did she blame you?"

He shrugged. "Hal and I had gone into business 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 or Kelly. Helen resented the long hours. 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.

"Oh, Mick."

"Helen found it difficult to live with me after that. She felt that I'd neglected her and Kelly. And she was right."

Jennifer shook her head. "No! You were trying to build a foundation so you'd all have a better life. You had a good reason for working long hours."

"I thought so at the time, but it didn't seem so good once Kelly was killed. 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, no!"

"It's something I have to come to terms with."

She shook her head. What could she say to make him feel better?

He glanced out the window. "Feel like a walk along the pier?"

"Yes. Just give me a few moments to go to the ladies' room."

He nodded.

When she returned, they left the restaurant to walk along the pier at Penn's Landing. Sensing he was still sad, she brushed her hand against his. He responded by linking his fingers through hers.

They walked in silence. Although it was cool, there were a lot of people on and near the pier. Some walked along it. Some sat in the grassy area just before it. Some sat along the outcropping with their legs dangling over the waters of the Delaware River 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 *Corrina, Corrina*, a love story about a black woman who fell 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 slow danced while Louis Armstrong sang *You Go To My Head*.

That's when Mick put his arm around her. She half turned to him and he really kissed her for the first time that day—full on her mouth. With his lips and his tongue, warm and sweet, caressing and tasting hers, she felt a knot of desire and tension tighten her belly.

“You go to my head, Jenny,” he breathed the words against her lips.

In response, she leaned closer and kissed him with all the passion and desire that had built steadily all afternoon.

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, and then he drove her home.

“Would you like to come in for coffee?” Jennifer asked as they stood at her door.

Mick nodded, stepping inside after her. “What time is Tia getting 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.

Remembering the passionate kisses they'd exchanged earlier 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, Jennifer.”

That would mean his coming closer to her. That would lead to her shamelessly rubbing against him. “Thanks, but I can open it.”

Ignoring her protest, he took the jar from her. 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.

She leaned close to him.

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 to feel him burrowing deep inside her again.

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.

That quickie in his office had heightened her senses and her need for intimacy. It had been too long since she'd been alone without fear of discovery with a handsome man who wanted her as much as she wanted him. Tumbling into bed with him would give him all night to love away all the lonely nights she'd suffered through over the last two years. A few weeks of hot, meaningless sex should take the kinks out and make it easier for her to stay focus on Tia and work until her Mr. Right came along.

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, silently shaking her head.

"Neither do I."

She turned back to him. "You don't?"

"No, I don't. Why do you sound so surprised? I didn't have one in the office either."

She frowned. Did he make a habit of having unprotected sex? "You said you were horny last night and you would probably have slept with her."

"If things got interesting, I would have gone to buy a few."

"You wouldn't have just —"

"Had unprotected sex with her? No. Despite the insanity in the office with you, I don't have unprotected sleep. Nor do I sleep around or walk around with a condom in my wallet."

She believed him. "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-eight and you've had how many lovers?"

"One." She bit her lip. "Two, if we count you."

"Oh, we're definitely going to count me, honey." He caressed her cheek and neck. "That's not easy. And even if you'd had several more, it wouldn't be my place to judge you."

She squeezed his arm. "Thanks."

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."

That's what she wanted him to do but she also appreciated the respect he showed her. 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 body. 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 eased her away. 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," Mick said in a ragged voice. "I blew it once. That's not going to happen again. When we make love for the first time, 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!"

He stared at her for a moment, clearly surprised. Then he laughed softly and gently kissed her cheek. "Sweet dreams, Jenny."

"Mick —"

"I'll call you. Sweet dreams," he said again.

She sucked in an aching breath. Restless dreams were more like it, she thought as she got ready for bed. After a long shower, 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.

Why hadn't she suggested he make a quick run to the all night pharmacy? Because she didn't want him to think she slept around? Or because she just didn't have the nerve? 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 without seeming like a thoughtless jerk?

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, once she was ready to embrace a relationship with him.

* * * * *

"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 silently 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."

She looked 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. "My disappointment in your canceling our date Saturday night was mitigated by the certainty that you'd call to reschedule another one."

He 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 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?"

Okay. He'd beat around the bush enough. "Actually, I already knew her when I met you."

"What?"

He told her about Jennifer.

She was silent for a moment. "I see. Are things between you 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. 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?"

Mick felt like a heel. He had intended to use her to relieve his sexual frustration. Hell, he might even have hurt her. He sighed. 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. Nevertheless, she expected him to walk into the office with roses. 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 allowing him to become her lover.

She didn't delude 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 during the day. 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 but 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, 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," Jennifer 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, Jen," 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 office 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."

"Jen, 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 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?"

"You wish."

"Yes, beautiful brown eyes, I do."

"Where are you?"

"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."

"I'm not jealous."

"Of course you're not."

"Where the hell are you?"

"It's a good thing you're not jealous," he said, sounding amused.

"Mick!"

"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, but let's do it another time when you're not so tired. How about we just have pizza out and go back home?"

"Okay. I have to go home to shower and change."

"We'll be waiting, Mick."

"See you soon, Jenny."

Chapter Seven

The phone rang as Jennifer, Tia, and Mick returned from the pizza parlor later that night.

"It's probably my daddy!" Tia pushed pass 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, dropping his hand. Surprised, 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's 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. Not light, white."

Jennifer 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 take me in the dining room to show me how well you can color."

"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."

"Jen, 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's Caucasian."

"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, Jen. You go right ahead and let that white boy use you. But you listen to me. I am not having a white boy around my baby. You'd better dump him or —"

"He's not a damned boy! And you have no say about who I see. So don't you dare try to dictate to me."

"Listen to this Jen, and listen good. Tia is my daughter and I am not going to have some white dude hanging around her. I'll do whatever's necessary 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 after you decide you have something better to do than see your daughter? What about her right not to be disappointed? And what about my right to see who the hell I like?"

"She's my daughter, Jen! Mine! Don't push me on this! You tell that white dude he'd better stay the fuck away from my baby girl or you'll both be sorry!"

"You fuck off, Jim!" she snapped and slammed the phone down.

She sank on the sofa with her hands clenched into fists. She still sat there 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?"

"Leave that to me, sweetiekins."

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. "I'm sorry, Mick, 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 closer.

After a moment of resistance, she pressed her head against his shoulder.

"What did he say to you, Jenny?"

"He doesn't want you around us."

"That's too damn bad!"

"Mick!" She pulled away from him, surprised.

"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."

His vehemence pleased her. "Mick?"

"I know we haven't known each other long, but I know 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."

She stared up at him, her heart racing as she listened.

"I'm sorry if he doesn't want me around, but I'm going to be around for you and Tia. Leave him to me. 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.

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.

Mick didn't speak until she fell silent. "He's full of shit. 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?"

He frowned. "What did I say to make you ask that?"

She bit her lip. "Nothing. I'm just scared."

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 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 that body all right," she admitted.

His eyes gleamed with satisfaction. 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. With Jim's threat hanging over her head, her answer should have been an unequivocal no. Once they took that step, there'd be no going back. Jim would surely find out and he didn't make idle threats. "Yes. I do."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, her heart thumping. "Oh, yes, Mick."

He leaned forward and kissed her. "I can hardly wait," he said against her lips.

She caressed his hair, returning his kiss. "Neither can I."

He drew away from her. "So? When are we going to get better acquainted?"

"I need to talk to the friend who had Tia sleepover on Sunday night."

"Okay, but if she's busy, we can go the paid babysitter route."

She shook her head. Her budget didn't include additional babysitting fees and there was no way she could see asking Aunt Linda to babysit Tia while she spent the night or weekend with Mick. "Let me talk to my friend Tasha first."

"Okay, but make it soon." He kissed her on the side of her neck.

She shuddered and bolted to her feet.

He laughed and pulled her down onto his lap. He licked the side of her neck and caressed her breasts. "Wait until I get you alone, Jenny."

She pulled away, her heart pounding and her thong damp. "I'd better go check on Tia."

"You do that before I decide I can't wait and take you now."

She blushed and rushed from the room to the sound of his laughter.

* * * * *

On Tuesday, Mick went to Trey and Carlee Brandauer's house for dinner. A pretty woman with long, thick hair, sexy brown eyes, and smooth dark skin met him at the door. "Hi, handsome."

He and Carlee's best friend, Erinae had shared a torrid but brief fling. They had parted on friendly terms. Smiling, he bent to kiss the corner of her mouth. "Hi, gorgeous."

Erinae slipped her arm through his and walked him down the hall towards the living room. "Carlee tells me you're dating."

"I am."

She turned to look up at him. "Anything serious?"

He nodded.

"Good for you."

"What about you, Erinae? Are you seeing anyone?"

She nodded, her dark eyes sparkling. "I've just starting dating this tall, dark, handsome hunk. Things look promising."

"I'm glad to hear it," he told her.

She grinned. "So am I."

They walked into the living room where Carlee sat on Trey's lap kissing him.

Mick and Erinae exchanged a smile before she leaned close and spoke in a voice loud enough for the kissing couple to hear. "You'd think they'd learn to keep their hands to themselves. They're still behaving like newlyweds after year and a half of marriage. No wonder she's pregnant again."

Carlee, tall and attractively shaped with short, natural hair, rose. As she did, Mick noticed the swell of her belly. "Jealousy will get you nowhere, Nae." She grimaced at her friend before quickly crossing the room to embrace Mick. "Mick, you're looking more handsome than ever."

"And you look lovelier every time I see you," he responded, bending to kiss her cheek.

Trey rose. "All right you two, break up the lovefest." Although Mick and Trey were the same age, Trey's hair had silvered early.

He crossed the room and shook hands with Mick.

Mick looked around. "Where's Sami?" he asked of Carlee and Trey's sixteen-month old daughter.

"She's in bed."

"Can I take a quick peek?"

Carlee nodded. "Yes, but try not to wake her up."

"I'll come with you," Trey said quickly.

Carlee and Erinae laughed and shook their heads.

"What?" Trey demanded, smiling.

"You look for every little excuse to stand staring at her," Erinae said, smiling.

Trey shrugged. "I love her. So sue me."

Carlee walked over and leaned up to kiss him. "It was a happy day when we met again, Trey."

Trey bent his head and pressed a long, hot kiss against Carlee's parted lips.

"Hell, that was so hot I almost felt it," Erinae said. "Get a room you two. It's indecent for a married couple with a toddler to carry on the way you two do," she said, laughing.

Smiling, Trey followed Mick out of the living room.

They walked down the hall to Sami's room.

A large, white German Sheppard with dark blue eyes rose from the floor near her crib. Mick extended a hand, waited until the dog sniffed it, and then reached down to scratch his head. "I see you're still guarding her, Danny."

The Sheppard wagged his tail and lay on the carpet near the crib.

