



*Love Beyond
Reason*

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BROWN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

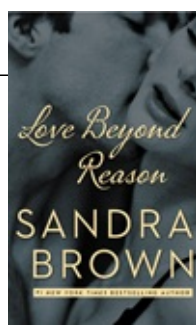
Love Beyond Reason

Sandra Brown



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Chapter One

“The Denver City Council voted today to increase taxes by six percent for the coming fiscal year. Councilmen argued that—”

“Great,” grumbled Katherine, “that’s just what I need—another drain on the budget.” She replaced the hairbrush she had been using in the well-organized drawer and reached for a bottle of lotion on the bathroom dressing table. She rested her leg on the commode seat as she smoothed a liberal application of the emollient to her long, shapely leg. She returned her attention to the voice coming from the radio on her bedside table in the adjoining bedroom.

“An armed man’s attempt to rob a convenience store was thwarted today by Denver police. A tactical squad surrounded the building after receiving a call...”

Higher taxes and crime. What a wonderful note to end the day on, Katherine thought ruefully as she brushed her teeth.

Was this to be one of those nights when she allowed herself to wallow in self-pity and bitterness? Such introspection was rare, but she indulged herself whenever this melancholy mood settled over her.

It would be nice to say good night to someone, share a room, space, with him, breathe the same air, hear the same sounds. Him? Why had this nonentity taken a masculine form? She sighed. Living alone had its compensations, but it could be lonely too.

“Tomorrow’s weather...”

Frowning, Katherine glanced at the radio and wondered if the late-night announcer ever got weary of talking to himself. Did he ever think about the souls he was talking to? Did he sense their loneliness and strive with his easy chatter to ease that solitude?

His voice was pleasant. It was well-modulated and distinct, but somewhat... sterile. His casual bantering was rehearsed, anonymous, and impersonal.

God! What a dour mood I’m in, she chided herself as she pulled on her robe and left the bathroom. *Maybe I should get a roommate now that Mary is married,* mused Katherine as she went through the house on one last inspection before turning out the lights.

Katherine loved this old house. After her father died when she was barely six years old, her mother had managed to keep the house and had reared Katherine and her younger sister, Mary, as comfortably as she could on her postal clerk’s salary. It hadn’t been easy for the widow, but forced frugality had taught the girls to live economically.

Katherine checked the door locks and switched off the living-room lights just as she rejected the idea of a roommate. She and Mary had gotten along fine after their mother’s death three years before, but they were sisters, and Mary’s cheerful disposition made her easy to live with. Katherine might not be so lucky with someone else.

Mary. Dear Mary. Her life certainly hadn’t improved with her marriage. *No, thank you,* Katherine thought wryly. She would remain independent and suffer through these short, though painful, spurts of

loneliness.

“This bulletin just came in...”

Katherine reached for the button on the radio to set her alarm when she recoiled, staring fixedly at the wood-and-chrome box and listening in disbelief to what the announcer was saying.

“Tonight Peter Manning, a prominent figure in Denver’s business community, was tragically killed when his car spun out of control and crashed into a concrete abutment. Police reported that Mr. Manning’s car left the road at a high rate of speed. He was pronounced dead at the scene. An unidentified woman, riding on the passenger side of the sports car, was also killed in the tragic accident. Peter Manning was the son—”

Katherine jumped when her telephone rang stridently at her side. She took deep gasping breaths before her trembling hand grabbed the receiver. She sank onto the bed as she raised the instrument to her ear. “Yes?” she wheezed.

“Miss Adams?”

“Yes.”

“This is Elsie. I work here at the Manning estate. I met you—”

“Yes, Elsie, I remember you. How is my sister?” she asked urgently.

“That’s why I’m calling, Miss Adams. Have you heard about Mr. Peter?”

It wasn’t necessary to tell the maid that she hadn’t been officially notified, but confirmed that she knew of Peter’s accident.

“Well, all hell’s broken loose over here. Mrs. Manning is hysterical, screaming and yelling. Mr. Manning is little better. Photographers and reporters are all over the place talking and waving cameras and microphones and flashing lights—”

“How is Mary?” Katherine interrupted imperiously.

“I’m coming to that. When the policeman told them about the wreck, they were all in the living room. When he mentioned that a woman was in the car with Peter, and that she was dead too, Mr. Manning turned to Miss Mary, who is so sweet, and started yelling at her. She said such awful things to her, Miss Adams. She said if Miss Mary had been a better wife, Mr. Peter wouldn’t have gone out that night to look—”

“Please, Elsie, is Mary all right?”

“No, Miss Adams, she isn’t. She ran up the stairs to her room to escape Mrs. Manning. No one was paying any attention to her, even in her condition. I went in to check on her and she’s bleeding, Miss Adams.”

“Oh, God—”

“Yes, and she’s in labor, I think. I thought you ought to know ’cause nobody around here seems to care about her. They’re all thinking about—”

“Elsie, listen carefully. Call an ambulance. Get Mary to the hospital right away. I’ll call her obstetrician. Don’t tell anyone what you’re doing. If you have to sneak Mary out through the kitchen, do it. Just get her in the ambulance. Okay?”

“Yes, Miss Adams, I will. I always liked your sister and thought—”

“Never mind all that now, Elsie. Just call the ambulance.” Katherine couldn’t afford to be exasperated by Elsie’s garrulity, but she hoped the excited woman would get Mary to the hospital immediately.

Katherine cut that connection and quickly dialed the doctor after fumbling through the telephone book frantically searching for his number. Alphabetical order seemed to have escaped her, and she cursed her ineptitude. She reached his answering service and quickly apprised the operator of her

sister's condition. The operator promised to contact the doctor immediately and have him go directly to the hospital.

Without thinking about her actions, Katherine stripped off her robe and nightgown and dashed to her closet. Pulling on a pair of jeans, she damned the Mannings and especially Peter. How could he? Hadn't he made Mary's life miserable enough without humiliating her by getting himself killed while another of his women was in the car with him? She believed Mary's tales of his physical abuse, but would that extend to his inducing her labor to deliver a seven-month fetus? *God, help her*, Katherine prayed while pulling a T-shirt over her head and stepping into a pair of sandals.

Without combing her hair or bothering to apply any makeup, she ran out of the house, climbed into her car, and headed for the designated hospital. She forced herself to drive slower than she felt compelled to do. She would be no help to Mary if she were injured or killed herself.

Mary, Mary, why didn't you see the kind of man Peter Manning was? Had she been so blind, so captivated by the smile that graced the society page columns that she couldn't see the superficiality of it? Peter Manning, the Golden Boy, son of one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in Denver, heir apparent to bank directorships, real estate holdings, insurance companies, and numerous other enterprises, had become Mary Adams's husband a year ago.

Katherine had been puzzled to say the least when Peter's attention had suddenly become riveted on Mary, whom he had met while she was working in an art gallery to help pay for art classes.

He was suave, debonair, devastatingly handsome, polished, and confident. He had swept gently and naively, trusting Mary off her feet and then let her fall. Hard and far.

Why? From the outset of that bizarre romance that question had plagued Katherine. Mary was pretty, but nothing like the dazzling debutantes and celebrities Peter was accustomed to escorting. Why had he bothered with Mary?

Katherine honked belligerently at a motorist who was sitting through a green light. Her anger wasn't directed toward the other driver, however. It was directed toward the man who had turned a laughing, happy, vibrant young woman into a haunted, listless robot.

