

THE MANSFIELD MEASURE

Glenna Holloway

Lonnie's hand kept creeping to her perfectly made-up face, her fingertips hypersensitive to the barely perceptible ridge under her left cheekbone. Every nerve in her body felt hyper-- as if even her smooth auburn hair would start squirming the minute Kirk Mansfield came down those marble stairs. Deliberately, she had left her compact at home and there was nothing in the half-light of the Old Masters restaurant to reflect her image.

Kirk was on time as usual, impeccably goodlooking in a new gray suit. He kissed her cheek then leaned back. "You look beautiful, Miss Falkland," he said as he always did. His smile was wide; his light gray eyes were softly convincing.

He moved closer to her in the booth. "I hope you're ready for some shameless gluttony. I missed lunch altogether. No nouvelle cuisine tonight."

"Wonderful," said Lonnie. "If one is going to pig out, one should do it in French."

He kissed her cheek again. While he ordered dinner, she wondered if he could feel the seam with his lips.

When the waiter left, she turned up the wick of the lantern on their table. "Does my face-- Is there any difference?"

"Not a bit. If I hadn't seen it happen I wouldn't believe there was ever a problem. Your unveiling is a total success and we're going to celebrate like New Year's. I've even got balloons in my pocket."

Her smile started slowly and kept spreading. For the first time she didn't notice the tightness in her skin.

The waiter returned with their wine and Kirk said, "Oh, there may be another gentleman named Mansfield arriving shortly. He doesn't see very well. Would you bring him to our table?"

Lonnie ran her nails down the stem of her goblet. "I didn't know John would be coming."

"Well, I didn't have a chance to call you. He came in late this afternoon and of course, he wanted to know

how you're doing--just kept asking. So I told him to join our little gala if he could make it. I was sure you wouldn't mind. He's one of your fans, you know."

She was dimly aware that she should be more resentful of Kirk's inviting John than she was of John's possible acceptance. There was no real doubt in her mind that Kirk's cousin would appear any minute to alter the evening she had been rehearsing for weeks. Somehow he was always around at the wrong time. She did want to chide Kirk a little for not making sure they were alone tonight. Some girls could phrase it in just the right sultry-toned innuendo and get desired results. She knew if she began, her voice would rise and accumulate a sharp little tilt.

"Hello, John," she heard herself saying, offering her hand. His eye patch was different tonight--designed as part of his glasses. He was in his early thirties, several years older than Kirk, same tall build. They could pass for brothers.

Slow dancing between the Chateaubriand and the "sorbet to cleanse the palate" Kirk ordered, Lonnie remembered the nights she thought she'd never dance with Kirk again or feel his hot skin on hers. It wasn't, she'd scolded herself, that she believed he would reject her if her face was ruined. It was a matter of

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no longer being able to offer him her best. She sighed.

Lord, a woman's pride is as fierce and primitive as the self-preservation instinct.

In Kirk's ear she said, "Doesn't John ever have a date?"

"Not for a long time. He got burned. I don't know what he saw in her. One of those broody types, not even pretty. It turned out she had run away from a husband and child in Colorado. Then she got religion and went back for the kid's sake. Guys like Jay are slow to mend."

Lonnie glimpsed John's one eye following them forlornly. She felt a wave of sympathy. There was nothing wrong with John, not a thing-- she would just appreciate him more if he would separate himself from Kirk like a cell dividing and go his own way.

She smiled at Kirk. "People are always saying how much alike you two are. I don't see it. Somehow I think you would mend overnight."

He laughed and whirled her in tight circles to the drummer's exclamation points at the end of the music.

The last course of dinner was given to talk of Kirk's new office which Lonnie hadn't seen. "It's the final word in corporate chic," said John. "Probably the most fashionable euphemism industrial waste management ever presented to the public."

"Turning something unattractive into something praiseworthy is the name of the game. If the front door doesn't look good, what can you expect from the working end?" Kirk shrugged. "Hey, Lon, wait'll you see the mock-up of the new landfill. It's going to be a Japanese garden with a big torii gate and two teahouses."

