
Touch Not My Heart

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BUILDING WAS QUIET, except for the click of her heels on the polished marble floor as Gayle crossed the lobby. She looked up at the arched ceiling, at the wrought iron panels of the balcony on the mezzanine floor, at the iridescent glass of priceless light fixtures, and thought about the contrast between the century-old building and the high-tech industry it sheltered. She shook her head. Only Logan Electronics would have dared to design sleek new computers in the elegant surroundings of another age.

The young man at the information desk looked up from his newspaper with a grin. “Good morning, Miss Bradley. You’re early. It’s barely light outside.”

“I thought it was just dark because of the snowstorm coming in.” Gayle had scarcely noticed the still-dusky sky and the pale winter sun struggling to break through the morning haze. Her mind had already been at the office. A good executive secretary was a professional who didn’t let things like weather or personal problems interfere with her job. And Gayle Bradley prided herself on being a professional.

The young man raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t argue. “You shouldn’t worry so much about being on time,” he said, low-voiced, with a glance around the lobby to be sure no one could hear. “It will be hours before Mr. Logan comes down. On a morning like this, with Mrs. Weston to entertain him, it will probably be noon before he comes out of the love nest.”

Gayle stopped dead, her hand on the elevator door. “What did you call it?” she asked.

He winced, “Sorry, Miss Bradley. That just slipped out. But everybody knows about Mr. Logan’s penthouse and the—”

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Gayle cut across his words. “I don’t believe that you’re being paid to discuss Mr. Logan’s morals, Thomas.”

“Oh, come on, Miss Bradley,” he said, his tone a little defiant. “You’re not blind. You certainly know what goes on up there as well as anyone.”

“And I consider it to be none of my business. Mr. Logan is my employer, and what he does with the rest of his time is not my concern.”

Thomas was abashed. “Yes, Miss Bradley. But I can’t understand why you’re so blindly loyal to him.”

“Because he signs my paychecks, Thomas. You might think about that. I believe he still signs yours, too,” she added gently, and let the elevator door close behind her.

Her cheeks were flushed, she saw in the long mirror on the elevator door.

Embarrassment, for Jared Logan’s sake? *Hardly*, she thought. But was Thomas right, when he said she was suffering from blind loyalty? It was a good question. She hadn’t jumped to her employer’s defense out of respect for the man, that was certain. She didn’t even really like him, much less respect him. But when every employee in the entire building knew who was visiting him upstairs, it was time for someone to take a hand.

Obviously it would not be Jared Logan himself; he didn’t care how public his affairs were. If Thomas were to ask Mr. Logan about Natalie Weston and his love nest, the man would throw back his head and laugh— “And pat Thomas on the head for being a good boy,” Gayle said crossly. “Love nest—indeed!” It wouldn’t exactly be the name she would choose for that penthouse apartment atop the Logan Building—she could think of a few adjectives that were far more appropriate.

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She was still scowling when the elevator reached the eighteenth floor. She unlocked the door of the office suite and simply stood there for a long moment, her irritation at Jared Logan forgotten. The sweep of glass before her, with its ever-changing panorama of the city skyline and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains beyond, never failed to take her breath away. Today, the sky was low and sullen, with the promise of snow, and the foothills were hidden by the gray clouds. But the beauty that was Denver was always there, just outside her window. And on every new day, it was different.

Gayle hung her wool coat in the closet, made sure every dark brown strand of hair remained smoothly in the neat coil at the back of her neck, straightened her cuffs and the skirt of the black dress. She always wore black in the office—well tailored and good quality, severely plain and just a shade longer than the prevailing style. It was her uniform, part of being a professional who sought no attention for herself. A good secretary faded into the background and left the honors for her boss.

Her first action, as it was every morning, was a quick tour of the office suite, making certain that the cleaning staff had left everything in order. She straightened the blotter on the inch-thick plate glass table that Jared Logan used as a desk, started a fresh pot of coffee, turned on his personal computer, opened a new package of pencils and sharpened three to needle points. It was all done automatically, with the ease of two years of practice, while her mind was somewhere else.