The two men stood looking down at the sleeping child for several moments in silence before Mick stroked her cheek, Trey kissed her, and they walked out of the room. Instead of returning to the living room, they went into Trey's home office where he poured them both a drink.

"So tell me about Jennifer," Trey invited.

He told Trey how he and Jennifer had met but didn't mention their office tryst.

"You don't think it's early days to be so wrapped up in her and her daughter?"

He shook his head. "My mother always told us we'd know the one when we met her."

Trey grinned. "Of course she expected it would be a bonnie Irish lass who put that glint in your eyes."

Mick shrugged. "No doubt about that."

"Are you in love with her?"

"Am I in love with her?" He shook his head. "All I know about her is that she gets me hard in record time and I can't seem to stop thinking about her."

"You're horny but not in love?"

He shrugged.

"Do you like her?"

"Hell yeah."

"When do we get to meet her?"

"I'm not sure if she's ready to meet my friends yet, but this will be one of my first stops when she is." He tilted his head. "Are you looking forward to a boy this time?" He watched a slow smile spread across Trey's face.

"I used to be certain I'd want a son, but having Sami has changed things for me. I'd be quite happy to have another little girl."

No one who knew Trey and Carlee could doubt they were in love and devoted to each other and to Sami. Mick sighed. How long would it take before he knew the joy of such a relationship? How long before he could watch the belly of a woman he loved slowly swell with their baby?

"It'll happen for you," Trey said.

Mick nodded. "I know. I just need to be patient."

Trey took a sip of his drink. "Think you have it in you?"

"I don't have a choice."

* * * * *

Jennifer invited Tasha to dinner on Wednesday 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 spoke. "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 case in her hand.

"Can you take Tia for the night on Friday or Saturday?"

Tasha looked up.

Jennifer waited for the barrage of questions and suggestions.

After the smallest hesitation, Tasha nodded. "This coming weekend?"

She nodded. "Do you have any plans?"

"No. 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, Jen. Now no more road blocks. Tia and I always have a great time together. We'll pop corn, make lemonade, and spend the weekend playing video games in our pajamas."

"Thanks, Tasha."

She shrugged. "You'd do the same for me. Right?"

"Sure. Now I'll just have to tell Tia."

Tasha batted a hand. "Piece of cake, but just in case, have your big, Irish hunk over for dinner when you tell her. Hell, if that doesn't work, tell her I'm depressed and need to be cheered up."

After Tasha left, she called Mick.

He took her and Tia out for dinner on Thursday night. When they returned, she told Tia she would be spending the weekend with Tasha.

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?"

Jennifer 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? "Mick and I would like to get to know each other a little better."

"Why can't you do that 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 room with Mommy like Daddy used to?"

Jennifer's face felt like a fiery furnace. She couldn't look at Mick as she struggled to decide how to answer.

"Yes."

She turned to stare at Mick, annoyed that he'd answered for her.

He gave her a brief look before turning his attention back to Tia. "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're bigger than Daddy. 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!

When Tia was in bed, she walked him to the door.

He stroked her cheek. "So we're on for tomorrow night?"

She nodded and leaned up to kiss him on the corner of his mouth. When he parted his lips, she brushed her tongue against his. He lifted his head.

"Don't start anything you're not prepared to finish tonight," he warned.

She leaned closer and traced the outline of his mouth with the tip of her tongue. "I could say that to you for deciding for me what to tell Tia."

He stepped away from her. "She's an astute little girl. Not the kind you can or even should easily deceive."

"Granted she's probably going to be as intelligent as my mom, who has a very high I.Q, but Tia's still only five-years-old, Mick. My mother always made an effort to set a good example for me. I want to do the same for her. I don't want her to think it's okay to sleep around without a commitment."

He studied her face. "Is that what you think we're going to do?"

It's what she knew they were going to do. But admitting it was beyond her at that moment.

When she didn't respond, he brushed the back of his hand against her cheek. "I overstepped the bounds?"

She didn't want to discourage him from caring about Tia. "Just let me decide what to tell her next time," she said.

"Understood. Here or my place tomorrow?"

Having him make love to her in her bed would be nice. So would seeing where he lived. "Your place," she decided.

He kissed her cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

She squeezed his hand. "All right."

* * * * *

On Friday night, Mick took her to one of Philadelphia's premier restaurants. The prices were outrageous and the portions tiny. Glancing around, Jennifer thought she recognized a news anchor and a ballplayer dining at nearby tables.

After a meal she ate without really tasting, they went dancing. Moving around the dance floor with his arms around her in the dimly lit club filled her with a hunger to have him inside her again.

It seemed to take forever before he finally suggested they leave. They made the drive to his Washington Square condo in silence.

"What do you think?"

Jennifer turned from her consideration of the big, plush, room to face Mick, who stood behind her in the living room after giving her a quick tour.

His whole condo was like something out of a lifestyles of the rich and famous 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 she would spend the next three nights with him.

The other amenities included a hot tub on the terrace with heated towel racks, a hide-away flat screen television and attached mini bar, a large whirlpool bath, a custom built fireplace, and a gourmet kitchen.

With her thoughts returning to the big bed, she turned to face him. "It's lovely, Mick."

He bent to brush his lips against her neck. "So are you."

She sucked in a breath, her heart racing, doubts slowly creeping in. Nothing good had ever resulted from her sleeping around with a man who only wanted sex. Despite all her devotion and love for him, Jim had dumped her and was marrying a woman who had made him wait for sex. She and Mick were from two different races, cultures, and economic worlds. How could things with him turn out any better than they had with Jim?

He lifted his head and guided her across the room to leather loveseat.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked once she was seated.

She shook her head. "No, thanks."

Mick studied her face for a moment in silence before he sighed. "You're having second thoughts."

"I didn't say that."

He sank onto the loveseat beside her. "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. "I'm not going to pull out on you now. You'll call me a ball buster."

He shook his head. "I was teasing then. I'm not now. This isn't just about me, Jennifer. It's about us. If you're not ready for this, it really is okay."

"Are you ready?"

"I've been ready since the moment I saw you, brown eyes."

She smiled and relaxed slightly. "Oh, Mick, you say the sweetest things."

"I meant what I said to you, Jennifer. Despite losing our heads in the office, I'm 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."

"But?"

She shrugged. "But I was raised to believe that sex outside of marriage leads to unwanted pregnancies and heartbreak. If nothing else, my experience with Jim kind of reinforced that belief. Sleeping and living with him went against everything I believed in, but I loved him."

"He was a lucky bastard. At this point in our relationship, I have no interest in getting you pregnant. Nor do I intend to break your heart." He caressed her cheek.

"You can trust me, Jenny."

Lord knows she wanted to.

"If you like, I'll take you home."

So she could lie alone in bed thinking of him all night? She felt certain she'd regret her decision after the weekend, but she'd worry about that on Monday. "I'm where I want to be tonight, Mick. With you."

"Are you really sure? Because I meant it when I said I could 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. I need you to be very sure."

She caressed his cheek. "You are the sweetest, most considerate man I've ever met. And I want you too."

His gaze locked with hers. "No doubts?"

None strong enough to keep her out of his arms. "No."

"Thank God."

She smiled. "Someone sounds very horny."

"I don't know about someone but I sure am." 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 lifted her onto his lap and then spent several long, sweet moments kissing her, tasting her lips, gently sucking her tongue. Lifting his lips from hers, he slid her zipper down. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes.

He touched her cheeks while gazing into her eyes. "You are so beautiful."

She stroked her fingers through his hair.

"And you're mine?"

"Yours," she whispered, leaning close with her lips parted.

As he kissed her, he pushed her dress off her shoulders. Then he trailed his lips down her neck to her cleavage. He reached around her body to unhook and remove her bra.

He was only the second man to see her without a bra. Jennifer struggled to overcome the urge to cover her breasts.

"Damn, you're beautiful," he whispered, bending his head.

She closed her eyes. Feeling his lips and hands on her bare breasts, left her feeling hot and needy.

"Love me, Mick."

"I'm going to." He put her on her feet, stood up, and swept her up in his arms.

Jim had rarely picked her up and she liked the sensations of being swept off her feet but felt compelled to protest. "I can walk."

"I can carry you," he countered.

She stroked her fingers through his hair. "Only to the steps. I want you to save your energy for other things, Mick."

"Intelligent as well as pretty."

And horny.

He carried her to the staircase where he set her on her feet. She slipped her hand in his and followed him up the steps to his bedroom, her heart racing and her thong soaked.

In his bedroom, he finished undressing her slowly, stopping to tenderly kiss each part of her exposed body. His lips and touch left molten need in their wake. He lingered a long time at her breasts, sucking and kissing them until her nipples were hard, aching peaks. When she was completely nude, Mick stared at her with a look of adoration in his eyes.

"My beautiful brown girl," he whispered. "Oh, Jenny! I need to touch every lush, brown inch of you."

Standing before him, she felt beautiful and desirable. And surprisingly unashamed. She was eager to see his big body naked. "Why don't you show me how beautiful you are?" she suggested, trailing her hands down his chest and abs to press against his cock.

He nodded.

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip as she watched him shed his clothes. Studying his naked body, she decided 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 again.

"Oh, . . . Mick . . ." she whispered, feeling a rush of dampness as she gazed hungrily at the exquisite symmetry of his big body.

She stood staring at him until he took her in his arms, bringing their naked bodies in close contact. She shuddered as she felt his arousal pressing against her. The hot, heavy feel of it made her ache.

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. "I want you," she whispered, cupping him in her eager hands.

"I'm yours, baby," he promised. He tipped up her chin.

She closed her eyes.

He kissed her gently then hungrily. It was a kiss different from any they'd shared before. It was hot, hard, and demanded her complete and total surrender.

She offered it willingly, melting against him. She felt his hands gently parting her trembling thighs, his big palm caressing her feminine core.

Jennifer 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.

She pumped him. "This is very hard. That must be painful for you. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to fill you up, my sweet, brown lass," he growled, lapsing into a thick brogue that only added to her excitement.

He lifted her off her feet and laid her on the bed. Instead of joining her, he stood staring down at her. "Lights on or off?"

"On." She reached out to touch his thigh.

He reached into the nightstand drawer for a condom.

Jennifer sat up, taking slow deep breaths as she watched him slip it on. When he had, she lay on her back with her legs parted. He got into bed with her, slipping between her thighs. Feeling his cock against her entrance, she took a slow, deep breath.

He brushed his lips against her ear. "Are you ready for me?"

"Oh, God, yes."

He reached between their bodies to slip his fingers inside her. She closed her legs on his hand, humping against his fingers.

"Someone's horny."

“As hell.” She stroked her hands down his abs. “What are you planning to do about it?”

“This.” 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, God, Mick!” Having him inside her was sweet. Ecstatic. Maddening.

He kissed her, lifted his hips, and then slowly eased back inside her.

