

Just Curious  
By Jude Deveraux

"I DON'T BELIEVE in miracles," Karen said, looking at her sister-in-law with her lips pressed tightly together. Sunlight shone on Karen's shiny-clean face, making her look like the "before" photo of a model without makeup. But lack of makeup only revealed perfect skin, high cheekbones, and eyes like dark emeralds.

"I never said a word about miracles," Ann replied, her voice showing her exasperation. She was as dark as Karen was fair, half a foot shorter, and voluptuous. "All I said was that you should go to the Christmas dance at the club. What's so miraculous about that?"

"You said that I might meet someone wonderful and get married again," Karen answered, refusing to remember the car wreck that had taken her beloved husband from her.

"Okay, so shoot me, I apologize." Squinting her eyes at her once-beautiful sister-in-law, Ann found it difficult to believe that she used to be eaten up with jealousy over Karen's looks. Now Karen's hair hung lank and lifeless about her shoulders, with split ends up to her ears. She hadn't a trace of makeup on and with her pale coloring, Karen looked like a teenager without it. Instead of the elegant clothes she used to wear, she now had on an old sweat suit that Ann knew had belonged to Karen's deceased husband, Ray.

"You used to be the most gorgeous girl at the country club," Ann said wistfully. "I remember seeing you and Ray dance at Christmas. Remember that red dress you had, slit so high your tonsils were visible? But how you and Ray looked when you danced together was worth it! Those legs of yours had every man in the room drooling. Every man in Denver was drooling! Except my Charlie, of course, he never looked."

Over her teacup, Karen gave a faint smile. "Key words in that are 'girl' and 'Ray.' Neither of which I am or have any longer."

"Give me a break!" Ann wailed. "You sound as though you're ninety-two years old and should be choosing your coffin. You turned thirty, that's all. I hit thirty-five this year and age hasn't stopped me." At that Ann got up, her hand at her back, and waddled over to the sink to get another cup of herbal tea. She was so hugely pregnant she could hardly reach the kettle.

"Point made," Karen said. "But no matter how young or old I am, that doesn't bring Ray back." When she said the name, there was reverence in her voice, as though she were speaking the name of a deity.

Ann gave a great sigh, for they'd had this conversation many times. "Ray was my brother and I loved him very much, but, Karen, Ray is dead. And he's been dead for two years. It's time you started living again."

"You don't understand about Ray and me. We were..."

Ann's face was full of sympathy, and reaching across the table, she clasped Karen's wrist and squeezed. "I know he was everything to you, but you have a lot to offer some man. A man who is alive."

"No!" Karen said sharply. "No man on earth could fill Ray's shoes, and I'd never allow anyone to try." Abruptly, she got up from the table and walked to the window. "No one understands. Ray and I were more than just married, we were partners. We were equals; we shared everything. Ray asked my opinion about everything, from the business to the color of his socks. He made me feel useful. Can you understand that? Every man I've met before or since Ray seems to want a woman to sit still and look pretty. The minute you start telling him your opinions, he asks the waiter to give him the check."

There was nothing that Ann could say to contradict Karen, for Ann had seen firsthand what a good marriage they'd had. But now Ann was sick with seeing her beloved sister-in-law hide herself away from the world, so she wasn't about to tell Karen that she'd never find anyone who was half the man Ray was.

"All right," Ann said, "I'll stop. If you are bound and determined to commit suicide for Ray, so be it." Hesitantly, she gave her sister-in-law's back a hard look. "Tell me about that job of yours." Her tone of voice told what she thought

of Karen's job.

Turning away from the window, Karen laughed. "Ann, no one could ever doubt your opinions on anything. First you don't like that I love my husband and second you don't approve of my job."

"So sue me. I think you're worth more than eternal widowhood and death-by-typing."

Karen could never bear her sister-in-law any animosity because Ann truly did think Karen was the best there was, and it had nothing to do with their being related by marriage. "My job is fine," she said, sitting back down at the table. "Everyone is well and everything is going fine."

"That boring, huh?"

Karen laughed. "Not horribly boring, just a little bit boring."

"So why don't you quit?" Before Karen could answer, Ann held up her hand. "I apologize. It's none of my business if you, with all your brains, want to bury yourself in some typing pool." Ann's eyes lit up. "So anyway, tell me about your divine, gorgeous boss. How is that beautiful man?"

Karen smiled and ignored the reference to her boss. "The other women in the pool gave me a birthday party last week." At that she lifted her eyebrows in challenge, for Ann was always saying snide things about the six women Karen worked with.

"Oh? And what did they give you? A hand-crocheted shawl, or maybe a rocking chair and a couple of cats?"

"Support hose," she said, then laughed. "No, no, I'm kidding. Just the usual things. Actually, they chipped in together and got me a very nice gift."

"And what was that?"

Karen took a drink of her tea. "Aneyeglassesholder."

"A what?"

Karen's eyes twinkled. "A holder for my eyeglasses. You know, one of those string things that goes around your neck. It's a very nice one, eighteen-karat gold. With little, ah, cats on the clasp."

Ann didn't smile. "Karen, you have to get out of there. The combined age of those women must be three hundred years. And didn't they notice that you don't wear glasses?"

"Three hundred and seventy-seven." When Ann looked at her in question, Karen said, "Their ages total three hundred and seventy-seven years. I added it up one day. And they said they knew I didn't wear glasses, but that as a woman who had just turned thirty I would soon need to."

"For an ancient like you, support hose are just around the corner."

"Actually, Miss Johnson gave me a pair last Christmas. She's seventy-one and swears by them."

At that Ann did laugh. "Oh, Karen, this is serious. You have to get out of there."

"Mmmmm," Karen said, looking down at her cup. "My job has its uses."

"What are you up to?" Ann snapped.

Karen gave her sister-in-law a look of innocence. "I have no idea what you mean."

For a moment Ann leaned back against the bench and studied her sister-in-law.

"At last I am beginning to understand. You are much too clever to throw away everything. So help me, Karen Lawrence, if you don't tell me everything and tell me now, I'll think of some dreadfully way to punish you. Like maybe not allowing you to see my baby until she's three years old."

When Karen's face turned white, Ann knew she had her. "Tell!"

"It's a nice job and the people I work with are "

Suddenly, Ann's face lit up. "Don't you play the martyr to me. I've known you since you were eight years old, remember? You take extra work from those old biddies so you'll know everything that's going on. I'll bet you know more about what's going on in that company than Taggart does." Ann smiled at her own cleverness. "And you let your looks go so you don't intimidate anyone. If that dragon Miss Gresham saw you as you looked a couple of years ago, she'd find some reason to fire you."

Karen's blush was enough to tell her that she was right.

"Pardon my stupidity," Ann said, "but why don't you get a job that pays a little more than being a secretary?"

"I tried!" Karen said vehemently. "I applied at dozens of companies, but they wouldn't consider me because I don't have a university degree. Eight years of managing a hardware store means nothing to a personnel director."

"You only quadrupled that store's profits."

"Whatever. That doesn't matter. Only that piece of paper saying I sat through years of boring classes means anything."

"So why don't you go back to school and get that piece of paper?"

"I am going to school!" Karen took a drink of her tea to calm herself.

"Look, Ann, I know you mean well, but I know what I'm doing. I know I'll never find another man like Ray who I can work with, so maybe I can learn enough to open a shop of my own. I have the money from the sale of Ray's half of the hardware store, and I'm managing to save most of what I earn from this job. Meanwhile, I am learning everything about running a company the size of Taggart's."

Karen smiled. "I'm not really an idiot about my little old ladies. They think they use me to do their work, but truthfully, I'm very selective about what I agree to do. Everything in that office, from every department, goes across my desk. And since I always make myself available for all weekends and holidays, I always see what's most urgent."

"And what do you plan to do with all this knowledge?"

"Open a business somewhere. Retail. It's what I know, although without Ray there to do the selling, I don't know how I'll cope."

"You should get married again!" Ann said forcefully.

"But I don't want to get married!" Karen nearly shouted. "I'm just going to get pregnant!" After she'd said it, Karen looked at her friend in horror. "Please forget that I said that," she whispered. "Look, I better go. I have things "

"Move from that seat and you're dead," Ann said levelly.

With a great sigh, Karen collapsed back against the upholstered banquette in Ann's sunny kitchen. "Don't do this to me. Please, Ann."

"Do what?" she asked innocently.

"Pry and snoop and generally interfere in something that is none of your business."

"I can't imagine what you could be referring to. I've never done anything like that in my life. Now tell me everything."

Karen tried to change the subject. "Another gorgeous woman came out of Taggart's office in tears last week," she said, referring to her boss, a man who seemed to drive Ann mad with desire. But Karen was sure that was because she didn't know him.

"What do you mean, you're 'going' to get pregnant?" Ann persisted.

"An hour after she left, a jeweler showed up at Taggart's office with a briefcase and two armed guards. We all figure he was buying her off. Drying her tears with emeralds, so to speak."

"Have you done anything yet about getting pregnant?"

"And on Friday we heard that Taggart was engaged again. But not to the woman who'd left his office. This time he's engaged to a redhead." She leaned across the table to Ann. "And Saturday I typed the prenuptial agreement."

That got Ann's attention. "What was in it?"

Karen leaned back again, her face showing her distaste. "He's a bastard, Ann. He really is. I know he's very good looking and he's rich beyond imagining, but as a human, he's not worth much. I know these . . . these social belles of his are probably just after his money they certainly couldn't like him but they are human beings and, as such, they are worthy of kindness."

"Will you get off your pulpit and tell me what the prenupt said?"

"The woman, his bride, had to agree to give up all rights to anything that was purchased with his money during the marriage. As far as I could tell, she wasn't allowed to own anything. In the event of a divorce, even the clothing he bought her would remain with him."

"Really? And what was he planning to do with women's clothing?" Ann wiggled her

er eyebrows.

"Nothing interesting, I'm sure. He'd just find another gorgeous gold digger who fit them. Or maybe he'd sell them so he could buy a case of engagement rings, since he gives them out so often."

"What is it you dislike about the man so much?" Ann asked. "He gave you a job, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, he has an office full of women. I swear he instructs personnel to hire them by the length of their legs. He surrounds himself with beautiful women executives."

"So what's your complaint?"

"He never allows them to do anything!" Karen said with passion. "Taggart makes every decision himself. As far as I know he doesn't even ask his team of beauties what they think should be done, much less allow them to actually do it." She gripped her cup handle until it nearly snapped. "McAllister Taggart could live on a desert island all by himself. He needs no other person in life."

"He seems to need women," Ann said softly. She'd met Karen's boss twice and she'd been thoroughly charmed by him.

"He's the proverbial American playboy," Karen said. "The longer the legs, and the longer the hair, the more he likes them. Beautiful and dumb, that's what he likes." She smiled maliciously. "However, so far none of them have been stupid enough to marry him when they discover that all they get out of the marriage is him."

"Well . . ." Ann said, seeing the anger in Karen's face, "maybe we should change the subject. How are you planning to get a baby if you run from every man who looks at you? I mean, the way you dress now is calculated to keep men at a distance, isn't it?"

"My! but that was good tea," Karen said. "You are certainly a good cook, Ann, and I've enjoyed our visit immensely, but I need to go now." With that she rose and headed for the kitchen door.

"Ow!" Ann yelled. "I'm going into labor! Help me."

The blood seemed to drain from Karen's face as she ran to her Mend. "Lean back, rest. I'll call the hospital."

But as Karen reached the phone, Ann said in a normal voice, "I think it's passed, but you better stay here until Charlie gets home. Just in case. You know."

After a moment of looking at Ann with anger, Karen admitted defeat and sat back down. "All right, what is it you want to know?"

"I don't know why, but I seem to be very interested in babies lately. Must be something I ate. But anyway, when you mentioned babies, it made me want to hear all of it."

"There is nothing to tell. Really nothing. I just..."

"Just what?" Ann urged.

"I just regret that Ray and I never had children. We both thought we had all the time in the world."

Ann didn't say anything, just gave Karen time to sort out her thoughts and talk. "Recently, I went to a fertility clinic and had a complete examination. I seem to be perfectly healthy."

When Karen said no more, Ann said softly, "So you've been to a clinic and now what?"

"I am to choose a donor from a catalog," Karen said simply.

Ann's sense of the absurd got the better of her. "Ah, then you get the turkey baster out and "

Karen didn't laugh as her eyes flashed angrily. "You can afford to be smug since you have a loving husband who can do the job, but what am I supposed to do? Put an ad in the paper for a donor? 'One lonely widow wants child but no husband. Apply box three-five-six.'"

"If you got out more and met some men you might " Ann stopped because she could see that Karen was getting angry. "I know, why don't you ask that gorgeous boss of yours to do the job? He beats a turkey baster any day."

For a moment Karen tried to stay annoyed but Ann's persistence thawed her. "Mr. Taggart, rather than a raise," Karen mimicked, "would you mind very much givi

ng me a bit of semen? I brought a jar, and, no, I don't mind waiting."

Ann laughed, for this was the old Karen, the one she'd rarely seen in the last two years.

Karen continued to smile. "According to my charts, I'm at peak fertility on Christmas Day, so maybe I'll just wait up for Santa Claus."

"Beats milk and cookies," Ann said. "But won't you feel bad for all the children he neglects because he spent the whole night at your house?"