After only a few months of marriage, Peter's loving attitude toward his wife, which Katherine had always felt was a little too overdone to be sincere, began to change drastically.

Katherine had been shocked to listen as Mary tearfully related one horror story after another. Physical and emotional abuse were daily occurrences. Peter was furious over Mary's pregnancy, though she swore he had raped her one night without giving her time to take precautions against the condition. The marriage was a living nightmare.

But the picture Peter presented to the world was one of marital bliss. With total devotion he doted on Mary in front of his parents and their country club friends. His hypocrisy would have been laughable if it weren't so tragic.

Katherine wheeled into the hospital's emergency entrance and thankfully found a parking space near the door. She locked her car and raced for the well-lit alcove only moments before she heard the wail of the ambulance.

She and Mary's doctor were standing in the wide foyer as the paramedics guided the stretchers through the glass doors which opened automatically. Katherine gasped when she saw her sister's face. She covered her mouth to stifle a scream. Mary's eyes were open, but unfocused, and didn't register her sister's presence as they whisked her past Katherine and into one of the treatment rooms.

After a cursory examination Mary was sent to the maternity ward where she delivered a baby girl after only thirty minutes of labor.

The doctor looked bleak as he walked toward Katherine down the hushed, softly lit corridor in his

rubber-soled shoes.

~~“She’s in a bad way, Miss Adams. I don’t think she’ll last the night.”~~ Katherine slumped against the wall and stared at him over the tight fist she was pressing hard against her bruised lips. Her green eyes overflowed with tears that flooded over the lower lids, coursing down her pale apricot cheeks. They dampened the strands of honey-gold hair that tumbled around her head in heedless disarray.

“I’m sorry to be so blunt, but I think you ought to know the severity of her condition. She hemorrhaged so much before she got here that there was little we could do about it, though we transfused her.” The doctor paused and studied Katherine before saying softly, “It hasn’t been a happy pregnancy. She wouldn’t take care of herself. I’ve been worried about her before.... Well, I know what happened tonight. I’m sorry about Mr. Manning. I don’t think Mary wants to live,” he added sympathetically.

Katherine nodded mutely. As the doctor was turning away, she grabbed his sleeve and asked hoarsely, “The baby?”

He gave her a ghost of a smile. “A little girl. Four pounds. Perfectly formed. She should make it.”

* * *

Mary died at dawn. In one of her few lucid moments during the long night, she asked for Katherine. “A piece of paper,” she whispered.

“Paper?” Katherine repeated stupidly. Didn’t Mary realize this was their farewell?

“Yes, please, Katherine. Hurry.” She could barely form the words.

Katherine searched the hospital room desperately looking for a piece of paper, and finally found a paper towel in the small bathroom.

“Pen.” Mary croaked.

Katherine supplied that out of her purse and watched in wonder as her weakened sister managed to write several lines on the towel with a shaking hand. She signed her usual signature at the bottom when she was finished.

Mary fell against the pillows, totally exhausted. The exertion left her face white and beaded with perspiration. Her lips were blue. Dark circles ringed her eyes, but they were brighter, more alive and vivid than they had been since her marriage. Katherine caught a shadowy glimpse of the former Mary in this wasted shell and wanted to weep copiously for her loss.

Mary was blond and blue-eyed. Her skin had always been clear and rosy. Her eyes had laughed whenever her cherub mouth had curled into the slightest suggestion of a smile. She was shorter and plumper than her svelte sister and agonized over every calorie, until recently when all appetites vanished. The cheerful voice that was now subdued to a gasping whisper brought Katherine back from her reveries.

“Katherine, name her Allison. Don’t let them have her. They mustn’t have her.” The white clawlike hands gripped Katherine’s forearm. “Take her away from here. Tell her I loved her very much.” She closed her eyes and breathed a few shallow breaths. When her eyes opened again, they had taken on a dreamlike quality. They were peaceful. “Allison’s such a pretty name. Don’t you think so, Katherine?”

* * *

The double funeral took place two days later. It was a circus. The public’s voracious appetite for

scandal was fed by the eager reporters competitively trying to write the most sensational story. The girl who had been killed with Peter was a seventeen-year-old high-school cheerleader. Her body had been only partially clothed when the accident occurred. Allison's premature birth and Mary's subsequent death only added more spice to the tantalizing story.

Katherine was saturated with grief over Mary's death. Peter had died instantly from a broken neck without a mark on him. Sadistically, Katherine thought that to be unjust, especially when she remembered Mary's ravaged face, her innocent beauty marred by months of physical abuse and verbal attacks. It wasn't fair.

Katherine had barely been able to cope with the ostentation of the society wedding a year earlier, but the funeral was even more of an ordeal.

Eleanor Manning, managing to look lovely in her black designer dress and well-coiffed blond hair, was inconsolable. One minute she was clinging to Peter Manning, Sr., who was a tall, distinguished gray-haired man, weeping uncontrollably. The next moment she berated poor dead Mary for not loving Peter, her darling son, enough. Then she would curse Jason, Peter's younger brother, for not being in attendance.

"It wasn't enough that he humiliated us by not attending the wedding. He had to further our shame by not coming home for his brother's funeral. Africa! My God, he's as barbaric as those heathens who live there. First it was Indians. Now it's pagans in Africa!" At that point she would lapse into another bout of hysterical tears.

Katherine knew very little about the brother, Jason Manning. Peter had always referred to him vaguely, as if his existence was of no consequence. Mary, however, had been excited when she received a letter from him.

During a visit with Katherine she exhibited the letter with timid pride. It had never taken much to make Mary happy.

"I got a letter from Peter's brother, Katherine. He's in Africa, you know. He works with oil or something. Anyway, he apologized about not being able to get away for the wedding and congratulated me on the baby. Listen." She read from the plain white stationery which was slashed with a bold, black scrawl.

" 'I look forward to returning home and greeting you as a proper brother should. If you're as pretty as the pictures Mother sent me, I wish I had seen you first. Damn Peter. He's got all the luck!' Of course, he's only teasing me," said Mary blushing. "Doesn't he sound nice? He says, 'Take care of that new niece or nephew of mine. It'll be great to have a baby around, won't it? Just think. I'll be Uncle Jace.' "

Katherine nodded enthusiastically, though it was really out of politeness. She was alarmed by how thin Mary was growing despite her expanding abdomen. On that particular day, she had been much more interested in her sister's declining health and obvious unhappiness than in a long-lost brother. She shelved her impressions of him along with those she had formed about the other Mannings.

After the funeral the days fell into a dull, grinding, and exhausting routine. Katherine went to work every day at the electric company and continued writing the research papers and press releases that she had been hired to do five years ago. Was it really that long since she had graduated from college? Had she been doing this same tedious job that long? She made a respectable salary, but she saw the job only as practice for better things to come. She was a more gifted writer than her job demanded and she longed to have her creativity challenged. Maybe with the new responsibility of a baby, she would be compelled to go looking for a higher-paying job.

Allison! Katherine delighted in her. Every night she visited the hospital and gazed at her niece

through the glass wall of the premature-baby nursery. She longed for the day she could hold her. Allison was gaining weight every day, and the pediatrician told the anxious aunt when the baby maintained five pounds for five days he would release her into Katherine's care.

She made arrangements to take two weeks' vacation at the time she could bring Allison home and started scouting out the best day-care center for working mothers. It would have to be the best before she would entrust Allison into its care. It never occurred to her that her guardianship of the baby would be jeopardized.