She shivered, sliding her hands down his back to his taut ass. “Take me, Mick. I’m yours.”

“Mine.”

“Yours. So take me.”

Mick began a series of long, slow, steady movements that sent delicious waves of desire through every nerve ending in her body.

Jennifer shuddered and wrapped her legs around him.

When he kissed her again, she dug her nails in his ass, and sucked his tongue into her mouth. She lifted her hips, eager to feel him sliding back deep inside her. He did and within minutes, they moved in perfect sync. She felt her climax quickly building, setting her body on fire. She tightened her legs around him, humping herself against his groin, shivering with pleasure each time he powered back inside her.

“Oh, Mick...”

He kept kissing, caressing, and stoking her fires until, with yet another series of deep, rhythmic thrusts, he pushed her over the precipice into a wild, exhilarating free fall.

She bit into his shoulder, awash in luscious waves of mindless bliss, and her entire body shuddered with the force of her relief.

He quickly followed her into the sweet oblivion that belonged 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. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "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. "A beautiful, golden brown that takes my breath away." His hand stilled on her hair. "Did it bother you?"

"It depends."

She felt him tense under her. "On what?"

"On what you meant. Do you wish I was more brown than black?"

"No!" The word exploded out of him and he bolted into a sitting position.

His abrupt movement sent Jennifer spilling onto her side, clutching the blanket that had covered them against her breasts.

She scrambled to sit back against the headboard to look at him. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Mick turned to face her. "Let me tell you 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."

She stared at him.

"You preferred black women?"

"In a word? Yes."

He tugged at the sheet. After a moment of resistance, she released it. He pulled the sheet away, exposing her breasts. He sucked in a breath before trailing a finger down her bare thigh.

"Her legs were bigger. Her hips wider. Her butt rounder. There isn't anything about a black woman that doesn't turn me on. I prefer black women, in general, Jenny. I always have. I meant it when I said you were perfect just as you are."

"I just happen to be black."

He nodded, smiling. "So I noticed."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

He caressed her breasts. "Fuck you."

"Sounds like a plan."

He removed the used condom, dropped it in a wastebasket beside his bed, and then slipped on another one before he turned off the lights. She rolled away.

He caught her hand and pulled her into his arms. She kissed his shoulder. He slid them both back onto the rumpled sheet.

"Glad you like it." He rolled her onto her back.

She parted her legs. Resting his weight on her, he devoured her lips. The demanding, insistent pressure from his mouth combined with the feel of his big hands caressing her body, sent her senses into overdrive. He pulled her tongue into his mouth.

A surge of heat engulfed her.

She tore her mouth again from his. "Mick..." She slipped her arms around his neck. "I want you deep inside me again."

"That's the plan, my beautiful brown lass." He pushed his cock slowly into her.

"Oh..." She tightened her vaginal muscles around him. "You feel so good."

He reached down to lift one of her legs and pushed in deeper. "You have no idea how being inside you feels."

Jennifer turned her head, seeking his mouth.

Although he'd talked of wanting to fuck her, as he kissed her, she suspected he intended to make slow, sweet love to her. But sex with him was still so new that she was impatient. She wrapped her legs around him, clenched his tensed buns in her hands, and lifted her hips.

"Mick...ah...yes! Yes! More, please."

He quickened his pace. She bucked against his hips, rotating her hips. "Oh, yes! Yes!"

He slipped his hands under her to cup her ass. "Fuck me back, baby."

She rocked against him. "Oh...oh...yes...I'm coming."

He slammed his cock back into her. "Come for me."

She clutched him close, her body shaking as her orgasm crashed over her. He held her until the last shudder left his body. Then he slipped in and out of her until he stiffened and came.

Sated, she curled onto her side when he pulled out of her. He curled his body against hers, pulling the sheet over their bodies. She drifted to sleep with his lips pressed against her neck.

Later Jennifer woke, turned on the lights and watched him sleep. She loved everything about him: the way his dark hair curled on his neck, his laugh, his smile, the way he walked, and the taste of his lips. Most of all, she loved the way he made her feel as if she were the most beautiful, desirable woman in the world.

Dare she hope they could develop a relationship that went beyond the purely physical? Or was she allowing great sex to turn her head? She brushed the hair off his forehead. Could they have a relationship that she wouldn't be ashamed to reveal to her mother and Aunt Linda?

She bent to kiss the corner of his mouth. Without opening his eyes, he pulled her into his arms. She curled her body against his and fell asleep.

Each time she woke during the night, she enjoyed feeling some part of his body touching hers. Sometimes, it was his arm around her waist. Once it was to find him nibbling at her neck while his cock lay against her butt.

She rolled onto her back.

He slipped on a condom and they shared a quick, explosive fuck before falling back to sleep.

* * * * *

Jennifer couldn't get enough of Mick. Finding him asleep when she woke the next morning, she stretched out on top of him and kissed him awake.

He smiled. "Good morning, brown eyes."

"Hi."

He stroked his hands down her back to her ass. "What a lovely way to wake up."

She rubbed herself against his groin. "Now that you're awake..."

"Why, Jenny, do you have sexual designs on me?"

She reached a hand between their bodies to fondle his cock. "Yes. I do." She gently pumped him.

He brushed his lips against hers. "You're welcome to anything I have."

She massaged him. "This is what I want."

"You can have it as often as you like."

"I like now." She rolled off him to lie on her back.

He turned onto his side. "Now?"

"Now."

He sat up and rose. "Let me make a quick pit stop and I'll be right back."

Watching him walk into the master bathroom, she decided she wanted to spend most of the entire weekend in bed. To her surprise, Mick had other ideas. He insisted on buying her roses and taking her out every night.

"I'm not going to have you think sex is all I want from you," he told her late Sunday afternoon after he'd awakened 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."

"Beast!" she cried in frustration. "Come back to bed and make love to me."

"Later. Right now, it's 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."

"Jennifer —"

She slipped her arms around him, resting her hands on his ass. "I want you."

"Oh, hell. You can have me." Pressing his lips to her, he tumbled onto 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.

"You're not only very pretty, you're right." 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.

The incredible feeling of having him fully seated in her was so totally delicious, she couldn't speak. She closed her eyes and enjoyed 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: dinner in expensive restaurants, dancing, an abundance of flowers, and exquisite love making.

Reality returned when her car wouldn't start.

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.

"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 her fist 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."

"And how would he know you haven't?"

"He expects me to be honest and trustworthy, Mick — even when he's not there."

"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," Mick 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," Jennifer 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 shook his head. "This isn't a loan, Jennifer."

"Yes, it is."

He stared down at her, his eyes cold. "Would you have expected to pay Jim back in similar circumstances?"

"That was different."

"How?"

"It just...is...was."

"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 in your life?"

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. She was under no illusions about Mick's ultimate intentions. When the newness wore off their relationship, he'd do what Jim had – leave her. Probably for a woman who knew how to say no and mean it.

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."

"If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't have spent the weekend with you."

"If you trust me, as you say, why are we having this conversation, Jennifer?"

"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!"

"Then stop making a big deal out of nothing, Jennifer."

Her resistance dissolved. "Mick, I didn't mean to...you're making me sound like...fine. Pay for the damn 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, Jen, 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 sat 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."

"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?"

"Yes, to all those questions."

"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? 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 horrors."

Jennifer felt the heat rising up her neck as she remembered just how satisfying she'd found Mick and his equipment. She looked away. "He more than satisfied me."

"How many times?"

Her cheeks burned. "Too many to count."

"Too many to count? Damn girl! Then exactly what is your problem?"

"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 wants to make life easier for you and Tia. Please enlighten me, Jen. What am I missing? Why wouldn't you want to be his woman? Is he too old?"

"No! He'll be forty in a few months."

"That doesn't exactly make him a spring chicken."

"It doesn't make him old either!"

"Then the problem is what?"

"I learned my lesson with Jim. I'm not going to make the mistake of being too dependent on a man again."

Tasha sighed. "I've always thought independence was overrated."

"You know how important being independent is to me. On 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."

"It's too early to expect talk of marriage, Jen. But that doesn't mean 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. "I need to be able to stand on my own two feet, Tasha. If I allow myself to depend on him and he lets me down, I'd be even more crushed than I was when it happened with Jim. I can't go through that again."

Tasha squeezed her hand again in silent empathy.

She sighed. "I have to stop thinking with my coochie."

"Since when do you think with that?"

Since she'd met Mick. She sighed. "Spending the weekend with Mick was a mistake."

"Don't overreact just because he wants to make things easy for you."

"It's not that."

"Then?"

"Sleeping with him again just complicated things."

Tasha blinked. "Again? What am I missing?"

She sighed and told Tasha about their office tryst.

"In his office when anyone could walk in on you? I thought the two of you just kissed and touched a little."

"I should have been straight with you, Tash."

"But?"

"But I felt sleazy afterwards."

"Damn! It was that good?"

The two friends stared at each other and then both laughed.

"Yes," Jennifer said when she sobered. "But I'm not hard wired to find sleeping around a comfortable fit for me."

"Two men at twenty-eight don't constitute sleeping around, Jen."

"It will be if I keep sleeping with him. I want to be loved by a man who thinks enough of me to marry and cherish me."

"And your big, Irish hunk doesn't fit the bill?"

"I don't know, but I think he could really hurt me if I let my guard down."

"Or he could really come through for you. I say give him a fair chance, Jen."

"Maybe I should but I need a little time to think things through."

"Meaning?"

"I need some time away from 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."

"Maybe you should wait awhile."

"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 for him."

"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 see him while you work things out in your mind?"

"Because he goes to my head, Tash. I let him do me the third time I saw him and now I've just spent the weekend with him."

"So?"

"So 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, Jen! Don't be so hard on yourself. 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. For now don't do or say anything rash."

Rash had been sleeping with a man she wasn't sure felt enough for her to be willing to risk marriage with her, even if everyone he knew and loved disapproved. Until she was sure that was at least possible, she needed to stay away from him for her peace of mind.

* * * * *

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 without interruptions until four o'clock when someone knocked on the office door.

Her heartbeat quickened. After spending the entire day trying to prepare herself for a confrontation with Mick, she hoped her resolve wouldn't dissipate the moment he smiled at her or called her his brown girl.

"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 before reaching for her handbag.

"No. That's not necessary." With his hand on the door, he turned to glance over his shoulder. "The brakes are fine now."

"The brakes? It was the battery that was supposed to be replaced."

He nodded. "It was, but the brakes were shot too. It runs great now."

"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? How much would she owe him?

She felt the difference in the car the moment she started it. The sluggishness was gone. He'd probably had a tune up done as well.

Tia met her at the door with a big hug and a kiss when she arrived at home. "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? He's a big man —"

"I'm fine, Aunt Linda."

"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.

"Yes." She turned to look at Tia. "I'm sorry I spent the whole weekend away from you."

