

Jenny's Dreams

Inside her dream, Jenny Logan awoke to the sound of a knock on her apartment door. The knock was subtle but also insistent and compelling, stoking her curiosity like embers in a fireplace. She rolled out of bed, stretched, and slipped a thin, translucent gown over her naked body. When she reached the door, she peered through the peephole and saw that the person knocking was a tall man wearing a dark-gray suit, white shirt, and burgundy tie. He was holding a long box made of heavy, green paper.

The knock came again, and she scanned his clean-shaven face, clear, blue eyes, and black, wavy hair, noting that he bore a striking resemblance to Patrick Dempsey's Dr. McDreamy. She smiled. She knew the man couldn't possibly be the actor, but she just had to find out. She opened the door a crack without unlatching the security chain. "Yes?" she said while continuing her scan.

He gave her a slow but certain smile, his eyes running up and down what he could see of her body. "Miss Logan?"

"Yes." She ignored his use of the appellation, 'miss.'

"I have a delivery for you." His voice was deep and resonant, complementing his movie star looks.

"What is it?" she asked, shifting her gaze to the box.

"Roses from Bellingham Florist."

Who would be sending her roses? As usual, she was between boyfriends and didn't believe she had any admirers, secret or otherwise. She looked at the man again, thinking that he was too well-dressed to be a delivery driver. "Who are they from?" she asked, still peering through the crack in the doorway.

“I don’t know,” he said. “There’s no card.” He paused for a few seconds, his eyes still moving over her. “Ma’am, I’m sorry if I disturbed you. If you like, I can leave the box here and you can bring it in after I’m gone.”

She considered his offer and the thin gown she was wearing, a gown that left little to the imagination. She was no fool; nor was she naïve. She understood very well the potential danger in opening her door to a man she didn’t know—or any man, for that matter.

But she was captivated by both his looks and his gentlemanly manner. At that moment, she didn’t want him to go away. She was willing to accept the risk and see if there was a reward. Perhaps she was more of a hopeless (although hopeful was the word she sometimes used to describe herself) romantic than she was, at times, willing to concede. She unlatched the door and swung it open. “Please bring the box inside. Would you like some coffee or perhaps a glass of wine?”

He smiled at her and crossed the threshold into the apartment. “Thank you,” he said. “I would like that.”

Jenny awoke a few minutes later. It was five forty-five, and her bedroom was enveloped in murky, early-morning darkness. She rubbed her eyes and slid slowly out of bed, the dream still fresh in her mind. Should she have opened the door to the Dr. McDreamy lookalike, acting on pure instinct while hoping that he just might be *the one*? She smiled at the thought and compared this dream to one she’d had last week in which Daniel Craig delivered a pizza and she had invited him in to share it with her. She shook her head to clear the images, then turned on her bedside lamp and picked her way to the bathroom to get ready for work.

Thirty minutes later, she emerged, showered and dressed in her usual teal scrub pants and top; her long, dark hair was dry and secured behind her head in a prim ponytail. She checked her

cell and activated her playlist. As she moved into the kitchen, she sang along to Coldplay's "Adventure of a Lifetime." She hummed along to "Viva la Vida" while eating a bowl of cereal and sipping orange juice. She made her bed and brushed her teeth to U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking for."

As she placed her towel in the bathroom hamper, she scowled when she saw a large, white T-shirt mixed in with her underwear. It reminded her that Darryl had spent Saturday evening and part—but not all—of Saturday night with her. She couldn't remember when he left. She couldn't remember much of anything about the evening.

They had consumed the better part of a bottle of Jose Cuervo and then somehow found their way to her bedroom. It was all a blur after that. She assumed they had sex, but she wasn't even sure about that. She only hoped he had used a condom and that he made it home okay, as inebriated as he was. She had no idea how his undershirt got mixed in with her panties and bras.

Jenny closed the lid and glanced at her watch. It was now six thirty-five, no time to think about Darryl or what they may or may not have done two days ago. He was little more than a distraction anyway, certainly not someone she would ever be serious about, as if she could ever be serious about a man who made a career out of working as a hospital security guard—not to mention being about two six-packs short of being a candidate for AA. She imagined he felt the same way about her; at least, she hoped he did.