She was bolted out of her placidity when the Mannings' lawyer called upon her at work. Inundating her desk with official-looking papers, he told her in his prissy, arrogant voice that his clients "intend to take sole responsibility for the child."

"My clients are prepared to take the child and rear her as their own. Of course, for your time and trouble, and expense these past few weeks that she's been in the hospital, you will be compensated."

"You mean bought off, don't you?"

"Please, Miss Adams, I think you are misinterpreting the purpose of my clients. They are financially able to rear the child in an opulent environment. Surely you want what's in the best interest of the child?"

"The mother felt it in her child's best interest that I rear her." Wisely she refrained from telling him of the handwritten instructions.

"I'm sure the father's wishes would have differed greatly." Katherine hated his condescending attitude. "Besides, this discussion is academic. I'm sure no court would award guardianship of a child to a single working girl with indeterminate morals, when such an illustrious couple as the Mannings are more than willing to take responsibility for their only grandchild, the heir and offspring of the eldest son."

The insult to her character was so unethical that Katherine didn't honor it with a comment, but she knew that he was threatening her. She could well imagine him saying words to that effect in a courtroom, and it chilled her to the bone to predict what the outcome of such a custody hearing would be.

Katherine stifled her initial panic and tried to reason through her predicament. Uppermost in her mind was the determination that Allison would not grow up under Eleanor Manning's influence and power. They must have many friends in high places. She and Allison had to get away from them. Plans were made and she carried them out with dispatch.

The pediatrician agreed to release Allison from the hospital a few days earlier than he had originally planned with the condition that Katherine bring the infant to his office the following week. Katherine hated lying, but solemnly promised she would have the baby there.

She called a realtor and discussed the sale of her house. Whatever monies were made were to be put into a savings account in Allison's name. That could be collected later along with any interest accrued. All the furnishings in the house were to be sold, except what Katherine would take with her. The realtor could keep that money in payment for her trouble.

Katherine rented a safety deposit box and, after making a copy of the pitiful paper-towel document, lovingly folded it into the metal box.

She didn't answer her telephone and covered her movements well. Her car was parked away from the house, and she sacrificed the use of lights after dark. Fearful of being presented with a subpoena, she strove for invisibility.

She packed everything she possibly could in the small compact car. Her emotions were running high as she picked up Allison from the hospital.

Katherine gently lay her in the car bed that was strapped by the safety belt onto the front seat of the car. She leaned over and placed a soft kiss on the velvet forehead.

“I don’t know much about being a mother,” she whispered to the sleeping child. “But then you don’t know a lot about being a baby either.”

Gazing down into Allison’s sweet face that so reminded her of Mary, she felt at ease for the first time since hearing of Peter’s death.

As she left Denver, she allowed herself no poignant backward glances toward the mountains or thoughts about selling the house that had been the only home she remembered. She thought of the future, hers and Allison’s. From now on, they had no past.

* * *

Katherine straightened her back and hunched her shoulders to stretch the cramped muscles. She was sitting on the newspaper-lined living room floor of her garage apartment. For the past half-hour she had been painting a chest of drawers for Allison’s room. The evening before she had applied the final coat of glossy blue to the wood surface and was now adding a contrasting yellow stripe. The yellow paint had spotted the newspaper and a few drops had landed on Katherine’s bare legs.

Dipping the fine brush into the paint can, she sighed with contentment. Everything had turned out well for her and Allison. Under any circumstances, traveling halfway across the country by oneself with a newborn baby in tow would be an intimidating project. Katherine had left Denver under the grimmest of circumstances, yet the trip had gone smoothly. Allison was an angel of a baby, sleeping every minute that Katherine wasn’t changing or feeding her.

Katherine never remembered living in Van Buren, Texas, but her family had lived in the small town before her father’s insurance company had offered him a better job in Denver.

Katherine remembered her mother reminiscing about east Texas and its verdant landscape and deep woods. The pictures she painted of it belied the stereotypical depictions of Texas that portrayed vast barren landscapes with tumbleweeds being tossed about by incessant winds. Katherine, after driving through miles of country like that in west Texas, was surprised to find that Van Buren was just as her mother had described it—a peaceful, quaint college town nestled in the piny woods.

Glancing out her wide windows now, Katherine delighted in the sight of the six pecan trees that grew in the yard separating her garage apartment from Happy Cooper’s house.

Her new landlady had proved to be a godsend. Katherine had reached Van Buren just as the college’s spring term was ending and was lucky enough to secure the apartment which for the past two years had been shared by two Van Buren College coeds. The apartment, having two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and bath, was spacious.

Katherine lay her paintbrush aside and walked on silent bare feet into the room she had designated as Allison’s, though they both slept in it. Leaning over the repainted crib she had found in a second-hand store, she looked at her niece. The infant’s rapid growth was amazing. In the two months she had been in Van Buren, she had gained weight and filled out to become a plump, happy baby despite her inauspicious birth. Katherine smiled at Allison and scooted a stuffed bunny from under a chubby hand before settling a light blanket over her.

Katherine enjoyed her days off when she could be alone with the baby. She had miraculously secured a job in the public relations office of the college, but was concerned about Allison’s care during the day. Much to her surprise, Happy had timidly offered to keep the baby. When Happy made the unexpected suggestion, Katherine had stared at her, smiled, laughed, then to her own amazement

and Happy's alarm, began to cry.

What would she have done without Happy, who was a frustrated grandmother who rarely got to see her grandchildren? She had two grown daughters who lived with their families on each coast, and a son who lived and worked in Louisiana. He was still single, and Happy mourned his marital status at least once a day. Having been married for forty-three years before being widowed, Happy couldn't imagine anyone voluntarily living alone.

Yes, everything was going well. Katherine's job was surely more interesting than what she had been doing in Denver. Her boss sometimes struck her as odd, for he had the annoying habits of staring, perspiring, and licking his lips. But overlooking his peculiarities, she liked her work.

Scratching her nose absentmindedly, she unknowingly smeared yellow paint across it. Then softly humming to herself, she rose from the floor to answer a knock at the door. It wouldn't be Happy. She usually didn't take the time or effort to knock.

Katherine tugged on the bottom of the short, ragged cutoffs she was wearing, hoping that whoever was at the door wouldn't be offended by her appearance.

"Yes?" she said, opening the door.

Had she been about to say anything else, it would have been impossible. The man who filled the doorway was the most spectacular-looking man she had ever seen. If his size weren't enough to distinguish him, certainly the raven black hair and startling blue eyes would have been.

He gave Katherine the same intent inspection she was giving him, and his sensual mouth curved into an amused grin when he took in her disheveled state. Knowing she was going to be working from home all day, she hadn't bothered to do anything more with her honey-colored hair than sweep it up into a careless knot on the top of her head and secure it with pins haphazardly stuck in at varying angles. Tendrils, bleached by the sun, brushed against her cheeks and clung damply to her neck.

Her skin was flushed with color from exertion and the humid warmth of the late summer morning. The extremely short and faded cutoffs were topped by an equally ragged chambray shirt whose sleeves had been cut out long ago either by Katherine or Mary. She had tied the shirttail in a knot under her breasts. It was a good shirt to paint in, but was far from being appropriate attire for greeting guests.

Katherine's first impulse was to slam the door and protect herself from further embarrassment, but the man stared straight into her wide, green eyes and said with no inflection, "I'm Jason Manning."