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?"

"Yes. He was."

"Did you like sleeping with him?"

Oh, God. What a mess. How was she supposed to answer that?

"Talking about it is kind of embarrassing."

"Why? I'm your little girl. You can tell me anything, Mommy."

"Well, yes, sweetiekins. Yes, I know that, but you're too young for us to have this conversation."

"I'll ask Mick. He says I can ask him anything."

"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 frowned again. "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."

"Hi, Jenny."

His voice was warm, reminding her of their weekend together. Her cheeks burned.

"I was hoping I could stop by for awhile."

"When?"

"Now. I need to see you."

"After a whole day of silence?"

"I've been busy."

"Too busy to pick up the phone for a few minutes?"

"I didn't call because I didn't feel like arguing with you about repairs to the car."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing."

"How much did the repairs cost?"

"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!" Aware of Tia listening to every word, she attempted to keep her voice level.

"It's only different because you're making it different."

"That's my 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 know that but right now I need to know how much the repairs 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."

"You can give it to me tomorrow at your office."

A tense silence ensued. "Meaning you don't want to see me tonight?"

"I need some time to process things before we see each other again."

"How much time?"

She glanced at Tia and held the phone against her chest. "Sweetiekins, I need to talk to Mick in private."

"Why are you fighting with him, Mommy?"

"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. "We need to discuss this weekend, Mick."

"What about it?"

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 made love."

"Call it what you like, it was a mistake, Mick."

"What the fuck!"

"Mick!"

"Don't Mick me. I told you that we could wait if you weren't ready. You said you were. Now you want to hold it against me?"

"I'm not holding anything against you, Mick."

"Then why are we having this conversation?"

"I'm not saying it was your fault or your mistake. I'm just saying it was a mistake."

"The hell it was!"

"I know it's incredibly old-fashioned, but I'm not comfortable sleeping around. It's a mistake I don't want to make again."

"I don't recall asking to sleep with you again, Jennifer."

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's that supposed to mean, Jennifer? That you don't want to see me anymore?"

She sucked in a breath.

"Jennifer?"

"I need some time away from you."

"Because of a few repairs to your damned car? I apologize for caring that you might either get hurt or killed driving around with bad brakes! Now, can we please move on?"

"There isn't any us."

"You're overreacting."

"Overreacting? I spent part of tonight trying not to discuss having spent the weekend with you to Tia! That's not a position I want to be in again."

"We can see each other without sex."

"For how long? You bring out all the...you make me do things that shame me, Mick."

"What are you saying? That I'm bad for you?"

"Mick—"

"Fuck you, Jennifer."

He hung up before she could decide how to respond.

She replaced her own receiver, biting her lip to keep tears at bay.

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 back so hard that it slammed into the wall behind him. He stalked around the table to where Hal sat and glared down at him. "I am telling you this for the last time, Hal. Unless you want to be knocked on your ass, stay the hell out of my face and my personal life!"

Hal's eyes widened. "Hey, Mike, come on. I —"

He angrily batted Hal's hand away. "I mean it, Hal. Mind your own damned business!" He retrieved his folders and briefcase, and stormed out of the room.

He made his way back to his office, not looking toward the small office where Jennifer worked. The desire to storm into the room and ask her to reconsider seeing him was almost too strong to resist. But damn if he'd make a fool of himself by asking for something that she was 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.

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'm sorry, man."

He shook his head. "I don't want to talk about her, Hal."

"Okay. I just wanted you to know that Marge and I are behind you, Mike. We both want whatever makes you happy. 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 ass off. Smell the roses man. I know you have a thing for her, but Philly is full of beautiful, black women. If she's not interested, there are plenty of other women who will be."

But there was only one maddening 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, you let me know."

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 arrived home longing to put Tia to bed before having a good cry. A late model sedan sat in front of her house. Oh, hell. After a miserable week spent 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 sent 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."

"This is my house, Jim. You have no right to come in here issuing orders and —"

"So where is this white boy of yours, Jen? 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 busy."

"Too busy to face me? Or too afraid?"

"He's not afraid of you, Jim! Why should he be?"

"Then bring him on, Jen! 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!"

"That makes one of us."

"He'd never hurt her!"

"So you say. But you're sleeping with him and that means you're not thinking with your brains."

"Who said I was sleeping with him?"

"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, Jen 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, Jen. No. He got what he wanted and dumped you?"

"He did not dump me!"

"Then where is he?"

She got up. "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. After changing and braiding her hair, she started down the stairs. The doorbell rang. "Yes?"

"It's Mick."

For a moment, she felt a sense of panic at the thought of Mick and Jim meeting. 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 the question 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. She said he was angry and 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 blinked. "I am?"

"Yes, you are. She shouldn't have called me. You should have."

"You shouldn't have come, Mick."

"He's not here demanding to see me?"

"Yes, but 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."

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?"

She blinked back tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I don't want or need your sorrow, Jennifer. I want you."

"Mick, I—"

"Never mind." He released her hand and looked past 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."

"Tough shit."

"You won't let him egg you into a fight?"

He shrugged. "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. "He's shorter and lighter than you, Mick. 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 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.

He followed.

She paused in the doorway. Jim stood by the fireplace, 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 with his hand extended 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.

Jim stared 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 shake Mick's hand. "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. "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 and cheese, 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.

Mick stood in the doorway, watching her.

She studied 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."

"Are you all right?"

He nodded.

She glanced passed him. "And Jim? He's all right too?"

"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. “I’ll show you out.”

“I’m not leaving without a kiss or two.”

Jennifer shook her head and pressed back against the counter as Mick started toward her.

He put his arms around her.

She shoved at his shoulders, but his arms tightened and he buried his face against her neck. “I’m not leaving without tasting your warm, sweet, addictive lips again.”

She trembled as she felt the warm, nibbling kisses he pressed against her neck. “Mick! Please.”

He lifted his head to look down at her. “Please kiss you? Oh, I’m going to. I’m going to kiss you until your knees knock, your heart races, and your pussy is slick and wet with wanting me inside.”

She sucked in a breath and leaned against him.

He bent his head, brushing his lips against her cheek. Slowly, sweetly, his mouth continued its warm path to her already parted lips.

She curled her fingers in his shirt.

He gripped her braid and brought her mouth to his. He kissed her slowly, tasting her lips and sucking on her tongue.

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. Or make her ache so much for his touch. Allowing herself the heady luxury of leaning into him, she linked her arms around his neck and greedily returned his kisses.

His free hand brushed over her rear.

She trembled against him.

He deepened the kiss, grinding his groin against her.

Feeling the evidence of his arousal and fearful she'd soon succumb to her desire for him, she dragged her mouth from his. “Jim or Tia might walk in.”

“If they do, neither will be surprised to find me kissing or holding you since they both know you go to my head.”

Jennifer pulled out of his arms. "Why did you tell Jim?"

"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?"

Mick brushed a finger down her cheek. "He wanted to make sure I wasn't planning to sleep with you then discard 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 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. 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 me to."

"You had no right saying anything to Jim or Tia. Do you have any idea how impossible she'll be now? Demanding to know if we're going to be a couple?"

"Are we?"

"I don't know," she said.

"That answer's not good enough, Jennifer."

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.

She blinked back tears. Jim came into the kitchen ten minutes later as she set the table.

"You've done well for yourself, Jen. 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 anywhere 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 wouldn't admit it, but I'd be surprised if he's not 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 the last time I looked we weren't married."

Jim ran a hand around the collar of his shirt and averted his gaze. "Let's not go there again, Jen. We were both too young for marriage."

"I wasn't too young. How could you be?"

He shook his head. "I never meant to hurt you, Jen."

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? We 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, Jen. You know I'm not prejudiced. I was just surprised. I didn't know you went in for big white boys."

She shook her head. "I don't!"

"Jen, news flash. He's very big and very white."

She considered telling him she wasn't going to see Mick any more but decided 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, Jen."

"Jim! I never doubted that. I know you love her."

"Good. Can we be friends again?"

She sighed "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 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."

"I think he's in it for more than just sex. And if you slept with him –"

"That doesn't mean that I want to marry him."

He nodded, smiling. "Of course it means that. I know you, Jen. 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."

"I do know, Jen, 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, Jen, 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."

"Okay. I'll have her ready by 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 elicited a smile. "Oh, Jim. She's going to love that."

"So am I."

* * * * *

After a long, sleepless night recalling Jim's claim that Mick had refused to say he loved her, 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 dinner, and turned the water off. Jennifer 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 pliers 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 heartbeat 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.

Jennifer opened the door. "Mick."

He glanced down at her.

She longed to be 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.

"What are you doing with that pliers?" he asked after he'd followed her inside and closed the door.

She grimaced. "I'm changing the washers on the hot water faucets 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 faucets. Frustrated, she sank onto the floor, struggling to hold back tears.

After a brief tap, Mick walked into the bathroom. He glanced at the still dripping spigots and knelt in front of her. "Let me do that."

"I can do it."

"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 those damned pliers."

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 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 anymore."

"I know," he said softly. "You told me. A couple of times."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I'm a glutton for punishment, obviously." He kissed her fingertips. "Does my age bother you, Jenny?"

"No!" She turned to look at him. "No. This has nothing to do with your age."

"Then what does it have to do with? You knew I was white before our weekend together."

"I'm afraid, Mick."

"Of what?"

She pulled her hand away but didn't get to her feet. "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."

"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. "You're wrong if you think I don't have feelings for you."

He bounded to his feet. "Then 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..."

"Not ready to take the plunge with me? Okay. Think about it." 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. "I want a serious relationship with you."

Her heart thumped painfully in her chest. "How serious? As 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, brown eyes."

A shiver of remembered passion shot through her as her senses flooded with a delicious, vivid memory of his teeth gently sinking into 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!"

He laughed and she watched in disbelief as he ran down the stairs. Moments later, she heard him saying goodnight 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 dreaded 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 lay reading a mystery on the sofa when the doorbell rang at seven-thirty. She sat up and put the book down on the coffee table. Even before she went to the door, she suspected she'd find Mick there. With Tia gone, there was no reason to let him in, yet she still 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, beautiful brown eyes."

"They're beautiful. Thank you." Jennifer 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." Mick 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."

"Why?"

He grinned. "She wanted me to come and keep you company. Since I aim to please, here I am."

"Thanks, but I have all the company I need in the pages of a book." Jennifer made the mistake of trying to push past him.

Mick caught her arm and swung her around to face him. "If that were true, you wouldn't have let me in."

"If I hadn't, you would have just pushed past me."

"How right you are."

"I told you I needed time."

"For what? To decide if you want to see other men?"

Was that what he thought of her? That she wanted to sleep around? She shrugged.
"Maybe we both should see other people."

He slipped his arm around her waist and drew her close. "You're telling me you don't mind my seeing other women?"

