
Kiss Yesterday Goodbye

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CHAPTER ONE

Gray clouds scudded across the low sky, promising to bring snow before morning. But Jenny Ashley paid no attention to the threatening clouds, or to the cold that bit through her ski jacket, as she walked along the path beside the deep lagoon. Her head was bent and her hands were jammed in the pockets of the down jacket.

She kicked a stone off the snowy path and watched it splash into the water; the ripples widening out to the bank. A mallard duck, startled by her passing, flew from under a bush and splashed awkwardly into the water.

Jenny pulled the knitted stocking cap down tighter around her ears and blew on her mittened hands. Watching the ducks was not an ideal pastime for a December day, but it was better than sitting in that tiny waiting room up at the hospital, waiting for the next time her father could have a visitor. After an eight-hour drive, sitting any more was the last thing she wanted to do.

It frightened her, that her father was so ill that he was only allowed visitors once an hour. And the nurses had refused to make an exception, even if Jenny had just gotten into town.

She had argued with them, but the head nurse of the intensive care unit had been adamant. "I'm sorry, Miss Ashley," she had said, not sounding sorry for an instant. "The rules are made for the good of the patient. Your mother just came out half an hour ago and went home for a rest."

"I believe you mean my stepmother," Jenny had corrected coolly.

"I mean Mrs. Ashley," the nurse said, not to be proved incorrect. "You may go inside in half an hour from now. Not until then."

Jenny kicked another stone off the path and looked at her watch. She wished she had asked the nurse which army she had been trained in. "Probably Mussolini's, she murmured. But at least being out in the fresh air was better than sitting in that stuffy waiting room.

"Would you like a slice of bread?"

The suddenness of the question startled Jenny, for she hadn't realized anyone else was nearby. She spun around to face the young man who had spoken.

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He was hatless, with a stray fleck of snow in his wavy blond hair. He held out a plastic bread wrapper. “To feed the ducks,” he explained unnecessarily. His gaze openly admired her dark brown eyes, framed in lashes so thick and dark they looked sooty, and the creamy complexion. “Would you like to feed them?” he asked.

He tore a slice of bread in half and tossed it into the water, watching as two male mallards snapped at it, their green heads and ringed necks brilliant against the gray water.

Jenny reached into the wrapper. “Thank you. I haven’t fed the ducks in years,” she said almost to herself, remembering those Sunday afternoons of her childhood which had nearly always included her father, a bag of day-old bread from the bakery, and the ducks. It was a habit in Twin Rivers to feed the ducks year-round, and the growing flock of wild birds reflected it. She tore the slice of bread into small pieces and flung it into the water.

“It won’t be long before the lagoon starts to freeze over,” the young man said. “I really feel sorry for them then.”

“They wouldn’t have it any other way,” Jenny mused. “But I agree with you. If they stop paddling, it freezes right in around them. I’ve felt that way sometimes—as though if I stopped paddling for an instant, I’d freeze solid!” She looked up and smiled. “Sorry, I’m not usually such a philosopher.”

“I don’t mind. You’re new around here, aren’t you?”

“No. But I haven’t been back to Twin Rivers in years.” She noted, quite calmly, that she had not said, *I haven’t been home in years*. It had ceased to be home five years ago when she had that last flaming quarrel with her father.

She glanced at her watch. What if, right now, up in that hospital, he was dying? Stop it, Jenny, she told herself. People don’t always die of heart attacks these days. He’s past the first two days; that’s the hardest.

“Are you staying long?”

“Probably just a few days.” She’d stay until her father was out of danger, if he wanted to see her at all. She wouldn’t be surprised if he wouldn’t let her come in. They had not parted on good terms five years ago, and there had been plenty of opportunity for others to convince him that he should forget he’d ever had a daughter.

“You picked a rotten season to be a tourist in Iowa.”

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Jenny smiled unwillingly. “Oh, I don’t know. I’ll take winter any day. I’m at my best when it’s cold outside.”

“If that’s true, you should consider staying. It’s colder here than any place else I’ve ever been, especially along February when outdoor thermometers start coming inside to get thawed.”

“You’re not a native, are you? I don’t remember you.”

