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1449
February

Bittersweet Passion

PEGGY WEBB

Here's the thing. No matter how much you love your family and your friends, the relationship that will come first is the one with your true love...

It's quiet in the hall now. I can almost believe I'm back at Belle Rose with Michael, that he walked into the room and hugged me from behind, leading me to the bed with that sweet, familiar face and that special look of love in his eyes.

He's going to be down with me soon, whispering, 'Don't let go, Annie. Don't ever let go.'

And I won't, my darling. I promise.

SPECIAL EDITION

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***This was no dream; this was real.
She was lying in bed cuddled up
to a preacher.***

“Good morning,” she said, and then they stared at each other until both their faces flushed with the knowledge of where they were and how close they were.

“I’m afraid I don’t remember much about last night,” he said. “How did I get here?”

“You said you didn’t want to go home, so I rescued you.”

He chuckled. “You rescued me?”

“Well, don’t tell anybody. I don’t want to ruin my reputation.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

She gave him a wicked smile. “And yours is safe with me.”

“Did anything happen here last night?”

“Believe me, Daniel, if anything had happened in this bed last night, you’d remember.”

Dear Reader,

Do I have a sweet lineup for you—just in time for Valentine's Day! What's more enticing than a box of chocolates? The answer lies in the next story, *Cordina's Crown Jewel*, from *New York Times* bestselling author Nora Roberts's CORDINA'S ROYAL FAMILY series. This gem features a princess who runs away from royal responsibility and straight into the arms of the most unlikely man of her dreams!

Another Valentine treat is Jackie Merritt's *Marked for Marriage*, which is part of the popular MONTANA MAVERICKS series. Here, a feisty bronco-busting beauty must sit still so that a handsome doctor can give her a healthy dose of love. And if it's heart-thumping emotion you want, Peggy Webb continues THE WESTMORELAND DIARIES series with *Bittersweet Passion*, a heavenly opposites-attract romance between a singing sensation and a very handsome minister hero.

In *With Family in Mind*, Sharon De Vita launches her gripping SADDLE FALLS miniseries. One Valentine's Day, this newlywed author admits, she wrote a heartwarming love poem to her husband about their first year together! Our next family tale is *Sun-Kissed Baby*, by Patricia Hagan—a darling tale of a new single mom who falls for the man she thinks is her little boy's father. This talented author shares her Valentine's Day dinner tradition with us—making “a heart-shaped meatloaf” and at the end of the pink meal, “a heart-shaped ice cream cake, frosted with strawberry whipped cream.” The icing on the cake this month is Leigh Greenwood's *Undercover Honeymoon*, a passionate tale of two reunited lovers who join forces to stay ahead of a deadly enemy and care for an orphaned little girl.

Make sure that you sample every Special Edition delight this month has to offer. I wish you and your loved ones a warm and rose-filled Valentine's Day (and that box of chocolates, too)!

Best,

Karen Taylor Richman
Senior Editor

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PEGGY WEBB



SPECIAL EDITION™

Published by Silhouette Books

America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

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For Michael...
"Wonderful Tonight" and always...



SILHOUETTE BOOKS



ISBN 0-373-24449-5

BITTERSWEET PASSION

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Printed in U.S.A.

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PEGGY WEBB

and her two chocolate Labs live in a hundred-year-old house not far from the farm where she grew up. "A farm is a wonderful place for dreaming," she says. "I used to sit in the hayloft and dream of being a writer." Now, with two grown children and more than forty-five romance novels to her credit, the former English teacher confesses she's still a hopeless romantic and loves to create the happy endings her readers love so well.

When she isn't writing, she can be found at her piano playing blues and jazz or in one of her gardens planting flowers. A believer in the idea that a person should never stand still, Peggy recently taught herself carpentry.

Dear Daniel,

If your father were not in a coma, I know that he would be the first person you would turn to when it comes to matters of the heart. However, I am your mother and my sorrows will never take precedence over my children. I am here for you.