"Why should I?"

His arm around her waist tightened.

She trembled with uncontrolled desire as she felt the evidence of his increasing arousal against her.

"You expect me to believe the thought of another woman arousing me 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 other women arousing you. 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 want 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 attempted to rein in her desire. "Don't," she whispered, dragging her lips away from his.

"Why not?" he asked, his voice husky. He pressed his lower body against hers, making her shudder. "I'm not the only one aroused, Jennifer."

Why should she deny the obvious? 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?

"No, you're not," she admitted and pulled his head back down to hers.

Dismay filled her when he abruptly pulled away. "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."

She sucked in an angry breath. What right did he have to arouse her when he had no intentions of making love to her? "Thanks, but I think I'll pass." She pushed past him.

He caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. "The last time I listened to you when you said you wanted to make love, we both lived to regret it."

Damn him. She 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."

Finally he admitted what she'd feared all along. That he didn't think a relationship with her was worth any real effort. Succumbing to that quickie in his office had created the impression she was easy. She recoiled as if he'd slapped her.

"Go ahead. Get yourself one of those willing women!"

"Fine. I will." He turned and walked away.

Jennifer stood still until she heard the front door open and close. He'd left. Maybe for good this time. No! She rushed to the front door. "Mick! 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, brown eyes?"

"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 a reluctant smile curved her lips. "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 rubbed 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?"

"What about it?"

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. "I've already eaten."

"I haven't. Get dressed, Jennifer. Please."

"There are plenty of 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 that, 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'll go get dressed."

"You do that." He licked her lips. "I'll wait."

When she returned forty minutes later, wearing a short-sleeve V-neck black dress with a flared skirt that ended just below her knees, he swept her against him and pressed a long kiss against the side of her neck. "You look good enough to eat, beautiful brown eyes. One, dark, delicious piece at a time."

Despite her mood, she smiled.

"That's better." He extended his hand. She slipped hers in his and they walked to his car.

On the drive, he played Bill Withers *Lean on Me* twice. Listening to the singer's admonition that no one could feel needs that weren't revealed, Jennifer turned to stare at Mick's profile. Did he really want to fill her needs or did he just want to cultivate an environment conducive to great sex with someone he thought wouldn't expect marriage?

They danced after a meal her uncertainty precluded her from enjoying. 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 suspected that she was a heartbeat away from falling in love with him.

"Mick?"

His lips moved gently against her ear. "Yes, darlin'?"

"Will you spend tonight with me?"

His arms tightened around her. "Yes."

Smiling, Jennifer 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 spend hours making love. And although, they ended up sprawled on the living room sofa when they returned to her house, he resisted all of her efforts to seduce him.

"I told you I'm not sleeping with you, Jennifer."

She hated when he called her Jennifer. "Then why agree to spend the night?"

He shrugged. "I like being near you."

At the moment the feeling wasn't mutual. "Fine. You can have the bedroom at the back."

"Thanks."

She stalked away without answering. 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.

She woke in the morning to the smell of coffee brewing. After a quick shower, she dressed in jeans and a T-shirt before going downstairs. As she neared the kitchen, she heard the ending strands of Bill Withers's voice advising his listeners to lean on him when they weren't strong.

She paused in the kitchen door.

Mick, fully dressed, stood at the electric range. The aroma of bacon made her stomach growl. He glanced over his shoulder. "Mornin' darlin'."

His unshaved face looked sexier. She smiled. "Good morning."

He reached over to the counter to turn off an MP3 player before he crossed the room to kiss her on the corner of her mouth.

She resisted the urge to lean into and stepped away instead. "Something smells delicious."

"You mean besides you?"

She jabbed his shoulder. "Don't start anything you're not prepared to finish, Mick."

He laughed, nipped at her earlobe, and returned to the range. "Have a seat, brown eyes."

She did. He poured coffee and orange juice for her before he put a plate of wheat toast, bacon, and a Western omelet in front of her. Over breakfast she found it difficult not to stare at him.

Looking up to find her gaze locked on him, he touched his face. "I don't have my razor with me."

"I like it."

"You do?"

She nodded. "It makes you look so sexy."

"If you tell me that I may never shave again."

She laughed. "Well, I don't know that I like it that much." He smiled. "Are we spending the day together?"

"Is that an invitation, Jenny?"

"Yes."

"I'd be delighted to spend the day with you. However, I need to go home to shave, shower, and change first."

"I'll come with you," she said quickly.

He put his fork down. "You haven't been invited."

She shrugged. "If you only came here when you were invited that would have been one, maybe two times. I'm coming with or without an invitation."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Okay."

"And I don't want any more subliminal lean on me messages."

He rose, walked across to her chair and leaned down to speak against her ear.

"Take the damn hint, Jenny, and I won't be forced to resort to not so subliminal messages. You can trust me."

She turned her head and kissed his mouth. "That's a conclusion I need to reach on my own, Mick."

He whispered something indistinguishable and straightened.

She looked up at him. "What?"

He shook his head. "Let's clean up and head over to my place."

After he showered and dressed, they spent the rest of the morning at the Philadelphia Art Museum. They had lunch at an outside café on the parkway before taking a stroll in the nearby park.

"How would you like to spend the rest of the day, Jenny?"

"Let's go down to Atlantic City to walk the boards in the moonlight."

"You're in a gambling mood?"

"Don't I wish. I haven't been down to gamble in over two years."

"Why not?"

"I can't afford to lose any money. I already owe you money I don't have."

"You don't owe me anything."

She parted her lips.

He held up a hand. "If we're going to spend the rest of the weekend together, I'm not prepared to argue about it, Jenny."

"Fine." She tossed her head, sending her hair cascading around her shoulders.

He curled his fingers in her hair. "You have beautiful hair."

She smiled. "Thank you."

They had dinner at one of the casinos and then he insisted they go onto the gaming floor.

"I don't have any money."

"I do and you're with me."

"Mick—"

"There are benefits to dating an older man with no financial worries, Jennifer."

"You're not that much older and I'm not interested in your money."

"I'm very glad to hear it, darlin'. Now don't give me any shit. Slots or table games?"

"Slots."

He spent two hours watching her play the slots in silence. When she won five hundred dollars and tried to give him the two hundred back he'd given her to start with, he refused to take it. "Buy something for yourself or Tia you wouldn't ordinarily purchase and I'll consider I won as well."

"Thanks, Mick."

"You're welcome." He glanced at his watch. "Are you ready to cash out and head home?"

Eager to spend the night in his arms, she nodded. On the drive back to Philadelphia, he played *Lean on Me* twice. She laughed. "You're impossible, Mick."

"I'd rather you thought I was irresistible."

"You're that too."

"I'll take that—for now. Are we spending the night at your place or mine?"

She wanted to wake in her own bed with his naked body pressed against her back or with his leg or arm tossed across her body. "Mine."

"Good choice. I like waking in the morning knowing I'm in your house and you're near."

"Then we're on the same page."

They were if he shared her desire to spend the night in his arms.

At her house, he turned out the lights, leaving the only source of illumination in the living room moonlight. He sat on the loveseat and drew her down onto his lap.

"Oh, Mick," she whispered, turning her head in search of his mouth.

He curled his fingers in her hair and pressed a series of scorching kisses against her lips while he unbuttoned her top to fondle and caress her breasts. He kissed her until her nipples were hard and her thong damp. She parted her legs to cup her hands over his hardening cock.

He swore softly and then abruptly rose, setting her on her feet.

She opened her eyes to look up at him. "Mick?"

He took a deep breath, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "Do you mind?"

"Do I mind what?"

"If I say goodnight now?"

Standing in front of him with her breasts exposed, Jennifer felt her cheeks burning.

"You're leaving?"

"No. Just going to bed in the back room."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Alone."

Oh, God, not that again. She reached down to button her blouse over her breasts.

"Why alone?"

"I don't think our having sex again is a good idea until we're really on the same page."

She struggled to control her anger that he was doing what he'd accused her of doing – making decisions for both of them. "And what page is that?"

"I need you to trust me not to hurt you."

"What does sex have to do with trust, Mick?"

He caressed her cheeks. "I want you to understand that I'm not just in this for the sex."

She shook her head. "Fine. You know the way to the back bedroom."

"You're angry."

"Yes. I am. If that's your position, why did you rev me up again? What are you trying to do to me? Make me beg?"

"If you believe that, clearly you don't trust me, Jenny."

Damn. A woman couldn't win with him. "Fine. Have it your way, Mick!" She turned and hurried from the room.

He followed her. "Do you want me to leave?"

She spun around to face him at the bottom of the steps. "No. I don't."

They spent the night in separate bedroom again. Lying sleepless in bed, she wondered how he'd react if she waltzed into the guest bedroom and joined him in bed. Would he rebuff her? Or would he welcome her and make love to her? Plagued by doubts, she decided not to subject herself to possible rejection.

The next morning she woke to the aroma of pancakes and freshly brewed coffee. After breakfast, they went for a drive in Fairmount Park. They found a place to park and spent an hour walking before having lunch out.

When he drove her home, he went inside with her but refused her offer of coffee. He glanced at his watch. "Thanks, but I don't have time."

"Stay until Tia gets home."

"I can't."

"Why not? You have a date?"

He nodded. "As a matter of fact, I do."

She frowned. "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. "I hate when you call me Jennifer, Michael and you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do." He removed her hand from his shoulder, kissed the clenched fist, and stepped away from her. "I'll see you later."

"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."

She clenched a fist. "How can you say that?"

"You haven't really given me a reason to believe otherwise, Jennifer."

"That's not fair."

"I don't have time to argue with you." He kissed her cheek and left her standing at the door.

* * * * *

"You always take his side!"

Tasha put down her sandwich and stared across the small café 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, Jen. 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, Jen," 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?"

"He hasn't asked me."

"Then why don't you ask him?"

"I can't do that."

"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 have I been jerking him around?"

Tasha lifted her eyes ceiling ward. "That's what it looks like from where I've been sitting, Jen. 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 Jennifer said it, she had a distinct memory of him telling her he would not be handled by any woman. And his damned date he wouldn't discuss.

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not. I just know he wouldn't."

"Don't count on anything you can't explain."

Jennifer felt as if she'd been doused with ice water. "Why are you saying these things?"

"Because I'm the one who's going to have to pick up the pieces if you blow it with him. Tell him how you feel 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." Tasha 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, Jen, before you lose him."

"That's easier said than done when I don't know how he feels."

"Ask him."

"I did. He laughed and left. After he spent the entire weekend arousing me only to refuse to satisfy me, it's his move."

“Before you decide if that’s how you want to roll, decide how much you want him in your life.”

She knew Tasha was right. Back at work, she sat trying to decide what to do about her relationship with Mick. She absolutely wanted him in her life. The only question was what she was prepared to do to ensure she kept his interest.

