



# Touch the Wind

By Janet Dailey

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All her life, beautiful Sheila got what she wanted. Now she yearned for the raw passion of a man beyond her reach, a violent, mysterious outlaw whose followers adored him. A lion of a man who held her for ransom -- a man who would trade her for a fortune in gold. But Sheila wanted only him -- with all the reckless longing of her body and soul.

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## Editorial Review

### From the Back Cover

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### About the Author

**Janet Dailey** is the author of scores of popular and uniquely American novels, including such bestsellers as *Scrooge Wore Spurs*, *A Capital Holiday*, *The Glory Game*, *The Pride of Hannah Wade*, and the phenomenal Calder saga, including the newest title in the series, *Shifting Calder Wind*. Her romantic fiction has also been featured in a story anthology, *The Only Thing Better Than Chocolate*. Since her first novel was published in 1975, Janet Dailey has become the bestselling female author in America, with more than 300,000,000 copies of her books in print. Her books have been published in seventeen languages and are sold in ninety countries. Janet Dailey's careful research and her intimate knowledge of America have made her one of the best-loved authors in the country and around the world.

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## Chapter 1

A trio of gold bracelets jingled as Sheila Rogers closed the door of her blue Thunderbird. She turned toward the hotel where Brad worked, sleek, tawny hair swinging freely near her shoulders.

There wasn't a whisper of a breeze. Beyond the towering hotel structure, the waters of the dammed Colorado River were mirror-smooth. On its downward path, a Texas sun was leaving a long, yellow trail across the surface. The February afternoon air was cool against Sheila's cheek.

Her amber gaze flicked to her wristwatch as she started toward the hotel entrance. It was nearly five o'clock. She had cut it close again. Her shoulders lifted in a typical I-don't-care shrug that revealed she was accustomed to having people wait for her. It wasn't a conscious gesture.

Sheila didn't admit to being spoiled, although she would concede that, as an only child, she had been indulged by a pair of loving parents.

But not by Brad. She couldn't wrap him around her finger as she had the other men she dated. Perhaps that was one of many reasons why she was so fascinated by him. Now Brad would be angry with her for being late, but Sheila was confident she could make him forget his displeasure.

At the thought, a faint smile curved her sensuous lips, glossed a dusty-rose shade. Combined with the promising sparkle of her gold-flecked eyes, the movement gave a look of secretive pleasure to her expression, tantalizingly mysterious to a casual onlooker.

Sheila had nearly reached the entrance door when she saw Brad standing to the side of the building with another male member of the hotel staff. The brown light of his eyes was roughly accusing as he met her gaze. He had to have seen her walking from the parking lot to the entrance, yet he hadn't called out to her. He would have let her waste precious minutes looking for him inside to punish Sheila for her tardiness.

Poised near the door, Sheila gazed at him, her breath caught in her throat. Blonde hair fell with masculine carelessness across his tanned forehead. Blatant virility was stamped in the handsome lines of his face, a suggestion of arrogance in the set of his jaw. Tall, well muscled, his sun-god looks would have set any girl's heart beating faster. The hotel uniform of a camel-tan blazer over a white pullover with dark slacks accented his male physique.

Each time Sheila saw him, her reaction was the same. First there was a vague sense of surprise that she could have forgotten how stunningly handsome he was, followed by a sense of guilt that she had kept him waiting, however unintentionally.

True, her steps were unhurried, graceful, almost leisurely strides carrying her forward. Her lips parted into a smile, beguiling and faintly apologetic. The bracelets jingled again as Sheila tucked golden-toast hair behind her ear.

"I'm sorry I'm late, honey." Her voice was low and warm, designed to soothe his irritation.

Brad Townsend didn't return the smile. He nodded briefly to his co-worker and took Sheila's hand in a finger-crushing grip. She breathed in sharply at the pain as he pulled her after him to the side of the building.

"Brad, you're hurting my hand," Sheila protested when they stopped, uncertain if he was aware of his own strength.

He released her numbed fingers immediately, his hands grasping her shoulders as he pulled her roughly against him.

"I don't like being kept waiting," Brad growled beneath his breath, its warmth moving hotly over her lips a split second before his mouth smothered them.

The kiss was a combination of bruising punishment and mastery. Sheila struggled against his attempted domination even as she thrilled to his possession. His arms encircled her to crush the minor rebellion, the heat radiating from his embrace. Conquered, Sheila tipped back her head to let his hard mouth explore the sensitive cord of her neck and the hollow of her throat.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her eyes closed as a fiery weakness spread through her limbs. "I didn't mean to be late."

"That's what you always say," he muttered, nipping an ear lobe.

Her fingers slid inside the unbuttoned blazer to curve her arms around him, feeling the burning warmth of his body and the flexing muscles in his shoulders and back. His roving hands were moving over her waist and hips to mold her closer to him.