Ann laughed so hard at her own joke that she let out a scream.

"It wasn't that funny," Karen said. "Maybe Santa's helpers could Ann? Are you all right?"

"Call Charlie," she whispered, clutching her big stomach; then as another contraction hit her, she said, "The hell with Charlie, call the hospital and tell them to rush a delivery of morphine. This hurts!"

Shaking, Karen went to the phone and called.

"Idiot!" Karen said, looking at herself in the mirror and seeing the tears seeping out of the corner of her eyes. Tearing off a paper towel from the dispenser on the restroom wall, she dabbed at the tears, then saw that her eyes were red. Which of course made sense since she'd now been crying for most of twenty-four hours.

"Everyone cries at the birth of a baby," she muttered to no one. "People cry at all truly happy occasions, such as weddings and engagement announcements and at the birth of every baby."

Pausing in her wiping, she looked in the mirror and knew that she was lying to herself. Last night she'd held Ann's new daughter in her arms and she'd wanted that child so much that she'd nearly walked out the door with her. Frowning, Ann had taken her baby from her sister-in-law. "You can't have mine," she said. "Get your own."

To cover her embarrassment, Karen had tried to make jokes about her feelings, but they had fallen flat, and in the end, she'd left Ann's hospital room feeling the worst she had since Ray's death.

So now Karen was at the office and she was nearly overpowered with a sense of longing for a home and family. Making another attempt to mop up her face, she heard voices at the door, and without thinking, she scurried into an open stall and locked the door behind her. She did not want anyone to see her. Today was the office Christmas party and everyone was in high good spirits. Between the promise of limitless free food and drink this afternoon and a generous bonus received from Montgomery-Taggart Enterprises this morning, the whole office was a cauldron of merriment.

If Karen hadn't already been in a bad mood, she would have been when she realized that one of the two women who entered was Loretta Simons, a woman who considered herself the resident authority on McAllister J. Taggart. Karen knew she was trapped inside the stall, for if she tried to leave the restroom, Loretta would catch her and badger her into hearing more about the wonders of the saintly M. J. Taggart.

"Have you seen him yet?" Loretta gushed in a way that some people reserved for the Sistine Chapel. "He's the most beautiful creature on earth tall, handsome, kind, understanding."

"But what about that woman this morning?" the second woman asked. If she hadn't heard all about Taggart, then she had to be the new executive assistant, and Loretta was breaking her in. "She didn't seem to think he was so wonderful."

At that, Karen, hidden in her stall, smiled. Her sentiments exactly.

"But you, my dear, have no idea what that darling man has been through," Loretta said as though talking about a war veteran.

Standing against the wall, Karen put her head back and wanted to cry out in frustration. Did Loretta never talk about anything but the Great Jilt? the Great Tragedy of McAllister Taggart? Wasn't there anything else in her life?

"Three years ago Mr. Taggart was madly, insanely in love with a young woman named Elaine Wentlow." Loretta said the name as though it were something vile and disgusting. "More than anything in life he wanted to marry her and raise a family. He wanted his own home, his own place of security. He wanted "

Karen rolled her eyes, for Loretta was adding more to the tale each time she told it: fewer facts, more melodrama. Now Loretta was on to the magnificence of the wedding that Taggert had alone planned and paid for. According to Loretta, his fiancée had spent all her time having her nails done.

"And she left him?" the new assistant asked, her voice properly awed.

"She left that dear man standing at the front of the church before seven hundred guests who had flown in from all over the world."

"How awful," the assistant said. "He must have been humiliated. What was her reason? And if she did have a good reason, couldn't she have done it in a more caring manner?"

Karen tightened her jaw. It was her belief that Taggert waited until the night before or the day of the wedding to present his bride with one of his loathsome prenuptial agreements, letting her know just what he thought of her. Of course Karen could never say that, as she was not supposed to be typing Taggert's private work. That was the job of his personal secretary. But beautiful Miss Gresham was much too important to actually feed data into a computer terminal, so she gave the work to the person who had been with the company the longest: Miss Johnson. But then Miss Johnson was past seventy and too rickety to do a lot of typing. Knowing she'd lose her job if she admitted this, and since she had a rather startling number of cats to feed, Miss Johnson secretly gave all of Taggert's private work to Karen.

"So that's why all the women since then have left him?" the assistant asked. "I mean, there was that woman this morning."

Karen didn't have to hear Loretta's recapping of the events of this morning, as it was all the office staff could talk of. What with the Christmas party and the bonus, yet another of Taggert's women dumping him with almost more excitement than they could bear. Karen was genuinely concerned for Miss Johnson's heart.

This morning, minutes after the bonuses had been handed out, a tall, gorgeous redhead had stormed into the offices with a ring box in her trembling hand. The outside receptionist hadn't needed to ask who she was or what her errand was, for angry women with ring boxes in their hands were a common sight in the offices of M. J. Taggert. One by one, all doors had been opened to her, until she was inside the inner sanctum: Taggert's office.

Fifteen minutes later, the redhead had emerged, crying, ring box gone, but clutching a jeweler's box that was about the right size to hold a bracelet.

"How could they do this to him?" the women in the office had whispered, all their anger descending onto the head of the woman. "He's such a lovely man, so kind, so considerate," they said.

"His only problem is that he falls in love with the wrong women. If he could just find a good woman, she'd love him forever" was the conclusion that was always drawn. "He just needs a woman who understands what pain he has been through."

After this pronouncement, every woman in the office under fifty-five would head for the restroom, where she'd spend her lunch hour trying to make herself as alluring as possible.

Except Karen. Karen would remain at her desk, forcing herself to keep her opinions to herself.

Now Loretta gave a sigh that made the stall door rattle against its lock. Since Loretta had told every female in the office all about the divine Mr. Taggert, she wasn't worried about anyone overhearing.

"So now he's free again," Loretta said, her voice heavy with the sadness and hope at such a state. "He's still looking for his true love, and someday some very lucky woman is going to become Mrs. McAllister Taggert."

At that the assistant murmured in agreement. "The way that woman treated him was tragic. Even if she hated him, she should have thought of the wedding guests."

At those words, Karen could have groaned, for she knew that Loretta had recruited yet another soldier for her little army that constantly played worship-the-boss.

"What are you doing?" Karen heard Loretta ask.

"Filling in the correct name," the assistant answered.

A moment later, Loretta gave a sigh that had to have come straight from her heart. "Oh, yes, I like that. Yes, I like that very much. Now we must go. We wouldn't want to miss even a second of the Christmas party." She paused, then said suggestively, "There's no telling what can happen under the mistletoe."

Karen waited for a minute after the women were gone, then, allowing her pent-up breath to escape, she left the stall. Looking in the mirror, she saw that the time she'd spent hiding had allowed her eyes to clear. After washing her hands, she went to the towel holder and there she saw what the women had just been talking about. Long ago some woman (probably Loretta) had stolen a photograph of Taggart and hung it on the wall of the women's restroom. Then she'd glued a nameplate (also probably stolen) under it. But now, on the wall above the plate was written "Miserably Jilted" before the M, J. Taggart.

Looking at it for a moment, Karen shook her head in disgust, then with a smirk, she withdrew a permanent black marker from her handbag, crossed out the handwritten words, and replaced them with, "Magnificently Jettisoned."

For the first time that day, she smiled, then she left the restroom feeling much better. So much better, in fact, that she allowed herself to be pulled into the elevator by fellow employees to go upstairs to the huge Taggart Christmas party.

One whole floor of the building owned by the Taggerts had been set aside for conferences and meetings. Instead of being divided into offices of more or less equal space, the floor had been arranged as though it were a sumptuously, if rather oddly, decorated house. There was a room with tatami mats, shoji screens, and jade objects that was used for Japanese clients. Colefax and Fowler had made an English room that looked like something from Chatsworth. For clients with a scholarly bent there was a library with several thousand books in handsome pecan-wood cases. There was a kitchen for the resident chef and a kitchen for clients who liked to rustle up their own grub. A Santa Fe room dripped beaded moccasins and leather shirts with horsehair tassels.

And there was a big, empty room that could be filled with whatever was needed for the moment, such as an enormous Christmas tree bearing what looked to be half a ton of white and silver ornaments. All the employees looked forward to seeing that tree, each year "done" by some up-and-coming young designer, each year different, each year perfect. This tree would be a source of discussion for weeks to come.

Personally, Karen liked the tree in the day-care center better. It was never more than four feet tall so the children could reach most of it, and it was covered with things the children of the employees had made, such as paper chains and popcorn strings.

Now, making her way toward the day-care center, she was stopped by three men from accounting who'd obviously had too much to drink and were wearing silly paper hats. For a moment they tried to get Karen to go with them, but when they realized who she was, they backed off. Long ago she'd taught the men of the office that she was off limits, whether it was during regular work hours or in a more informal situation like this one.

"Sorry," they murmured and moved past her.

The day-care center was overflowing with children, for the families of the Taggerts who owned the building were there.

"If you say nothing else about the Taggerts, they are fertile," Miss Johnson had once said, making everyone except Karen laugh.

And they were a nice group, Karen admitted to herself. Just because she didn't like McAllister was no reason to dislike the entire family. They were always polite to everyone, but they kept to themselves; but then with a family the size of theirs, they probably didn't have time for outsiders. Now, looking into the chaos of the children's playroom, Karen seemed to see doubles of everyone, for twins ran in the Taggart family to an extraordinary degree. There were adult twins and toddler twins and babies that looked so much alike they could have been clones.

And no one, including Karen, could tell them apart. Mac had twin brothers who had offices in the same building, and whenever either of them arrived, the ques

tion "Which are you?" was always asked.

Someone shoved a drink into Karen's hand saying, "Loosen up, baby," but she didn't so much as take a sip. What with spending most of the night in the hospital to be near Ann, she'd not eaten since yesterday evening and she knew that whatever she drank would go straight to her head.

As she stood in the corridor looking in at the playroom, it seemed to her that she'd never seen so many children in her life: nursing babies, crawling, taking first steps, two with books in their hands, one eating a crayon, an adorable little girl with pigtails down her back, two beautiful identical twin boys playing with identical fire trucks.

"Karen, you are a masochist," she whispered to herself, then turned on her heel and walked briskly down the corridor to the elevator. The lift going down was empty, and once she was inside, loneliness swept over her. She had been planning to spend Christmas with Ann and Charlie, but now that they had the new baby, they wouldn't want to be bothered with a former sister-in-law.

Stopping in the office she shared with the other secretaries, Karen started to gather her things so she could go home, but on second thought she decided to finish two letters and get them out. There was nothing urgent, but why wait?

Two hours later Karen had finished all that she'd left on her desk and all that at three of the other secretaries had left on their desks.

Stretching, gathering up the personal letters she'd typed for Taggart, one about some land he was buying in Tokyo and the other a letter to his cousin, she walked down the corridor to Taggart's private suite. Knocking first as she always did, then realizing that she was alone on the floor, she opened the door. It was odd to see this inner sanctum without the formidable Miss Gresham in it. Like a lion guarding a temple, the woman hovered over Taggart possessively, never allowing anyone who didn't have necessary business to see him.

So now Karen couldn't help herself as she walked softly about the room, which she'd been told had been decorated to Miss Gresham's exquisite taste. The room was all white and silver, just like the tree and just as cold, Karen thought.

Carefully, she put the letters on Miss Gresham's desk and started to leave, then, on second thought, she looked toward the double doors that led into his office. As far as she knew none of the women in the secretarial pool had seen inside that office, and Karen, as much as anyone else, was very curious to see inside those doors.

Karen well knew that the security guard would be by soon, but she'd just heard him walking in the hall, keys jangling, and if she was caught, she could tell him that she had been told to put the papers in Taggart's office.

Silently, as though she were a thief, she opened the door to the office and looked inside. "Hello? Anyone here?" Of course, she knew that she'd probably drop dead of a heart attack if anyone answered, but still she was cautious.

While looking around, she put the letters on his desk. She had to admit that he had the ability to hire a good decorator; certainly no mere businessman could have chosen the furnishings of his office, because there wasn't one piece of black leather or chrome in sight. Instead, the office looked as though it had been taken intact from a French chateau, complete with carved paneling, worn flagstones on the floor, and a big fireplace dominating one wall. The tapestry-upholstered furniture looked well worn and fabulously comfortable.

Against a wall was a bookshelf filled with books, one shelf covered with framed photographs, and Karen was drawn to them. Inspecting them, she figured that it would take a calculator to add up all the children in the photos. At the end was a silver-framed photo of a young man holding up a string of fish. He was obviously a Taggart, but not one Karen had seen before. Curious, she picked up the picture and looked at the man.

"Seen all you want?" came a rich baritone that made Karen jump so high she dropped the photo onto the flagstones where the glass promptly shattered.

"I... I'm sorry," she stuttered. "I didn't know anyone was here." Bending to pick up the picture, she looked up into the dark eyes of McAllister Taggart as a tall six feet of him loomed over her. "I will pay for the damage," she said nervously, trying to gather the pieces of broken glass.



He didn't say a word, just glared down at her, frowning.

With as much in her hand as she could pick up, she stood and started to hand the pieces to him, but when he didn't take them, she set them down on the end of the shelf. "I don't think the photo is damaged," she said. "I, uh, is that one of your brothers? I don't believe I've seen him before."