“My name is Steve Whitman.” He held out a large hand. “I’m from Arizona originally, and I plan to go back. I’m assistant manager over at Twin Rivers Bakeries.” He misinterpreted her startled look. “It’s one of the biggest industries here — except for the university, that is. Twin Rivers, the cookie capital of the world.”

“I know bread and cookies are big business. I didn’t know the company had been sold.”

“It hasn’t; Dick Ashley still controls it down to the last mixing bowl. But when he brought in the new manager, they decided it should have a bigger name than just the Ashley Bakeries.”

Jenny said between clenched teeth, “And tell me — does this new manager just happen to be named Dane Sutherland?”

“Yes. Do you know Dane?”

“I certainly do. He’s been plotting to take over the Ashleys for the last ten years.”

The sentence was broken off in the middle as something red and furry slammed into the small of Jenny’s back, catapulting her almost to the edge of the bank.

Steve’s face was white as he bent over her. “Are you all right? Can you get up?”

Jenny shook her head to clear it. “What hit me?”

“That stupid dog. Get off her, you mutt!” He grabbed at the Irish setter’s collar to haul him away. “It’s lucky he wasn’t travelling any faster or you’d have had a swim.”

“Not exactly the weather for it,” Jenny murmured, still shaken.

Steve turned to the dark-haired man who followed the dog. “I’ve told you before that if I ever see that dog roaming loose, I’ll shoot him,” he threatened. “He almost

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pushed the lady into the lagoon!”

“Steve, you know Finnegan wouldn’t purposely hurt anybody. Any harm done?” The man brushed Steve aside and dropped to one knee beside Jenny. The dog, abruptly realizing he had done wrong, put his sorrowful nose on her knee, his plumed tail dropping dispiritedly.

Jenny looked up, startled. Her enormous brown eyes met the gray ones of the man kneeling beside her, who rocked back on his heels. “Well, hello, Red,” he said calmly. “I should have known it would be you in the middle of the storm.”

“That’s right, put all the blame on me!” she snapped. “If that isn’t just like you, Dane Sutherland! I didn’t exactly tell the dog to jump on me.”

“What a comfort. We’re taking up exactly where we left off. Don’t you want to add any choice remarks about my character and animal instincts as you did last time?”

Jenny struggled to her feet and brushed the snow off the seat of her jeans. “Not just at present. But I’d like to say a few words about that damned dog of yours!— I assume he *is* yours?”

“The doubtful honor is all mine. Finnegan has very little brain, but he’s a good listener when he isn’t chasing rabbits or knocking people down.” The setter looked up at the peaceable note in his master’s voice. His tail thumped against Jenny’s knee a couple of times.

“Don’t think I’m going to applaud you!” she told the dog fiercely.

“See what I mean? He’s a real four-footed imbecile. He thinks you’re the type who’ll be kind to animals and other creatures in need of concern.”

“Do you have to practice being nasty or does it come naturally?” Jenny asked. “How I have missed your so-called charms.”

His eyes brightened. “Have you really, Red?” he asked, his voice suddenly intimately husky. “Is that an invitation?”

“Don’t call me Red!”

“Why? Have you started dyeing your hair?” Dane’s hand shot out and plucked the stocking cap from her head. He pushed it into his pocket and ran a rough hand down the

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masses of red-gold hair that had tumbled from under the cap, falling past her shoulders. “If that isn’t red, what do you call it? Have you two met, by the way? Jenny Ashley—Steve Whitman. And you’re wrong about one thing, Steve; let me warn you right now. Whatever else Red is, she is not a lady.”

Steve had been staring at Jenny’s shining hair as she shook it out. “Your sister?”

Dane frowned. “Stepsister,” he said, with emphasis on the first word. “Thank you,” Jenny told him with awful politeness. “You saved me the trouble of explaining that there is absolutely no blood tie between us. Thank God.”

“Wasn’t it unfortunate for us that your father and my mother had no more sense than to start a second marriage at their age?”

“Oh, it certainly was unfortunate for me,” Jenny said sweetly. “As for you — well, I hear you aren’t doing badly at all.”