It is clear that you are deeply in love with Skylar. And rightly so—she is a very beautiful woman. So beautiful that it might be hard for you to see the pain in her eyes. Her father, a minister, just as you are, hurt her and died before they could make peace. Regardless of the love she feels for you, you are still a small reminder of the pain. So use your gift of love and forgiveness. And remember that she can run away, but she can never hide from love. True love has wings and will find her wherever she goes.

With all my love and understanding,

Mom

Prologue

From the diary of Anne Beaufort Westmoreland:

September 18, 2001

The doctor just came in and said, "Anne, I know this is going to be hard for you, but I'm afraid there's nothing else we can do here for Michael."

I was too stunned to ask questions. I was too scared to say, "You can't just give up hope." Too mad to scream, "What do you mean, nothing else you can do? You're a doctor. *Do something.*"

He patted my hand and left, saying he'd send somebody named Ethelene to talk to me about moving Michael to a nursing home.

What kind of person calls herself that? It makes me think of something that would burn up if you lit a match to it.

I can't believe this is happening to me.

Well, there I go again being selfish. Thinking only of myself when it's my husband I should be worried about. And oh, I am, I am. It's just that Michael's lying in his coma looking peaceful and relaxed while I'm left in the real world all by myself. Trying to cope.

Of course, I'm not by myself. I have my three children, and every single one of them would come if I called. I'm not going to, though. They have their lives. Emily is planning her wedding to Jake, Hannah's still chasing a story out in Yellowstone and Daniel has a big church in Atlanta looking to him for leadership.

No, I'll do this all by myself.

The first thing I'm going to do is tell Michael, "It's time to get up now, darling. Hurry before they kick us out of here."

I'll try to keep it light because I don't want to alarm him.

Or maybe I do. Maybe I'll scream at him, "Michael Westmoreland, if you don't get out of that bed this instant they're going to haul your butt out of here like a load of lumber and stick you in some godawful place where nobody expects you to leave. Ever."

Oh, I can't bear to think of it. I can't bear to think about a future without Michael. My heart, my soul, my life.

There has to be hope. I won't give up. I *won't*. And I won't let Michael give up either. Even if we do have to move into a nursing home.

I lean toward the bed, touch his hand and whisper, "Michael, wake up, darling."

But he doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Doesn't respond in any way.

After he first got hit by that avalanche in the Hima-

layas I was able to feel his thoughts. I knew that Michael was somewhere listening to me, feeling me, knowing me.

I'm not sure anymore. Though, God forbid I should tell any of the children that. Emily is convinced her father will wake up in time to walk down the aisle and give her away. And Daniel's faith never wavers.

"We just have to keep praying, Mom," he tells me, and oh, I know it's true. But sometimes I wonder if God's really listening. Maybe there's too much static. Just think...millions of people sending up petitions, all of them desperate.

Like me.

Well, there now. I've said it. I'm feeling desperate. And alone. I need to cry. I need to scream. I need help.

God, help me...

A loud ringing. I jump as if I'm shot. It's the phone. Is it more bad news? Maybe I won't even answer it.

Chapter One

“Hello, Mom.”

The minute Daniel spoke, his mother started to cry, and the sense of foreboding he'd had all morning grew. That was why he'd picked up the phone in the first place. He usually waited until after he'd checked his messages with the church's secretary before calling the hospital in Vicksburg to find out if there was news from home. But something had kept prodding him, something dark and urgent.

“Mom? What's wrong? Is it Dad?”

“Yes...no, not what you're thinking. Oh, Daniel, the doctors are sending him to a nursing home.”

“When?”

“Soon. As soon as arrangements are made for the transfer. Probably first thing next week.”

“I'll be there.”

“No...no, I can handle this. Really, I can.”

"You don't have to go through this alone. I'll *be* there, Mom."

"Oh, Daniel...they say there's nothing else they can do." Her voice gave a little hitch, then she sniffed two or three times before coming back on the phone. "I'm sorry. I'm such a mess."

"You're tired. Anyone would be after four months of caretaking. There's nothing to apologize for. You're entitled to express your feelings. It's not only human, it's healthy."