At that Taggert's eyes widened and Karen was quite suddenly afraid of him. They were alone on the floor and all she really knew about him personally was that a lot of women had refused to marry him. Was it because of his loathsome prenuptial agreements or was it because of something else? His violent temper maybe?

"I must go," she whispered, then turned on her heel and ran from his office.

Karen didn't stop running until she'd reached the elevator and punched the down button. Right now all she wanted on earth was to go home to familiar surroundings and try her best to get over her embarrassment. Caught like a teenage girl snooping in her boss's office! How could she have been so stupid?

When the elevator door opened, it was packed with merrymakers going up to the party three floors above, and even though Karen protested loudly that he wanted to go down, they pulled her in with them and took her back to the party.

The first thing she saw was a waiter with a tray of glasses full of champagne, and Karen downed two of them immediately. Feeling much better, she was able to calm her frazzled nerves. So she was caught snooping in the boss's office. So what? Worse things have happened to a person. By her third glass of wine, she'd managed to convince herself that nothing at all had happened.

Standing before her now was a woman with her arms full of a hefty little boy and juggling an enormous diaper bag while she frantically tried to open a stroller.

"Could I help?" Karen asked.

"Oh, would you please?" the woman answered, stepping back from the stroller as she obviously thought Karen meant to help her with that.

But instead, Karen took the child out of her arms and for a moment clasped him tightly to her.

"He doesn't usually like strangers, but he likes you." The woman smiled. "You wouldn't mind watching him for a few moments, would you? I'd love to get something to eat."

Holding the boy close to her, while he snuggled his sweet-smelling head into her shoulder, Karen whispered, "I'll keep him forever."

At that a look of fright crossed the woman's face. Snatching her child away from Karen, she hurried down the hall.

Moments ago Karen had thought she'd never before been so embarrassed, but this was worse than being caught snooping. "What is wrong with you?" she hissed to herself, then strode toward the elevators. She would go home now and never leave her house again in her life.

As soon as she got into the elevator, she realized that she'd left her handbag and coat in her office on the ninth floor. If it weren't zero degrees outside and her car keys weren't in her purse, she'd have left things where they were, but she had to return. Leaning her head back against the wall, she knew she'd had too much wine, but she also knew without a doubt that after Christmas she'd no longer have a job. As soon as Taggert told his formidable secretary that he'd caught an unknown woman for Karen was sure the great and very busy McAllister Taggert had never so much as looked at someone as lowly as her in his office, Karen would be dismissed.

On the wall of the elevator was a bronze plaque that listed all the Taggerts in the building, and toward the bottom it looked as though Loretta's new recruit had been busy again, for a piece of paper had been glued over McAllister Taggert's name that read, "Marvelous Jaguar." Smiling, Karen took a pen out of her pocket and changed it to, "Macho Jackass."

When the elevator stopped, she didn't know whether it was the wine or her defiance, but she felt better. However, she did not want another encounter with Taggert. While holding the door open, she carefully looked up and down both corridors to see if anyone was about. Clear. Tiptoeing, she went down the carpeted hall to the secretaries' office and, as silently as possible, removed her coat from

the back of the chair and her purse from the drawer. As she was on her way out, she stopped by Miss Johnson's desk to get notes from her drawer. This way she'd have work to fill her time over Christmas.

"Snooping again?"

Karen paused with her hand on the drawer handle; she didn't have to look up to know who it was. McAllister J. Taggart. Had she not had so much to drink, she would have politely excused herself, but since she was sure she was going to be fired anyway, what did it matter? "Sorry about your office. I was sure you'd be out proposing marriage to someone."

With all the haughtiness she could muster, she tried to march past him.

"You don't like me much, do you?"

Turning, she looked him in the eyes, those dark, heavily fringed eyes that made all the women in the office melt with desire. But they didn't do much for Karen since she kept seeing the tears of the women who'd been jilted by him. "I've typed your last three prenuptial agreements. I know the truth about what you're like."

He looked confused. "But I thought Miss Gresham "

"And risk breaking those nails on a keyboard? Not likely." With that, Karen swept past him on her way to the elevator.

But Taggart caught her arm.

For a moment fear ran through her. What did she really know about this man? And they were alone on this floor. If she screamed, no one would hear her.

At her look, his face stiffened and he released her arm. "Mrs. Lawrence, I can assure you that I have no intention of harming you in any way."

"How do you know my name?"

Smiling, he looked at her. "While you were gone, I made a few calls about you."

"You were spying on me?" she asked, aghast.

"Just curious. As you were about my office."

Karen took another step toward the elevator, but again he caught her arm.

"Wait, Mrs. Lawrence, I want to offer you a job over Christmas."

Karen punched the elevator button with a vengeance while he stood too close, looking down at her. "And what would that job be? Marriage to you?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," he answered as he looked from her eyes to her toes and back up again.

Karen hit the elevator button so hard it was a wonder the button didn't go through the wall.

"Mrs. Lawrence, I am not making a pass at you. I am offering you a job. A legitimate job for which you will be paid, and paid well."

Karen kept hitting the button and looking up at the floors shown over both doors. Both elevators were stuck on the floor where the party was.

"In the calls I made I discovered that you've worked the last two Christmases when no one else would. I also found out that you are the Ice Maiden of the office. You once stapled a man's tie to your desk when he was leaning over you asking for a date"

Karen turned red, but she didn't look at him.

"Mrs. Lawrence," he said stiffly, as though what he said were very difficult for him. "Whatever may be your opinion of me, you could not have heard that I've ever made an improper advance toward a woman who works for me. My offer is for a job, an unusual job, but nothing else. I apologize for whatever I've done to give you the impression that I was offering more." With that he turned and walked away.

As Karen watched, one elevator went straight from the twelfth floor down to the first, skipping her on nine. Reluctantly, she turned to look at his retreating back. Suddenly, the image of her empty house appeared before her eyes, the tiny tree with not much under it. Whatever she thought of how he treated women in his personal life, Taggart was always respectful to his employees. And no matter how hard a woman worked to compromise him, he didn't fall for it. Two years ago when a secretary said he'd made a pass at her, everyone laughed at her so hard, she found another job three weeks later.

Taking a deep breath, Karen followed him. "Alright," she said when she was just behind him, "I'll listen."

Ten minutes later she was ensconced in Taggert's beautiful office; a fire burned in the fireplace, making a delightful rosy glow on the table that was loaded with delicious food and what seemed to be a limitless supply of cold champagne. At first Karen had thought of resisting such temptation, but then she thought of telling Ann that she'd eaten lobster and champagne with the boss and she began to nibble.

While Karen ate and drank, Taggert started to talk. "I guess you've heard by now about Lisa."

"The redhead?"

"Mmmm, yes, the redhead." He refilled her glass. "On the twenty-fourth of December, two days from now, Lisa and I were to be in the wedding of a good friend of mine who lives in Virginia. It's to be a huge wedding, with over six hundred guests flying in from all over the world."

For a moment he just looked at her, saying nothing. "And?" she asked after a while. "What do you need me for? To type your friend's prenupt?"

McAllister spread a cracker with a pate de foie gras and held it out to her. "I no longer have a fiancée."

Karen took a drink of the wine, then reached for the cracker. "Excuse my ignorance, but I don't see what that has to do with me."

"You will fit the dress."

Maybe it was because her mind was a bit fuzzy with drink, but it took her a moment to comprehend, and when she did, she laughed. "You want me to pose as your fiancée and be a bridesmaid of some woman I've never met? And who has never met me?"

"Exactly."

"How many bottles of this have you drunk?"

McAllister smiled. "I'm not drunk and I'm absolutely serious. Want to hear more?"

Part of Karen's brain said that she should go home, get away from this crazy man, but what was waiting for her at home? She didn't even have a cat that needed her. "I'm listening."

"I don't know if you've heard, but three years ago I was . . ." He hesitated and she saw his eyelashes flutter quite attractively. "Three years ago I was left at the altar of my own wedding by the woman I planned to spend the rest of my life with."

Karen drained her glass. "Did she find out that you were refusing to say the lines 'with thee my worldly goods I share'?"

For a moment McAllister sat there and stared, then he smiled in a way that could only be called dazzling. And Karen had to blink; he really was gorgeous, with his dark hair and eyes and a hint of a dimple in one cheek. No wonder so many women fell for him. "I think, Mrs. Lawrence, that you and I are going to get along fine."

That brought Karen up short. She was going to have to establish boundaries now. "No, I don't think we will, since I do not believe your tragic little-boy-lost story. I have no idea what really happened at your wedding or all those other times women refused to marry you, but I can assure you I am not one of these lovesick secretaries who think you were 'Miserably Jilted.' I think you were " She halted before she said too much.

Enlightenment lit his face. "You think I was 'Magnificently Jettisoned.' Or do you think I am a 'Macho Jackass'? Well, well, so now at last I know who the office wordsmith is."

Karen couldn't speak because she was too embarrassed and how had he found this out so quickly?

For a moment longer he looked at her in speculation, then his face changed from feel-sorry-for-me to that of one friend talking to another. "What happened back then is between Elaine and me and will remain between us, but the truth is, the groom is her relative and she is going to be at the wedding. If I show up alone, with yet another fiancée having left me, it will be, to put it kindly, embar

rassing. And then there is the matter of the wedding. If there are seven male attendants and only six female, women get a bit out-of-sorts about things like that."

"So hire someone from an escort service. Hire an actress."

"I thought of that, but who knows what you get? She could audition lady Macbeth at the reception. Or she could turn out to know half the men there in a way that could be awkward."

"Surely, Mr. Taggart, you must have a little black book full of names of women who would love to go anywhere with you and do anything."

"That's just the problem. They are all women who ... well, they like me and after this ... Well..."

"I see. How do you get rid of them? You could always ask them to marry you. That seems to cure every woman of you forever."

"See? You're perfect for this. All anyone has to do is see the way you look at me and they'll know we're about to separate. Next week when I announce our split, no one will be surprised."

"What's in it for me?"

"I'll pay you whatever you like."

"One of the engagement rings you give out by the gross?" She knew she was being rude, but the champagne was giving her courage and with every discourteous thing she said to him, his eyes twinkled more.

"Ouch! Is that what people say about me?"

"Don't try your sad-little-boy act on me. I typed those prenuptial agreements, remember? I know what you are really like."

"And that is?"

"Incapable of trust, maybe incapable of love. You like the idea of marriage, but actually sharing yourself, and above all sharing your money, with another human, terrifies you. In fact, as far as I can tell, you don't share anything with anyone."

For a moment, he gaped at her, then he smiled. "You certainly have me in a nutshell, but coldhearted as I am, it still embarrassed me that Elaine left me so publicly. That wedding cost me thirty-two thousand dollars, none of which was refundable, and I had to send the gifts back."

Refusing to give in to his play for sympathy, she repeated, "What's in it for me? And I don't want money. I have money of my own."

"Yes. Fifty-two thousand and thirty-eight cents, to be exact."

Karen nearly choked on her champagne. "How?"

"My family owns the bank in this building. I took a guess that it might be the bank you use, so I tapped into the files after you left my office."

"More spying!"

"More curiosity. I was checking to see who you were. I am offering you legitimate employment, and since this is a very personal job, I wanted to know more about you. Besides, I like to know more about a woman than just the package." Taking a sip from his champagne glass, he looked at her the way a dark, romantic hero looks at a helpless damsel.

But Karen wasn't affected. She'd had other men look at her like that, and she'd had one man look at her in love. The difference between the two was everything. "I can see why women say yes to you," she said coolly, lifting her glass to him.

At her detachment, he gave a genuine smile. "All right, I can see that you're not impressed by me, so, now shall we talk business, Mrs. Lawrence? I want to hire you as my escort for three days. Since I am at your mercy, you can name your price."

Karen drained her glass. What was this, her sixth? Whatever the number, all she could feel was courage running through her veins. "If I were to do this, I wouldn't want money."

"Ah, I see. What do you want then? A promotion? To be made head secretary? Maybe you'd like a vice presidency?"

"And sit in a windowed office doing nothing all day? No, thank you."

McAllister blinked at her words, then waited for her to say more. When she was

s silent, he said, "You want stock in the company? No?" When she still said nothing, he leaned back in his chair and looked at her in speculation. "You want something money can't buy, don't you?"

"Yes," she said softly.

He looked at her for a long moment. "Am I to figure out what money can't buy? Happiness?"

Karen shook her head.

"Love? Surely you don't want love from someone like me?" His face showed his bafflement. "I'm afraid you have me stumped."

"A baby."

At that McAllister spilled champagne down the front of his shirt. As he mopped himself up, he looked at her with eyes full of interest. "Oh, Mrs. Lawrence, I like this much better than parting with my money." As he reached for her hand, she grabbed a sharp little fish knife.

"Don't touch me."

Leaning back, McAllister refilled both their glasses. "Would you be so kind as to inform me how I'm to give you a baby without touching you?"

"In a jar."

"Ah, I see, you want a test-tube baby." His voice lowered and his eyes grew sympathetic. "Are your eggs?"

"My eggs are perfectly all right, thank you," she snapped. "I don't want to put my eggs in a jar, but I want you to put your... your ... in a jar."