"Is that the area where private property owners and the county got into the big rhubarb?"

"Yeah, but it's all settled. Quietly and in our favor. While you were gluing back together, lots of gears were meshing."

She noticed a small frown pulling at John's brows. He muttered something under cover of the music.

"They bought the whole concept," Kirk continued. "Design and all. If we make the right moves, we may even get that parcel of forest preserve across the road."

"Oh, Kirk, not the forest preserve. Surely they'd never--" She recalled the huge oaks and maples in fall.

"Listen, there've been four major crimes in those woods in the last year. The locals say it's a druggies hangout. If those folks get loud enough, it'll be up for a bid. Course the company would hold it in blind trust for awhile until the community gets used to Heavenly Gardens and realizes it's not going to explode in a sulphurous cloud. By the way, Jay, you were going to look

into that other acreage I told you about."

"Aren't you forgetting I'm on vacation?"

"So? You've been fishing a few days, taken a lot of deep breaths. Throw in a little labor, son. You don't want to go stale." He winked at Lonnie. "Why don't you take Yergan and slip up there Monday and poke around?"

"Yeah, well--" John adjusted his glasses. "I wasn't going to mention this until I came back to the office--but-- I've decided to give the ole two weeks' notice. I'm leaving the company. Moving out west."

Kirk stared at him. "I hope I didn't hear that right."

"You did. I told you some time ago I was seriously thinking about it."

"But I-- Listen, you're not letting that disagreement on policy bug you, are you? Or Stelter's department?"

John was shaking his head. "I've had an offer in Montana that appeals to me and I've accepted. It's that simple."

"Whatever it is, we can top it. Besides, what the hell's the future for a whiz-bang PR man in Montana?"

"Hey, they've got parking lots and neon in the capital." He grinned a little. "So," he shifted to the edge of the booth, "I'm gonna run now. It was great having dinner with you two. Thanks, Lonnie, for letting me share your coming-out party. You look wonderful. But you were

gorgeous even all gauzed up. I always said there was more to you than a fancy facade. Make sure this guy appreciates you."

She gave him her hand when she grasped the finality of his words. With a sudden rush of shame that nettled her cheeks, she realized she hadn't once asked about his progress with his eye injuries. "John, what did the doctor say after your last treatment?"

"Oh, it may take another laser zap and some more exercises. No big deal."

Kirk was on his feet, reaching for his shoulder. "I'll see you, cousin. We've got to huddle on this."

Lonnie and Kirk drank their coffee in silence. She noted the sullen turn of his mouth. John's departure certainly hadn't enhanced things but she was no longer angry at him. "Do you still think his eye is going to be okay? --Kirk?"

"Unh?" He looked up. "Oh, sure it will."

"How much longer will he have to wear the patch?"

"I don't know. But women flip. I've been thinking of getting one myself."

Maybe there was a glimmer of hope for the rest of the evening. "Be serious," she said teasingly.

"All right. I'm serious. I want you to ask him to stay."

"What?"

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"You know-- just talk to him-- ask him to stay for my sake. He'd listen to you." He ran his finger down her nose and chin, traced her jaw and jiggled her earring.

Several times Lonnie tried to change the subject but he kept coming back to it like a bulldog.

"He seems to have made up his mind," she said.

"He's a fool. You could make him change his mind." His forehead glistened in the flickering light. He drained his wine glass and she noticed the magnum was empty too.

"Why would he listen to me any more than you? He's your cousin. He hardly knows me."

His hand circled the back of her neck and she felt the hair follicles come to attention. "Nobody needs to instruct you in how to be a woman." He leaned toward her, his lips brushing her ear. "Tell him you want him to stay."

She tried to slide away from him but the velvety seat was like flypaper. "Are you suggesting I flirt with John?"

"Of course not. Just be your winning self. You could persuade Satan to turn in his tail."

"Then let me persuade you to leave me out of this. He wants to go to Montana. Why can't you just give him your blessing?"