The musky scent clinging to his smoothly shaven jaw was intoxicating. Sheila breathed it in deeply as she exclaimed, "I was asked to stay for a few minutes after my last class, and the time just slipped away from me."

He lifted his head. "Which professor was it this time? Not that it matters. You are every professor's pet,"

Brad said with a slight curl to his lips.

"It was Benton." Sheila ignored the faint jeer. "He had some suggestions to make on the outline I had submitted for this semester's theme."

"And you kept me waiting while you talked to that dried-up old prune," he accused.

"I said I was sorry."

"Maybe I should find out how truly repentant you are." Brad said it lightly, the dark light of desire in his brown eyes.

With a breathless laugh, she withdrew her arms from around him, letting her hands rest on his chest to wedge a slight space between them. She felt the strong beat of his heart beneath her fingers.

"But you have to be on duty in just a few minutes," Sheila pointed out, partially aware that she hadn't exactly told him "no."

"Yes," Brad agreed, lowering his head to let his mouth brush the sensual curve of her lips, "and making love to you isn't something I would want to hurry."

An inner heat warmed her cheeks. Not from shyness. It came more from the age-old temptation and fear to explore the unknown.

"Don't say things like that," she murmured.

"I could always be late for work," he added suggestively, and her pulse leaped in that odd combination of fear and excitement.

"No." But Sheila wasn't certain what she was denying.

His mouth continued to teasingly trace her lips until they quivered with longing for his kiss. Deliberately, Brad ignored their message. Unable to bear the tormenting nearness of his mouth without receiving his kiss, Sheila curled her fingers into his sun-gold hair and forced his head down.

The initiative was taken from her as he claimed her willing lips. The kiss hardened with fiery passion until Sheila felt engulfed by the flames. Her lips were forced apart by the rough demand of his tongue. His sensuous exploration of her mouth fanned the flames into a raging inferno that seemed to isolate them from the world, but it wasn't so.

"Come on, Brad!" A voice called out, low and impatient. "It's a couple minutes after five now."

Cold reality washed over Sheila like ice water as Brad abruptly ended the kiss, lifting his head. Shaken that someone had witnessed her abandoned behavior, Sheila willingly accepted the support of Brad's arms, letting him shield her from any knowing looks.

"I'll be there in a few minutes. Tell the boss I'm here but that I'm helping somebody start their car."

"I'll cover for you," the voice assured Brad in an unmistakably suggestive tone. "Call me if you need help."

"I won't need any help," Brad said with an arrogant laugh.

The footsteps faded behind them. A vague sensation of revulsion twisted Sheila out of Brad's arms. Yet the weakness from the overwhelming passion he had ignited moved her only a foot away. Her back was turned to him as he stepped after her, his hands settling familiarly on her waist.

The warmth of his breath stirred her hair. Sheila stiffened in spite of the unsatisfied ache in the pit of her stomach. The light touch of his hands seemed to burn through the material of her clothes to her skin.

"Embarrassed?" he mocked softly. "Tom only saw us kissing. That's all."

"It's not that." Sheila moved her head to the side to deny his assumption.

Brad immediately took advantage of the gesture to bury his mouth in the silken tangle of her hair along the outer curve of her neck. Her senses leaped in answer to the caress as his hands spread across her stomach, drawing her back against his muscular chest.

"I don't think you realize what you do to me," Sheila whispered.

"What I do to you?" Brad laughed shortly and paused to push the hair away from her ear. "You are nothing but a tease, Sheila Rogers," he accused roughly, his arms tightening around her waist until she could no longer ignore the burning imprint of his male need pressing against her flesh. "You promise with your kisses, but when it's time to come across, you back down. I should drag you into one of the hotel rooms and take you now." His hand cupped the swell of her breast.

"No."

"I won't do it." Brad turned her around to face him, his expression hard and slightly frightening. "But there have been several times in the last few weeks when you would have let me seduce you with only a token protest, so don't deny it."

An angry flush filled her cheeks. His arrogant confidence that he could take her whenever it suited him irritated Sheila, because she was all too aware that it was probably true.

"Then why haven't you seduced me?" she challenged.

"Because, my spoiled little brat," mocked Brad, "I'm not going to dance on your string the way your other boyfriends have. When we make love, it's going to be at your invitation and not because I've overcome your resistance. When we go to bed together, it's going to be because you asked for it, literally. I don't care if it's before we are married or after, but you will invite me."

"Of all the --" Sheila sputtered at his arrogant presumption that, in time, she would beg him.

Brad laughed and covered her defiant lips with his mouth. Sheila resisted for a few minutes before his kiss worked its magic and she was clinging to him again, momentarily forsaking her pride.