Chapter Two

His announcement hit her like a blow in the stomach and robbed her of logical thought. She stood stupefied for several seconds before she slumped against the door frame. She expelled her breath, having held it since opening the door and catching sight of this magnificent man who was Peter Manning's brother.

When she didn't reply or show any inclination toward inviting him in, he said mockingly, "I'm not in the habit of ravishing young women, Miss Adams. And though I've been in Africa for the better part of two years, I'm still civilized."

His eyes were twinkling with mirth, and Katherine automatically resented his humor. He was going to destroy the world she had so painstakingly built for herself and Allison, and he had the gall to stand there and smile!

"May I come in?" he asked politely, and begrudgingly Katherine moved aside and allowed him to come through the door. She closed it behind him, then changed her mind and opened it again. He caught her move and smiled even deeper. The dimples on either side of his mouth were his only resemblance to Peter. His teeth showed incredibly white in his dark face.

"Still afraid I'm here to do you bodily harm?" he asked teasingly. Then he assumed a serious face and said softly, "Seeing you in that outfit, I'll admit the prospect is damned tempting, but I would never take advantage of a lady with paint on her face."

Katherine glanced down at her atrocious clothes and gasped as she noted how closely the damp cloth was clinging to her breasts. While she was bathing Allison, as was usually the case, she had become drenched. She had forgotten until now that her shirt had been soaked by the time she put the baby down for her nap.

Oh, God! she mentally groaned. She risked looking up at Jason Manning, but he was bending down from his tremendous height to pick up a wet cloth she had used to wipe away the dripping acrylic paint. Fascinated, like one hypnotized, she watched him approach her and reach out to grasp her chin in his fingers.

He tilted her head back so he could see what he was doing as he applied the cloth to the spot of paint on her nose. He went about his job absorbedly, unemotionally, but Katherine was finding it difficult to breathe. His whole presence was overwhelming, suffocating. The fingers on her jaw were strong, but gentle. His skin was very dark. Tans like that weren't acquired by short periods of exposure to the sun while lying coated with thick applications of suntan lotion.

The lines that fanned from the corners of his eyes like fine webs were another indication that he had spent most of his time out of doors. Oil? Wasn't that what Mary had said? She couldn't remember. She couldn't remember anything. Her brain had been swept clean when he came toward her and clasped her chin in his hand.

His eyes were surrounded by thick, short, black lashes and framed by raven black brows that arched

and tapered as if painted on. Katherine was on eye level with his chest and by raising her eyes on slightly, she could see his strong column of throat. In the deep V of his open sport shirt collar, she saw curling black hair that undoubtedly covered his broad chest. God! What was she thinking?

Angry with herself for allowing him such familiarity, she pushed his hand away and stepped backward.

“What do you want, Mr. Manning?”

He shrugged and dropped the cloth back onto the newspapers spread under his feet. “A Coke would be nice.” He smiled beguilingly.

“That isn’t what I meant and you know it,” she snapped. She was furious in her desperation. His friendly manner was only a ploy to reduce her suspicions and relax her guard. Well, she had resisted the advances of one Manning. Shivering in disgust, she remembered Peter’s behavior toward her. I’ll resist this Manning too. “What are you doing here?” she inquired coldly.

He sighed and crossed the room to sit on the sofa, the cushions of which she had so proudly re-covered herself.

“I think my reason for being here would be obvious to you, Katherine.” The sound of her name coming from his mouth made her heart lurch. Were they on a first-name basis already? Another of his disarming tricks, no doubt.

He studied her a moment as he leaned negligently back against the cushions of the couch. “I can’t wait to get my brother’s baby.”

She had known his purpose, but having him verbalize it struck terror in her heart. The pain in his chest was almost more than she could bear. She wasn’t going to crumple in front of him. She couldn’t.

Her face paled considerably, and, slowly shaking her head, she choked out, “No.”

When he saw her distress, he stood and took a few steps toward her. She backed away from him and when he read the aversion on her face, he stopped. Raking his fingers through hair that would forever be somewhat unruly, he muttered a curse under his breath.

He pulled his bottom lip through his teeth several times and stared at her through squinted eyes. He stood with his hands on his hips, and the commanding stance made Katherine feel even more vulnerable in her shabby clothes and bare feet. She shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another but met his stare with as much calm as she could muster.

Finally he spoke. “Look. I know this isn’t going to be easy on anyone. So could we at least try to make it as painless as possible? I really would like a Coke if you have one. A cup of coffee? Let’s discuss our mutual problem like rational grown-ups. Okay?”

“I have no problem, Mr. Manning.”

“Jace.”

“What?” she asked, momentarily distracted by his interruption.

“Call me Jace.”

“Oh. Well, as I was saying, I have no problem. I love my sister’s baby as if she were my own. On her deathbed Mary commissioned me to take care of her, to rear her, to prevent her from ever coming under the influence of any Manning. I have rocked her, bathed her, fed her—”

“*You* fed her?” His eyes went to her breasts, and Katherine flushed hotly in embarrassment and anger. And why were her nipples pressing so tautly against her shirt? Ever since Jace had touched her she had been self-consciously aware of them being unrestrained under the chambray. A bra had seemed an unnecessary garment when she dressed that morning. This man was threatening in ways other than taking Allison away from her, and she was incapable of dealing with any of them.

Jace was still looking at her with that annoying, amused grin, and she lashed out at him. “Don’t l

obtuse, Mr. Manning. You know that at the hospital babies are put on a formula if the mother can't or doesn't want to... to..."

"Breast feed?" he asked softly, intimately.

Katherine looked out the window, then at her bare feet—anywhere to escape those penetrating eyes. She swallowed the lump in her throat before she mumbled, "Yes." She hurried past him on her way to the kitchen. The business of getting him a drink would cover her acute embarrassment. "I'll get you a drink."

She went through the kitchen door practically at a run and braced herself against the counter as she had reached a haven of repose. Breathing heavily, she put both hands to her pounding temples and asked herself in a critical whisper, "What is the matter with me?"

This person... this man—and, God, what a magnificent man!—had totally disconcerted her. She was trembling. There was a tickling sensation in her thighs. She had attributed it to the strings on the legs of her cutoffs, but now admitted it was coming from within. She pressed the palms of her hands flat against her nipples, willing them to return to their relaxed state.

"Can I help?"

Katherine jumped as she heard the voice so close behind her. "W-what? Oh, no. What did you want? A Coke?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice." He hitched a thumb over his shoulder. "What do you call that color on the walls of the living room?"

She was nervously unscrewing the cap on a bottle of Coke she had found in the refrigerator. How long had it been there? What if it was flat? "The color? Oh, it's called terra cotta." She rattled the glass as she set it on the counter and reached for the ice in the freezer. The ice tray stuck and she almost broke a fingernail trying to pry it out.

"It's pretty. How'd you ever think of it? Isn't it a bit unusual?"

She laughed in spite of herself. "You should have seen my landlady's face when I asked permission to paint the room and showed her the sample. She thought I was crazy, but then finally agreed to it. You see, my sister Mary—" she broke off remembering suddenly who he was and why he was here.

He sensed her reticence and gently urged, "Yes? Your sister Mary...?"

Katherine turned away from him and poured the Coke down the side of the ice-filled glass. "Mary was an artist. Sometimes for fun we'd plan rooms and imagine them in outlandish colors. One night she planned a room with orange walls, and surprisingly, we liked it. I've wanted to do a room like that ever since."