* * * * *

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 dusty 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, Mick.”

“What kind?”

“It's in your office.” Still grinning, Hal turned away.

Mick 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 was ready for more than just sex. 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 practically begging her to trust and lean on him, and no more running after her. He'd stay away from her for awhile – 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. “What a nice surprise to hear from you.”

“I’ve called you before.”

“Once and that definitely was not enough.”

“I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with Tia and me.”

“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?”

There was no mistaking the disappointment in her voice and he steeled himself to ignore it. “Yes.”

“With the woman you left me for on Sunday?”

“No.”

“Another one?”

His lips twitched. “Don’t worry, Jenny. I haven’t lost an ounce of appreciation for your beautiful brown eyes.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Mick. So who do you have these plans with?”

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?"

"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 —"

"When? When will you call, Mick? Tonight? Tomorrow? Wednesday? When?"

She sounded irritated. Good. 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 and rummaged in the refrigerator for something to eat. He'd just finished eating several slices of cold pizza and downing two beers when his bell rang. He was surprised to see Erinae on his doorstep.

"What brings you here?" he asked after they shared a quick kiss and a brief hug.

"I was at a loose end and Carlee said your girlfriend was giving you a run for your money. So I came to offer moral support."

"Thanks. I think."

She laughed and slipped her arm around his waist. "Invite me in."

"You're already in." He ushered her into his living room where they shared the love seat and settled down with popcorn to watch a John Wayne western.

"Why didn't you tell her how you feel, Mick?"

He lowered the sound of the DVD. "And give her another weapon to jerk my chain with?" He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Is she really jerking your chain, Mick, or is she just afraid of being hurt again? Look at it from her point of view. She's a single mom dating a handsome, older white male whose financial position puts him out of her league. You told her you prefer black

women but you married a white one. You two haven't known each other long. Give her some room to get a feel for you."

He arched a brow. "Do you know her?"

She slipped her arm through his. "No, but I can imagine how she must feel trying to weave her way through a relationship with you, Mick."

"She trusted her ex. Why can't she trust me?"

"Some black women dating white men have issues of trust."

"But they don't have those same issues with black men?"

She shrugged. "I'm just telling you how it is, Mick."

He gave her a cool look, recalling how she'd made it clear that he was good enough to sleep with but not good enough to marry. Jennifer appeared to share the same viewpoint.

"What's that look for?"

The phone rang. He allowed it to go on the answering machine.

He tensed at the sound of 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 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. We hope you enjoy your date — but not too much.

"I hope you didn't misunderstand what I said Friday night. I'm not seeing anyone else, Mick. And I'm not going to. I hope you won't either. Bye."

"Was that her?"

He nodded.

"Why don't you tell her you love her?"

"I don't recall mentioning anything about love."

Erinae flashed a smile at him and then shot her hand out to rest on his crouch.

He closed his hand over her wrist and removed her hand.

"But you do love her. Don't you?"

He shrugged and released her hand.

"Maybe if you admitted you loved her, she'd trust you."

"Maybe if she trusted me, I might be willing to tell her I do!"

Erinae sighed and stroked his arm. "Being in love isn't always easy, handsome."

"Are you in love?"

She nodded, a slow smile spreading across her face. "I think I am."

"And is he?"

"He'd better be."

"Who could resist you?"

She smiled. "Right answer." She squeezed his cheek. "Give her a little room, Mick."

He sighed. It must have 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. "I'll think about it."

"Good." Erinae rose. "It's time I got home. Walk me to my car."

After he'd seen Erinae on her way, he returned to the living room. He wasn't ready to see Jennifer again, but he couldn't allow Tia to get caught in the middle. After an hour wait, he picked up the phone. To his relief, 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 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. 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 anymore?"

"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 with Jennifer.

"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 anymore!" 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. Tia had it 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 the moment. 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 sprawled on her stomach on Jennifer's 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 and 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 into 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, Jen? It's only been —"

"He's avoided me for three weeks. I've sent him red roses two times, 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 I know except become a stalker."

"You'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 anymore!"

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 going to help?"

"What am I supposed to do, sit around waiting for him to notice me again?"

"Why not if he's worth waiting for?"

"I've had my fill of begging. If this is the way he wants it, fine." Jennifer 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, Jen. 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 not become involved with 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?"

While Jennifer reeled under Tia's bombshell, 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 heart beat a wild pattern against her chest. 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, "Jen, I think our plans have changed."

"What? Why? Has Paul changed his mind about escorting us both?"

"Come see," Tasha called back.

Jennifer got up and went into the hall. She froze.

Mick stood in the doorway holding a bouquet of red roses.

She blinked back tears. His appearance on the very night she planned to head to a club would surely be a good sign.

"You're Jen's Irish hunk?" Tasha asked, allowing her eyes to slowly flick over Mick. "Jen said you were gorgeous. Are there any more like you at home?"

"Tasha, as you've already deduced, 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. "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 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."

"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. "I don't like it."

"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 sexy," she said, aware that she sounded more than a little defensive.

"Sexy? I guess that's one way of looking at it. 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 easy. "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."

"Are you here as the man 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 Jennifer 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."

"Did you want her? Did you sleep with her?"

"I haven't felt the need to sleep with more than one woman at a time since college, Jennifer."

"Then why did you see her?"

"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 goodbyes."

"And who were you with that Monday when I first called?"

"John Wayne."

"What?"

"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 shrugged. "A friend did stop by but I wasn't with her."

"When you say friend, what do you mean?"

"There are no benefits attached to our relationship."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive." He took her into his arms.

"Oh, Mick! I thought . . ." Her eyes filled with tears. "I thought you were with another woman. I thought you didn't want me anymore."

"And did that bother you?"

"What do you want me to say? 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. "You know I more than like you."

"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."

She clutched the lapels of his jacket in her hands. "What are you saying? It has to be enough!"

Mick 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. Good night and goodbye, 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."

"This hasn't been a game."

"You know something, Jennifer? I don't care anymore. 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."

"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, fighting back tears. "Please wait, 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."

"I know that. I also know when I've had enough." He shook his head. "I'm too damned old to play games with you." He brushed 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 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 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 she'd finally 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 whose interest didn't extend beyond sex.

Well, Jennifer wasn't the only woman in the world. Maybe it was time Mick 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 Jennifer and Tia. 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.

He needed to be with a woman who wanted to be with him. Erinae would fit the bill perfectly but he wasn't about to do anything to interfere in her new relationship. That left a pick-up or Janet Walker. If she were willing to see him, knowing how he felt about Jennifer, he'd be a fool not to oblige her.

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. His heartbeat quickened 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.

"I need 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 wore 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 that indecent dress 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.

Mick motioned to one of the chairs in front of his desk. Jennifer met his gaze briefly and 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 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 held. "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. "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 expectantly 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."

Afraid that his desire and love would shine through in his eyes, Mick rose and stared out the window behind his desk. "Tonight? I'm not sure that's such a good idea. I don't think she wants to see me. She doesn't come to the park anymore and she refused to speak to me the last two times I called her."

"I know. She told me, but she also told me she was sorry. She wants to see you."

"Then I'll come."

Jennifer sighed.

He turned to face her. "Anything else?"

"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?"

"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?"

"That's rich when we both know 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! 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 provide some. 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 easy, Mick!"

Remembering that dress that had been intended for other men, he bit back the urge to reassure her. "What have you been doing with yourself? Who have you been seeing?"

She tossed her head, sending her hair cascading around her face. "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 sit there acting as if I'm easy!"

"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. All I'm saying is that we obviously want very different things from a relationship. I'll be forty soon, Jennifer. I don't have

time to fool around with meaningless relationships. I need a commitment. 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.

"Tell me I haven't blown it with you. Tell me you 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.

"Mick?"

He ground his teeth together when her fingertips touched his back.

"Who's sending you red roses? Have you been sleeping with another woman?"

He didn't answer.

"Mick?" Her voice quivered. Her hands moved against his back before she slipped her arms 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. "I want 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."

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. "Don't cry."

"I need you."

He brushed her tears away with the backs of his hands. "Need or want?"

She took a deep, gulping breath. "Both! I've been so miserable without you."

"Why?"

She bit her lip. "You must know how I feel, Mick."

"I know how I want you to feel. 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."

"You've never said them to me."

"I've been in love with you from the moment we met."

"You have?"

He nodded.

"I love you too."

He stared at her, almost afraid he'd misunderstood her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I'm very 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 don't sleep around. We only spent the weekend together because I loved you."

"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?"

"Yes. Who? I sure as hell never said or implied I didn't."

She moistened her lips. "Do you?"

"Hell, yes!"

She sucked in a breath, staring up at him. "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 sobbed.

He stroked her shoulders and let 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.

"Damn, I'm in trouble if a marriage proposal makes you cry."

She lifted her face and stared up at him. "I didn't think you loved me and then I thought I'd lost you. I love you so much!"

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.

"Yesss! Yesss!" 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! 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 fell for you the moment I looked up into your beautiful brown eyes that day on the train."

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 matter 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 matter what color you were too. I'm thinking you and I were meant for each other. It's almost like we're soul mates."

"Soul Mates? I guess if you consider the series of coincidences that brought and kept us together that makes sense. Tasha said our meeting was fated."

"So you'll marry me?"

"Will I marry you?" Jennifer 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. "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."

"Some people like your mother?"

"No! Well...maybe. Who told you?"

"Early in our relationship, Tia mentioned that your mother was less than thrilled, shall we say, with interracial socializing."

She stared up at him, an anxious look on her face. "I don't want you to misunderstand, Mick. She's not prejudiced."

"No?"

"No!"

He brushed his hand against the back of her cheek. "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."

"What about 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 just as we were. He died before we came to America, but I still miss him."

She touched his cheek. "And your mom?"

"Mom." He smiled. "She struggled to provide for us and to keep us safe and happy after my father died. But she could never understand my preference in women."

"What about the rest of your family? How will they feel?"

"My two surviving brothers live in Ireland with their wives. I don't foresee any problems with them, Jennifer. We've always been close. They both know of and accept my preference in women. 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?" Mick shrugged. "He's one of my oldest and best friends. . 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 that party?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"You've been seeing her?"

He reached out and pulled Jennifer back in his arms. "No, I have not. I haven't seen or been with anyone in the sense you mean. 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."

"Then let's not wait." He crossed the office to lock the door. Then he turned to extend a hand to her.

She rushed across the room to him.

He positioned her against the wall by the door and bent to rain kisses against her ear and neck. "I need to kiss you...to touch you...to love you."

She reached between their bodies to unbutton her blouse. "Take me, Mick. I'm yours."

He lifted his head to look down at her. She reached behind her to unhook her bra. She then pushed it up above her breasts. Mick inhaled sharply when she trailed her hands down his body to unzip his pants. Moments later, he felt her soft, warm fingers on his cock.

