

CHAPTER ONE

Jenny Arlen hugged her sack of groceries close, shifting the uncomfortable weight from one hip to the other as she waited for the traffic light to change. Her eyes and throat burned from the exhaust fumes. The winter wind cut through the city streets, fluttering her thin coat and pulling nearly white tendrils of hair from beneath her knit hat. Another time, another season, she would not have given the four-block walk a second thought – and carried twice the bags with little effort. Now, though, as the years made themselves felt, a simple trip to the store was a major expedition, a fact she acknowledged with a grimace at the red neon pedestrian light. The dull throb between her shoulder blades echoed the beat of her heart. Would the light ever change?

Finally the walk light clicked on. The throng of people around her surged forward, sweeping her along with them. As she picked her way carefully around the slippery patches and mounds of dirty snow, she heard piercing shrieks all around her. Her glance jerked upward. Too late, *much too late...*

The grille of a huge truck loomed right on top of her. She was caught up in explosions of blinding light, tremendous pressures, and then nothing.

* * *

Eyes closed, Jenny lay quietly but her thoughts raced and tumbled. *She wasn't cold any more.* The leaden clutch of despondency slipped from her. Strange, she could smell Mennen After Shave. It reminded her of her father. It had been years...

She became aware of the weight of a large, warm body on hers. Shivers of sensation rippled through her. Her wrists were being held over her head in a strong hand. Her eyes flew open. Her knees were drawn up on either side of his hard body. Panic surged as she realized that he was inside her, sliding deeper. She stared at the face just inches above hers.

Her struggles were futile. In desperation she strained to pull her hands from the iron grasp. His big body held her immobile. Her alarm faded as a delicious feeling of languor began to overwhelm her. New sensations pushed away her fear.

She gasped and shut her eyes, shocked to find herself completely lost in a spiraling pleasure that engulfed her whole body.

As the crescendo of delight began to subside, thoughts drifted to the surface of her mind. I've died, and this must be heaven. I must have been very good to have such a handsome man making love to me like this.

It had been a long time since she had known a man's embrace and felt him filling her. She shivered with delight, pushing aside the feeling that she should be afraid. It had never before felt quite this wonderful. Well, dying wasn't so bad, if this was to be her reward!

Smiling, she opened her eyes and looked at the face so close to her own, enchanted with his thick dark hair and startlingly blue eyes. The angled planes of his face were highlighted in the golden gleam of a setting sun flooding the room. His grip on her wrists had loosened a bit and she pulled her hands free and brought them to his face, stroking the strong high cheekbones.

"Who are you?" she murmured with a tender smile, gazing into those blue eyes.

He froze and his jaw tightened under her stroking palms. His soft smile tensed into a hard line of compressed lips. She could feel his whole body stiffen.

"For God's sake, Merrily! What in the hell do you mean 'Who am I?'"

"Who's Merrily?" Jenny whispered, a terrifying emptiness flooding her body.

With a groan, he sank down onto her, his ardor dissipating like mist. She felt him withdrawing from

inside her body and stifled a small, "Oh." She stared at his face, aware of a sense of loss. Jenny lay there, her hands still cupping his face. Mixed with the Mennen were sweat and the almost-forgotten scent of male musk. She didn't know this splendid young man, but she knew by the sudden tension of his body that he was furious. He raised his head, his drawn-down brows framing his icy eyes. She let her hands drop. Her tumbling thoughts sent unease flaring up through her. If this was heaven, why was he so angry? If she wasn't dead, then where was she? How did she get here? Why would this young man want to make love to *her*? If she wasn't dead, then she should be afraid. *Who was Merrily?*

Anger hardened his handsome face. Rolling off her, he sat on the edge of the bed, the rigidity of his back muscles sending a growing fear through her. As she raised herself on one elbow, he spun around and glared. She saw such anguish in his eyes. She could almost feel his pain.

He pushed the words out through tensed jaws. "All right, Merrily. What the hell is this? What do you mean 'Who are you?' and 'Who's Merrily?' If this was the Army, I'd say you were bucking for a Section Eight discharge! That's the kind they give you for being nuts!" His voice had grown louder as he spoke and he spat the last out nearly shouting.

All the delicious sensations he had been stirring in her just moments before fled; she was frozen with dread and fear.

Jenny cringed back from his intensity, all sympathy for his obvious anguish gone. His rage-filled face loomed as he slammed his hands down on either side of her. His hot breath swept over her face. Blue eyes had turned a chilling grey and his mouth was a tight, pinched line.

Jenny grabbed at the trailing sheet, clutching it like a shield. "I didn't mean to upset you," she moaned. "I just don't know where I am or why I'm here."