"No wonder all your parishioners love you so much. You're a marvelous minister, Daniel. I'm so proud of you. And Michael was...*is*, too. I want you to know that."

"Not everybody in my flock finds me as appealing as a mother does, but thanks for your vote of confidence.... I'll drive over after Sunday morning services, Mom...to help you take care of things."

"What about Sunday evening services?"

"Quentin can take care of that."

"You're sure?"

"That's what assistant pastors are for."

After Daniel had hung up he tried not to think about why he would be going back to Mississippi. Instead he made arrangements with Quentin, then called his secretary Evelyn in to reschedule his Monday and Tuesday appointments.

His plan was to be back in Atlanta in time for Wednesday-night meditations.

The day they moved Michael into the nursing home, it was pouring rain, a gray cheerless day perfectly suited for their somber task. Daniel kept his dark thoughts to himself. As a matter of fact, he tried hard to erase them completely.

He tried hard to pretend an optimism he was far from feeling. For his sake as well as his mother's.

Lately he'd felt a slipping away inside himself, a loosening of truths long held to be inviolable. He'd tried to pass his feelings off as fatigue due to overwork and stress, but they were manifesting themselves with increasing regularity. This scared him more than he cared to admit.

He was a minister. A man whose faith was supposed to be unassailable. In addition, he was now the head of the Westmoreland family with a mother and two sisters looking to him for leadership.

Michael had been the cornerstone on which their family was built, the rock they'd all stood on, the bulwark they'd all been sheltered by. And now it was Daniel's turn.

Heavenly Father, make me adequate to the task, he silently prayed, but his words seemed hollow even to himself.

Anne was at Michael's bed adjusting the pillow, smoothing the covers, touching his face, her gestures jerky, her chatter nervous.

"Everything's going to be all right, Michael," she said. "You'll see. We're going to like this place. See, they have a big window with a view of the front lawn. There's a magnolia tree out there, and a bird feeder. Even a little pond. Much better than looking out at the hospital parking lot...don't you think so, Daniel?"

She turned to him in something as close to desperation as he'd ever seen in his mother. He put his arm around her and drew her to a chair.

"I do. The view is great, and when the sun shines we'll open the window so Dad can smell the grass and listen to the birds."

"I hadn't thought of that. He's missing the outdoors. I know he is."

"Maybe that's exactly what he needs to trigger an awakening."

"Yes, yes. And the staff here is very nice. Don't you think so?"

So far they'd only met three people, the director Winslow Raines, the daytime head nurse Sally Schuster, and the physical therapist Gloria Marshall. Raines was a jovial Santa look-alike, Schuster a dour spinster who looked as if she'd take scalps if you crossed her and Marshall a freckled sprite who looked twelve instead of three times that.

"I do. I think we're going to like it here."

His mother held on to Daniel's hand, and they lapsed into a silence as they both watched the bed where Michael lay, watched and waited. Hoping for a miracle.

Daniel had been praying for one since June, battering Heaven's gate with his fervent petitions, imploring his Father to bend a compassionate ear his way, to turn a tender heart toward Vicksburg and restore a beloved husband and father to his family.

So far he'd received no answers. Or had he? What if the answer was *no*?

Unconsciously he balled his hands into fists. He couldn't accept that. Not yet. His mother was counting on him.

"I need to go home for a little while, wash up, eat a bite, get some things for tonight," she said. "Will you stay here until I get back?"

"Of course. Why don't you let me stay tonight, too? You need some rest."

"Michael's counting on me. I can't let him spend his first night in a new place without me."

Daniel knew it was no use to argue. Instead he kissed his mother's forehead, then escorted her to the door. She cupped his cheek briefly, then was gone. Before he was

even settled into the chair, she was back standing at the bed bending over Michael.

"I'll be back soon, darling." She kissed him softly on the lips, then wagged two fingers at Daniel as she left.