Dane’s face darkened, and Jenny almost panicked. It wasn’t safe to remind Dane that, had his mother not married Richard Ashley, he would probably be running one of the dough mixers at the bakery rather than being its manager. In fact, if it had not been for her father’s second marriage, Jenny told herself fiercely, she would never have met this officious fool who now had the right to call himself her stepbrother. It would have been no great loss.

“You always did throw the first punch so nobody could sneak up on you, didn’t you, Red?” Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Steve. “If your lunch break is over, Steve, one of us should be in the plant. I’ll walk Jenny up to the hospital and then I’ll be back. I trust you were going to see your father, Red? Or did you just come for the funeral?”

Jenny sputtered, “You son of a ... that’s my father lying up there in that intensive care unit!”

Dane shrugged. “You’ve forgotten it conveniently enough for the last five years. See you later, Steve.”

Steve looked at his boss with a trace of anger, but said only, “Will you be staying long, Miss Ashley?”

“I really don’t know,” she said tightly, not looking at Dane.

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“Till Richard is better, no doubt,” Dane said curtly, then added thoughtfully, “Or buried. Unless, of course, he has enough sense to throw her out today.”

Jenny watched Steve till he was out of earshot, then turned angrily to Dane. “You always enjoyed airing our quarrels in public, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t see you holding any intimate information back.”

She ignored the interruption. “And ordering everyone around—you get a positive kick out of that. Well, I’ll decide how long I stay and when I go, and you won’t get me to leave this town an instant sooner than I want.”

“You’re quick to interpret my motives, aren’t you? Look, Red—”

“My name is not *Red!*”

“It’s an ingrained habit. Look, *Jennifer*, if I had anything to say about it, Mother would never have called you at all.” He started down the gravel path, the dog penitently trailing at his heels.

“Obviously. At this point I might still be able to upset your applegart. Or should I phrase it more appropriately? I could put my hand in the cookie jar that you’ve grown to think of as all yours.”

“So now we get down to real motives. You’re here to make sure your inheritance is safe.”

Jenny dug her fists into her pockets to keep from hitting him. “It’s got nothing to do with inheritances. I’m worried about my father.”

“Pardon me for not believing you, but you haven’t wasted much concern over him in the last few years. Now just as soon as it looks like there might be money in it, here’s little Jenny. Complete with her mother’s approval.”

“And how did you conclude that Rosemary approves?”

“It’s obvious. You wouldn’t risk her goodwill on the chance of your father taking you back.”

“I do have a mind of my own,” she said coldly.

“I doubt it. At any rate, when Richard had his attack, Mother insisted that you must

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be notified. I'm amazed that she knew where to find you, and even more amazed that you actually came. But since you're here and I can't get rid of you..."

"Do you mean that you haven't considered murder yet?" she asked flippantly.

"At least a thousand times in the ten years since I met you, Red. Don't push me. You are not going to upset Richard any more. I won't let you pull off the tearful reunion scene and talk him into reinstating you in his will and then take off and leave him with another burden of guilt as you did after you had that fight with him."

"It's the bit about the will that really bothers you, isn't it, Dane?"

He paid no attention. "I don't care if you stay ten minutes or two months..."

"I can guess which one you'd prefer!"

"But you'll promise me that you won't quarrel with him. Or else you'll go now, and I'll tell him you were unfortunately unable to make the trip. What will it be?"

"You'd like it if I left, wouldn't you? It would clear the way for whatever little schemes you have worked out."

"How that brilliant man acquired such a blind spot where you're concerned, I'll never know. It was probably the same thing that attracted him to your mother."

"Just leave my mother out of this. What happened to that college degree in chemistry Daddy financed for you? Did you prefer cookie dough to noxious chemicals after all?"

"I'd give anything to get back into those — as you call them — noxious chemicals. Baking bread and cookies for a living — God!"

"It's such a pity that you can't go back to your chosen profession. We'd all love the idea. But I don't imagine Daddy will be back to work soon, will he?"

"I wish you'd get it through your head that a coronary occlusion is not a stroll in the park," Dane told her. "I had to quit my doctoral program to run the company when he had his first attack, and it was small potatoes compared to what this one looks like."

"I suppose he was paying for that degree, too."

"You suppose wrong."

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Suddenly Jenny registered what he had said. “His *first* attack? He’s had more than this one?”