She extended the glass of Coke to him and he nodded his thanks. He moved aside and let her go before him back into the living room.

"Who's going to carry the firewood up the stairs?" he asked completely out of context.

His perception and keen observations were uncanny and disturbing. "Happy, my landlady, asked me the same thing. But I like fireplaces and hated seeing this one going to waste. A former tenant had bricked it in. I had it reopened. I guess I'll have to bring up the firewood one log at a time."

She stepped around the newspapers and the naked-looking chest of drawers. She had pulled out all the drawers for easier painting and stripped them of their hardware. He would think she was terribly messy. But why should his opinion of her matter?

"Please excuse this mess. I needed to do this on my day off, and I have to do it indoors so I'll be close to the baby." She could have bitten her tongue. Why did she make that reference to Allison? Somehow she hoped he would forget his objective and just go away. Did she want him to go away? Yes! she averred silently, but was not quite convinced.

He drained the Coke and put the glass on the coffee table after carefully taking a coaster out of the rack. Didn't he ever make a mistake, do anything wrong?

From the basket on the coffee table he picked up an orange spiked with whole cloves and sniffed appreciatively. Replacing it, he reached for a bright green Granny Smith apple and gave it the same clinical analysis.

Katherine watched him warily as he crossed the room and stood in front of the large window looking out over the tree-shaded yard. The white shutters had been pushed aside to allow Katherine a vista of the green expanse she loved.

Palms out, his hands slid into the back pockets of his jeans, and Katherine noticed that he could barely squeeze them between the layers of fabric which stretched so tightly across his slim hips.

The muscles of his shoulders and back stirred the cloth of his plaid cotton shirt. The cuffs had casually been rolled up to just under his elbows. She had never given such avid attention to a man before. But then had she ever seen legs so long and lean and—

“Nice trees,” he observed. No comment was required, so she didn't offer one. Long moments of silence passed before he turned to her and asked softly, “Can I see the baby now?”

“She's sleeping,” Katherine tried.

He didn't buy it. “I promise not to wake her.”

She wanted to refuse him, but it would be useless. If he wanted to see the baby, she couldn't physically stop him. She sighed resignedly and indicated the room where Allison was taking her nap, completely unaware of the friction her existence generated between these two people.

Jace's large body seemed to fill the room as he bent over the crib and pulled back the light blanket.

Allison was in her usual sleeping position. She lay on her stomach, her head turned to one side, her knees drawn up under her tummy, her bottom stuck up in the air.

Katherine carefully watched Jace's reaction as he studied the baby whose gentle, rapid breath was the only sound in the close room. He reached out with one large brown hand and stroked the rosy cheek with his index finger.

“Hello, Allison,” he whispered.

Katherine, who had been awed by the contrast of his hand against Allison's small head, turned quickly to look at him. “How did you know her name?” she asked. She had been mindful not to mention it to him, thinking that the less of an individual the baby seemed to him, the less he would want her.

“The nurses at the hospital told me. When I started looking for you, that was the first place I went. They remembered Allison well. The circumstances of her birth and Mary's—” he broke off mid-sentence and looked at Katherine. Was it pain she saw in his eyes? “Anyway, they remembered her. And you.”

“Me?”

“Oh, yes, I was told countless times how sweet and considerate you were. Not to mention how beautiful.” His voice was a hoarse whisper, and Katherine avoided the blue eyes that looked at her from a face far too close to her own. She could feel his breath fanning her cheek.

Her hands were trembling as she drew the blanket over Allison again. Jace's hand touched her shoulder as if to turn her toward him, but she recoiled and jerked away.

“Don't,” she cried. When Allison jumped in reaction to the loud noise, she lowered her voice to a rasping hiss. “How dare you come in my house and act civilly and friendly and... and affectionately. Understand me, Mr. Manning. No one is taking Allison away from me. Especially someone named Manning. I want nothing to do with any of you. I ask nothing of you, and neither will Allison.” She

drew a deep, ragged breath. "Your brother killed my sister!"

The words hung in the room between them. Momentarily they were frozen in time, adversaries assessing each other and weighing the opponent's strength.

The atmosphere crackled with emotion and expectation. Later in private, self-analyzing Katherine swore that she hadn't leaned toward him, that the lunge that brought them together had been solely on his part. All she could truly recall was being enfolded in his powerful warmth. The lips that crushed hers were bruising and hard, and she matched his anger by meeting them in kind. She clutched his back as he wrapped her in arms of steel.

At what point the kiss changed character Katherine was never able to discern. But for some reason it was no longer her aim to punish, but to please. She opened her mouth to his demanding tongue and sensing her acquiescence, his plunder became sweet exploration. They sipped each other as if unable to quench a terrible thirst. Then their mouths fused together again.

"Yoo-hoo, Katherine. There's the strangest-looking car outside. I got worried about you so thought I'd check—"

Happy Cooper's immense proportions filled the doorway to Allison's bedroom and she stood transfixed as she saw Jace standing with Katherine next to the crib.

At the sound of her voice they had sprung apart, stunned by what had happened between them. Katherine felt as if every ounce of blood in her body were concentrated in her earlobes and her body was radiating heat like a stove. Her breasts were heaving in an effort to fill oxygen-starved lungs.

"Katherine?" the landlady asked cautiously in a quivering voice. When neither Katherine nor the handsome stranger answered, she began backing up and then ludicrously made a mad dash for the telephone in the living room.

The sight of Happy's bulk bouncing toward the telephone roused Katherine from her stupor. "Happy," she called and rushed after her landlady. She put a restraining hand on her friend's arm. "It... it's okay. Nothing's wrong. You just startled us, that's all."

"Well, you scared me to death!" Happy exclaimed. "I'm not used to seeing strange men in your house, Katherine." She laughed and her chest and stomach shook. Her round face was wreathed in a genuine smile as she crossed to Jace and extended her hand. "I'm Happy Cooper, Katherine's friend and landlady. How's my angel doing?" she asked, indicating the sleeping Allison. "Isn't she the dearest baby you've ever seen? I love her like my own."

Jace shook the hand presented him and stared at Happy, overcome by her size and open friendliness.

"Katherine, introduce me to this beautiful man before I swoon. He looks like a movie star! Who is he?" Happy had never mastered prudence or tact. When she thought something, she said it.

Katherine groped for a plausible lie and stammered a near truth. "This... this is my... uh... brother-in-law. Yes. My late husband's brother and Allison's uncle."

She looked at Jace over Happy's gray coiffure and hoped that he had gotten the message. Would he give her away? She had loved the apartment on sight and wanted to rent it right away. Happy's initial hesitancy to lease it to a single woman with a baby had made it expedient for Katherine to invent a husband who had been killed. Most people couldn't deny anything to a young, helpless widow.

"What a pleasure, Mr. Adams," Happy gushed. "I'm sure Katherine feels reassured to have one of her family visit her."

"My name isn't Adams, Mrs. Cooper. It's Jason Manning. Jace."

Happy's cheerful countenance collapsed in bemusement. "Well, how is it that you and your brother have different names?"

Katherine held her breath and closed her eyes. Jace would expose her lie, and she would lose her most valued friend.

“He... he was only my half brother. We had different fathers,” Jace lied smoothly. Did deception always come so easily for him?

“Oh, I see, of course,” Happy patted Jace’s hand. “It was a tragedy for him to die overseas like that. In Africa, wasn’t it?”