"Yes, now I understand." Looking at her, he sipped his drink. "What I don't understand is, why me? I mean, since you don't like me or exactly think I'm of good moral character, why would you want me to be the father of your child?"

"Two reasons. The alternative is going to a clinic, where I can choose a man off a computer data bank. Maybe he's healthy but what about his relatives? Whatever I may think of you, your family is very nice and, according to the local papers, has been nice for generations. And I know what you and your relatives look like."

"I'm not the only one who has been snooping. And the second reason?"

"If I have your child in a manner of speaking later you won't come to me asking me for money."

It was as though this statement were too outlandish for McAllister to comprehend, because for a moment he sat there blinking in consternation. Then he laughed, a deep rumbling sound that came from inside his chest. "Mrs. Lawrence, I do believe we are going to get along splendidly." He extended his right hand. "All right, we have a bargain."

For just a moment Karen allowed her hand to be enveloped in his large warm one, and she allowed her eyes to meet his and to see the way they crinkled into a smile.

Abruptly, she pulled away from his touch. "Where and when?" she asked.

"My car will pick you up at six A.M. tomorrow, and we'll leave on the first flight to New York."

"I thought your friend lived in Virginia," she said suspiciously.

"He does, but I thought we'd go to New York first and outfit you," he said bluntly, sounding as though she were a naked native he, the great white hunter, had found.

For a moment Karen hid her face behind the champagne glass so he wouldn't see her expression. "Ah, yes, I see. Based on what I've seen, you like your fiancée to be well coiffed and well dressed."

"Doesn't every man?"

"Only men who can't see beneath the surface."

"Ouch!"

Karen blushed. "I apologize. If I am to pretend to be your fiancée, I will try to curb my tongue." She gave him a hard look. "I won't have to play the doting, adorable female, will I?"

"Since no other woman to whom I have been engaged has, I see no reason you should. Have some more champagne, Mrs. Lawrence."

"No, thank you," Karen said, standing, then working hard not to wobble on her

feet. Champagne, firelight, and a dark-haired, hot-eyed man were not conducive to making a woman remember her vows of chastity. "I will see you at the airport tomorrow, but, please, there'll be no need to stop in New York." When he started to say something, she smiled. "Trust me."

"All right," he said, raising his glass. "To tomorrow."

Karen left the room, gathered her things, and took the elevator downstairs. Since she didn't feel steady enough to drive, she had the security man call a cab to take her to a small shopping mall south of Denver.

"Bunny?" Karen asked tentatively as a woman locked the door of the beauty salon. Looking at Bunny's hair, Karen couldn't decide if it had been dyed apricot or peach. Whatever, it was an extraordinary shade.

"Yes?" the woman asked, turning, looking at Karen with no recognition in her eyes. "You don't remember me?"

For a moment Bunny looked puzzled, then her fine pale skin crinkled in pleasure. "Karen? Could that be you under that... that...?"

"Hair," Karen supplied.

"Maybe you call it hair but not from where I'm standing. And look at your face! Did you take vows? Is that why it's so shiny and clean?"

Karen laughed. One of her few luxuries while married to Ray had been having Bunny do her hair and give her advice on makeup and nails, and pretty much anything else in life. For all that Bunny was an excellent hairdresser, she was also like a therapist to her clients and as discreet as though she'd taken an oath. A woman knew she could tell Bunny anything and it would go no further.

"Could you do my hair?" Karen asked shyly.

"Sure. Call in the morning and "

"No, now. I have to leave on a plane early in the morning."

Bunny didn't put up with such nonsense. "I have a hungry husband waiting at home, and I've been on my feet for nine hours. You should have come earlier."

"Could I bribe you with a story? A very, very good story?"

Bunny looked skeptical. "How good a story?"

"You know my gorgeous boss? McAllister Taggart? I'm probably going to have his baby and he's never touched me nor is he going to."

Bunny didn't miss a beat as she shoved the key back into the lock. "I predict that hair of yours is going to take half the night."

"What about your husband?"

"Let him open his own cans."

KAREN SETTLED BACK in the wide seat of the airplane, business class, and sipped her glass of orange juice. Beside her, McAllister Taggart already had his nose in the papers in his briefcase. Early this morning when she'd arrived at the airport, she was escorted to a lounge that she'd had no idea existed at the Denver airport.

Unobtrusively, she'd taken a chair across from him, and he hadn't bothered to greet her or even look at her. Ten minutes later, idly, he'd glanced up, lost in thought, then back down at his papers. Karen then had the great satisfaction of seeing him pause and look back at her a long, slow look that went from her head to her toes then back up again.

"You are Karen Lawrence, aren't you?" he asked, making her smile, and making her sure that the three hours at Bunny's, with her head covered in foil, her face slathered in mud, then another three hours at home trying on everything in her closet, had been worth it.

He told her he had to work on the trip to Virginia, then looked back down at his papers, but several times he glanced at Karen. All in all, she found those looks quite gratifying.

Now, on the plane, she sat beside him, sipping orange juice and growing more bored by the minute. "Anything I can do to help?" she asked, nodding toward his papers.

He smiled at her in that way men do when they think a woman is pretty but had somehow managed to be born without a brain. "If I'd brought a computer, you could type for me, but actually, no, I have nothing for you to do. I just have some decisions to make."

Ah, yes, she thought, Men's Work. "Such as?" she urged.

A slight frown crossed his handsome brow. Obviously he liked his women to remain silent. "Just buying and selling," he answered quickly, in a tone that was meant to make her stop asking childish questions.

"And exactly what are you considering buying or selling this morning?"

The small frown changed to one that made his brows meet in the middle over the bridge of his nose. Love is such a funny thing, she thought. Had Ray looked at her like that, she would have backed off immediately, but this man did not frighten her a bit.

When he saw that she wasn't going to stop questioning him, he snapped, "I'm thinking of purchasing a small publishing company," then looked back at his papers.

"Ah," she said. "Coleman and Brown Press. Bad covers, mostly reprints. A few good books on regional history, but the covers were so bad no one bought the books."

McAllister looked at her as though she should mind her own business. "If I decide to buy it, I'll hire a new art director who can design good covers."

"Can't. The publisher is sleeping with her."

McAllister had just put his glass of orange juice to his lips and at Karen's words he nearly choked. "What?"

"I was curious, so when the publisher's secretary came to deliver the financial sheets to you I asked her to have lunch with me. She told me that the publisher who is married and has three children has been having a long-term affair with the art director. If he fires her, she'll blab to his wife whose family owns the publishing house. It's a very sticky situation."

Mac blinked at her. "So what do you recommend?" he asked with great sarcasm.

"Buy the house and put some competent people in there, then consolidate several of the small history books into one fat one and sell it as a textbook on Colorado history to the schools. There's a great deal of money to be made in textbooks."

For a long moment Mac just looked at her. "And you found out all this because you were curious, right?"

Turning away, Karen looked out the window and knew she'd never missed Ray more than she did in that moment. Ray used to listen to her; he liked her ideas and her input. Unfortunately, she'd found that most men's minds were as closed as their man's.

It wasn't until the plane had taken off and they were cruising that he spoke to her again. "What other things have you looked into?" he asked softly. "Jet engines? Sewage plants? Road building equipment?"

She knew he was being ironic, but at the same time, she could hear that he actually wanted to know. "I'm only interested in the small things, especially the local Denver places."

"Such as?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Lawson's Department Store," she answered quickly.

At that he smiled indulgently. "That place is an eye-sore to downtown Denver. I already have an excellent offer from Glitter and Sass."

"Those stores that sell leather and chains?" she asked with a curled lip.

"More like leather and rhinestones." Leaning back in the seat, he looked at her in speculation. "And who would you sell it to?" When she didn't answer, he gave her a little smile. "Come on, don't chicken out on me now. If you're going to tell me how to run my business, don't stop after one suggestion."

"All right," she said defiantly. "I'd open a store that sells baby paraphernalia." At that she expected him to turn away in disgust, but he didn't. He just sat at there, patiently waiting for her to continue.

She took a deep breath. "In England they have stores called Mothercare that sell everything for babies: maternity wear, strollers, nursery furniture, diapers, the works. In America you have to go to different stores for different items, and when you're eight months pregnant and your feet are swollen and you have two other kids, it's not easy schlepping to five different stores trying to get what you need for the baby. I don't know from experience, but it seems that it would

It'd be a wonderful convenience to be able to buy everything from one store."

"And what would you call this store?" he asked quietly.

"Sanctuary?" she answered innocently, making him laugh.

McAllister took a piece of paper and a pen from his briefcase and handed it to her. "Here. Write down all you know or think about Coleman and Brown Press. All of it, gossip, everything. I want to know how I can make that place a going concern."

Karen used all her strength to keep from smiling, but it was no use. She had a feeling he'd never before asked a woman her opinion of what he should buy or sell. His branch of Montgomery-Taggart was very small, and he had a few women executives, but everyone knew that McAllister Taggart was a law unto himself. He infuriated people in his employ by his stubborn insistence on doing things his own way. It further infuriated them that he was pretty much always right.

But now he was asking her opinion! "Aye, aye, sir," Karen said mockingly as she started to write, but out of the corner of her eye, she could see just a bit of a smile playing about his lips.

If Karen thought she was going to get any warmth out of Taggart, the notion was short-lived, for what time during the flight he didn't have his nose buried in papers, he was on the telephone. He ate with one hand, papers in the other. When they landed at Dulles Airport, outside D.C., he handed her three one-hundred-dollar bills, said, "Green hanging," then nodded toward the baggage carousel. Karen was tempted to give the porter one bill as a tip, but instead, she paid the five dollars out of her own pocket, then tried to find Taggart. He found her, rental car keys in his hand, and quickly, they went outside into the crisp, cold air to the car.

Once inside the warmth of the car, it felt almost intimate to be alone with him and she looked about for something to say. "If I'm to pretend to be your fiancée, shouldn't I know something about you?"

"What do you want to know?" he asked in a way that made Karen give him a look of disgust.

"Nothing really. I'm sure that knowing you are rich is enough for any woman."

Karen had expected the jab to make him laugh or respond sarcastically, but it didn't. Instead, he just looked straight ahead, his brow creased in concentration. For the rest of the drive, Karen didn't bother to talk. She decided if anyone asked why she was planning to marry M.J. Taggart, she'd say, "Alimony."

He drove them through the highways of Virginia to Alexandria, then through wooded countryside, past beautiful houses until he reached a graveled road and made a sharp right. Minutes later a house came into view and it was the place where all little girls dreamed of spending Christmas: three stories, tall pillars in front, perfectly spaced windows. She half expected George and Martha Washington to greet them.

The front lawn and what she could see of the rolling gardens in the back were alive with people playing touch football, gathering armloads of wood, or just strolling. And there seemed to be children everywhere.

The moment the car was spotted, what seemed to be a herd of people descended on them, opening the door and pulling Karen out. They introduced themselves as Laura and Deborah and Larry and Dave and

One very good looking man grabbed her and kissed her soundly on the mouth. "Oh!" was all Karen could say as she stared at him.

"I'm Steve," he offered in explanation. "The bridegroom? Didn't Mac tell you about me?"

Karen didn't think about what she was saying. "Taggart never speaks to me unless he wants something," she blurted, then stared wide-eyed. These people were his friends, what would they think of her!?

To Karen's consternation, they burst into laughter.

"Mac, at last you found a woman who knows the true you," Steve yelled across the roof of the car as he put one arm around Karen's shoulders, then a pretty woman put another arm around her, and they led her into the house, all of them laughing.

They led her past heavenly rooms with huge fireplaces that blazed cheerfully,



then up a grand staircase, down two halls to a wide white door. Steve opened it. "He's all yours," he said, laughing, then pushed her inside and closed the door behind her.

Taggart was in the room, their suitcases were already placed on luggage racks, and there was only one bed. "There's been a mistake," Karen said.

Mac frowned down at the bed. "I've already tried to rectify this, but it's impossible. The house is full. Every bed, cot, and couch is already assigned. Look," he said, frowning, "if you're afraid I'm going to attack you in the night, I can see if a hotel room can be found for you."

There was something about his attitude that always seemed to rub her the wrong way. "At least with a full house if I scream, I'll be heard."

He gave her a little half-smile then started unbuttoning his shirt. "I need to take a shower. The wedding rehearsal is in an hour." He was looking at her as though he expected her to be a heroine from a Regency romance and flee the room in fear at the very thought of a man undressing. But she wasn't going to let him intimidate her. "Please don't steam up the mirror," she said, chin in the air, then turned away as though sharing a room with a strange man was of no consequence to her.

With a bit of a chuckle, he went into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar for the steam to escape.

When he was out of sight, Karen let her breath escape and her shoulders relax. The room was lovely, all green silk and Federal furniture, and as she heard the shower running, she happily unpacked suitcases. It wasn't until she was finished that she realized that, out of habit, she'd unpacked Taggart's case too. As she put his shoes in the closet next to hers, Karen almost burst into tears. It had been so long since a man's shoes had been next to her own.

When she turned, Taggart was standing there, his hair wet, his big body encased in a terry-cloth robe, and he was watching her.

"I, ah, I didn't mean to unpack your case, but, uh ... Habit," she finally managed to say before escaping into the bathroom and firmly closing the door behind her.