“So you were, listening after all. Amazing! Yes, a minor attack — if there is such a thing.” He walked on a few steps. “Five years hasn’t improved your personality, has it?”

“It has nothing to do with time. It’s strictly a matter of the people I have to be around.” She turned at the hospital door. “The fascist in intensive care should let me in now, so I’ll run along. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Mother told him you were coming, so it won’t too much of a shock,” Dane told her.

“You didn’t consider the possibility that it might be a pleasant shock?”

“Not for an instant. And not even pleasant shocks are good for heart patients. Keep that in mind, Red. No scenes. Dinner is at seven, by the way.”

“You aren’t letting this upset your schedule, she said sarcastically.

Dane shrugged. “Everybody has to eat.”

“Well, I’m staying at the Inn. I won’t be at the house at all.”

He was unconcerned. “In that case, dinner will be whenever you want to walk to the dining room and order it. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Not if I see you coming,” Jenny retorted.

Richard Ashley’s face still carried the slightly-blueish tinge that indicated insufficient heart action, and Jenny’s stomach ached as she got her first good look at him. He lay weakly in the high bed, the guard rails pulled up, his oxygen supply bubbling beside him, and an intravenous drip monotonously feeding into a vein in his forearm.

He’s an old man, she thought. The hair that had been frosted lightly at the temples five - years ago was all white now. He was nearing sixty, she calculated quickly. He hadn’t exactly been young when she was born.

“Hi, Daddy,” she said gently, teaching between rails to pat his arm.

“Jenny.” It was little more than a breath. He lifted one hand weakly, and she took it

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between both of her own. "I'm sorry I have to greet you this way."

"Daddy..." She wanted to cry, to tell him how she hated to see him this way, how sorry she was that the five long years had stretched out between them, a headstrong girl and a man too proud to show his hurt. But Dane's stem face appeared in her mind, one eyebrow raised, as he had told her, "*No scenes, Red.*"

So she squeezed her father's hand and said nothing at all.

"You'll be staying, won't you, Jenny? Just seeing you is the best medicine I could have."

"That depends on how fast you get well. I can't stay too long, you know. I will have to get back." She didn't want to make any promises. Jenny hated promises; too many of them, she had found, were impossible to carry out.

"Just a few days?" The disappointment in his eyes shocked her. "At least till Christmas, Jenny?"

"I don't know, Daddy. That's two weeks."

He tried to smile. "Got a boyfriend you can't stand to be away from?"

"At least a dozen." Her voice was teasing. "I'm never going to limit myself to one." Or would she? she wondered. She stared at her bare ring finger, wondering if Brian's diamond would soon gleam there. He hadn't actually asked her to marry him, but she thought it was only a matter of time. Perhaps if she spent a few weeks in Twin Rivers, it would give them both a chance to think about it.

Richard, weak as he was, had not been fooled by her feeble joke. "Someone special, Jenny? Would I like him?"

Jenny smiled. "I think he's very special, and yes, you'll like him, Daddy." Why had she said that? she wondered. In all probability, the two men would never meet. Brian was a junior executive in a big corporation, and he would have little to gain by getting to know Richard. Brian knew only people who might be of advantage to him.

Yes, Jenny thought, a couple of weeks in Twin Rivers, away from Brian Randall, might not be such a bad idea. It would give her a chance to think, things over and realize whether she loved Brian or had just let him become a habit.

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The dispirited droop of Richard's mouth nudged her to say, "Maybe I can stay. I don't know. Don't worry about it, please." Surely there was no harm in letting him think she might spend Christmas in Twin Rivers. There would be plenty of time for her to break the news if she decided to leave after he was better.

He was tiring fast. "I expect you have a job you have to get back for. My daughter the advertising executive."

Jenny laughed. "It's public relations, Daddy. And I'm hardly an executive. I don't have any talent for writing those snappy ad slogans, but I could get good PR for Attila the Hun."

He smiled weakly. "Have you seen Margaret? She was anxious for you to get here."

"No. I came straight to the hospital. and she had gone home. I'll see her later."

He didn't press. "What are you doing now, Jenny? Are you living with..."

He wouldn't even say her mother's name, Jenny realized. For the first time in her life she stopped to think about the shock it had been to him when Rosemary had left him with an infant child to care for. It had all happened more than twenty years ago, but it was still having its effect on him.