Daniel went to the window and watched until she drove out of the parking lot, then he stood at the bed looking down at his father. Michael had lost weight. His pajamas hung on him and his swarthy sun-and-snow-burned skin had lightened to a pale gold that looked yellow in the waning light of day.

This was Daniel's favorite time of day. He flicked off the lights then stood in the deepening shadows and listened in the stillness.

Sounds during this time of day became sharper, clearer—the distant squeaking of rubber wheels against polished tiles, the faint clinking of silver as dinner trays were dispersed to the rooms, the ping of rain against the windowpanes.

Daniel closed his eyes and fell into evening, absorbing the place, centering himself. And then suddenly, there was music. The voice of an angel. Sweet and clear. A glorious golden contralto lifted in song.

Spellbound, Daniel listened. He couldn't make out the words. But, ah...the melody. It rang through him as if the angels themselves were pulling at his heartstrings.

He was so enthralled he didn't even hear the door open. He didn't know anyone was in the room until the woman spoke.

"Reverend Westmoreland? May I turn the light on?"

"Of course. I'm sorry."

He snapped the light on and there stood a large beaming woman, her face as shiny as patent leather shoes.

"I've brought you some dinner, Reverend," she said, and when she smiled she showed two gold teeth.

"Thank you..." He looked at the name tag. "Mrs. Strong. But you didn't have to do that."

The angel's voice lifted pure and rich down the hall, and Daniel realized he was hungry.

"It's no problem, Reverend. I take good care of my patients and their families. I want you to know that."

"We appreciate that. And please...call me Daniel."

She smiled again, that warm gold-toothed smile that brightened the room. "If you call me Vicky we'll be all set here."

Beyond his room the voice sailed upward on a clear sustained note, then abruptly dropped back an octave to a deep intimate tone that made the hair rise on the back of Daniel's neck.

"It's a deal," he said.

"All right then, I'll leave you to your supper. It's ham and greens. Good country cooking. We've got a good cook here."

The beautiful voice dropped even lower in a dark bluesy riff that had Daniel wondering why his collar was too tight and the room too hot.

"Wait," he said as Vicky headed toward the door. "Who is that singing?"

"Oh, that. That's Skylar, Skylar Tate. I'll go tell her to stop if it's bothering you."

"No, no, please. It's..." *Riveting. Mind-boggling. Miraculous.* "...very nice." He had to know more. "Is she a patient here?"

Vicky laughed. "Lord, no. That girl's got more energy than any three of us put together. Healthy as a horse. She just comes here when she's in town to entertain our patients. They all seem to like it."

"No doubt."

"But now if she ever gets too loud for you, you just let

me know. I'll tell her to pipe down. I don't know if she'll do it, though." Vicky laughed. "The last time I did that, way back last Easter I think, when that mean old Mr. Gumpus was still here, Skylar just laughed and said, 'Vicky, you tell that old fuddy-duddy to go straight to hell'... Oh, excuse me, Reverend...I didn't mean to offend you."

Daniel laughed. "The only thing that offends me is when people start treating me as if I'm not human like everyone else."

"Well, now, that's a relief. No, more than that. It's a pure-dee jubilee."

"What's a jubilee, Vicky?"

"It's joy that just pops up out of nowhere, usually in the least likely of places."

"Sounds great. I'll have to look for some."

"Oh, it won't come if you go looking. You have to wait and let it come to you...'night, Daniel."

"Goodnight." She left, pulling the door closed behind her. "Oh, Vicky...would you mind leaving the door open?"

She gave him a knowing grin. "Sure thing, Rev."

His dinner tray forgotten, Daniel gave himself over to the heavenly music. With the cessation of conversation and the door wide open he began to make out snatches of lyrics. A smile spread across his face that got bigger and bigger.

Skylar Tate was singing about honky-tonks, wild wicked women and blues-struck men with empty whiskey glasses and empty beds.

Drifting toward the door like a moth to a flame, Daniel revised his opinion about the singer. He pictured a fallen angel. With a crooked halo...and spike-heeled shoes.

The door down the hall had opened and there she was. In stiletto heels. Red. A skirt so short it barely covered the