Had it really been so long, she wondered, since she had come to work here? Two years of her life, spent in the executive suite at Logan Electronics, and she still didn't know her fellow employees any better than the day she had first walked into that coldly beautiful marble hall downstairs, on her way to the job interview.

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That's exactly how you want it, she reminded herself curtly. Gayle didn't intend to get involved with anyone or anything. She would take care of herself and let the rest of the world go by. It was a choice she had made years ago, for even friendship caused hurt, and she didn't intend to be hurt again.

"Enough of this nonsense," she told herself. "You're sounding like a wish-washy little girl—changing your mind about things that were decided long ago." She put it firmly out of her mind and sat down at her own desk to tackle the problems of the day.

The new advertising mock-ups had come up—the advance copies of an ad campaign that would begin within the next few weeks, when Logan Electronics' brand-new computer, the latest of a long line, would be released. Gayle pulled the glossy photos out of the portfolio and spread them out on her desk.

The ad manager had taken advantage of the very contrast which had been in Gayle's mind that morning, and so the new computer had been photographed down in the grand foyer, with the gleam of old marble reflecting around it.

It was a well-conceived, well-carried out plan. The photography was superb; the contrasts were sharp and eye-catching. And the model had been well-chosen, Gayle had to admit. Natalie Weston, in an ante-bellum ball gown with a frilly parasol, played the astonished belle who had stumbled across this unknown, sleek machine. She looked wonderful.

Gayle flipped through the photographs. Natalie was thoroughly professional when it came to modeling, but even she had been worn out by the ad manager's demands for perfection this time. One of the glossy color photos had caught her hamming for the camera, in a sultry movie-star pose with her hoopskirt caught up at an angle no southern belle would ever have been caught dead in.

Gayle looked at the photograph for a long time, wondering why on earth the ad manager had included it—it certainly would never appear in a magazine!—and

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whether she should take it out before the boss saw it. Would Jared Logan laugh, or would he scold the ad manager for wasting his time? It was so difficult to anticipate him, she thought, even after two years.

And if Natalie Weston was indeed the woman in the penthouse today—there was no way of knowing how Mr. Logan would react to that less-than-tasteful photo.

In the end, she left it in the portfolio. It wasn't her business to censor what Mr. Logan saw. But she made a mental note to talk to the ad man. If he was merely trying to add a little humor, Gayle thought he should be warned that he was treading on thin ice.

It was only an hour later when Jared Logan came in. So much for Thomas' ability to predict the boss, Gayle thought dryly. It was certainly no better than her own.

“Good morning, Miss Bradley,” he said briskly, without looking at her, and went on into his own office.

She followed him, notebook in hand, and sat down silently by his desk. He poured his coffee into a big mug, ran a hand over the surface of the new computer as if he found in it a sensual experience, and pulled the leather chair around to face her.

He was as elegantly tailored this morning as ever, she thought, and felt again just a little of the shock she had experienced when she first met Jared Logan. She'd been told only that he built computers, and she'd come to her job interview expecting a long-haired, bearded, wild-eyed kid who spoke computer jargon rather than English. Instead, she had found a man who wore silk shirts and hundred-dollar ties, who played as hard as he worked, who indulged himself in a small dark moustache but kept it neatly trimmed—

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She suddenly realized that she was staring at him, and dropped her eyes to the notebook in her lap.

“Will I pass inspection this morning, Miss Bradley?” he asked quietly.

Gayle looked up, feeling an irrational desire to puncture that self-satisfied air of his. “You could use a haircut,” she said.

Jared Logan’s hand went automatically to the dark brown hair at the back of his neck. The gold Liberty dollar in the heavy ring on his finger gleamed under the office lights. He looked startled.

Satisfied at her advantage, Gayle asked sweetly, “Shall I make an appointment for you?” A man might be all-powerful, she reflected. He might even be a god to his wife, if he had one, which Jared Logan didn’t. But he had no secrets from his secretary.

He watched her for a long moment, like a cat who was considering pouncing. Then he smiled, and his midnight-blue eyes sparkled. “Your point, Miss Bradley.”