Jace raised his eyebrows in a mocking, silent query and Katherine flushed. That he had been in Africa never entered her mind. It was just the most remote place she could think of as she told Happy a tale of an airplane crash that killed a nonexistent husband.

“Yes, Africa,” said Jace. “And it was tragic. A pity he can’t be here with us today.” His face and voice were serious, but his blue eyes were glinting with humor as he looked at Katherine over Happy’s head, which was bent as she dabbed her eyes with a lace-bordered handkerchief.

“Poor Katherine,” Happy sighed as she once again turned to the young woman. Her look of concern was instantly converted to one of joy as she exclaimed, “But now that Jace is here, you won’t have to go to the dance tonight alone. Isn’t that lucky?”

She grabbed Jace’s hand and shoved him toward Katherine.

Despite Jace’s size, Happy’s gentle push provided enough impetus for him to collide into Katherine. He reached out and grabbed her around the waist before she fell backward. They stared at each other, their faces close as he pulled her back to her feet. The kiss of moments before was still imprinted on their minds. Neither had taken it lightly.

“Here I was worrying about Katherine having to go unescorted to a dance, and right out of the blue a handsome brother-in-law drops in.” Happy continued chattering happily, oblivious to Katherine’s covert signals that she cease.

“Dance?” Jace picked up on the idea. Did he have a radar device in his head?

“Yes! The faculty banquet and dance is tonight. Katherine’s worked so hard on the arrangement. She’s required to attend because of her job, and was having to go alone. Now you can take her. Do you have a tuxedo? Well, no matter. A dark suit will do just as nicely.”

“Happy, you don’t understand. Mr... uh... Jace isn’t staying. He just came by—”

“Of course I’m staying, Katherine. Do you think I’d leave you stranded without an escort for the evening. Besides I hadn’t had time to tell you that the oil company I work for is drilling near here. I’ll be around for a long time.”

Katherine stared open-mouthed at this announcement, but Happy clapped her hands in glee. “Oh Jace, you can’t imagine how happy that makes me. I never like to think that a young woman is left alone in the world. It will be such a comfort to Katherine for you to be here.”

Jace was smiling benignly at Happy, but then he turned to Katherine. He impaled her with his eyes and the message was clear. He was staying until he got custody of Allison.

“I’ve got to go now and carry my groceries in. I had just come in from shopping when I saw this cute little... uh...” For once, Happy was at a loss for words.

“Jeep.” Jace supplied.

“A jeep! How quaint!” Happy chirped. Katherine rolled her eyes heavenward. Apparently Happy wasn’t aware that the big status symbol these days was a four-wheel drive vehicle. “You two have a nice visit. I’ll keep Allison tonight and you can stay out as late as you want to.”

“I’ve got to go for now too. Katherine, what time do I need to pick you up?” Jace settled one large hand on her shoulder in brotherly affection, and, in deference to Happy’s curious eyes, she stifled the impulse to fling it off. Things were moving too fast. She couldn’t think. How could she spend a

entire evening with him?

“Seven thirty,” she heard herself answer and wasn’t even conscious of shaping the words in her mouth.

“Okay, then. Happy, can I carry your groceries in for you? A lady like you shouldn’t be doing menial tasks like that.”

Happy giggled like a young girl. “Oh, Jace, I miss having a man around to do things like that. I really do. My son, Jim, lives...”

Her voice trailed off as they descended the stairs to the lawn below. Jason Manning. He was disgustingly transparent. He was being charming and a perfect gentleman. Was it his intention to get to her through her friends? What was his game plan?

He frightened her. He thrilled her. She must have been insane to even let him come into the house. A Manning wasn’t to be trusted. Hadn’t she seen how shallow Peter Manning’s charming veneer was? She must protect Allison. But how? Jason Manning was too handsome and glib. Katherine thought these characteristics were far more formidable than malicious meanness and disreputability.

* * *

The reflection in the mirror verified that Katherine’s efforts in dressing for the dance hadn’t been time wasted. She had soaked in a tub of bubble bath while Allison took her afternoon nap. The warm water was intended to ease some of her tension. Instead it had only made her more aware of the effect Jace’s embrace had had on her body. She dried herself quickly, skimming over the most sensitive areas that continued to throb whenever she thought of his kiss.

Taking out the electric curlers, she began styling her hair. What should she have expected of Peter’s brother? Peter had made a pass at her. He and Mary were already engaged.

One evening he had been waiting with Katherine for Mary to come downstairs. Katherine called to her sister to hurry her along, uneasy being left alone with Peter even in her own house.

“You don’t like me very much do you, Katherine?” he surprised her by asking. “Why not?” He insisted bluntly. “I’m quite charming when one gets to know me. I’d like for us to be friends.”

He stood close behind her while she nonchalantly continued to water a plant near the window. His hand caressed her shoulder lightly. Her poise vanished at his touch. She turned quickly to face him, jerking his hand away.

“I don’t know what you mean, Peter,” she said sharply. “I don’t know you well enough to say if I like you or not.”

“Precisely my point!” he exclaimed, flashing her the famous smile that had been captured time and again in the society page photographs.

He reached out and put his hand under her elbow, squeezing it gently. “Why don’t you and I have lunch sometime soon, and”—his eyes lowered to her lips—“get to know each other better.”

She shuddered in revulsion as his body moved closer to hers. Loathingly she pushed him aside just as they heard Mary coming down the stairs.

Mary was blissfully unaware of his personality flaws, and, of course, Katherine never told her of the incident. Even then he had been playing his macabre games.

At the lavish wedding reception he insulted Katherine with another pass. Mary was chattering gaily to some of the Mannings’ friends when Peter sauntered over to his new sister-in-law. She was making herself as invisible as possible amid potted plants and baskets of flowers.

“Sister Kate, how lovely you look in your bridal frock.” She hated that cooing voice and his

learned to dread it. He had adopted the nickname for her after she rejected his first advance. It rankled her every time he used it, but she would never have given him the satisfaction of letting her anger show.

He took possession of her hands and kissed her coolly on the cheek. She jumped back in mortification when she felt his warm tongue poke through his lips and lightly brush her cheek. Her back was turned to the room full of wedding guests, so no one had seen what he did. The embrace appeared to be a filial kiss between new in-laws.

She glared at him through slitted green eyes, but he only smiled at her sardonically, his lip curled into a smirk which marred the perfection of his regular features.

“You’re unspeakably vile,” she said.

“Tsk, ts, sister Kate. Is that any way to talk to your dear brother?”

Justifiably she had hated Peter Manning.

“Yes, Mr. Jason Manning is running true to form and upholding the family traditions,” Katherine said to her image as she misted herself with cologne.

Katherine critically scrutinized her gown and was pleased with what she saw. At the last moment she had decided to pack it when she left Denver. “I couldn’t have afforded another one,” she muttered ruefully. She had splurged on the expensive dress for a pre-wedding party at the Manning estate. It had made a large dent in her budget, but it was worth it. The style was classic and would be in fashion for a while yet.

The sea-green georgette crepe draped close to her body and hung in soft folds at her feet. In the Grecian style, one shoulder was left bare while, on the other, the fabric was gathered into a graceful knot.

The dress accented her slender figure and clung to her gentle curves. The color flattered her summer’s tan and brought out the highlights of her green eyes. Katherine was unconscious of how beautiful she looked in the dress. But she felt an added streak of confidence when she wore it.