He sat back and stared at her, her fright surprising him. “Merrily?”

Jenny broke in—anger beginning to overcome her terror. “Stop calling me Merrily!” she snapped. “My name is Jenny. I don’t know you. My name is not Merrily! I don’t even *know* anyone named Merrily.” She took a shaky breath.

His hands shot out and grabbed her shoulders, giving her a hard shake. “Stop this! You know damned good and well who you are. You’re my wife, Merrily MacDaniel – *what in the hell is the matter with you?*”

She struggled desperately to pull free and finally got one hand loose. The red print slowly blossomed on his cheek as she slapped him with a strength born of terror and frustration. Shock contorted his face and he flung her from him.

Defeat in every word, he grated out, “Merrily, I’ve tried to be a kind and understanding husband these last three months, but I think you’ve finally won the war.

“If you hate being with me so much that you’re going to pretend to be crazy, then all right. I won’t touch you again. I give up!”

The last bits of hope shattered and turned to dust in his heart. He had been so sure that time, patience, and tenderness would change Merrily’s coldness and bring back the warmth and love he hoped were buried deep within her. As he slid deeper into her body, he had felt her returning his passion. Then she had insisted that she wasn’t Merrily. He stood and strode heavily across the bedroom.

Jenny stared at his retreating broad shoulders and narrow hips. He seemed to believe what he was saying and appeared genuinely distraught.. How could he possibly think she was someone named Merrily? *They were married?* He couldn’t be more than thirty. How could he be married to *her*? She was old!

“Wait, uh, uh ... I don’t even know your name. Please wait! We need to talk,” but he was gone and she was talking to an empty room.

Grabbing a robe lying in a heap by the bed, she hurried after him, pulling the silky folds hastily around herself. She was determined that he understand that something very strange was happening. She didn’t know how she had suddenly been spirited out of cold Philadelphia and into his bed. How *could* he think she was his wife?

Didn’t he have eyes? Surely his wife wasn’t some old woman? How could he think she was his Merrily? She clenched her hands into the soft silk sash as she yanked it into a knot, aware of the pain flooding through her that she was the cause of this man’s torment. She was so wrapped up thinking of his suffering that she didn’t notice that she was walking lightly and easily...

As she hurried after him, her thoughts in turmoil, she glanced briefly around the room. Her eyes slid past the big dresser mirror. She stopped short with a gasp as the image seared into her mind.

She backed up and stared. The face was not her own! She raised her hand to her hair and the figure in the mirror did the same. Jenny gawked at the reflection of an absolutely beautiful young woman with long curling dark hair falling down her back to her narrow waist. Wide-set hazel eyes fringed with incredibly long dark lashes stared back at her.

Jenny put both hands to her cheeks as her mind registered what her eyes were seeing. How could this be? She touched the smooth face and the room began

to spin and buzz. Her tormented cry faded as the darkness swarmed over her.

In the next room, the anguished wail sliced into the miserable young man like a blade and he sprinted towards the connecting doorway, fear churning in his gut. She lay collapsed into a small heap. He dropped to his knees beside her and gathered her in his arms, pressing his lips to her forehead. He held her limp form to his chest, arms trembling.

“Merrily, darling! God, what happened? I’m so sorry!” Cradling her tightly, he rose and moved to the bed. He laid her down gently and sat on the edge beside her. He began rubbing her hands, his mind whirling with anxiety.

“What’s wrong, Merrily? What happened? Speak to me, darling, it’s Jonathan.”

Her eyes slowly opened. As his face came into focus, she gasped, remembering what she had seen in the mirror. Pushing him away, she moved to the side of the bed and unsteadily got to her feet. She swayed, but determinedly started to move towards the dresser.

He stood and wrapped an arm around her waist, holding her against him. Her body was trembling and her skin felt cold, in spite of the warm breeze wafting through the room.

“What are you doing?” he asked, puzzled.

“The mirror! Please!” she managed to squeak as she pulled him toward the dresser.

Standing there with his arm steadying her, she gazed at their reflections. The images were of the same beautiful young woman and the handsome man who had been making love to her. Her head barely came to the chin of the man beside her. His tousled dark hair hung over his forehead. Those clear blue eyes stared back piercingly. His broad shoulders and hard chest pressed against her back and she shivered at the strength of his muscled thigh against the back of hers. She turned her head and looked up at him, fright clutching her heart.

“I don’t know what’s happening, but that’s not me in the mirror. My name is Jenny Arlen. I live in Pennsylvania and I’m not young and beautiful! I’m not young at all!” she gasped out with shuddering apprehension.