Gayle said calmly, “I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Logan.”

“Shall we get down to business?” The humor had died out of his face. “The new ad campaign was supposed to be here this morning,” he grumbled.

Gayle reached across the desk and handed it to him. “I also have the Softek files out for you to review before you leave tonight,” she said.

“Good, I want to have everything at my fingertips when I go talk to Russell Glenn.” He opened the portfolio and glanced at the top photograph.

“If you’d like, I could arrange to be here in the office this weekend, in case you need more information,” Gayle offered.

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He looked up in surprise, “You’d give up a whole weekend, just on the off chance I might call?”

She didn’t like the way he’d said that, she thought. He made it sound as if she would be sitting by the phone like an anxious teenager, waiting for a new boyfriend to call. She shrugged. “It’s part of my job,” she said quietly. “And there are plenty of things that need doing around here.”

He turned back to the photographs. “It won’t be necessary, Miss Bradley. I don’t expect that we’ll come to an agreement this weekend, anyway. He says he wants to sell Softek, but it’s waited all these weeks. It can wait another three days.”

Gayle nodded. She’d been in on this negotiation for months, since Logan Electronics had made the first tentative approach to buying the computer programming company that would double the services it could offer to customers.

“What I can’t figure,” he mused, “is why Russ is holding out. That one division based here in Denver, when the rest of his holdings are in California, makes no sense at all. I can’t understand why he hasn’t jumped at the chance to sell it before it causes him trouble.”

Gayle didn’t comment. He hadn’t expected her to answer, she knew; he had only been thinking aloud. She glanced down at her notebook, at the list of messages. “Peters called this morning and asked if you wanted him to pack your things for the weekend.”

“I’ll call him.” He didn’t sound interested. He was flipping through the photographs as he listened, and now he stopped to look more closely at one.

“He also wanted to know if you’d be coming to Piño Reposo before you left, or if he should bring your luggage to Denver.” She kept her voice carefully neutral. “He said it had been quite a while since he’d seen you.”

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Jared looked up. “You needn’t pass on the message word for word, Miss Bradley. I’m quite aware of what my houseman thinks of me.” He pulled a single photograph out of the pile, set it face down on the corner of his desk, and pushed the rest back into the portfolio. “Tell Ron these are fine. He can use any of them. And ask him when I can see the television spots.”

“He said they’d be ready next week.”

“Good. We need to get started on the arrangements for the sneak preview party. It’s only three weeks away.” He was getting restless, she saw, his long fingers wandering over the glass surface of the desk, reaching for the computer as if he couldn’t wait another instant to play with it. “Oh, please send two dozen roses— yellow ones, this time—to Mrs. Weston. She’s staying at the Brown Palace.”

Gayle nodded and made a note. She didn’t trust herself to speak. He often said it with flowers—but usually he confined himself to a dozen. Natalie Weston must be something special.

He must have seen the frozen look on her face, because his hands stilled suddenly. “You and Peters agree, don’t you Miss Bradley?” he said. “Neither one of you thinks much of me.”

She kept her eyes on the lined page of the notebook. “It isn’t my business to think about you at all, Mr. Logan,” she said woodenly. “If that’s all this morning, I’ll go back to my work.”

He waved a hand towards the door, and silently, Gayle went out.

THE PROMISE OF SNOW had been fulfilled, and the bus labored through the streets at dusk that night. Gayle glanced at her watch and wondered if Jared was flying towards California to meet with Russell Glenn or if his plane was stranded

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on the ground at Stapleton International. As lucky as he is, she thought, he's probably well on his way towards sunshine and seacoast, while the rest of us are struggling with winter. *And wait and see*, she grumbled, *even if he spends all weekend arguing with Russell Glenn, he'll manage to come back on Monday afternoon with a tan that looks like a month in the Bahamas.*

She sighed and stood up as her bus came to its stop. Thank heaven her brother had been sensible enough to buy a house just a block from the stop. Otherwise, Gayle would have gone straight home to her apartment and called him to say that she couldn't possibly make it for her regular Friday night dinner with Darrel and Rachel and their little daughter.