She dropped her earring when she heard the knock on the door. Making one hasty last inspection, she retrieved the pearl cluster, inserted it into her pierced ear, secured the back, and went through the living room to answer Jace’s knock.

Earlier in the day she had cleaned up the painting mess and moved the chest of drawers to the other bedroom. The living room was softly lit by shaded table lamps. Katherine hated overhead lights and glaring bulbs.

She opened the door and involuntarily caught her breath at the sight of Jace in his dark gray suit. From the distinctive buttons, she knew that it sported a designer label, and the European cut fit his physique perfectly.

His shirt was pale blue silk and his necktie a deeper shade of the same color. The wavy black hair had been brushed but still looked a trifle untamed. It shone with iridescent highlights.

He whistled long and low as he came through the door. “Wow! Can this be the same Widow Adamson that I met this afternoon?”

“Come in, Mr. Manning.” She hadn’t missed his sarcasm. These games must stop if she were ever going to gain control. “Why are you doing this?” she asked in desperation.

“What?”

“This!” she cried, spreading her arms wide with palms up to encompass the whole situation. “Why are you being so pleasant and prolonging the inevitable confrontation? We both know why you’re here, so I wish you’d drop this protective brother-in-law routine.”

He smiled but chided her softly. “Remember who made up that ridiculous brother-in-law story

Katherine. Not I. I saved your skin today. You should be thanking me. Besides all that, I *am* your brother-in-law.”

“Oh!” she ground out, clenching her fists at her sides. When she saw that he was not to be provoked, it angered her even more. “Don’t do this!” she shouted.

A spark of annoyance flickered across his face and he put both hands on his hips. “Look, all I’m here for is to take you to this dance, or whatever the hell it is. Is that so dastardly? Believe me Katherine, I can think of several other ways I’d rather spend an evening with you.” He fixed her with a warm blue stare and added suggestively, “Shall I elaborate?”

For a moment, she was lost in the depths of his eyes, but she managed to answer hoarsely, “No. Let’s just get this over with. I’ll get Allison.”

She went into the baby’s room and was surprised when he followed her. “Here, I’ll carry her.” He leaned toward the crib and reached for the baby.

“No,” she said in a panic and grabbed his arm, drawing it away from Allison.

The face turned on her was angry, but softened when he saw the genuine fear in her eyes. “I’m not going to run off with her, Katherine. That’s not my style.” Was that a censure for her leaving Denver with Allison? “I just wanted to carry her for you so she wouldn’t wrinkle your dress. Okay?”

She licked her lips, ashamed of her outburst, and began gathering disposable diapers and putting them in a tote bag. “Okay,” she conceded.

Jace gently turned the baby over onto her back and studied the pink, round face. He chuckled. “Someday you’ll be a real beauty some day, Allison.” His large hands were amazingly competent and gentle as he wrapped her in a light blanket and picked her up. He held her correctly, supporting her head in one of his palms. “She looks like—”

“Mary,” interrupted Katherine quickly. She didn’t want him to say that the baby looked like Peter.

He glanced at her over the baby’s head. “That’s what I was about to say. Of course, I never saw Mary, only pictures, but Allison has her coloring. Are her eyes blue? She’s so lazy, she hasn’t opened them for me yet.”

Katherine laughed. “She’s a good sleeper. And her eyes are blue. I hope they don’t change color.”

He turned to leave, but Katherine halted him. “Wait. She may spit up on your coat. Let me put that over your shoulder.”

She picked up an absorbent pad and placed it over his shoulder, patting it into place. The close contact with his tall frame made her heart begin to pound. She stepped back quickly, but not before he noticed her reaction.

To cover her embarrassment, she busied herself with gathering up other supplies for the baby and switching out lights as they made their way out of the apartment.

Happy greeted them at the back door of her house and Jace relinquished Allison to her eager arms. She barely took the time to compliment them on how nice they looked before she began gurgling at Allison.

Crossing the lawn under the pecan trees, Jace suggested that they take her car. “I’m sorry, but the jeep is rather unsuitable for a date.”

“No, we can take my car.” She handed him the keys, and he clasped her elbow as he helped her into the passenger side. Her arm tingled long after his touch. The compact car barely accommodated her height, but somehow he managed to wedge himself behind the steering wheel, muttering deprecations and curses when he bumped first his head then his knee.

Planning the dinner-dance had consumed much of Katherine’s time since her employment in the public relations office. Now it all seemed so inconsequential. All of her senses were absorbed by Jace.

Manning.

~~She made polite introductions; she ate dinner; she applauded the speaker; she conversed when she~~ was required to. But everything paled against her awareness of the man beside her. Even among strangers he behaved with courtly manners and easy charm, totally confident of himself.

An awkward moment came when Katherine introduced Jace to her boss, Ronald Welsh. The two men eyed each other warily, and their immediate reciprocal hostility made Katherine uneasy.

“Mr. Welsh,” Jace said as he extended his hand.

Ronald Welsh shook Jace’s hand, but there was no warmth in his expressionless gray eyes as he murmured a greeting.

“Katherine, you look lovely this evening,” he said, dismissing Jace and turning his full attention to Katherine. He reached out and stroked her arm. Instinctively she shrank away from him. Recently he had made similar moves in the office, and they never failed to make her uncomfortable. She didn’t want him touching her. Unwarranted and unnecessary familiarity had always disturbed her. She reflected on the kiss this afternoon and pushed the thought aside. That hadn’t been the same thing at all!

“Thank you, Ronald.” He had insisted she call him by his first name, but she didn’t like doing so. It had altered their relationship in a manner that she felt was injurious to a professional rapport.

“Would you dance with me, Katherine?” Before she could answer, Ronald Welsh had scooped her up into a bearlike embrace and hustled her away. There was little she could do but go along with him. After all, he was her boss, and she couldn’t afford to offend him.

Ronald’s thinning hair was heavily oiled in order to keep the sparse strands in place over the balding spots. The hair oil’s perfume was overpowering.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” he asked, drawing her closer to his short, thick body.

“Yes, very,” she said. He seemed intent on holding her suffocatingly close and pressing her into his paunch.

She suffered through that dance and several others before Jace came up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. He didn’t issue a verbal invitation to dance. Instead one strong arm slid around her waist while the other captured her hand.

Jace pulled her close to him and led her into a slow, effortless dance. He didn’t speak. She couldn’t have. The sensations that were emanating from the pit of her stomach and spreading over her body reached her vocal cords, constricted them, and rendered them useless.

The hand that held her to him with fingers spread out wide on her back was like a brand that scorched her skin. Through the sheer fabric of her dress she could feel hard, muscular thighs pressing against her own. The warm breath that fanned her temple was soft and aromatic.

She was too close to him to look up into his face, but she could see the black curls that brushed her collar, and she had a compelling desire to slide her hand toward those curls and caress their black silkiness with her fingertips.

The music stopped and yet he didn’t release her. He maintained a possessive hold on her arm and steered her to one of the French doors that led out onto a terrace.

Chapter Three

The campus was dark. Only the banquet hall where the faculty dance was being held was lit. Katherine followed Jace's lead, never pausing to examine why she did so without any hesitation.

They crossed the brick terrace and a narrow strip of manicured lawn to a low wall that surrounded the rose garden. Before she could protest, he grasped her around the waist and swung her up to the top of the wall and sat her down. "Your feet hurt."

Could he read her mind? "How did you know? Was I limping? These are new shoes and they are killing me," she confessed.