She pulled into the parking lot of the Gorton J. McCloud Medical Center at six minutes before seven, just enough time to clock in and get to her station in the sprawling medical laboratory complex. She was singing along to "A Sky Full of Stars" when she parked and turned off the engine.

Once inside, she greeted her lab colleagues with half-hearted enthusiasm and made small talk with Lisa and Ryan as she threaded her way to the hematology section, where a backlog of blood samples awaited her. She began her work and thought about the course of her life while injecting some patient's blood into her analyzer, following a routine that didn't require a lot of conscious thought for a professional who had done this particular task thousands of times.

She was now twenty-eight years old and had worked at GJM since she was nineteen and a sophomore at Baxter State. She had started as a phlebotomist because she needed a night shift job so she could attend classes during the day. At first, it was just a job, a way to help pay for college. But the longer she worked, the more she appreciated the atmosphere and the people she encountered in the hospital. Sometime during her junior year, she changed majors from chemistry to medical lab technology. When she graduated two years later, she was promoted from phlebotomist to technologist and never looked back.

At eleven-thirty, she put her analyzer on stand-by and joined three of her colleagues in the massive hospital cafeteria. Occasionally, they would talk to each other while they ate. But mostly, they scrolled through their smartphones, checking the latest social media posts.

Jenny looked at her Facebook page and saw that her seven-year-old nephew, Aiden, was on the honor roll again and that Mark, her brother-in-law, finally made partner in his law firm. She clicked 'like' to both posts, then exited Facebook, happy—but not surprised—that her older sister, Sarah, seemed to be doing so well.

Jenny herself hadn't posted anything in months. What was she going to post anyway, that she couldn't keep a boyfriend longer than a few weeks, that she had gotten drunk and slept with an alcoholic security guard, that she had frequent dreams about men with movie-star looks showing up at her door bearing gifts?

She glanced up from her phone in time to see Darryl smiling at her from across the room. She gave him a half-hearted smile in return, then looked away. She didn't wave him over or make a move to join him. She had no interest in talking to him now or ever, for that matter. She did wonder if he missed his undershirt or if he had left it for her as a souvenir.

Relieved that Darryl had elected to sit with the other guards rather than approach her table, she took a sip of the diet peach Snapple she had purchased and glanced at the wall clock. She was about to rise from the table when she noticed that her three companions suddenly shifted their attention to the cafeteria entrance. "Oh, my god, it's him," Lisa exclaimed.

Jenny looked up and saw a tall man move gracefully toward the food line. His body filled out his green scrub clothes, accentuating his firm arm and chest muscles. His dark eyes were bright and alert behind a pair of wire-rim glasses. She recognized him immediately as Dr. Cristoból Hernandez, the young cardiovascular surgeon the hospital had recruited two years ago, their own version of Dr. McDreamy.

Practically every female staff member at GJM was at least attracted to him, if not hopelessly in love. Jenny was no exception. She knew he was married with two young children. She also knew that, although he was friendly enough, he never appeared to flirt with any of the women or do anything to even hint that he was interested in any kind of extramarital fling.

But there were rumors, occasional gossip most likely fueled by wishful thinking or jealousy. After all, wasn't it patently unfair that a man that successful and well put-together should devote himself to one woman? Jenny, herself, had had more than one dream in which Dr. Cris was a central character, appearing at her front door carrying a large bouquet of red roses.

"I've got to get back to work," she said once Dr. Cris had disappeared from view. She stood, lifted her tray off the table, and headed for the door, trying as she went to put the image of

the cardiovascular surgeon out of her mind, which was already overcrowded with men she would never have a relationship with outside of her dreams.

When she arrived home to her empty apartment after work, Jenny changed out of her scrub clothes, got her laptop, and sank into the soft cushions of her sofa. She checked Facebook and noted that nothing new had been added since she last checked it, at least nothing that interested her. Next, she checked her email and quickly discarded five without reading them before she got to the one from her mother. She was tempted to discard this one too.

Her mother had been emailing her at least three or four times a week ever since her parents moved to Bradenton six months ago to care for Jenny's aging grandfather. Mostly, the emails were short and non-informative, with occasional invitations for Jenny to come for a visit.