"You're already hard," she whispered.

"Tell me something I don't already know, brown eyes. Like what you're going to do about it."

She pumped and massaged him, making his shudder. Keeping one hand on his cock, she used her other hand to push up her skirt.

He was surprised and pleased to see her hose ended at her upper thighs, showcasing her bare pussy. He reached down to finger and caress her slit and clit. "Naughty girl. You came out without your thong."

"Oops. I knew I forgot something when I dressed this morning knowing I was going to force a meeting on you." She slid her hand up and down his cock. "What are you going to do with this? Where are you going to put it?"

"I don't have a condom."

"You love me and want to marry me?"

"Oh, hell, yes, brown eyes."

"Then I'm prepared to lean on you and trust you to do the right thing."

"What?"

"I'm prepared to extend the ultimate trust to you, Mick."

"Jen—"

"I'm yours." She rubbed the end of his shaft along her slit twice before she pushed her hips forward. She slowly allowed her warm, wet pussy lips to close around the head of his cock.

Overcoming the urge to drive the rest of his length deep inside her, he pressed his hands against her shoulders. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Are you sure you love me and want to marry me?"

"I've never been more certain of anything else."

"Then I'm sure I want this." She slipped her palms over his ass and pulled him forward until he'd slid balls deep inside her tight, warm pussy.

She looked up at him. "I love you," she whispered. "Love me."

"Oh, shit, Jenny! I do. I really do!" Mick pushed her against the wall, captured her mouth, and slipped his arms around her waist until he felt her hardened nipples against his chest.

Clutching her close, he gave her a slow, long fuck, taking the time to savor each deep foray into the depths of a pussy he now knew would belong only to him. He enjoyed the low, gasping sounds she made and the way she trembled as he drove his cock into her.

Lost in the sweet heat of her hot, tight pussy, he closed his eyes and struggled to retain control until he felt the involuntary contracting of her vaginal muscles as she came. Only then did he pin her against the door and blasted his seed inside her.

For several moments after they came, they clung to each other with his cock still inside her before he heard a phone ring in the reception area and reality returned.

He lifted her head from his shoulder and looked down at her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, a slow smile spreading across her pretty face. "Never been better. What about you, handsome?"

"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.

Once Jennifer emerged from Mick's passionate embrace, she struggled to clear her thoughts as she straightened her clothes. "Have dinner with me Tia and me tomorrow night so we can tell her we're getting married together."

"Do you think she'll be pleased?"

"Do pigs fly?"

"No. They don't."

Noting the narrowing of his gaze, she laughed, leaning against him. "Lighten up, Mick. You must know she'll be delighted."

"Do I? I'm not exactly her favorite person these days."

"She's just trying to be loyal to me because she knew I was unhappy. Underneath, she's almost as crazy about you as she is about her father."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Great. Then I'll have dinner with you and Tia tomorrow night." He slipped an arm around her waist. "Can you get a babysitter so I can have you for dinner tonight?"

She rubbed her cheek against his shirt. "I'd love to, but it's time I started remembering I'm a mom setting an example for her."

"I don't think I like where this is going, Jennifer."

She looked up at him. "I don't want her to think it's okay to sleep around, Mick. So I can't sleep around with you."

"Then you're going to need to rethink having a wedding and we'll just get married ASAP."

"I want a wedding, Mick."

His lips tightened.

She caressed his cheek. "When she's with her dad, we can spend the weekend fucking like bunnies. When she's home, I want at least the appearance that we're not sleeping together."

He sighed and allowed his arms to drop away from her waist.

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"This is the twenty-first century."

She tensed. What happened to all his talk of being able to control himself?

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, it's refreshing to meet a woman your age who wants to teach her daughter morals."

"So you're okay with the no sex when she's home?"

"Hell no I'm not okay with it, but I'll deal with it." He smiled suddenly. "What do you say we send her to stay with her father until after the honeymoon?"

"Mick!" She tapped a fist against his shoulder.

He laughed. "Just kidding."

"Were you?"

"Yes. Believe me I'm the last man not to appreciate how precious time with a child can and should be. I wouldn't trade the time I can share with her for anything."

She kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Mick."

"You're welcome." He bent to kiss her lips.

She pulled out of his arms several long, delicious minutes later. "I have to get home."

"Did you drive today?"

"No. The car had a funny feel to it so I left it home and took the train."

"I'll drive you home."

"Thanks."

"How about a quickie first?"

She trembled at the thought but shook her head. "I'm already late and I don't want to keep Aunt Linda waiting any longer."

Later that night, she lay in bed hugging her pillow and thinking of him until she drifted to sleep.

She got up early the next morning to make preparations for dinner that night. After giving Aunt Linda specific instructions on how to prepare dinner, she left for work. To Jennifer's surprise, the other woman didn't appear to mind cooking for Mick.

Outside, she hesitated by her car before deciding she'd better not risk it breaking down. After walking Tia to school, she headed for the train. Her day was busy but boring since Mick spent the entire day out of the office.

She left work early so she had time to take a fifteen minute bubble bath before she told Tia Mick was having dinner with them while she dressed.

Tia was silent for several moments before she spoke. "Is he in love with you again, Mommy?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes. He is. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I don't know."

Jennifer paused in the act of slipping on her heels. "I thought you'd be happy to see him."

Tia shrugged. "Is he going to stay this time?"

She caressed Tia's cheek. "Why don't you ask him when he arrives?"

"Okay, Mommy."

When Mick arrived with a mixed bouquet for Tia and a dozen red roses for her, Jennifer was dismayed at her daughter's cool reaction to him. All through the meal, Tia gave Mick long, unsmiling stares.

"What can I do to make things right with you, Tia?" he asked Tia as he sat with her and Jennifer in the living room after dinner.

"Are you going to stop seeing us again, Mick?"

"No, honey, I'm not."

"Why not? You stopped before."

He hesitated before he reached into his pocket. When he opened his hand, Jennifer caught her breath. There was a small, black velvet box in his palm. He looked at her as he opened the box and held it out for Tia's inspection.

Jennifer blinked back tears as she stared at the beautiful white gold diamond solitaire.

"It looks like the ring my daddy gave my Mommy when he wanted to marry her."

"Maybe that's because I want to marry her too."

"You do? Why?"

"Because I love her."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm very sure, honey."

"You're not going to change your mind like you did before, Mick?"

"I never changed my mind. I just didn't think your Mommy wanted to marry me."

"But she did."

"I didn't know that."

"You do now?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Tia stared at him, looked at the ring, and then tossed herself onto his lap. "I knew you'd love her."

"I love you too."

A wide smile spread across Tia's pretty face. "You do?"

"Oh, yes, I do."

Tia smiled at her. "I knew he'd love us, Mommy!"

Jennifer smiled. "And we love him too. Don't we?"

"Yes, Mommy. We do."

Mick released a breath. "So I have your permission to marry her?"

Tia nodded. "I think Mommy and me would like to have you be married to her."

He hugged Tia with one arm while holding the box out to Jennifer. She took it, removed the ring, and gave it to him. He took it and then slipped it on her finger.

She laughed and then started crying

Tia cried too.

Mick pulled her onto his lap and held them both while they sobbed with happiness.

Later when Tia was in bed, and he and Jennifer were alone, he embraced her from behind as she stood at her living room window. "How was your day?"

"It would have been better if I'd seen you and if I didn't have to keep taking the train."

He brushed his lips against her cheek. "Do you know what I'm going to do tomorrow morning?"

She leaned back against him. "I will when you tell me."

"I'm going to buy you a new car that won't break down or leave you stranded."

She sucked in a breath and quickly stepped out of his arms.

"Jen?" Mick touched her shoulder. "This isn't the time to give me any shit. I'm buying the car whether you like it or not."

"Really?"

“Really. How are you planning to handle that?”

She turned to face him. “I’m going to let you.”

“What?”

Her lips twitched. He’d clearly been expecting her to argue. She shrugged. “Why should I drive an old, unreliable car when my man can afford to buy me a new one? But I warn you, Mick, I want a big, shiny, gas guzzler loaded with all the latest gadgets.”

He grinned. “That’s my woman.”

“I am your woman, Mick. Now do I get my new SUV?”

“Of course you do.”

“When?”

He laughed. “You go from demonizing me because I dared to make a few repairs on your car to demanding a new gas guzzler? This is going to be an interesting marriage.”

“Having second thoughts?”

“No way in hell. I’m going gas guzzler shopping tomorrow. Come with me, and if what you want is in the showroom, maybe you can drive it off the lot tomorrow night.”

“Hmm. Maybe there will be other advantages to loving you besides getting to slide up and down your big cock every night,” she teased as she leaned against him.

He engulfed her in a warm embrace. “You keep talking like that and you’re going to have to fight me off.”

“I’ll never fight you off,” Jennifer told him, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. “I love you and I’ll be yours forever, Mick.”

“Oh, damn! At last.” He buried his face against her neck.

She clung to him. Travelling the road they’d chosen wouldn’t be easy. But it represented the greatest promise of happiness for them both. And that’s all she wanted – a chance for happiness with him.

Large, Shy, and Beautiful

by
Marilyn Lee

"Here he comes," my best friend Betty hissed. "Go ahead. Ask him."

I turned a cool look on her. "When are you going to learn that I am not going to ask him or any other man out to dinner?" I demanded.

"Forget that old-fashioned nonsense and ask him! He's gorgeous!"

No doubt about that. "I don't care how good looking he is. I'm not asking him out!" I hissed back and deliberately looked away from the man heading in our direction in the small cafe.

"What?" Betty demanded.

"You heard me," I answered, even as my heart raced.

"Are you nuts?" Betty's dark eyes narrowed and her mouth compressed into a tight line. She hated it when I refused to fall in with her plans for me.

I narrowed my own brown gaze and thinned my somewhat fuller lips. I hated it when she tried to remold me into something I could never be, so I figured we were even. "Am I nuts? No more than usual."

As we hissed and tried to stare each other down, the object of our debate, a tall, attractive man with thick, dark hair, deep, dark eyes, and the high cheekbones and coloring indicative of a Native American male slowed his stride as he neared our table.

"Neida! He's coming this way and he's going to stop!" Betty whispered, squeezing my hand almost hard enough to cut off the blood flow.

I didn't answer. There was no time. He was nearly level with the small table we shared. We both held our breaths, expecting him to stop or at the very least speak to us.

Well, me. He did neither.

We sighed in unison and turned to watch him walk out of the cafe and into the warm April sunshine.

"I suppose *you're* satisfied," Betty said coolly.

"Satisfied?" I frowned at her. "You're kidding. Right?"

"No, I am not kidding!"