She took as long as she dared in the bathroom and was very pleased to see that he was gone when she reentered the room. After dressing as quickly as she could, she left the bedroom and ran down the stairs to join the rest of the wedding party, who were piling into cars headed to the church for the rehearsal.

All the way to the church, her annoyance toward Taggart built. If she was supposed to be his fiancée, shouldn't he be showing her some consideration? Instead, he dropped her at the front door and expected her to find her own way among strangers. No wonder so many women refused to marry him, she thought. They were all obviously women of sense and intelligence.

At the church the rehearsal went off smoothly until at the end, when Taggart was to be the first to start down the aisle. He was to walk to the center, offer his arm to Karen, then walk with her out of the church. Maybe he hadn't heard what was said, but whatever his excuse, he walked to the center of the aisle, then started down alone, without Karen.

It was too much for her. "You know how Taggart is," she said, "he thinks he can partner himself."

Everyone in the church burst into laughter, and Taggart, turning, saw his mistake. With a great show of gallantry, he returned, bowed, and offered his arm to Karen.

"Getting me back for all those weekends of typing?" he said under his breath.

"Getting you back for all those women who were too timid to stand up to you," she said, smiling wickedly.

"I am not the monster you think I am."

"I shall ask Elaine's opinion on that. By the way, when is she coming?"

From the look on his face as they reached the back of the church, Karen regretted her remark.

"Christmas Day," he said softly, then turned away from her.

The rehearsal dinner was loud, with everyone talking at once about summers they had spent together and places they had visited. At first Karen looked at her

food and listened but didn't participate in the conversation among these people who knew each other so well. Taggert sat on the other side of the big table, at the opposite end from her, and he, too, was quiet. Every once in a while, Karen glanced toward him and thought she saw him looking at her, but he turned away so quickly that she wasn't sure.

"Karen," one of the women said and the whole table quietened. "Where is your engagement ring?"

She didn't hesitate before she spoke. "Taggert had bought all the store had, so they're awaiting a new shipment of diamonds. He buys them by the dozen, you know."

The windows of the restaurant nearly exploded with the laughter of the diners, and even Mac laughed as Steve, next to him, slapped him on the back.

There were calls of, "I think you ought to keep this one, Mac," and, "It looks as though your taste in women is improving."

For the rest of the meal, Karen wasn't allowed to sit in silence. The two women across from her asked many questions about what she did and where she'd grown up and all the normal questions that people ask. When she told them that Mac was her boss, they were fascinated and wanted to know what it was like working for him.

"Lonely," she answered. "He doesn't need any of us, except to type a letter now and then."

Through all of this, Taggert ate his dinner without saying a word, but Karen could feel his eyes on her and even when Steve leaned forward to say something to him, Mac's eyes never left Karen's face.

It wasn't until they were alone in "their" room that Karen thought maybe she'd gone a little too far. "About tonight..." she began as he walked past her out of the bathroom. "Maybe I shouldn't have"

"Going to chicken out on me now?" he asked, his face very close to hers.

Inconsequentially, Karen thought, he has a beautiful mouth. But she recovered herself and stood up straight. "No, of course not."

"Good. Now, what did you do with my sweatpants?"

"Isn't it a little late for sports?" she said without thinking, not that it was any of her business what he did when.

Mac gave her a one-sided smile. "Unless you want me sleeping raw, they're the only alternative."

"Third drawer left," she said as she scurried into the bathroom. When she emerged, swathed in a puritanical white cotton nightgown, he was already in bed, and there was a long, thick bolster pillow down the center of the bed. Slipping in to the vacant side of the bed, she said, "Where did you get this?"

"Stole it."

"So I guess some poor unfortunate is sleeping on a couch without a back cushion."

"Want me to take it back? You could sleep snuggled up with me or, better yet, we could have a serious discussion about this jar that you want me to"

"Good night," she said firmly, then turned on her side away from him, but she was smiling as she fell asleep.

KAREN AWOKE TO the sight of a gorgeous man wearing only a thick white towel about his waist, standing before the bathroom mirror shaving. In those few minutes before she awoke fully and remembered where she was, she had a vision of him coming toward her, kissing her, then tossing the towel aside and climbing into bed with her. For just those few seconds she could remember clearly how it felt to have a man in her arms, the size of him, the warmth of his skin, the weight of him, the

"Want to share that thought?" he asked, not turning his head but looking at her in the mirror.

Turning away so he couldn't see her red face, she rolled out of bed, grabbed her robe, and moved toward the closet, out of his line of vision.

"What do you have planned for today?" he asked, coming out of the bathroom, still wearing only that tiny towel and wiping excess lather from his face.

Karen flung open a closet door so she couldn't see him. Did he work out every

day? He must to keep his body looking like that. And was that warm honey his natural skin color? "Shopping," she mumbled.

"Shopping?" he asked, moving around the door to the other side of her. "As in Christmas shopping?"

"I, ah," she said, studiously looking at the clothes hanging inside, yet seeing nothing. "Yes, Christmas shopping. And a wedding gift." She took a deep breath. She had to get hold of herself! Turning, she looked into his eyes and not one inch lower. "Tomorrow is Christmas and if I'm to spend it with these people, I can't very well turn up empty-handed. Do you know a good shopping mall around here?"

"Tyson's Corner," he said quickly. "One of the best in the country. And I need to buy gifts, too, so I'll go with you."

"No!" Karen blurted, then tried to recover herself. "I mean, I concentrate better when I'm by myself." Even as she said it, she knew it was a lie. Christmas shopping alone became a chore.

"And how will you know who to buy for? Even how many kids are here? I assume you want to buy for the kids."

"Write down all the names for me and I'll get everything." She did not want to spend the day with this man and it was getting very difficult to keep her eyes off the muscles of his chest.

"I don't have a pencil," he said, smiling. "Everything is in my head."

Karen almost smiled back at him. "You can dictate them to me. Besides, wouldn't you rather stay here and play football with the other guys?"

"I am a fat, out-of-shape desk jockey and they'd cream me."

At that Karen did laugh, for there was no one who was less out of shape than he was.

Without waiting for her to say yes, he grabbed a terry-cloth robe from the closet, put it on, then kissed her cheek. "Pick me out some clothes, would you? I have to make some calls. I'll be back for you in thirty minutes."

Before Karen could protest, he was out of the room, the door closed behind him. Of course, she thought, feminists everywhere would shudder at the notion of her choosing the clothing of an autocratic, arrogant, presumptuous man like Mac Taggart. But by the time she'd completed this thought, she had draped a pair of dark wool trousers, an Italian shirt, and a heavenly English sweater across the bed. Shaking her head in disgust at herself, she went into the bathroom.

An hour later, after a quick breakfast, she and Mac were walking to the rental car, and on the lawn were the bridegroom and other men playing ball. Steve shouted to Mac, asking him to come play with them.

"She's forcing me to go shopping with her," he yelled back.

"Ha!" Karen called to them over the roof of the car. "Like I need a man to go shopping with me, right? Truth is, he's afraid to stay here because you might hurt him."

Ignoring the laughter of the men, Mac shouted, "What do you want us to get you for a wedding gift?"

"From you, Taggart?" Steve called. "A Lamborghini. But from her, I'll take anything she offers."

"I'll second that," one of the other men called, then they all laughed him a very complimentary way.

Feeling quite flattered, Karen smiled brilliantly at all the young men playing touch football and she smiled even more brightly when she saw that Mac was frowning. "What a very nice group of people," she said as she got into the car.

Mac, his body twisted as he looked out the back window while he drove the car out in reverse, maneuvering it around the many other vehicles in the drive, didn't answer her.

Maybe it was because of the men's flirting with her and Mac's resultant silence, but by the time they arrived at the beautiful Tysons Corner mall, Karen was in very good spirits.

"Where do we begin?" she asked as soon as they'd entered the center of the mall near Hecht's. Looking up at him, she saw that male shrug that meant that she was in charge. "Elephant time," she muttered.

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly.

"It's what I used to say when I was with my husband and we went shopping together. He'd refuse to participate in deciding what to buy anyone, but he'd carry anything I handed him. I called him my elephant."

For a moment Mac seemed to consider this, then he solemnly lifted his right arm, clenched his fist, and made his biceps bulge through his sweater. "I can carry anything you can pack onto me."

Karen laughed. "We shall see about that. By the way, if, as you said, 'we' are giving gifts, who's paying for these things?"

"Me?" he said with a mock sigh, as though he'd always paid for everything she'd ever bought.

"Perfect," she said over her shoulder as she took a right headed for Nordstrom's. "Your money, my taste."

"Just give me a peanut now and then and I'll be fine," he said from behind her.

Three hours later, Karen was exhausted but exhilarated. She'd completely forgotten what it was like to shop with a man. He never wanted to take the time to consider which of any two purchases was better. "This one," he'd say, or, "What does it matter?" And when it came to gift suggestions, he could rarely think past the music store. Twice she had him sit on benches, surrounded by shopping bags, while she went into stores and purchased sets of soaps and lotions, and some fruit and cheese baskets. She almost couldn't get him out of the Rand McNally shop, where he purchased a huge 3-D puzzle of the Empire State Building. And they visited all nine toy stores and made purchases from each one, so many purchases in fact that Karen suspected that they'd bought more toys than there were children.

"Does lunch come with this trip?" he asked after they'd visited the very last toy store the mall had to offer.

"Are you sure you want to eat? I think there was a toy car still left in that last store. Maybe you should go back and get it."

"Food, woman!" he growled, leading the way to the Nordstrom's cafe, where they placed their orders, then took their drinks and found a seat where Mac could put all the bags, for he wouldn't allow Karen to carry anything.

"You're a good elephant," she said as soon as they were seated, smiling at him.

After they were situated, he looked at her. "What plans have you made for Lawson's Department Store?"

Karen was in too good a mood to lie. "You don't have to patronize me. And you don't have to listen to my childish ideas. For all that this has been great fun today, you and I both know that as soon as we get back to Denver, it will end. You're the boss, and I'm just a typist."

"Just a typist, are you?" he said, one eyebrow raised as he reached down the neck of his sweater to his shirt pocket and pulled out several folded fax sheets. "You, your husband, and Stanley Thompson owned Thompson's Hardware Store for six years. You and your husband were everything to the store. Stanley Thompson was a deadweight."

As Karen looked at him in astonishment, he continued.

"After you two were married, Ray worked two jobs, while you typed manuscripts at home. You two saved every penny you had and bought a half share in Thompson's Hardware and you turned the place around. Ray knew about machines; you knew everything else. You wrote ads that made people come to the store and you handled the money, telling Ray how much you could and could not afford. It was your idea to add the little garden center and bring in women customers, and that was the most profitable part of the store. After Ray died you found out that the only way Thompson had originally been willing to sell to him was on the condition that on Ray's death he could buy you out for fifty grand."

"It was fair at the time the deal was made," Karen said defensively, as though he were saying that Ray had made a bad contract.

"Yes, at the time of purchase, half a share was only worth thirty thousand, but by the time he'd died, you and Ray had built up the business so a half share

was worth a great deal more than fifty grand."

"I could have stayed as a full partner." Karen said softly.

"If you shared Stanley Thompson's bed."

"You do snoop, don't you?"

"Just curious," he said, eyes twinkling at her as their food was set before them. After the waitress left, he said, "You want to tell me about your ideas for this store for mothers?"

"I haven't really thought about it, just some vague ideas," she said, playing with the straw in her glass of iced tea.

At that Mac gave a little snort of laughter and pushed a pen and a napkin toward her. "If you had unlimited money and owned Lawson's Department Store, what would you do with it?"

Karen hesitated but not for long. Truth was, she had thought about this for quite some time. "I'd put a children's play area in the center so mothers could watch their children at all times. If a mother is to be there a while, I'd tag the kids. You know, like clothing in department stores, so if the children wander outside the play area or someone tries to take them, bells go off as they exit the store."

Mac said nothing but his eyebrows were raised in question.

"They put tags on clothing so people can't steal them and children are a great deal more important than shirts, aren't they? And how can a woman try on clothes in comfort with a four-year-old screaming at her?"

After taking a bite of her food, she continued. "Surrounding the play area I'd have different departments: maternity wear, furniture, layettes, books on the various aspects of raising children, all the visual things. And I'd have clerks who were extremely experienced. And fat."

Mac smiled patronizingly at that.

"No, really. My sister-in-law just had a baby, and she was constantly complaining about anorexic sales girls who looked at her with pity every time she asked if they had something in extra large. And I'd have trained bra fitters and I'd have free brochures of local organizations the women could contact if they needed help or information, such as La Leche League. And of course we'd have contact with a local obstetrician in case of mishaps in the store. And "

She broke off as she glanced at his face. He was laughing at her!

"Haven't thought about it much, have you?"

She smiled. "Well, maybe just a bit."

"Where are your financials? And don't you dare tell me you haven't worked out to the penny how much opening a store like this would cost."

Karen took a few bites. "I have done a bit of number crunching."

"When we get back to Denver, you can put them on my desk and I'll " He broke off because Karen had removed a computer disk from her handbag. Taking it, he looked down at it and frowned. "When were you going to present me with this?"

She knew what he meant. He thought this was the real reason she'd agreed to this weekend. She was just one of the hundreds of people who tried to see him about or mail him their schemes for getting rich. Karen snatched the disk out of his hands. "I was never planning to show it to you or anyone else," she said through her teeth. "Millions of people have dreams in their heads and that's just where they stay: in their heads."