But recently, the emails began to sound more and more like Tula's father, Gus, in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* ("Dad and I are worried, dear. You should be settling down, getting married, having children like your sister."). Jenny sighed. Her mother had been comparing her to her older sister for as long as she could remember. Perhaps that's why I have a problem, she had begun to think, if I have a problem, that is.

She was about to move on to the next email when the heading in the subject line got her attention. She clicked on the email:

To: Jenny

From: Mom

Subject: Possible Job in Tampa

Hi Honey,

As always, Dad and I hope you are doing well.

The weather here is beautiful and Grandpa seems to be doing better. Just yesterday, I was able to get him to the beach by myself.

Jenny, Dad was talking to an administrator at one of the hospitals in Tampa yesterday and learned that the hospital has several openings in their lab. Good pay and benefits. We know you have a job at GJM, but we want you to think about moving here. It really is a very nice area in which to live, and maybe the change would do you good. Anyway, we miss you and would love to have you closer.

Please think about it. Dad can give you the name of the hospital and the right people to contact.

Love,

Mom

Jenny reread the email, then slumped against the back cushions of the sofa. Instead of the usual lecture she was expecting, she was now being encouraged to pull up stakes, leave the only city in which she had ever lived, and move fifteen hundred miles. It was a possibility she had never before considered.

Her first instinct was to reject the suggestion altogether, to tell her mother, “Thanks, but I’m very happy here.” But that was a lie. Happy people have friends and meaningful relationships, not alcohol-induced one-night stands they barely remember the next day. Happy people find fulfillment in the real world, not just in their dreams.

Okay, so I’m not happy. But what am I going to do about it? One thing she was very sure of: She didn’t want to move to Florida, to take a job her father, a medical sales rep, had found for her, to live once again near her well-meaning but single-minded mother. Just the thought of her mother’s meddling made her cringe.

Jenny slumped deeper into the plush cushions and allowed her eyelids to droop. She felt very tired, totally exhausted, as though the burden of everyone else's expectations was starting to bear down on her and she was having to expend more and more energy just to hold herself up, just to keep her own expectations—whatever they were—from being completely crushed.

She put her feet up on the coffee table and allowed herself to drift off into sleep. At first, she felt as though she was on a soft, fleecy cloud floating above the Earth, moving at the whim of a light breeze. But just as she began to relax and enjoy the ride, she found herself back in her apartment lying naked in her bed.

However, before she had time to settle into the sanctity of the quilt, she heard the all-too-familiar knock. She nodded to herself, got out of bed, put on her gown, and headed for the door. This time, she didn't bother to look through the peephole. Rather, she opened the door a crack and saw Sam Heughan standing outside. He appeared as Jamie Frazier and held several sprigs of heather in his hand.

He smiled when he saw her. "Jenny Logan," he started in his charming Scottish accent. "I've come to bring you back to Skye."

She gazed at him with a curious mixture of longing and incredulity. This was the best dream yet. Her fantasy man stood at her door, offering to take her with him to what she believed could possibly be a better time and place. She returned his smile and started to open the door.

But with her fingers twitching on the latch chain, she thought about what she was doing, what she was about to do. She released the chain without unlatching the door and let her hand drop to her side. She looked at Sam as Jamie once again and thought, what woman wouldn't fall at his feet, allow him to take her anywhere?

“Thank you for the offer, Mr. Heughan,” she said. “But I’m going to stay here.” Then she closed the door and went back to bed.

Jenny awoke with a start. Her head and neck ached, and her calf muscles began to cramp. With some difficulty, she lifted her heavy legs off the coffee table and sat up straight on the sofa. She shook her head and blinked several times. Late afternoon sunlight streamed in through her living room window, causing her to squint.

Once she was fully awake, she took a sip from the glass of white wine she had poured earlier. She grimaced at the warm taste and thought about the dream she had just had, laughing at the thought of sending Sam Heughan away without at least inviting him in. “But in the end, they’re just dreams, nothing more,” she told herself, not entirely sure who she was trying to convince.

She thought about her mother’s email, inviting her to move to Florida. “Nice try, Mom,” she said out loud. “But I hope and pray I’m never that desperate.”