It was with relief that she saw Darrel at the door as she came up the sidewalk. "I was watching for you," he greeted, pulling her into the warmth of the house. "I didn't realize the snow was so bad, or I'd have come after you."

"If the bus was having trouble, how could you have managed with that little car?" She gave him a hug. "It smells wonderful in here."

"It's ravioli night," Rachel announced from the kitchen door. "I've spent all week playing with the pasta machine you got me for Christmas."

"In that case, I know it was the right choice." Gayle let Darrel hang up her coat and followed Rachel back to the kitchen, rubbing her wind-reddened cheeks. In the middle of the kitchen floor, little Amy, who was three, was absorbed in a coloring book. She looked up, flung her crayon aside, and bounced across the room to Gayle, demanding to be picked up.

"Five place settings?" Gayle asked. "There are only four of us." She dropped a kiss on Amy's brunette curls and shifted the child to a more comfortable position.

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Rachel pulled a loaf of garlic bread out of the oven. Her cheeks were flushed. “One of Darrel’s friends is coming over,” she said with a careless shrug.

Gayle wasn’t fooled. “Rachel, we’ve been through this before. You know I’m just not interested in meeting anyone now.”

“Or ever, apparently. It’s been years, Gayle, and you don’t seem to care if you never meet another man.”

“There are none who come up to my standards.”

“Honey, believe me, there would be if your standards were a little more realistic. I know a hundred men who would love to date you.”

Gayle sat down, settling Amy on her lap. “So what does this one have that the other ninety-nine don’t?”

Rachel turned to her with a brilliant smile. “I knew you’d start being reasonable someday. For one thing, he has his own business. He’s thirty-five—”

“Married?”

“Of course not! Would I set you up with a married man?”

Gayle looked her over thoughtfully. “How long has he been divorced?”

Rachel sighed. “Just about a year. Gayle, you can’t expect to find this perfect man just sitting there waiting for you at the bus stop some morning, having appeared out of thin air. Any man you date is going to have a past.”

“Does he have any kids?”

“Three,” Rachel admitted reluctantly. “But his ex-wife has custody.”

“Rachel, really.”

“It’s no sin to have kids, for heaven’s sake. You like Amy well enough.” Rachel directed a pointed look at her daughter, snuggled on Gayle’s lap.

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“It’s different. I love taking care of Amy. I’m a wonderful aunt. But to be a stepmother... No, thanks.”

“Just what is it you want, Gayle?”

“To be left alone! I like my life just the way it is. I like my job and I’m making plenty of money to take care of myself—I don’t need a man!” Her words echoed vehemently.

Rachel’s eyes were sympathetic. “Aren’t you lonely sometimes?”

“So is everyone else—sometimes. Rachel, you knew Craig. After loving him and losing him, it would take a superman to make me forget him.”

“I’m not asking you to forget him, just to go on with your life. Damn it, Gayle, the man’s dead! It isn’t as if you were married to him—”

She broke off when she saw the set look on Gayle’s face, obviously knowing that she had gone too far. “Sorry,” she added cautiously. “I only want to see you happy, Gayle. But I don’t know anyone who wears a red cape and leaps tall buildings in a single bound. I’m doing the best I can.”

Gayle had to laugh. But her voice was firm as she said, “I’ll do my own looking, Rachel, when and if I’m ready. And if you ever greet me with an unexpected guest here again, I’ll walk out.”

Rachel nodded unhappily. “As long as you stay to meet Larry tonight, I promise I’ll never do this again.”

Gayle felt suspicion rising. “That promise certainly came easily,” she mused. “Are you so sure that this is the one and only man for me?”

Rachel didn’t answer.

Gayle finally said, “All right, I’ll stay. But only because it’s snowing, and the ravioli smells so good.”

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IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to regret the decision. Hell would be a picnic, Gayle thought irreverently midway through the evening, compared to spending a lifetime with Larry. He was nice enough, and he obviously liked her. But something in her shuddered away from his touch. It wasn't only a physical thing, she concluded, trying to puzzle out the odd way she felt. She didn't want him to touch her mind, either. She didn't want to share her thoughts, or talk about the things that were essential to her. Perhaps it was selfish of her, she thought, but Larry simply would not understand. Not as Craig had understood her every thought almost before it was uttered...