Angrily, she grabbed her purse and coat from beside her. "Excuse me, but I think this has all been a mistake. I think I'd better leave now."

Mac caught her arm and pulled her back down into the booth. "I'm sorry. I apologize. Really, I do."

"Would you please release me?"

"No, because you'll run."

"Then I'll scream."

"No you won't. You allowed Stanley Thompson to rob you blind and you didn't scream then because you didn't want to make a scene for his family. You, Karen, are not the screaming type."

She looked at his big, tanned hand clasping her wrist. He was right, she was not a screamer or much of a fighter. Maybe she needed Ray standing behind her tell

ing her she could do anything before she believed in herself.

Mac's hand moved so his fingers were entwined with hers, and Karen made no attempt to pull away as he held her hand in his.

"Look, Karen, I know what you think of me, but it's not true. Have you ever told anyone else about your ideas for the baby store?"

"No," she said softly.

"But you must have been working on this idea since before Ray died. Did you tell him?"

"No." She and Ray'd had as much as they could handle with the hardware store.

And she'd never wanted to give him the idea that she wanted something different or even something more.

"Then I am honored by your confiding in me," Mac said, and when Karen gave him a look of suspicion, he said, "Really, I am." Pausing a moment, he looked down at their two hands entwined. "All those prenuptial agreements were only to see if she would sign."

Karen looked at him in disbelief.

"Honest. If any of those women had signed, I'd have torn it up immediately. But all I ever heard was, 'Daddy doesn't think I should sign,' or, 'My lawyer advises me not to sign.' All I wanted was to be sure that the woman wanted me and not my family's wealth."

"Rather a hateful little trick, wasn't it?"

"Not as hateful as marrying me and four years later going through a divorce. And what if we had kids?"

In spite of herself, Karen felt herself curling her fingers around his. "And what about Elaine?"

"Elaine was different," he said softly, then pulled his hand from hers.

As Karen opened her mouth to ask another question, he said, "Ready?" and the way he said it was a command.

Minutes later they were again in the mainstream of the mall, Mac moving ahead, loaded down with shopping bags. Behind him, thoughtful, Karen followed until she was pulled up short at the sight of a shop full of the most beautiful clothes for children she had ever seen. In the window was hanging a christening gown of fine cotton, hand-tucked, dripping soft cotton lace.

"Want to go in?" Mac said softly from over her head.

"No, of course not," Karen said sharply, turning away.

But Mac, already large, was made even larger by all the bags he was holding and he blocked her exit as he moved forward.

"Really, I don't want . . ." she began, but she stopped speaking as soon as she was inside the store. Never had she allowed herself to look at baby clothes as something for a child she might have. For others, yes, but never for herself.

As though in a trance, she went toward the pretty dresses hanging on racks at eye level.

Mac, who had been relieved of his bags by a kind saleswoman, came up behind her. "Not those. The first Taggart baby is always a boy."

"Nothing is ever 'always,'" Karen told him, taking down a white cotton dress hand-embroidered with pale pink and blue flowers.

"Here, this is much better," he said as he held up a red and blue striped shirt. "Good for playing football."

"I am not going to allow my son to play football," she told him, replacing the dress and looking at some white suits made for what could only be a little prince. "Football is much too dangerous."

"He's my son too and I say "

It suddenly occurred to Karen what they were talking about, that they might have a baby together but it wouldn't be theirs. Not in any real sense. It wouldn't be . . . Before she could put together another thought, she ran from the store and was staring in the window of Brentano's when Mac found her.

"You mind if we sit awhile?" he asked, and all Karen could do was nod her head. Her embarrassment over what had happened in the baby store was still too fresh to allow her to speak.

She sat, he piled shopping bags around her, then he went to get the two of them

em ice cream cones, and for a while they sat in silence with their ice cream.

"Why didn't you and your husband have children?" he asked softly.

"We thought we had all the time in the world, so we put it off," she answered simply.

For a moment Mac was silent. "Did you love him very much?"

"Yes, very, very much."

"He was a very lucky man," Mac said and reached out to take her hand. "I envy him."

For a moment Karen looked into his eyes, and for the first time since Ray's death she saw another man. Not Ray superimposed over another man's features, but she saw Mac Taggert for himself. I could love again, she thought, and in that moment it was as though all the ice she had protectively put around her heart melted.

"Karen, I " Mac began as he moved toward her as though he meant to kiss her right there in the midst of Tyson's Corner mall.

"My goodness!" Karen said. "Just look at the time. I have an appointment at the hairdresser for the wedding tonight, and I'm barely going to make it. It's here in the mall but on the next level, so I'd better run."

"When did you make an appointment?" he asked, sounding for all the world like a husband who couldn't believe she'd done anything without his knowledge.

"In between toy stores." She stood. "I have to go," she said, then started walking. "I'll meet you back here in two hours," she called over her shoulder, then disappeared around the corner before he could say another word.

The truth was, she had half an hour before her appointment, but she wanted to get a Christmas gift for Mac. And she wanted to get away from him. She could not possibly fall in love with a man like Mac Taggert. "He's out of your league, Karen," she told herself. A man like him needed a woman whose father was the ambassador to some glamorous country, a woman who could identify one caviar from another, who could ... could...

"Idiot!" she told herself. You are as bad as all the others, thinking you're in love with him. Or worse! Thinking he is in love with you.

By the time she met him two hours later, she had managed to calm herself and regain her equilibrium. She saw him sitting on the bench, looking very pleased with himself. "What have you done?" she asked suspiciously.

"Merely had everything wrapped and labeled, and now they are all in the car."

"I am impressed," she said, wide-eyed.

"Stop laughing at me and let's go," he said, taking her arm. "Is that shellac they used on your hair? Or did they give you a wig made out of wood?"

"It's lacquer and I think it looks great."

"Hmmm," was all he'd say as they hurried to the car.

Back at the house, everything was chaos as people scurried to get ready for the wedding. It seemed that nearly everyone had lost a vital piece of clothing and now was frantically trying to find it. When Mac closed the door to "their" bedroom, it was like a haven of calm, and when Karen came out of the bathroom, the bed was covered with boxes and a couple of hanging bags full of clothes.

"It all came while you were in there," he said, and when Karen started to comment that she'd heard no one enter, Mac scurried into the bathroom.

One box contained silk underwear, all of it white: lacy bra, teddy, and white stockings that ended mid-thigh in lacy elastic. Never before had she heard of a wedding providing underwear along with the dress.

"You don't have time to examine everything," Mac said as he entered the room.

"But "

"Get dressed!"

As she picked up the underwear, then the dress that must have been made of three hundred yards of chiffon, she looked at the narrow space in the bathroom and back at the voluminous skirt.

"I won't attack you if I see you in your underwear but only if you make the same promise to me," Mac said, deadpan.

Karen started to protest but then smiled devilishly. "All right, you're on," she said as she took the white silk underwear and went into the bathroom. Moment

s later she emerged wearing makeup and her underwear and nothing else and she knew that she looked great. She wasn't very large above the waist, but, as many people had told her, she had the legs of a showgirl.

"Do you know where " Mac said as he turned toward her, then Karen had the great, oh, the enormous, satisfaction of seeing all the color drain from his face as he stared at her.

"Do I know where what is?" she asked innocently.

But Mac couldn't say a word as he stood there, his hands frozen, one held out stretched, the other trying to fasten the cuff link on his shirt.

"Could I help you with that?" she asked, striding toward him as he stared at her speechlessly. As sweetly as she could, she fastened first one then the other of his cuff links, then smiled up at him. "Anything else you need?"

When he didn't answer, she smiled again and started to walk away from him, knowing that the back view of her was as good as the front. Thank you, NordicTrack, she thought.

But she had no more time for thought because Mac grabbed her shoulder and pulled her into his arms, then brought his lips down on hers. How could she have forgotten? she wondered. She'd nearly forgotten the deliciousness of a kiss.

He kissed her long and thoroughly, and his big hands caressed her body, pulling her close to him.

Had it not been for the loud knock on the door and the call, "Ready to leave for the church?" Karen wasn't sure what would have happened. Even so, she had to push her way out of his arms, and it was with great reluctance that she did so. Her heart was pounding and her breath was fast.

"We must get dressed," she managed to say while he silently stared at her. With shaking hands, she picked up her dress and tried to get it on over her head without mussing her hair. She wasn't surprised when Mac helped her pull the dress down over her body, then zipped it up the back. And it seemed natural to help him into the coat of his tuxedo.

It wasn't until they started to leave the room that he spoke. "I almost forgot to give you your bridesmaid gift." Out of his pocket he pulled a two-strand pearl necklace and an earring with a long drop pearl.

"They're beautiful," Karen said. "The pearls almost look real."

"They do, don't they?" he said as he fished out the second earring, then he fastened the necklace on while she put on the earrings.

"Do I look okay?" she asked in earnest.

"No one will look at the bride."

It was a cliché, but the way he said it made her feel beautiful.

The wedding was enchanting. For all the chaos beforehand, everything went smoothly, and the reception was filled with laughter and champagne. Mac disappeared with a group of men he hadn't seen in years, and for a few moments Karen was alone at a table.

"Do you know how to dance?"

Karen looked up at Mac. "Wasn't that in your report about me? Or did your spies forget such important things as dancing?"

With a laugh, he pulled her out of her chair and led her onto the dance floor. To say they danced splendidly together was an understatement.

Steve sailed by, his lovely bride, Catherine, in his arms, and told Mac he should keep "this one."

Mac smiled. "You know that no woman wants me for long."

After Steve had laughed and moved away, Karen frowned up at Mac. "Why don't you tell them the truth? Everyone blames you for all the breakups."

Mac pulled her closer into his arms. "Be careful, Mrs. Lawrence, it almost sounds as though you're beginning to like me."

"Ha! All I want from you is "

"A child," he said softly. "You want to have my child."

"Only because you're "

"What am I? Intelligent? A prince among men?"

"You're a reverse prince. When a woman kisses you, you turn into a frog."

"I didn't with the first kiss. Want to try again?"



For a minute he looked down at her and she thought he was going to kiss her again. But he didn't and she knew that her disappointment showed on her face.

Hours later she once again found herself alone in a room with Mac. When she returned from the bathroom wearing her chaste white nightgown, he was standing by the window, his back to her, looking out into the night.

"The bathroom is yours," she said.

"I'm going out," he said firmly.

To her horror, Karen said, "Why?" then put her hand to her mouth. What he did was none of her business. Stiffening her body, she forced a smile. "Of course." She gave a great yawn. "See you in the morning."

Mac grabbed her shoulders. "Karen, it's not what you think."

"I have no right to think anything at all. You're free to do what you like."

Quickly, he pulled her to him, and held her tightly. "If I stay in this room tonight, I'll make love to you. I know I will. I won't be able to stop myself." Without giving her a chance to reply, he left her alone in the room.

"Right," Karen said to the closed door. "And next week it would be business as usual, the little fling with your typist forgotten. Better not to do anything that could get you sued."

She went to bed and only went to sleep after she had vented her frustration on the thick pillow separating the two halves of the bed.

Hours later she was sleeping so soundly she didn't hear him return, slip into bed beside her or feel him press a soft kiss on her forehead before he himself tried to sleep.

KAREN AWOKE CHRISTMAS morning to screams. Thinking the house was on fire, she flung back the covers and started to leave the bed but Mac's strong hand stopped her.

"Kids," he muttered, head buried in the pillow.

As the screaming increased, Karen pulled away from him, but his hand crept up her arm and pulled her down into the bed beside him. During the night the bolster pillow that separated them had slipped down (or been pushed) until it was nearer their knees.

Mac's hand crept upward into Karen's hair. He still had his face buried, still wasn't looking at her, but she could see his black glossy hair, could feel his warmth. The room was dim and the noise outside their room seemed very far away.

As he pulled her down to his level, as his face came next to hers and as his lips touched hers, he whispered, "Kids. Christmas. You know how they are."

"I was an only child. I had breakfast before opening my presents."

"Mmmmm," was all he said as he kissed her, kissed her warmly, softly.

With the touch of his lips it was as though time fell away: to be in bed with a warm, sleepy man as he pulled her into his arms felt so very familiar. And so very right. It was easy to slide down so her body was stretched alongside his, to slip her arms about his neck and return his kiss with all the enthusiasm she felt.

Suddenly, the door flew open and in rushed two kids holding toys aloft, brandishing them over the heads of the couple in bed. Bewildered, Karen pulled her face away from Mac's and looked up at the toys the children were waving in the air. The girl had a Barbie doll in an outrageous dress with a handful of accessories worthy of any call girl, while the boy held a box full of trains.

In spite of this confusion, Mac was still kissing her neck while Karen was half on top of him and trying to look at the children's new toys.

Before she could make a suitable comment, because Mac was kissing her throat, a third child came tearing in through the open door with an airplane in his hand, whereupon he crashed into the other two children and sent them flying. Everything dolls, trains, children landed on Mac's head.

Instantly the little girl started screaming that her doll was hurt, while the two boys tumbled to the floor in a fistfight over who had pushed whom. Getting out of bed, Karen scrambled to find the missing pieces belonging to the toys, but it was several minutes before she could find everything and get the children settled.