He sat up rigidly. "Because I need him, dammit! His mind works like an abacus. Anywhere I've got a blank spot,

he's got the matching piece. We fit perfectly. We're a team."

"Well, if I run into him I'll tell him you need him. But I'm not likely to see him."

Kirk took a card from his wallet. "Here's his phone number. Be a love and call him. As soon as possible-- maybe later tonight. For me, darling. For me." He turned and ordered more wine.

On Wednesday, Lonnie took a magnifying mirror from her desk and went to the lounge to apply another coat of powder base. The flaw felt more prominent today. It was reddish. Maybe she'd caused trouble by wearing cosmetics too soon. Her doctor had said wait a few more days but she'd had a professional make her up for the Saturday night date with Kirk. This was her afternoon off and she was meeting him at his new office. He wanted to show her around and he was itching to hear about her call to John. She had put Kirk off on the telephone, saying she'd tell him when she saw him. Her heels made hollow clicks on the tile floor. She moved closer to the mirror. It was one thing to look good by glowing lamps, another to make it in the cold north light of a sunless workday.

Kirk rose from his desk, beaming, every inch the vibrant young VP. "Welcome to my world, darling."

"Oh, Kirk, it's smashing! And so spacious!"

"Yeah, I think it gives the business an upbeat image." He led her to one of two fat leather sofas, and took her coat. "Now what about John? I haven't been able to reach him for days."

"I didn't reach him until last night. Please don't be too disappointed. He's very firm on going to Montana."

"What did you say to him?"

"Just that you needed him and would be miserable without him."

"What did he say?"

"He was flattered but he's sure you'll find a replacement. He said he'll miss you too but he'll see you every fall when he comes on vacations. Oh, and he's sending someone over for you to interview tomorrow." She watched Kirk's frown deepen. "John'll be back Monday to put in his last two weeks. Maybe you can work on him then."

Kirk folded his arms thoughtfully. He looked at his watch. Suddenly he snatched her coat and pulled her to her feet. "I bet I know where he is right now. Lunching with his golf cronies at the club. It's Wednesday. Even though he can't play, he's a creature of habit. C'mon."

"Kirk! If you think you're taking me there, forget it."

Scowling, he propelled her through a back corridor to the executive garage. Once in his car he turned and said, "I'm only going to say this once. If you really love me, you'll come with me and help me change John's mind!" His fist thumped heavily on the wheel, underscoring his last three words.

"Why are you making such a crisis of this? Nobody's indispensable. There are plenty of qualified men around." She felt her warmth rising, knew it was tracing the line on her cheek, knew the light from the window-well was slanting across her face.

"For the time being he is indispensable. If you want to marry me-- if you want me to keep that office in there and all that goes with it-- you'd better make sure I keep John."

She gripped her purse hard. "This is hardly the way I care to discuss marriage."

"You'll find me more romantic when Jay is back in my ball park."

"Oh, for-- You sound as if you can't access your computer without John to show you how!"

He gave her a sidelong glance. "John went to MIT for three years--majored in chemical engineering before he switched to business. He still loves research and he putzed around in the lab whenever he got a chance. He

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came up with a cheap, fast, safe way to break down certain plastics into a biodegradable substance."

"And that's valuable, I take it. Okay," she nodded, "so you don't want him to take his formula with him. Why not buy it and take out company patents?"

He stared at the windshield. "I keep forgetting you're a legal secretary. The fact is, I made him an offer. Twice. He wanted to play with the idea some more and refused to sell it. Three months ago I was so excited about it--I, ah, indicated to the brass that we were developing the process. And I made some proposals for utilizing it that they seemed to like." He smoothed his tie. "I'm sure my promotion was partly based on that."

"Well, it may be that anything he developed on company time belongs to them anyway. I'll check it out."

