

⚠ WARNING:
MATURE CONTENT



STAR

DIMMER

PJ GRAY

Chapter 1

DRAMA MAMA

Jen Conrad felt like a sleepwalker. Days and hours flowed together. Only her dark roots showed the passing of time. She needed to visit a stylist. But her costly blonde highlights did not matter anymore. Jen was too busy worrying about her life. She was only 17. Yet she felt 70.

Downstairs, her mother was on speakerphone. It was on full blast, of course. Voices carried through the house.

“I know, I know,” her mom said. “Look, Jack. I can’t deal with this right now. I have a new gig. It’s a prime-time network show. I’m working 16-hour days! Jen was better off with you. You’re her father. Can’t you and Todd take her back? Just for a little while?”

Sleep faded. Her mother's voice made Jen bristle. Jen rolled out of bed. The gray bathrobe called to her. Its color matched her mood. Pulling it on, she walked down the hall. She loved her grandmother's house. The top of the stairs overlooked an open living room. One wall was all windows. They displayed an ocean view.

Jen looked down at her mother. Val was a small woman. She bounced from foot to foot, staring out a window.

"No way, Val," Jack Conrad replied. "We can't. Jen doesn't listen to us. She ran away twice when she was here last. Lately, the press won't leave us alone. We have been stalked. They even upset the poor dogs."

Jen rolled her eyes.

Her mom tried hard to convince Jack. "I know. But she's better now."

Jen smirked. *Better? It's not me who needs to change.*

Her dad was never on her side. He believed all the stories in the press. The tabloids wrote ugly things about Jen. Jack accepted them as fact. None of them were true. But her dad did not care. That led to way too many fights.

"No, Val," he said.

"Please! I can't keep her with me. My place in Los Angeles is too small. Besides, the press is still watching her. She can't keep staying here at the beach. My mother can't deal with her. Babe is too old for this. She

doesn't need to worry about photographers popping up everywhere.”

“No,” he said again. “We can't do it. Jen is all yours.”
The line went dead.

“Jack? Jack!” A growl erupted from Val. She threw the phone onto a sofa. Jen's mom was all about drama.

Chapter 2

“IT” GIRL

Jen looked around. She felt empty. This was Babe’s beach house. Babe was her grandmother. The place was giant. As a child, Jen had spent time there. Then came boarding school. Modeling was next. Traveling became her life.

Babe’s house was in Malibu. Jen had grown up in Beverly Hills. It was about 25 miles away. But it felt *so* far. Los Angeles did too. That was where Val now lived.

Jen walked back down the hallway. An open door stopped her. It was her mom’s old bedroom. Jen slowly stepped inside.

Pictures of Val were everywhere. They covered the walls. The dresser and desk were filled too. In the photos, her mom laughed with friends. Movie stars hugged her. It was a Val Kane shrine.

Jen picked up a frame. She wiped dust from the glass. It was a photo of her mom. She was with David Bowie. They were backstage at a concert. Val was a teenager. Her smile was huge. She looked like an adoring fan. Bowie appeared cool and distant.

Trophies and school ribbons were on the shelves. Jen moved through the room. Her fingers brushed the awards. A gold trophy stood in the center of the shelf. The label read “Val Kane, Miss LA County Teen.” The tall trophy next to it read “Val Kane, Miss Beverly Hills 1990.” That summed up her mom at age 17.

Jen shook her head. She was nothing like her mother. *Thank goodness*, she thought.

Val Kane had grown up a Hollywood kid. Her dad, Ben Kane, was a filmmaker. He wasn’t a big one. But he was famous enough. Val had been primed for a movie career. She was beautiful. Her dark hair was silky. Stunning blue eyes defined her. Magazines dubbed her an “it” girl. Casting directors wanted her. Pageant judges loved her. Val charmed them all.

Life was one big party. Hollywood socialites needed Val. Events filled her calendar. Everyone wanted to be where she went. It was called the “Kane effect.”

Val met Jack Conrad at her 20th birthday party. She had just landed her first commercial.

Jack was a stuntman from Utah. He was one of the best in the business. The man was Hollywood handsome too. His good looks were rugged.

Jen knew her mom's first words to her dad. The story had been shared many times. Val had asked, "May I touch your biceps?" Then she grabbed his arm. The thought made Jen cringe.

The couple had a whirlwind romance. Then Val Kane became Mrs. Jack Conrad. Her career soon took off. A walk-on part in a Coppola film was first. Next was a speaking part in a teen hit. Two more films followed. Then came her big break. She landed a role in an Eastwood film. Critics liked her work. Awards followed. Her star was rising.

But Val had a problem. Mood swings ruled her life. Doctors said it was bipolar disorder. Her mood shifted wildly. Pills helped. But Val didn't like taking them. Sometimes she drank alcohol. That made the mood swings worse. Jack tried to care for her. But Val never let him. She also wouldn't help herself. This finally ruined her marriage. It almost wrecked her career. She got better for a short time. A therapist helped.