"Wait," she said to Mac as she picked toys out of the covers, "there seems to

be a red high heel in your ear."

"It's not the first time," he muttered, annoyed that the children had interrupted them.

Giving him a quelling look, Karen rounded up the children and pushed them out the door.

Once they were alone again, Mac put his hands behind his head and watched her move about the room as she gathered her clothes. "Our kids will have better manners."

Karen was looking for her belt. "I hope our kids are just as happy and excited as they are and that they " With a red face, she broke off, glanced at him lying there, grinning at her, then she scurried into the bathroom to get dressed.

But Mac bounced out of the bed and caught her before she could close the door. "Come on, Only Child, you're going to miss all the fun."

"I can't go downstairs in my nightgown and robe!"

"Everyone else will be," he said, pulling her, grabbing a T-shirt as he passed a chair.

Mac was right. Downstairs under the Christmas tree was chaos, with an ocean of torn wrapping paper and children everywhere. Adults were sitting in the midst of everything, exchanging gifts and laughing and ignoring the children as best they could.

"Ah, the lovebirds," someone called. "You'd better get over here and see what Santa brought you."

"By the looks of them, I think Santa's already delivered," someone else called, making Karen drop Mac's hand, which she had been holding rather tightly.

It didn't take her long before she plunged into the middle of the paper and the people, and sat on the carpet beside a red wagon with a ribbon tied about on its handle. She was pleased that no one had yet opened the gifts she and Mac had purchased and she could have the pleasure of seeing their faces. However, she was surprised when people began heaping gifts into her lap. Each one had a tag telling who had given her the gift, but when she thanked them she saw a look of surprise on their faces, then they'd glance at Mac.

It didn't take her long to figure things out. He was sitting beside her, opening gifts, his face as innocent as a sleeping child's. "You were busy while I was at the hairdresser's, weren't you?" she asked softly, so just he heard. It was obvious that he had purchased all her gifts, had them wrapped, then labeled them as coming from his friends.

He didn't bother to deny it, but just smiled, his thick, black lashes half lowered. "Like your gifts?"

Her lap and some of the floor around her were covered with beautiful objects: a cashmere sweater, a music box, pair of gold earrings, three pairs of slouchy socks, a silver picture frame.

"What did / give you?" Steve called. He and Catherine had postponed their honeymoon until the day after Christmas.

Karen laughed. "Let's see," she said, picking up tags. "I think you gave me the string bikini."

"The what?" Mac blurted then turned red when everyone burst out laughing. "Okay, okay," he said, smiling, but he put his arm possessively around Karen's shoulders.

A woman who was Steve's cousin looked at Karen thoughtfully. "You know, Karen, I have met all of Mac's fiancées, and I can tell him now that I've never liked any of them, but you, Karen, I like. You are the first one who has ever looked at Mac with love in her eyes."

"Actually, I forgot my contact lenses," Karen said, "and " She was halted by words that made her blush and look down at her lap. Mac's arm tightened about her shoulders.

"So when's the wedding?" someone asked.

Mac didn't hesitate. "As soon as I can persuade her. Look, she won't even wear my ring."

"Maybe it's worn out from being slipped on and off the fingers of so many other women," Steve called, and everyone laughed.

It was at that moment that Steve's mother, Rita, stepped in from the kitchen. "Stop it, all of you! You're embarrassing Karen. And I need help in the kitchen!"

To Karen's consternation, the room cleared instantly. Within thirty seconds, there wasn't a single male, young or old, in the huge room, only women, girls, and a mountain of gifts and torn paper. "Works every time," Steve's mom said with a grin. "Now, come on, ladies, let's go gossip."

Laughing, the women went upstairs to dress before settling into their various tasks. Alone in the bedroom she shared with Mac, Karen dumped her gifts onto the bed and looked at them. It hadn't taken much sleuthing to find out that everything she'd received as a gift since she'd arrived had been from Mac. She'd been curious to find out what the other women had received as bridesmaid's gifts and was told the gifts had been given out last week. Hadn't she received hers?

More questioning had revealed that pearl necklaces and earrings had not been the gifts given. "If you're referring to the pearls you had on last night," one of the women said, "and if they were a gift from Mac, then you can bet your bank account that they are real."

Karen blinked. "So I guess the bride didn't give out complete sets of white silk underwear."

She'd said it more to herself than to the other women around her, but they heard and set up a howl of laughter that made Karen blush.

So now, alone in their room, she looked at what he'd heaped on her and knew she'd trade everything for an extra hour with Mac. Tomorrow they'd return to Denver and by the day after they'd be separated forever. Or at least as good as, she thought, remembering the office, with her desk about a million miles from his.

Turning, she noticed an envelope on the pillow, and when she moved the scarf she'd tossed onto the bed, she saw that it had "Merry Christmas, Karen" written on it.

Opening it, she saw that it was a short contract signed by Mac and witnessed by Steve. Quickly, she scanned it and saw that it gave her control of a business to be housed in Lawson's Department Store. Mac would put up the capital and she'd supply the expertise. She was to have complete control to run the business in whatever way she saw fit and she was to repay him at five percent interest starting two years after the store opened.

"It's too much," she said aloud. "I didn't want " She stopped when she saw that there was a letter with the contract.

My dearest Karen,

I know that your first instinct will be to throw this in my face, but I beg you to reconsider. I am a businessman and you have the knowledge and experience to run a business that I believe will show a profit. I am not giving you this contract because I think you are beautiful and funny and excellent company, and because I enjoy being with you. I did this because I was forced to by my constantly pregnant sisters-in-law. I have been told that I may not return home if I sell leather instead of diapers in that old department store.

Please don't turn me down.

Your future partner, McAllister J. Taggart

For a moment Karen's head reeled with the meaning of what he'd written. But it wasn't the business offer that made her dizzy, it was the "beautiful and funny and excellent company, and because I enjoy being with you" that was about to do her in.

"Stop it!" she commanded herself. "He's not for you. He has women by the truckload and ... and ..." She went into the bathroom, where she stared at herself in the mirror. "And, you, you complete and total idiot, are in love with him."

Turning away, she turned on the shower. "Business," she told herself. "Keep it to business and nothing else."

But it wasn't easy to do that. When she went downstairs, she was wearing jeans and a red cashmere sweater set that Mac had given her (under the label of "Rita," Steve's mother) and the pearls that she couldn't help touching often. She would, of course, have to return them to him. They were much too expensive a gift.

People were slowly beginning to move about, some trying to clear the living room

oom, some going outside to play games with the men, and some, like Karen, going to the kitchen to help prepare the Christmas feast.

Somewhere during the last days she had heard it mentioned that Steve's mother was Mac's mother's best friend. Not that it was any of Karen's business, but didn't best friends tell each other everything? And hadn't about thirty-five people mentioned that Elaine was supposed to show up this afternoon?

Karen was curious to know if Rita knew anything about the truth behind the breakup of Elaine and Mac.

She spent hours in the kitchen, chopping and peeling, while hearing some outrageous stories about Steve's family and a few about Mac's. Outside the kitchen window she could see Mac, wearing tight cotton-knit pants and an armless sweatshirt, playing touch football. Several times, whenever he made a goal or lost a goal, he looked at her in the window and waved. Happily, Karen waved back. She hadn't had a family in so long, and never had she known all the noise and confusion of this one, with children running around the kitchen, people laughing and, in the living room, singing carols. It was all the noise that small families missed.

She nearly jumped when Rita spoke behind her. "You like all this, don't you? You're happy in the midst of wrapping paper and kids screaming and stuffing onions inside some poor murdered creature, aren't you?"

"Yes, very," Karen answered honestly.

"Mac is a very good man."

Karen didn't say anything. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. The only thing she knew for sure was that he wasn't hers. "Do you know the truth about Elaine?"

She and Rita were alone in the kitchen, as most of the work was done, and for a moment Rita looked at Karen as though considering whether or not to tell her.

"I have been sworn to secrecy," Rita said, looking down at her knife.

Karen drew in her breath. A woman admitting that she knew a secret meant that half the battle was won. All Rita needed was a bit of urging. But Karen hesitated. Part of her wanted to know and part of her didn't want to hear. What had made the woman walk out of her wedding like that? What had Mac done to her? "I would truly like to know," she said with feeling.

Rita stared into Karen's eyes for a moment, then smiled and looked back down at her knife. "You really do love him, don't you?"

"Yes," was all Karen could say; she didn't dare allow herself to say another word.

"Elaine was madly in love with some poor artist who all of us could see was more interested in her trust fund than he was in her. But love is blind and Elaine fought for him with all she had. Her father sent the artist not that he ever painted anything a letter saying that if he married Elaine, her trust fund would be cut off. He enclosed a check for twenty thousand dollars that would only be honored if the man left Elaine. When Elaine got home that night, her artist was gone.

She blamed her father for everything, and said that if he wanted her to marry a rich man then she would."

Pausing, Rita looked at Karen with her lips tight. "Elaine systematically went after Mac, the oldest of the Taggerts who wasn't yet married. She's beautiful, talented, and confident. Mac didn't have a chance. The night before the wedding her artist came back, and when Mac returned to their apartment, he found them in bed together."

Rita gave Karen time to assimilate this information before continuing. "Mac refused to marry her, but, being the gentleman he is, he allowed everyone to think that Elaine was the one who walked out on him. Since then he's been scared to death of marriage. He wants to get married, to have his own home, but I think he purposely chooses women who only want his money, then he tests them with some ridiculous prenuptial agreement and when they won't sign, it reinforces his belief that that's all women want from him. I'm glad to see that at last he's going to allow that wound to heal. I'm glad he's going to marry you, someone who actually loves him."

Karen didn't look up from the celery she was dicing for the salad.

"I'm telling you this because Mac has some sort of misguided sense of honor toward Elaine, so I didn't think he would ever tell you. And there're only two pe

ople outside of them who know the truth his mother and I."

"But you told me this because I love him?"

"And because he loves you," Rita answered simply.

Karen smiled indulgently. "No he doesn't. We're not really engaged. He hired me to be his escort for the wedding and to " She broke off because Rita was smiling at her in a very smug way.

"Karen, get real. Mac doesn't need to hire a woman for anything. He has women making fools of themselves wherever he goes. His mother is constantly complaining about the way the women who work for him make believe he comes with the job. She says he has two women executives so crazy about him they think that any work he gives them is proof of his love for them. His mother tells him to fire them, but Mac is so softhearted he won't. So he pays them outrageous salaries then does all the work himself."

"And the women complain to everyone because he doesn't share the load," Karen said softly.

"Probably. But Mac always takes the blame rather than allow a woman to look bad. His mother wanted to tell the world about Elaine, but Mac wouldn't allow it. Mac is from another era in time."

"Yes," Karen said in agreement. "I believe he is."

"Speak of the devil," Rita said, "a car just pulled up and it's Elaine. Karen! Don't look like that. Go out there and "

Karen was looking out the kitchen window. The arrival of Elaine had stopped the ball game because all the men had run toward the car to help the elegant, beautiful, exquisite Elaine out of the backseat of the long, black limo. And at the head of the crowd was McAllister Taggart.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to ... to ..." Karen could think of nothing she needed to do, so she turned and ran out of the kitchen, then ran up the stairs to her bedroom.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Karen felt that she had lectured herself enough, and maybe she now had enough control to meet Elaine and not thrust a knife into her cold heart. Unfortunately, just outside the bedroom door, she found Elaine flanked by Steve and Mac.

Up close, Elaine was even more beautiful than she was from a distance. She was tall, blonde, cool-looking, and sophisticated enough to make Karen feel completely gauche. Elaine was exactly what Karen had envisioned as a woman Mac should marry. No doubt her father was the ambassador to some elegant foreign country, and no doubt she had a master's degree in something sophisticated and useless, like Chinese philosophy.

Just looking at Elaine made Karen feel as if she were wearing overalls and had straw sticking out of her hair. No wonder Mac had fallen head over heels in love with her, she thought.

Pausing at the head of the stairs, Elaine gave Mac a look that could warm a steel I-beam, while Mac just started at her like a lost puppy, his heart in his eyes. He still loves her, Karen thought, and, against her best self-control, a flash of rage ran through her.

Steve paused only long enough to introduce Karen as Mac's fiancée, then he ran down the hall, football in hand, leaving the three of them alone.

"Still trying to get a woman to marry you, Mac?" Elaine asked softly, her eyes on Mac, as though Karen didn't exist.

"Still paying men to marry you, Elaine?" Karen shot back, then had the satisfaction of seeing Elaine's perfectly composed face crumble just before she turned and ran down the stairs. Obviously she'd thought her secret was safe forever and she could taunt Mac at will.

What Karen was not prepared for was Mac's reaction. His strong hand clamped around her upper arm and he half pulled her into their bedroom. When the door was shut, he faced her. "I didn't like that!" he said angrily, his face near hers. "What happened between Elaine and me is our business and no one else's, and I won't have you or anyone else sneering at her."

Karen straightened her body, ordering her muscles to remain rigid. If she hadn't, she would have collapsed on the bed in tears. What did it matter to her that

t McAllister Taggart was in love with a woman who had publicly made him a laughingstock? "Certainly, Mr. Taggart," she said stiffly, then turned toward the door.