"Then *you're* nuts!" She had to be. I could almost taste my disappointment. And surely anyone with a pair of eyes could see it all over my face. She, of all people, knew that I'd only allowed myself to be dragged back to that cafe in the hope of seeing the good looking stranger we had first noticed having breakfast there on Monday morning. It had taken her four days to get me back here and now she dared to make dumb statements? "And furthermore, your elevator is clearly not going to the top floor today!" I snapped.

She glared at me. "You just wait until I get you alone."

"Don't start with me," I warned. I was not in the mood to be intimidated.

"Don't you use that tone with me!" She snapped back, looking like she'd like to give me a good, old-fashioned, teeth-rattling shaking. Of course that would take some doing because I out weighted her by, well let's just say she's a shapely size eight and I'm not. Daddy always called me pleasingly plump.

"Neida, are you daydreaming again?" Betty demanded, interrupting my thoughts.

Resisting the urge to snap at her yet again, I sighed and decided to consider the source. Betty had been happily married for five years, the last two of which she'd spent in a determined effort to fix me up with "Mr. Right." This was fine since, at thirty, I was ready to settle down. We continually ran into trouble because we had very different ideas about how my search for Mr. Right should proceed. While I was content to wait on the Lord to send my soul mate my way, Betty thought I should take every opportunity to help the process along.

"Now, mind you, I'm not implying that the Good Lord needs any help. She was fond of saying.

And when I stared disapprovingly and demanded, "But?"

She'd reply, "You know the old saying – 'The Lord helps those who help themselves.' So help yourself already. That's all I'm saying."

To which I would respond, "The Lord knows I'm not a go getter when it comes to men and he knows why."

"I didn't mean *that*, Cal."

That, of course being my weight, which we no longer discussed. After fruitless attempts to trim down and endless long talks with The Lord, I'd decided to accept myself for who I was – all of me. I was confident that The Lord knew I'd dieted till I couldn't diet no more.

"I know, but the Good Lord knows I need a little more assistance than other woman might need," I'd reply complacently.

Her usual response consisted of throwing up her hands and despairing of me for the rest of the day.

"We might as well go," Betty went on in the same aggrieved tone.

"We might as well," I agreed morosely.

I was mighty grateful the school where we both taught was just three blocks away because I had to suffer through Betty's silent treatment as we headed to work. Anyone would think I'd injured her in some way.

As we paused outside my classroom door, Betty suddenly perked up. I knew that gleam in her eyes well. "I am not going back there on Monday," I said quickly, hoping to foil whatever scheme she was devising.

She tossed her long, blonde curls. "Neida Headstrong, you are nuts if you think I'm going to stand by while you let your dream brave slip through your fingers!"

"The name is Armstrong. And..." I tossed my head, sending my long, dark hair cascading around my face. "Get this straight: I am not going back there and even if I do see him again, I am not asking him out."

"What?! Why do I waste my time with you, Neida Headstrong?" She shook her head and cast her gaze skyward in what I personally thought of as her Lord-give-me-the-strength-to-deal-with-this-lunatic look.

"I haven't a clue," I informed her coolly. "If the Lord wants us to meet again, we will. But I am not going to try to run him down."

"Fine. Be difficult," She shot back, looking for all the world as if I'd mortally wounded her. "See if I care."

Ignoring her woe-is-me routine, I escaped into my classroom and welcomed my students moments later. Betty was a bit much when she was on a mission. And she was on a big time mission with this guy. I would have loved to join her, but after the way he looked right through me, I knew it was hopeless. Big men like him always seemed to prefer tiny women.

Still I thought of him frequently on Saturday morning as I cleaned my apartment. But I knew I'd seen the last of him. Haldane was a small town. He was probably just passing through or visiting relatives. With my luck and track record with men, he was probably long gone by now. And even if he wasn't, there was bound to be some lucky tiny woman who'd already staked a claim on him.

The thought upset me more than it should, leaving me feeling unfairly deprived. I paused in my cleaning to offer a silent prayer of thanks for the things I already had: Among my blessing I included a close relationship with the Lord, good friends, and a job I found enjoyable and rewarding. Okay, so I was not slender. Never had been and probably never would be. I'd probably never make much more money than I currently did.

Dwelling on what I didn't have: a slim, willowy frame and a husband who'd share

my faith and my burdens was counter productive. It also made me uneasy, as if I were beginning to doubt that the Lord did indeed provide for those who loved him.

So I was actually relieved when Betty called that afternoon.

"Come have dinner with us tonight."

"Thanks, but I think I'll spend the evening reading," I said. I actually intended to spend it feeling sorry for myself while I thought about the tall, dark stranger. But I was not about to admit that to Betty.

"You can read anytime, Neida. Tonight, you have to come to dinner."

"Betty, I told you —"

"No, really. You *have* to come," she insisted.

I wasn't in the mood to socialize but if anyone could lift me out of my current dark mood, it was Betty. "Okay. I'll come," I agreed.

A short silence ensued. I smiled, certain my quick acquiescence had caught her off guard.

"You will?"

"I believe I just said that."

"You will! Great. Good. Oh and Neida, wear something pretty."

I glanced down at my comfortable jeans and extra large tee shirt. One of the beauties of meals at her house was dressing casually. "Why?"

After another silence ensued.

I frowned. "Are you feeling okay, Bet?"

"What? Oh. I'm fine, but Jack's in the dumps. He needs cheering up. Wear that new pink dress. He likes you in pink."

"He likes you better in it," I said. "If he needs cheering up, why don't you wear something pink? And anyway —"

"Pastels colors look great against your dark skin tone and you know it."

"So Jack's into plus-sized black women instead of beautiful, blue-eyed slender blondes? Or —"

"Will you please just wear the blue dress?" She cut me off, sounding exasperated. "And wear some heels with a decent height to showcase your legs."

I arched a brow at her tone. "In case no one told you, Jack's already married," I teased.

"If that's supposed to be funny, it isn't!" She snapped.

"Fine. No need to bite my head off. Me and the pink dress will be there."

"Oh, good," she said, and I knew she was smiling; no doubt pleased at having gotten her way. Yet again.

It was only after we'd said our goodbyes that I wondered what she were up to. When it came to finding my Mr. Right, Betty was always up to something. She was tireless and relentless in her efforts to fix me up.

"You'll find out soon enough what she's plotting," I told my reflection as I stood in front of my bedroom mirror. I smiled, pleased at how the dress flattered my plus-sized body and how the heels showcased one of my best assets-my legs.

I brushed my long, dark hair until it fell into another my shoulders. Satisfied I looked my best, I picked up my purse and let. Since it was a warm evening, I decided to walk to Betty and Jack's house.

Betty let out a piercing wolf whistle when she opened the door for me. "Now that's what I'm talking about. You look stunning. You'll be glad you wore it. You'll knock Jack right out of the doldrums."

Something about the gleam in her eyes set off an alarm. I frowned, backing away.

She reached out and gripped my hand. "You're going the wrong way."

"I suggest you tell me what you're up to or I'm going home."

"Up to?" She widened her eyes and tried to look innocent.

"Yes. What are you up to, Betty?"

"Neida, your paranoia is showing. I'm not up to anything. Come on in."

Despite her denials, I knew she wasn't being straight with me. We were, after all, best friends. I know her as well as she knows me. "Not until you tell me what's up," I insisted.

"God save me from overly suspicious friends."

"He's going to need to have you from me until you fess up quickly."

She laughed and practically snatched me into the house. "I don't know how or why I continue to put up with you."

"Because I'm so lovable?"

"Don't I wish," she muttered as she swept me down the hall.

Outside the living room, she released my hand and turned to stare at me.

I stared back, frowning. "What? Got food stuck between my teeth?"

I watched her eyes widen before she reached out and pushed my lips apart, revealing my teeth.

I jerked back. "Bet!"

"There's nothing between your teeth but your reckless tongue," she said and sighed with obvious relief.

"Don't you think you're going overboard for dinner?" I asked. "As I've already point out, Jack's married."

She gave me a cool look, and then smiled suddenly, pushing me into the living room.

"Hey, Wait..." The rest of my protest died on my lips as I found myself gaping up at the handsome man from the cafe.

"Oneida Armstrong, this is Braden Elkhorn. Braden, this lovely, single, voluptuous

creature is Oneida.” Betty grinned at him but gave me her Don't-mess-with-me-cause-I-don't-take-any-prisoners look. “Neida, keep Braden company while Jack and I put the finishing touches on dinner.” Grinning like the cat that ate the last tasty canary, she practically danced out the room.

My heart pounded and my legs shook. He was actually there. In Betty's house. Every tall, break taking inch of him. He was there. Waiting for me. This must surely be a sign from the Lord. This was my chance to wow him with the charm and wit Betty and Jack always insisted I excelled at.

I parted my lips to speak and drew a complete and total blank. I stared at him, silently praying for guidance and to have the locked muscles of my throat loosened.

“It's very nice to meet you, Oneida,” he said after an awkward silence.

He had a nice voice. Low, warm, and well modulated. He smiled, as if he were delighted, or at least not displeased to see me.

Watching his slow, warm smile spread from his lips to his dark eyes too filled my head and heart with lustfully desires. I glanced at his mouth and couldn't look away. Ashamed of the hunger coursing through me, I blushed like an inexperienced teenybopper.

When I swallowed and finally found my voice. “I can't tell you how glad I am to see you again!” Of course I would gladly have given my life savings to have those awful words back the moment they left my lips. Now he was bound to think I was desperate and shameless.

Apparently chivalry wasn't dead.

He exhaled. “Thank God. I'm glad you feel that way because I'm delighted to see you again too.”

But I felt sure he didn't really mean it. How could this well-built, handsome hunk who didn't appear to have an ounce of spare flesh on his big, sculptured body be

delighted to see me again?

Large, Shy, And Beautiful is an inspirational romance by Marilyn Lee

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Nice Girls Do

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Marilyn's Bio:

Marilyn Lee lives, works, and writes on the East Coast. In addition to thoroughly enjoying writing erotic romances, she enjoys roller-skating, spending time with her large, extended family, and rooting for all her hometown sports teams. Her other interests include collecting Doc Savage pulp novels from the thirties and forties and collecting Marvel comics from the seventies and eighties (particularly Thor and The Avengers). Her favorite TV shows are forensic shows, westerns (Gunsmoke and Have Gun, Will Travel are particular favorites), mysteries (loves the old Charlie Chan mysteries. Her all time favorite mystery movie is probably Dead, Again), and nearly every vampire movie or television show ever made (Forever Knight and Count Yorga, Vampire are favorites).

Marilyn has won numerous writing accolades, including a CAPA award for Bloodlust: Conquering Mikhel Dumont and the following Lub-Dubs Awards for 2009: Lifetime Achievement Award, In Blood And Worth Loving (Best erotic novel and best sci-fi/fantasy/paranormal Award.

She loves to hear from readers who can email her at Mlee2057@AOL.com or who can visit her website, <http://www.marilynlee.org>. She has a Yahoo! Group called Love

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