"No, Daddy. I have my own apartment, with a bunch of the girls I went to school with. Apartments are so terribly high-priced..." She chattered on.

A nurse tapped her on the shoulder. "Sorry, Miss Ashley. Your ten minutes are up."

This one really sounded sorry, Jenny thought as she patted her father's hand. The shift had changed while Jenny had been down at the lagoons, and the fascist was gone.

Richard held on to her hand. His grip was pitifully weak. "Don't go, Jenny. I'm afraid I won't see you again."

"I can't stay, Daddy. They want you to rest now. But I'll be right down the hall, and I'll come back in another hour, just as soon as they'll let me." She freed her hand gently.

He closed his eyes with a sigh.

Jenny paused at the desk, where the nurse was bending over a chart. "Why are his visitors so limited?"

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“It’s just intensive care unit policy, Miss Ashley. You’ll see a quick change when he’s moved out in a room in a few days. This unit is a depressing place to be.”

Jenny felt a little better. “I’ll be in the waiting room.”

“Very well. If he asks for you, we’ll come and get you.” The nurse gave her a genuine smile. “I’m expecting Dr. Grantham to be in soon. Would you like me to ask him to stop by the waiting room?”

“Yes, please. I’d like to see him, if he has time.” Jenny walked down the hall to the little waiting room, feeling for the first time that her father was in good hands.

The room was furnished in reds and blues — strong, cheerful colors that somehow made her feel even less cheerful. She curled up on a sofa and yawned. She was exhausted after the long drive; her tiny economy car was not intended for comfortable travel. Margaret had called late last night, and Jenny had been on the road at dawn.

She yawned again and closed her eyes. Maybe she could snatch a nap. The nurses must be used to having families camping out in this room, waiting for the next time they could see their loved ones.

But all she could see was Dane Sutherland’s face, stern and brooding, his gray eyes wary and — was *hateful* the word she wanted? — as he had looked down at her. That was understandable, she told herself. After five years, Dane certainly didn’t want her coming back, just when he had achieved what he wanted.

Richard Ashley was an invalid, and Dane was in control of the Ashley empire. Jenny wasn’t dumb; she could understand why he would resent her reappearance. But there had been a time when he hadn’t felt that way about her. The last time she had seen him, before she ran away...

She shook her head and tried to force him out of her mind. He wasn’t important, after all — wasn’t even a part of the family as far as she was concerned. But seeing him again had stirred old memories. She put her head back against the chair cushion and allowed herself to remember.

She had been twelve and Dane seventeen when their parents had married. And though Jenny had been resentful of the new additions to the family, she and Dane had managed to make peace of a sort between them. Having some interests in common had helped. Dane had taught her to ski when they’d all vacationed in the Rocky Mountains,

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and he'd taught her to dance and how to turn down a date without causing hurt feelings.

Having a brother had certain advantages, she had had to acknowledge. But as they got older the quarrels grew, until it had seemed that they were in a continual argument whenever they were in the same room. Jenny had never understood why; she just knew that about the time she turned fifteen Dane had stopped being helpful and easy to talk to. She had concluded that he was out to get all he could from her father, and that he was now seeing her as a rival. And so they quarreled whenever they were together, until Margaret had headaches and Richard left the room and the housekeeper yelled. Nothing anybody said could seem to stop them.

And then there had been that day five years ago — the last time she had seen him.

There was a bustle in the corridor and she opened her eyes as a gray-haired man came in, his lab coat hanging open. "Hello, Jenny," he said. "May I sit down?"

"Of course, Dr. Grantham." Her tone was affectionate.

This was the man who had treated her chickenpox, who had set her broken arm the time she fell out of the top of the apple tree, who had taken her seriously when the first signs of teenage acne developed and she had panicked.

"You've changed in five years, Jenny," he said, settling himself comfortably. He put Richard's chart on the table in front of him and laced his fingers together at the back of his neck. "Not all for the better, either. Your eyes are shadowed. Is that natural, or is it worry over your father?"

"Both, I guess." She uncurled and sat up straight. "How is he, Dr. Grantham? Really?"