But Mac caught her, shoved her against the wall, and kissed her hungrily. For a moment Karen's pride made her fight him off, but it wasn't long before she was pulling him closer to her, her hands in his hair, her fingers gouging into his back.

"I hate you," she managed to say as he kissed her neck, his hands moving all over her body.

"Yes, I know. You hate me as much as I hate you."

Later, she didn't know how it happened, but one minute they were against the wall, fully clothed, and the next they were naked and writhing on the bed. Karen had been celibate for over two years and the only way she had remained that way was by repressing all sexual desire. The combination of her anger at Mac and now his soft caresses made her erupt into flames, all her desires exploding at once.

Mac was a worthy opponent and his passion matched hers as he entered her with force, then more gently as he put his mouth over Karen's to keep her from crying out.

It didn't take long, but in those few minutes, a lamp fell crashing to the floor, Karen fell off the bed, and Mac lifted her so her feet were on the floor, her back on the bed.

When Mac came inside her, Karen wrapped her legs about his waist and pulled his body down onto hers, holding him tightly. Her heart was pounding, her breath ragged.

It was several minutes before she could think again, and when she did, she was embarrassed and ashamed. What must he think of her? The poor, uneducated little secretary making a fool of herself over the boss?

"Please," she whispered. "Let me up."

Slowly, Mac raised his head and looked down at her, and when she turned her head away, he put his hand on her chin and made her meet his eyes. "What's this?" he asked teasingly. "My little lioness can't be shy, can she?"

Karen looked away from him. "I would like to get up."

But Mac didn't allow her to move away from him. Instead, he pulled her onto the bed, wrapped his big naked body about hers, drew the bedspread over them, then said, "Tell me what's wrong."

Karen was having trouble thinking, for somehow, this cozy cuddling, their bodies naked, was more intimate than what they had just done. "You I " she said, but no coherent words came out of her mouth.

"We made love," he said softly as he planted a kiss onto the top of her head.

"It's something I've wanted to do for what seems like years."

"You never knew I existed until a few days ago."

"True, but I've made up in intensity for what I've lacked in time."

She tried to push away from him, but he held her tight.

"I'm not releasing you until you tell me what's wrong."

"What's wrong?!" she said with feeling, pushing away enough to look at him. "I am one of your secretaries, one step up from the custodian, and you're the boss and... and..."

"And what?"

"And you're in love with Elaine!" she spat at him. After all, how could she make more of a fool of herself than she already had?

To her great annoyance, Mac cuddled her closer and she could feel him chuckling against her.

"Ow! What was that for?" he asked when she pinched him.

This time she almost got away before he pulled her back. "I am not one of your bimbos. I am not after your money. In fact I want nothing whatever from you, not a business, not anything. Including ever seeing you " She broke off as he kissed her. "Again," she whispered, finishing her sentence.

"Gladly," he said, pretending to misunderstand.

It was when his hand moved to her breast and Karen could feel herself wanting

him again, and feel that he was again ready, that she pushed away from him. She didn't try to get off the bed, but she looked him in the eyes and said, "No."

"All right," he said, removing his hands from her body. "Tell me what's bothering you. Just don't leave. Please?"

Karen turned on her back, the spread covering her, none of her body touching his. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I just wanted " At that she turned to look at him. By her calculations, she was at peak fertility today and after what they had just done, maybe she was pregnant.

As though reading her mind, he lifted her hand and kissed it, first the palm, then the back of her hand. When he started kissing her fingertips, she pulled away from him.

But Mac drew her back into his arms, holding her tightly. "I don't love Elaine."

"That's not what I saw, and you defended her!"

"Whatever bad I wish to befall Elaine, it isn't worse than what has happened to her. A man married her for her money. I know how that feels, so I have only pity for her. If it helps her to make snide remarks to me, let her. At least I'm not married to her." His voice lowered. "And she's not the mother of my children."

"Do you have many?" she asked as though making conversation. More than anything, she wanted to remain cool and detached. Wasn't it all right in this day and age to have affairs with men? She was positively primitive to believe that people who went to bed together should get married.

"Maybe we made my first one today," he said softly, then held her as she tried to get away from him.

"It is not a laughing matter. I wanted you to be a donor, not a... a..."

"Lover? Karen, please listen to me. Today wasn't a mistake. I've never before been to bed with a woman without using protection." He lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "I love you, Karen. If you'll have me, I'll try to make you a good husband."

"Me and all the rest of the free world," she said before she thought, then was horrified when she saw the hurt in his eyes. Instantly, he turned away and started to get out of bed.

"I'm sorry," she said, flinging herself onto his back as he sat on the edge of the bed. "Please, I didn't mean that. You don't have to marry me or even ask me to marry you. I know your streak of nobility, how you're a chivalrous knight and "

Turning, he smiled at her. "Is that what you think of me? You think I ask every woman I go to bed with to marry me?"

Her face gave a positive answer to that.

Mac's face softened with his merriment. "Sweetheart," he said, smoothing a strand of hair behind her ears. "I don't know what's made you decide I'm a saint, but I'm not. Your first opinion of me was the most accurate any woman's ever had. You want to know the truth?"

Karen nodded, her eyes wide, then he pulled her into his arms and lay down beside her on the bed, her head on his shoulder.

"I was never in love with Elaine. Not really. I know that now, but it was flattering to have someone like her allow me to chase her."

"Didn't she chase you?" Karen said, then bit her tongue for giving away too much information.

Mac just smiled. "You have to remember that I've been around Elaine most of my life, and she was the one all of us boys went after. But she was unattainable."

She was gorgeous, and by the time she was fourteen, she was built. We used to take bets on who could get Elaine to go out with him, but none of us ever succeeded. She studied for her final exams the night of our high school prom; she must have turned down every guy in the school."

"So you wanted what you couldn't have?" she said with sarcasm.

"Of course. Doesn't everyone?"

Karen was too interested in the story to think about philosophy. "But you got her."

"In a way. About four years ago she came to my office telling me she wanted me to help her with some investments and I "

"Made a fool of yourself over her and asked her to marry you so you could show the other guys that you won."

"In a word, yes."

At that, Karen had to laugh. "So the artist saved you, didn't he?"

Mac hesitated before he answered. "Someday I want to know how you wheedled this information out of my mother. Or whomever she told who told you."

"Mmmm," was all Karen would answer. "So what about all the other women you asked to marry you?"

He paused, staring off into space. "You know, it was really quite odd, but every woman on earth seemed to think that after what happened with Elaine, I was dying to get married. Maybe they thought I wanted to show Elaine that I could get another woman if I wanted one."

"So they flung themselves on you," Karen said sarcastically. "You had nothing to do with all those engagement rings and prenuptial agreements."

He didn't laugh in return, but instead, turned so his face was above hers. "I'm serious. Two weeks ago I would have told you that I'd been in love with Elaine and maybe that I loved each of those beautiful girls I was engaged to. But now I know that I didn't love any of them, because when I'm with you, Karen, I don't have to be who I'm not. You're the first woman who has looked at me as just a man, not one of the rich Taggerts, not as a way to jump-start her own career. You saw me and nothing else."

He kissed her cheek. "I know it's sudden and I know you'll want to take time to think about this, and I'd love to court you, but I want to warn you what I'm after. I mean to marry you."

Karen's impulse was to throw her arms about his neck and say, "Yes, yes, yes," but instead she looked away for a moment, as though contemplating whether to marry him or not. When she looked back at him, her eyes were serious. "By courtin'g do you mean candlelight dinners and roses?"

"How about trips to Paris, a cruise down the Nile, and skiing in the Rockies?"

"Perhaps," she said.

Pulling back, he looked at her speculatively. "How about I buy you two more buildings in cities of your choice for those baby stores of yours and set you up with a state-of-the-art accounting system?"

"Oh!" she said, startled. "With an instant inventory system?"

"Karen, honey, if you marry me, I'll give you the private code to my own accounting system and you can snoop to your heart's content."

"You do know how to court a girl, don't you?"

"Mmmm," was all he said as he moved his leg on top of hers. "Did you know that twins run in my family?"

"I have seen a bit of evidence of that fact."

He was kissing her neck as his hand moved downward. "I don't know if you know this, but the way twins are made is to make love twice in the same day."

"Is that so? And here the medical people think it has to do with the way an egg divides."

"No. The more love, the more kids."

Turning her hips toward his, she put her arms about his neck. "Let's try for quintuplets."

"I knew there was a reason I loved you," he murmured before his mouth closed over hers.

## Epilogue

"KAREN!" SAID A WOMAN behind her, making Karen turn so quickly she dropped her packages. She was in a mall, people bustling about, and it took Karen a moment to recognize Rita, the woman she'd met on that remarkable weekend she'd spent with Mac.

To the consternation of both of them, Karen burst into tears.



With a motherly arm about the younger woman's shoulders, Rita led Karen to a tiled seat surrounding a quietly splashing fountain, then handed her a clean tissue and waited while Karen calmed herself.

"I am so sorry. I have no idea what is wrong with me. I seem to be bursting into tears constantly. I really am glad to see you. How is everyone? Steve?"

"Fine," Rita said, smiling. "Everyone is fine. So, when is your baby due?"

For several minutes Karen worked to control her tears. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to another mother. Now, why don't you tell me what is bothering you. Something wrong between you and Mac? He is marrying you, isn't he?"

Karen blew her nose. "Yes, we're to be married in two months in a perfect little ceremony. You're on the guest list." She looked down at her sodden tissue. "Nothing is wrong. Nothing at all. It's just "

"Come on, you can tell me."

"I'm not sure Mac wants to marry me," she burst out. "I tricked him. I ... I seduced him. I wanted a baby so much, and he " She broke off because Rita was laughing.

"I beg your pardon," Karen said stiffly, and started to get up. "I did not mean to amuse you with my problems."

Rita grabbed Karen's arm and pulled her to sit back down. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh; it's just that I've never seen a man pursue a woman as hard as Mac pursued you. Whatever could have made you think he doesn't want to marry you?"

"You really have no idea what you're talking about. If you knew the truth about what went on between us, you'd know that this will be more of a business arrangement than a real marriage. Everything was my idea and "

"Karen, forgive me, but you're the one who doesn't know what you're talking about. Did you know that there were only to be six bridesmaids in the wedding? Mac called Steve in a panic, said he'd met the love of his life and he had to have an excuse to spend the weekend with her. The addition of another bridesmaid to the wedding was his idea. He paid triple price for a custom-made dress in your size, then paid for a tux for a friend of his so there'd be a seventh groomsman."

Karen stared at Rita. "Love of his life? But he told me just after he met me about his problem with finding someone to fit the dress."

"Steve and Catherine have plenty of friends, they didn't need one of Mac's girlfriends. Certainly not when his girlfriends changed as often as Mac's did."

Karen shook her head. "But I don't understand. I don't think he'd even seen me before the night of the Christmas party. What made him make up such a story? Why would he want to? I don't understand."

Rita smiled. "There's a saying in the Taggart family, 'Marry the one who can tell the twins apart.'"

Karen's face showed no understanding.

"In Mac's office, there is a photo of a man holding a string of fish, isn't it here?"

Karen searched her memory, then remembered that night when she'd been snooping in Mac's office and picked up the photo from the shelf, then dropped it when Mac's voice startled her. "Yes, I remember the picture. It's one of his brothers, isn't it? I remember saying that I'd never seen the man before."

Rita smiled knowingly. "That was a photo of Mac's twin, a man who looks exactly like Mac."

"He doesn't look anything like him! Mac is much better looking than that man."

He " She stopped, then looked away from Rita's laughter, taking a moment to compose herself, then looked back. "He made up the whole bridesmaid story?" she asked softly.

"Completely. He offered to pay for the entire wedding if Steve would allow you to be in the ceremony. And he gave Steve free use of his precious speedboat for six months in return for putting both of you in the same bedroom. Those earrings Mac gave you came from the family vault, an heirloom, something given only to wives. Not girlfriends, wives. And I happen to know that twice that weekend he called home and told his family in detail about you, telling them how intelligent and beautiful you were and that he was doing everything he could to make you l

ove him."

Rita gave Karen's hand a squeeze. "You must have noticed how tongue-tied Mac was around you. We were all laughing because he was so afraid of saying the wrong thing that often he wouldn't say anything. He told Steve that he kept pretending to ignore you because he'd been told by a man in the office that you ran from any man who showed the least interest in you."

"He told his sisters-in-law about the store I wanted to open," she said softly.

"Dear, if he wasn't with you, he was talking about you."

"But I thought he asked me to marry him because . . ." She broke off, looking into Rita's eyes. "Because I asked for something from him."

"I have never seen a man fall as hard in love with a woman at first sight as he fell for you. He said you picked up a photo in his office, he looked into your eyes, and he fell in love with you in that single moment."

"Why didn't he tell me?" Karen said.

"You mean Mac hasn't told you that he loves you?" Rita asked in horror.

"Yes, he has, many times, but I . . ." Karen stood. She wasn't going to say out loud that she hadn't believed him, that she couldn't believe that a man like McAllister Taggart could...

"I have to go," Karen said abruptly. "I have to Oh, Rita, thank you," she said, then as Rita stood, she hugged her enthusiastically. "Thank you more than you could possibly know. You have made me the happiest woman on earth. I have to go and tell Mac that... that..."

Rita laughed. "Go! What are you waiting for? Go!"

But Karen was already gone.