"I saw you slip out of them just before I danced with you. I almost lost the heart to ask you but was afraid that if I didn't seize my chance, I may not have another with the belle of the ball," he teased.

"I'm hardly that," she protested. She started to remind him that he hadn't actually *asked* her to dance, but then his next action made her gasp.

He reached up under her long skirt and took one of her ankles between his warm palms. He slipped the uncomfortable high-heeled sandal off her slender foot and began massaging it with his long, strong fingers.

He grinned at her, ignoring her initial reflexive movement to take her foot away. His strokes were slow and rhythmical. "Dr. Manning's Famous Footrub. People come for miles to have one of these foot massages from me. Usually they have to wait for months for an appointment, but for you, little lady, I'll make a special deal."

His lighthearted mood was infectious. When had she last been able to relax and laugh? His doctor's medicine-man inflection was pure silliness, but she asked with mock seriousness, "Why am I suddenly afraid to hear the terms of this special deal?"

He raked her body with his eyes. He started at the top of her head and took in every feature of her face before moving to her throat and chest. His eyes lingered there for long moments before moving back to her face again. "You should be afraid," he whispered and brazenly winked at her.

She shifted, uncomfortable under his intent perusal. He released one foot only to grasp the other one and give it the same soothing treatment. His fingers were strong, but his caress was gentle.

They were quiet and the silence contributed to the unexpected intimacy. Nothing had ever stirred Katherine more than having Jace's hands under her skirt touching her with this exciting familiarity.

Was the forbidden, the unseen, always better? Is that why men of the last century couldn't resist a brief glimpse of a woman's ankle? Had modern women taken a giant step backward by flaunting their sexuality?

It was difficult to concentrate on anything while his thumb stroked her arch so sensuously, but she knew the subject of Allison still lay between them. Though, selfishly, she wanted this moment to go on forever, she couldn't remain silent. She cleared her throat and then asked bravely, "Jace, what are you going to do about Allison?"

His hands stopped their massage immediately, but he retained his hold on her foot. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

She swallowed hard and tried to control the trembling of her lips and the choked feeling in her throat. “Are you going to leave me alone with her?”

Quietly he answered her. “No, Katherine, I’m not.”

She sobbed brokenly and jerked her foot from his startled fingers. She jumped off the wall before he had time to assist her and knelt down and fumbled in the damp grass trying to locate her shoes.

“Katherine, please don’t,” he said. Determined hands encircled her waist and brought her upright to face him. She struggled against him, but he refused to loosen his strong hold. His strength won out and, finally, she ceased her efforts to escape and slumped against him in defeat.

His hands slid up and down her upper arms. Slowly he drew her closer to him until she was pressed against his long, hard body. He lowered his head and nuzzled the hair next to her cheek. With skill his fingers released the decorative comb which held back one side of her heavy hair. As it fell softly onto his face, he made a low, deep sound in his throat.

His fingers stroked her neck. Light kisses were brushed across her cheek as he rested his hand on her bare shoulder, caressing her collarbone with his thumb.

Katherine was incensed that he should take such liberties with her. Why wasn’t she pushing him away? She never allowed a man such access to her. Any man.

But she was incapable of moving, of protesting. The heat of his body held her like a magnet. Her limbs were powerless to pull away. She wanted to take in more of the brisk, clean scent of his cologne. It was so easy to lean against his large, masculine frame and surrender to this floating sense of delicious vulnerability.

Could he feel her heart pounding under his hand? His hand! How had it gotten there? All of her emotions felt so right, so good, she hadn’t even noticed this caress that shocked her with its boldness.

He settled his lips against her mouth and breathed her name. “Katherine.” His hand moved even lower from her bare shoulder, and he fit his palm over her breast. She pushed him away violently and struggled to regain her breath.

“Yes, you’re a Manning,” she cried in anger.

He was stunned, then defensive. “You make the name sound like an epithet.”

“That’s how I meant it,” she snarled. All of her frustrations and worry over the last few hours poured into her words, and she lashed out at him viciously. “Your brother made a pass at me after he was engaged to my sister and with no encouragement from me. He did something even more obscene at his own wedding.”

She shuddered as she remembered the feel of Peter’s tongue on her cheek. The image of Jace doing the same thing was projected on her mind, and the picture wasn’t at all repulsive. Impatiently she shoved the thought away and rasped in anger, “Now you come on to me panting and pawing. Do you think that a few soft caresses and sweet words will weaken my resolve? I will keep Allison and never let you or anyone else take her away from me. Do you finally understand? Stay away from her—and from me.” She was backing away from him, but it was a retreat from herself too. Even now she longed to return to the sensuous serenity of his arms.

She ran to her car and, after trying to open the door, realized that he still had the keys. Jace walked toward her slowly. Without speaking, he unlocked the door and held it for her. He made no move to touch her. When he had folded himself behind the wheel, he handed her the sandals which had been forsaken on the campus lawn.

They drove to her apartment in complete silence. He handed her the car keys, and she ran up the

stairs without waiting for him to escort her. It was prearranged that Allison would stay all night with Happy.

Katherine slammed the door and locked it. Her hands covered her face as she leaned against the door, breathing hard and grappling with her conscience. She had let him kiss her. Twice. She had wanted to go on kissing him. And he was her enemy.

It was long after Katherine heard the jeep roar to life and speed down the street that she felt capable of leaving the support of the door.

* * *

All night she tossed and turned, pounding her pillow and alternately folding her covers neatly over her and then kicking them to the foot of the bed. Katherine was furious with Jace for reducing her to this hot and bothered creature who was behaving like a teenager in the throes of her first boy infatuation.

In actuality, that wasn't far from the truth. Since her father's death when she was a child, Katherine's life had been totally devoid of a masculine influence. No uncles, grandfathers, brothers, or male cousins were available to her, or her mother, or Mary.

Her natural apprehension toward men had increased during her adolescence and early adulthood. Contemporary mores relating to sexuality allowed men to demand more than she was willing to give. She was unprepared to handle such situations, and had subconsciously built a self-protective wall around herself. It had never crumbled.

Until today.

Why, when she was wary toward any man, had one so supremely masculine been able to arouse her like Jace Manning had? After being with him today she was resentful of this protection she forced on herself.

Just the thought of his long, lean body made her flush hotly. She tossed her head to the other side of the pillow as she recalled his cerulean eyes raking slowly over her body. Her skin still burned where his brown fingers had stroked it lingeringly.

She was more than a little afraid of him and what his unexpected intrusion could mean to her life and Allison's. Her physical and emotional reaction to him made the threat even more ominous. He was too big, too virile, too arrogant. Was he always so coolly confident?

And she despised his name. Manning. Manning. Peter Manning's brother. Peter, who had killed Mary with cruelty and thereby orphaned Allison. Peter, who used money and charm as facades to hide the decay in his soul.

She searched for traces of deception in Jace's face. His image was clear on the back of her burning, gritty lids. All she saw were two captivating blue eyes, deep dimples, and a sensuous, smiling mouth. With that picture fixed in her mind, she eventually dropped off into a restless slumber.

* * *

"Good afternoon, ladies!" Jace called as he hopped out of the jeep.

Katherine was sitting with Happy under the pecan trees in the backyard sipping cold homemade lemonade. They were interrupted by the squeal of brakes and the crunching of gravel under tires. Jace wheeled the mud-splattered jeep into Happy's driveway.

"Hello," cried Happy cheerfully and jumped out of her lawn chair to pour Jace a glass of lemonade.

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