"Not all the test results are back yet. We won't know much definitely until then. He has had a heart attack, and there's some damage showing in his blood and his heart rhythms. But until all the tests are in we won't know how serious it is. He will probably be out of intensive care in a few days, home in another week after that, perhaps."

"What about the future?"

"He'll be housebound for the winter, of course. It's unfortunate that he won't be able to get outdoor exercise, but the cold won't allow that. He may be a good candidate for surgery to bypass the blockages in his cardiac arteries. But even so, he'll still have the

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damage from the two attacks he's already had."

Jenny closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"He can't return to his normal pace for a long time, Jenny. He knew this was a possibility; that's why he turned the company over to Dane." He studied her face, his eyes shrewd. "That bothers you, doesn't it? That Dane's in charge of the bakery?"

She bristled. "And why shouldn't it bother me? It's always been Ashley property. Now as soon as Dane's in charge, it doesn't even carry the Ashley name."

"It is still Ashley property," he told her bluntly. "And if you'd been here, Richard would have turned it over to you."

"I love my father, Doctor, but he never believed I could do anything for myself."

Dr. Grantham grunted. "At any rate, Dane didn't want it. I'm sure Richard could have been persuaded to let you try."

"Dr. Grantham, I would never have had a chance, and there's no point in discussing it. And I didn't come here to be lectured about Dane's Good Samaritan instincts. I want to talk about my father."

"Very well. You'll be staying, won't you?"

"Just for a few days. I told Daddy I might stay till Christmas, but I probably won't."

Dr. Grantham sighed and polished his glasses on his lab coat. "What is there," he asked finally, "that is more important to you than your father's life?"

Jenny pulled both feet up on to the edge of her chair and clasped her hands around her knees. "What do you mean? If you're trying to put the blame on me..."

"Of course not. It isn't your fault that Richard has had a heart attack. But he has had a great many anxious moments over you in the past five years. You could relieve his mind a great deal by staying here for the winter, by letting him see that you still love him, that you're still the daughter he adores. Five years without a word to him, Jenny — that was cruel."

"It was five years without a word from him, too, Doctor. And why should he have anxious moments? He knew I was with my mother." Jenny's voice was bitter.

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“I imagine that’s exactly why he worried,” Dr. Grantham said dryly.

“You never liked her, did you, Doctor?”

“No. Never,” he said bluntly. “I think it had something to do with the fact that when you were born Rosemary wouldn’t even look at you till you were bathed and dressed.”

Jenny shrugged. “She has her failings.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “*Failings?* Is that what you call it when a woman walks out on her husband and two-year-old daughter? *Failings?*” His eyes softened. “I don’t want to quarrel about Rosemary. But tell me, what is more important to you than your father? Your job?”

She shook her head silently.

“Then you’ll stay?”

“I don’t want to.”

“You must. You’re the best medicine he could have right now — having you back here, knowing that you’re father and daughter again. You’re all he has, Jenny.”

“He has Margaret and Dane — and he’s managed very well with them for five years.”

“Perhaps.” He mused, “I remember how you rarely had a babysitter when you were tiny, because wherever Richard went he took you. He’d scarcely, go anywhere that you couldn’t be with him. And he would never have married Margaret if he hadn’t been certain she’d be a good mother to you — no matter how much he loved her.”

“I could have done without the honor,” Jenny muttered.

“Could you? Really? I suspect you’re a lot fonder of Margaret than’ you would ever let anyone see.” He let her think about it a moment. “Won’t you stay here for a few months — through the winter, until he’s back on his feet? And then, if you must go, part friends and stay in touch with him? Should that be too much to ask?”

“No.” It was sullen.

“Good girl!” He got to his feet.

“I didn’t say I was staying, Doctor. I just said it shouldn’t be too much to ask.”

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He stopped at the door and looked back at her, disappointment in every line of his face. “Jennifer Ashley, if you aren’t compassionate enough to take pity on an old man who thinks the universe revolves around you, then you aren’t good enough to have his name.” And he was gone.

She sat unmoving for several minutes, and then the nurse came in. “Your father is asking for you, Miss Ashley,” she said.

Jenny stared at the wall for a few more moments, then slowly rose and followed the nurse back down the hall to intensive care.