"But it wasn't part of his job and he worked on it after hours. If I just knew what his catalyst was I think I could--" He pulled her nearer. "I want my wife to have the best this rotten world has to offer. And I'm not ashamed to admit I need help getting to the top." He turned her chin toward him. Slowly he closed the space between them and kissed her insistently.

His admission that he needed help touched a responsive note in her. His kiss thrummed away on chords that drowned out everything else.

"All right," she said softly. "Let's go."

"Good girl." He kissed her nose. "Hey, you might want to put some make-up on your scar."

They spotted John at a table with his father. Kirk firmly guided her toward them. "Well, y'never know who's running loose these days," he said cheerily. "Lonnies thinking of taking up golf. Thought I'd show her the course after lunch. Lon, you've never met my Uncle Ray."

Yet another Mansfield, she thought. And here she was again, about to share another meal with John, the last person in the world she wanted to dine with. Her palms became annoyingly damp. As soon as their orders were placed, she excused herself to wash her hands. When she returned, Kirk was gone.

"Kirk felt a migraine coming on, Lonnies. He went back to the office for some new medicine he's got. Says if he takes it in time he may be able to head it off."

"Oh, gee, he should have let me drive him. Those things can be awful."

"Yes, I offered," said Ray, "but he wouldn't hear of it. He insisted you start on your lunch. Said he'd be back fast."

How awkward, she thought. First we crash them, then-- She put the next thought out of her mind before it rooted.

A few minutes later, the matre d' appeared with a message for Raymond Mansfield. "You're wanted at your office, sir.

Your secretary said it was urgent."

After Ray's departure, Lonnie cleared her throat self-consciously. "Well. So maybe I shouldn't have had all that garlic for breakfast. Will you be taking the next flight out?"

John gave her a little lopsided smile. "No. Looks like you're stuck with me."

They were silent as the waiter served the salads. Suddenly John asked him, "Is it too late to change our order? Since we've already created chaos, I was just thinking--" He fixed his eye on Lonnie. "They make great Peking duck here but Dad didn't want to wait that long. Since Kirk will be awhile anyway, would you have it with me? They won't prepare it for just one."

Lonnie and the waiter agreed. John seemed pleased.

"It'll be a long trip from Montana for Peking duck. How does your father feel about your leaving?"

"He's all for it. In fact, my job contact came through him. He's decided to take early retirement. Mother died several years ago, so he plans to join me out there. I worked on a ranch every summer when I was in high school. He used to come after me in the fall to drive me home-- to save my money, he said. The truth was, that country really turned him on."

Strike three. It was useless to try to change his mind.

She nodded. The whole thing was--

"Who knows? You and Kirk may come west one of these days. You'd love Montana."

"Yes, I probably would. All that empty blue sky is very appealing. But you know Kirk would never be happy anywhere except in the middle of the hurley-burley of the east. I'm-- I'm worried about him, John. He's really upset over losing you. I've never seen him so tense. And his headaches have been more frequent. I wish you could postpone going for a little while. He's not the self-sufficient automaton everybody thinks he is. Right now he's like a little boy whose best friend and partner is leaving him. He really needs you, John."

"You love him a lot, don't you?" It was more of a statement.

She nodded, her eyes scalding with sudden wetness that took her by surprise.

He put his hand over hers then quickly took it away. "Don't worry. I'll work something out--do whatever's best. But Lonnie-- I know I shouldn't say this, but-- just don't let him bleed you. He has a way of tapping into people. You're a strong girl--exactly what he needs. Just don't let him manipulate you."

She opened her mouth then shut it tightly. Did he suspect, as she did for a moment, that this togetherness was

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a complete setup? Did John suppose she was in on it? Nothing she said was untrue. Nevertheless, she felt like a crowbar. His good eye was looking inside her at a burning red spot, not on her cheek.

His expression relaxed. "Now forget that rascal," he said. "You're about to be transported to the far east by the magic of culinary expertise."

The duck was superb. John drew her into a conversation about George Gershwin's music. She was amazed to find herself enjoying the meal, even laughing. It was almost an hour before she looked again at her watch.