The pain that she had thought long-buried came back, wracking her with its very unexpectedness. She had learned, over the years, to cope with it, to expect it on his birthday, or the holidays—but she had not seen this one coming, and it almost devastated her.

Rachel saw its reflection on her face, and was frightened. “Gayle?” she breathed.

“I’ll be all right.” Gayle forced a smile. “I think the snow has let up, and I really must go home. It’s been a long week.”

“I’ll take you,” Larry volunteered, and Gayle could have kicked herself for not anticipating his offer.

“No, I’ll call a cab. It’s out of your way, and on a night like this—” But her protest was futile, and before she realized what was happening she was bundled into her coat and scarf and sitting in Larry’s car.

“Let the cabbie have a night off,” he said comfortably. “I’m used to driving in this stuff.”

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The snow had stopped. In the cloudless sky, a few of the brightest stars outshone the city lights below. Despite the hour, the plows were running, pushing the heavy snow aside to let traffic resume its normal flow.

As the car pulled up in front of Gayle's apartment, she sneaked a look at her wristwatch. Not late enough to plead exhaustion, she decided, and after all the man had driven across town on nasty streets to bring her home...

"Would you like to come up for coffee?" she asked.

His shy smile sent shivers up her spine. Perhaps she was being a little hard on Larry, she thought. It wasn't his fault that he wasn't Craig.

As she turned on the light in her apartment, she looked around it with suddenly new eyes. The comparison to the cheerful suburban clutter of Rachel's house struck her hard. Here everything was in place. Every book was straight on its shelf. Every print was square on the wall. Each cushion on the couch was fluffed and neat. There was not a toy, not a speck of dust—not a single human thing, she thought, and then shook the thought out of her head. How utterly silly that thought was! The entire apartment reflected her taste, her way of living. It had taken years to get it just the way she liked it.

"Nice place." Larry was looking at the Salvador Dali print above her fireplace, one of a numbered series, as if he'd like to scratch his head in puzzlement. And that print, Gayle thought, was one of the artist's more realistic works. What would Larry think if she'd had one of the surrealist ones on her wall?

She went on to the kitchen and started the coffee.

"What is this thing supposed to be?" he called.

"Do you mean the Dali?"

"It doesn't look like a doll to me."

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“Not a dolly. Dali—the artist.” Gayle gave up. She wasn’t about to start a course in art appreciation at this hour.

He came to the kitchen a few minutes later. “You really did mean coffee,” he said.

“Of course. What did you think I meant?” Gayle knew that she sounded a little cross, and she didn’t care.

“Sometimes a girl means other things,” he said obliquely.

Gayle set a mug on the countertop, hard. “Such as an invitation to stay the night? I’ve only known you five hours, Larry.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay by me. I’m easy to please.”

“Well, I’m not. So you can either stay for coffee or you can get out of here, but I want it clear that coffee is all you’re getting.”

He picked up a mug and held it cupped in his big hand, his eyes pleading. “Not even a cookie?” he asked finally.

“Not even that.” He looked so much like a wounded puppy that she would have liked to throw him a bone. But, like a puppy, a scrap would probably only encourage him to hang around and wait for another feeding, she thought.

They drank their coffee in almost total silence. Without Darrel and Rachel to ease the conversation, there was nothing to talk about. It was with relief that she saw him to the door, offered her hand to shake rather than her cheek to be kissed, and said goodbye. As soon as he was gone, she leaned against the door, knees weak, and closed her eyes in silent thankfulness that the evening was finally over.

A weekend of blessed solitude stretched before her. Two glorious days in which she needed to answer only to herself. She would go to the art museum, she decided. And perhaps that little gallery where she had bought the Dali print—her

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bank account would stand another purchase now. And she'd drink hot chocolate and walk in the snow—and by Monday she'd be ready to face the world again.