She set the wine glass down on the side table and pushed herself up from the sofa. The combination of the wine and the short-but-hard sleep made her dizzy. Her leg muscles began to cramp again, and she almost fell back. She managed to catch herself and turned toward the picture window, now feeling like an old woman just barely clinging to life. She shook off the feeling and declared, “Old is as old does.”

She pulled back the lace curtain that covered her window and gazed at the parking lot of her sprawling apartment complex. She watched her fellow residents park and get out of their cars, obviously coming home from work. They all looked as tired and beaten down and disenchanted as she felt. All the activity reminded her of a beehive, each individual bee coming and going with only one purpose: To serve the queen.

Jenny stepped away from the window and closed the curtain to block out the scene. She took another sip of the wine and once more considered her mother's email. She shook her head in disgust. Spend your life serving the queen or break away from the hive and go it alone. Again, she laughed as she realized that life could be reduced to such a simple choice.

Okay, but how does one break away from the hive? She plopped down on the sofa and considered her options in the cold light of reason. "I am an educated and intelligent woman," she said. "I should be able to figure this out."

She picked up her abandoned laptop and navigated to Docs. She clicked Start a new document. When the screen displayed a blank page, she typed, My Options, and began her list, talking to herself as she typed.

First, I could do nothing, just keep doing what I'm doing and wait for something good to come along or hope my fairy godmother finally aims her wand at me.

She smiled at this. Isn't the definition of insanity doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result? She discarded the option. She knew there was little point in believing in fairy godmothers or magic wands—and she didn't think she was insane, at least not yet.

Second, I could spend more time with my sister and her husband, hoping that Mark knows a young, unattached lawyer with six-figure potential. She discarded this option too. She wasn't anything like Sarah and didn't want to be. She especially knew she didn't want to be a homemaker with a houseful of kids. She had seen enough of Sarah's three kids to be certain of that.

Third, I could wait for Dr. Cris or one of the other well-put-together docs to tire of his wife and give me a chance. After all, what do they have that I don't?

She scowled at this option. She wanted no part of being a homewrecker or living as the proverbial ‘other woman.’ And she didn’t really want to learn the answer to the question she just asked.

Jenny paused and re-read what she had typed so far: Three options, none of which was viable. Was there a fourth option, one that didn’t involve Florida and helping her mother take care of Grandpa Ed? She set the computer aside and took another sip of the wine, hoping the alcohol would provide some sort of inspiration. It didn’t.

She realized that if she couldn’t think of a fourth option, she was more-or-less stuck with option one: do nothing, stay the course, hope for something better to come along. Maybe it’s not so bad, she thought, probably better than what most people have. She took inventory: a job she enjoyed most of the time, a secure future, money in the bank, a roof over her head, a family that probably cared about her, sex if she needed it, which wasn’t that often. What was she missing?

She thought of Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy. She had the physiological and safety needs covered (she chuckled as she recalled her Intro to Psych class and the class’s reaction when Professor Bonami ranked sex as a need along with water and shelter). But there were three levels of needs above that on the pyramid, three levels that supposedly made life as a human being worth living. There had to be a fourth option, and it wasn’t in Florida.

She closed her eyes again and was almost asleep, hoping perhaps to have another of those delicious dreams. Would she go with Sam this time? But she didn’t fall asleep; she didn’t conjure another fantasy man coming to rescue her from this mind-numbing routine, this rat’s maze in which she was seemingly trapped and doomed to run forever.

She opened her eyes. No, going off with some man in a dream wasn’t an option. Moving to Florida wasn’t an option. She retrieved her cell and looked at her playlist; she recalled the

lyrics to *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*. As she scrolled through the words she had been singing to herself nearly every day of her adult life, she realized she wasn't sure what it was she was looking for, and she hadn't looked that hard for it anyway, certainly not as hard as the song suggested.

She finally conceded that that elusive fourth option wasn't at the Gorton J. McCloud Medical Center any more than it was at some hospital in Tampa. "To find what I'm looking for, I'm going to have to climb that highest mountain, run through those fields, scale those city walls," she proclaimed to her empty apartment.

She flushed, opened her laptop, and began updating her resume. While she typed, she wondered what the weather was like in San Diego or Houston or Omaha or any of the other places she had never visited.