As her slim young form shook with terrified sobs, he stared at the two of them in the mirror and spun her around. *What was the matter with her?* His fingers bit into her shoulders, he growled angrily, “Stop this, Merrily! You’re my wife and I will not allow you to continue this charade. I shouldn’t have tried to force you to make love to me! I won’t do that again.”

She stared unseeing up into his twisted face, too frightened by what was happening to listen. Her mind was a swirling tumble of terror.

“When is this? Where are we?” she wailed. The open French doors brought in warm breezes, the perfume of many flowers, and birdsongs. “This can’t be Pennsylvania. It isn’t even winter out there!”

His glowering eyes scanned her stricken face, his anger growing. He couldn’t believe that she was going to continue this farce.

“What are you talking about, Merrily? Of course this isn’t Pennsylvania. You’ve lived here in Southern California all your life. And you know damned good and well it’s December!”

Jenny shook her head, closing her eyes to block out his contorted face. She was cold, confusion filled her. How could the mirror reflect someone she had never seen before?

“You have to believe me,” she whispered, the tears sliding down her cheeks. “I’m Jenny Arlen and I live in Philadelphia in a small apartment over a store. Since my little dog died last year, I’ve been all alone.”

She was a hollow shell, her whole world gone in the blink of an eye. These were strangers in the mirror.

As he looked at the reflections, Jonathan’s face went stiff and the line of his jaw tightened. This woman with whom he had been making love said she was not his Merrily. After her initial screaming resistance, shrieking that she wished she were dead, she had been responding as he had always dreamed she would, warmly and passionately, *until she asked his name*. Then she was trying to tell him that she wasn’t Merrily, that she was someone named Jenny.

His hands dropped from her shoulders, his face a granite mask as he spun away from her. He turned and moved slowly and dejectedly to the connecting door, his steps dispirited and mechanical. He spoke harshly over his shoulder, “Be Jenny. Be Merrily. Be anybody you choose. Just be damned sure you’re ready to leave for the country club by 7:30.”

The door slammed shut behind his stiff back.

Jenny let her eyes travel back to the reflection. She stroked her hands down over her breasts and to her slim waist. How could she look so young and beautiful in the mirror when she knew she was Jenny Arlen? Guilt gripped her relentlessly. If she was here, in this body, where was his wife Merrily? Had *she* become Jenny Arlen? Did *she* die when the truck hit her? Was *she* lying somewhere in Jenny's body in pain and agony? Jenny's breath caught raggedly and she struggled to make sense of it all. If she was here, young and beautiful, then was poor Merrily suddenly old and badly injured? Horror clutched at her.

Why was she, Jenny, suddenly young again? She had never done anything even remotely heroic or wonderful in her life. What terrible thing had Merrily done to lose her youth and beauty like this? Jenny's mind raced.

She had tried to be a good, dutiful wife, making her husband's life as comfortable as she could, considering their limited circumstances. He'd been a quiet, mostly uncomplaining big man who had treated her with detached affection, once the excitement of youth had faded.

Life had been quiet, ordinary, and her three children had grown up without major problems and were now staid, middle-aged, middle-class parents with children and lives of their own. After her husband died, Jenny's life had been lonely, colorless, and perched on the edge of poverty. She had her little apartment over a small neighborhood store. She had never really gone hungry, but there had been few bright spots except for the little white dog who had loved her. It had become a greyer, lonelier existence when he died.

Nothing in her whole ordinary life merited her getting this boon of a second chance at life – obviously a life of beauty, wealth, and love.

Jenny shuddered with the wrenching fear that all this would disappear as quickly as it had happened and she would find herself under the truck, or worse. Her breath caught as she thought of coffin walls closing in and she fought for air. Jenny turned towards the doorway where Jonathan had disappeared and held out her hand, wanting to draw him back, but he had slammed the door. Tears of frustration spilled down her cheeks. It didn't seem possible, and yet her fear was beginning to mix with swirls of awareness towards this angry man, another woman's husband. How could he stir up this sense of connection in her in such a short time? When she had opened her eyes and looked at his handsome face above her, she had felt the tendrils. He would never feel anything like that towards her, though. Any attraction he might have was because she was wearing the face of his dead wife. If Merrily *was* dead. The not-knowing was an agony of its own.

Jenny's whole lifetime had disappeared and she was someone else. If Jonathan ever believed that she was Jenny Arlen, that his Merrily was gone, he would hate her for inhabiting Merrily's body. Jenny stood there wracked with grief and guilt, her arms clasped around herself. It was a monstrous joke. The face in the mirror mocked her. Where was the real Merrily? Why had this happened to *her*? She had tried to be a good person. Was this a punishment or a reward? *And what had happened to Merrily?*