Val needed to save her marriage. Having a baby seemed like a solution. Then Jen was born. But the damage was done. The star tried juggling motherhood with work. That wasn't easy. Work was hard to get. Even

worse, motherhood didn't come naturally to Val.

Jack and Val could not make it work. They divorced. Then Jen was sent to an East Coast boarding school. "Mama has to work," Val had told her.

A few years later, Jack left the film business. Stunt work aged a body quickly. He met a film producer named Todd. They fell in love. First, New York City became their home. Finally, they settled in Connecticut. By then, Jen rarely visited. Jack and Todd owned a big mansion. Three pampered pets were their babies. Jen thought their house was boring. It had spoiled dogs and too many rules. She could only stand visiting during the holidays.

"Jen!" Val shouted from the living room. "Where are you?"

Jen set the trophy down. She walked back to her room. *What now?*

Chapter 3

BIG BREAK

The view of the Pacific Ocean put Jen into a trance. She stared at the waves from her bedroom window. The sun felt warm through the glass. Jen knew what she was about to face. Soon her mother would find her. Then the peace would be broken.

Sunlight filled her room. Memories of the past year flooded in. A stranger had changed her life. Was it just a year ago? It felt like a lifetime.

Jen had returned to Los Angeles for high school. She had few friends at Goldwyn Prep. Kim was her only close friend. Mainly, Jen kept to herself. The school kids didn't impress her. Most girls disliked her. But she never knew why. The guys at school were jerks.

One day, Jen and Kim were in a shoe store on Rodeo Drive. A man in a suit tapped Jen on the shoulder. He

quickly studied her face. Then he admired her hair. Jen was surprised when he asked to take her picture.

She was bothered at first. A man approaching a teenager was weird. *What a creep. Who is this person?*

Then the man handed her a business card. He was a scout for a famous modeling agency. After that, things happened fast. Val agreed to let the agency interview Jen. In fact, her mom was thrilled. “I’ve never been so proud of you!” she gushed.

Then came the photo shoots. Finally, Jen signed with the agency. They wanted her in Japan. The company asked her to quit school. Jen was surprised.

But Val did not hesitate. “Yes!” her mom said. “Don’t wait! This is your big break. You can get your GED later.”

Before she could argue, Jen was shipped to Tokyo. She was under 18. This meant she needed a chaperone. A woman named Nev was chosen. But Jen never saw her. Nev only called or texted.

In Tokyo, Jen was also assigned a roommate. Cammie had been in Tokyo for two months on her own. The agency was marketing her as the next top model. But Cammie was better. She was 18 and a total beauty. The girl did not have a care in the world. Cammie was always upbeat. Having a good time was her goal.

Cammie loved Tokyo. She was eager to show the

city to the new girl. Jen did her best to keep up. But Cammie was always on the go. They became close friends.

The girl had changed Jen's life forever—in the worst way.

“Jen!” Val called from the doorway. “Did you hear me? We have to talk.”

Jen shook off the memory. She kept staring out the window as Val spoke.

Her mother took a long breath. “You need to stay here with Babe for a while. She has more room. My condo is too small. Rob is staying there now. I know you don't like him. Plus, the press is still after you. The last place you need to be is LA. I'm also hiring a tutor. You need to finish school. No arguments about that.”

Val's cell phone rang. “It's the studio,” she said. “I have to take this.” She turned and left the room.

“It's always the studio,” Jen said under her breath.

She continued to stare at the ocean. The sun reflected off the window. Jen studied her face in the glass. There were dark circles under her eyes. Her mother was right. She could not go back to LA. The press would never leave her alone.

Sounds of her past came roaring back.

Flashes popped nonstop during photo shoots. They were blinding. *Pop*. Each one sounded like a punch. *Pop*.

“Girl. Hey, you! Girl! What is her name? Hey, girl! What is it? Jen? Jen, honey? Turn your head to the left. I said left. Not that much. That’s it.”

Pop.

“Relax. You’re doing great. That’s it.”

Pop.

“Love it. Tilt your head. That’s it. Hold it!”

Pop.

“Now look at me. Relax more. Hold it. Don’t blink.”

Pop.

“That’s good. Now soften your face.”

Pop.

“No! I said soften. Stop wasting my time. Listen to me! Okay, hold it. That’s it.”

Pop.

“You’re doing great. Someone turn that second light down.”

STAR

DIMMER

Jen Conrad never wanted to be a tabloid sensation at age 17. But that's unavoidable when she has been wrongfully accused of murder. Plus, Jen's mom is a TV star struggling with her own issues. The press loves this kind of gossip.

Hoping to protect herself and her family, Jen hides out at her grandmother's beach house. Soon, she realizes that she is in more danger than she ever expected.



MONARCH
JUNGLE

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