The matre d' reappeared at John's elbow as they finished. "I'm sorry to tell you, the other Mr. Mansfield is too ill to return. He's sent a car for the lady." He presented the keys on a tray.

"Oh, I could have taken a cab." She gave him a bewildered look. "Is there a driver waiting or--"

"No, ma'am. He was followed by someone. They've already left."

"I guess Kirk has a real banger. John, it just dawned on me-- you must have come with your dad. I'll take you home. No point in your calling a cab now."

"Thanks, but we're going opposite directions. I've got to stop at the eye clinic."

"Well, these are Kirk's keys. My car is parked and

locked at his office. The clinic is right on the way over there, isn't it? Besides, as one of the wounded, I can offer support. After I switch cars we'll be headed in the same direction again if you're going home. I remember we dropped you off one night. Aren't you near the college?"

As she drove, John took out a small scratch pad and pen and began to write rapidly. When she parked at the clinic, he tore off two sheets. "Put these in your purse and give them to Kirk as soon as possible," he said. "Say it's a wedding present. He'll understand the scribbles."

Without looking at the symbols and figures, Lonnie knew it was the chemical process Kirk was so desperate for. She was certainly a howling success on her mission for her man. He would be overjoyed.

She went in with John. She was turning pages in a waiting room magazine when the inner office door opened. The doctor emerged with his patient, both grinning.

John was wearing two clear lenses in his glasses. "Good news! Things are in better shape than we thought. I'll be driving soon."

The doctor walked with him toward Lonnie's big smile. "And what better way to exercise those eyes than this?" he gestured her way. "Is this the girl you saved, John?"

"Aw, c'mon, Doc. She got clobbered." Hastily he introduced her.

"You're very, very lucky, Miss Falkland. The couple who brought John in that night said if he hadn't jumped in front of you, you'd have taken the whole thing full face."

Lonnie stared. Her arms and legs seemed to be melting. "I-- I didn't know that, Dr. Crandall. I'm glad you told me," she said weakly. "I-- didn't know." She reached for John's arm.

In the car she said, "Oh, John, I owe you a great debt! You must have wondered why I never even thanked you! Why didn't Kirk tell me!" She shook her head. "Maybe he thought I knew. But all I can remember is the sound of breaking glass and the wind and-- then I woke up in the hospital. You--"

"Look, Lonnie, I didn't do anything heroic. I just happened to be there when that tree limb blew in the window."

She closed her eyes and concentrated on that night. When she came out of surgery, Kirk, who was unscathed, told her that the branch and the glass had also cut John's eyes and hands, and their hostess's shoulder. It was days before she learned how serious John's injuries were. After that, Kirk said he was doing fine. "I remember someone saying the storm was getting rough and we decided to leave. Kirk and I got up from the sofa-- I was facing the window-- he was on my left saying something to the Bakers-- and-- John, you were standing off to my right-- way over by the

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piano! You must have--"

"I don't know who was where, it happened so fast. It was just a reflex action. I saw it coming-- I think I tried to catch it. I'm just sorry--" He looked down, "I hate that you got hurt. Anyway, it's all over, thank God."

Her mind was on instant replay. How often she'd struggled to be civil to him-- even when he visited her once with Kirk while she was recuperating-- he more bandaged but far less blind than she-- the one who was so impatient for him to leave so she could be alone with his cousin. For the first time, she noticed his eyes were deep blue. She'd thought they were gray like Kirk's. How close he came to losing one of them. There was a scar over his newly exposed lid, another at the edge like an extra long laugh crease. It must have been painful. And she saw something else, something every woman recognizes when she finally sees it. Clearly, Kirk knew it. It was why he was throwing her at John. It was one of the reasons John was leaving. She held her breath to keep from crying. If even one tear escaped, there would be a torrent. It was merely a postponement-- like the kisses that right now he'd mistake for gratitude.

Trembling, she put the key in the ignition. "John, I'm going to drive very slowly while you do your eye exercises and tell me all about-- everything you know-- about Montana."