Finally he lifted his head, a complacent gleam in his brown eyes as he gazed at the bemused expression on her upturned face. He flashed her one of his devastating smiles.

"Tell me you love me," Brad ordered, locking his arms around her waist.

"I love you," she responded dutifully.

"And you will promise to love, honor, and obey me," he recited.

Her mouth opened to respond to his command, but the beaming light faded from her eyes as she remembered the discussion with her parents.

"I will," Sheila managed to answer after several seconds.

Brad had noticed her hesitation and the slight change in her expression. He drew his head back to study her, his gaze narrowing.

"I talked to Mom and Dad about us."

"And?" His mouth tightened into a grim line.

"They thought we were being a bit premature about wanting to get married," Sheila stated.

He released her abruptly and stepped away, his volatile temper surfacing. "I'm not good enough for you. That's what they said, wasn't it?" he demanded savagely and didn't wait for a response. "What's the matter? Am I too poor for their darling daughter? I suppose they hold it against me because it's taken me seven years to get through four years of college. Is it my fault I wasn't born with rich parents like yours and have had to keep taking time off to work and earn the money to go back?"

"Brad, please." Sheila tried to stop his bitter tirade. "It is nothing like that. They just think it's unwise for us to get married right now. You won't receive your degree until this spring and --"

-- and they are afraid that if we get married now, they will have to support us...or, more specifically -- me! I suppose they think I'm marrying you for your money. You know what they can do with their money, don't you?"

"It isn't the money exactly." Sheila was painfully aware that talk of money struck a raw nerve with Brad.

"They think we should wait a year before getting married so you can finish your degree and get a job without the responsibility of a wife. A year isn't so long, not when we love each other."

His dark gaze pinned her. "Tell me honestly, Sheila, do your parents approve of me as your future husband?"

Unwillingly, she hesitated. Her father had made his disapproval of Brad obvious. Only the influence of her mother had obtained the concession to a year's wait. Sheila knew her father had agreed in the hope that she and Brad would part before the year was up.

"That answers my question, doesn't it?" he declared grimly.

"They don't exactly disapprove of you, either," Sheila rushed. "They just don't know you as well as I do. Besides, they still think of me as their little girl. It's hard for them to see me as a wife to some man who is practically a total stranger to them."

"Do you want to wait a year?"

"Of course I don't," she said.

"You don't look very upset about the idea." His hands were on his hips, pushing the jacket open.

Sheila lifted her hand in exasperation, bracelets jingling. "What do you want me to do? Beat my chest and wail?"

"I suppose they accused me of being a fortune hunter." His voice was thick with sarcasm.

"My parents accused you of nothing." Sheila controlled her rising temper with effort. "I admit my father doesn't exactly trust you, but my mother is willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. It isn't an endorsement, and neither is it a condemnation."

"Am I supposed to be grateful for that?" jeered Brad.

"You are supposed to understand their side of it!" she said.

It was obvious by his expression that Brad didn't agree. "What would you have done if they had told you not to marry me?" he demanded, his gaze narrowing.

"But they didn't!" Sheila protested.

"But if they had," he persisted.

Gritting her teeth, she answered, *"If they had, I would have married you, anyway."*

"I'll bet you would!" A bitter sound, only faintly resembling laughter, came from his throat. "I knew it would only be a matter of time before you'd admit that you're having second thoughts about marrying me."

"If I'm having second thoughts, it isn't because of anything my parents said to me." She pivoted to walk away. This was a side of Brad she despised.

He caught her arm and spun her back around, tightening his grip when Sheila strained to break free. His fingers were nearly digging into the bone as he forced her to face him.

"Don't you ever walk away from me again!" Brad ordered.

Sheila met the rage blazing in his expression without flinching. "Let go of my arm and you'll see me walk away again."

"I'm not letting you go." A strange light glazed his eyes. "You're mine, and I'm not letting you go."

A shaft of cold fear plunged into her stomach. "You're hurting me, Brad." She tried not to let the panic creep into her voice. "Let go of my arm."

"It's the money, isn't it?" He relaxed his hold slightly, the glazed look leaving his brown eyes. "You've decided that after having everything you've ever wanted all your life, you don't want to live on a budget, scrimping and saving for every little luxury. That's why you don't want to marry me, isn't it? Because I can't keep you in the style you are accustomed to."

"Money is all you ever think about, isn't it?" Sheila accused. "I am not going to spend the rest of my life apologizing for the fact that my parents are wealthy. I didn't choose it to be that way. I had no control over it whatsoever."

"You've never had to go without it." He breathed tightly. "I've never had it. I've had to fight and claw and sometimes even steal to get what I wanted. Nobody has ever given me anything. They're always trying to take what little I have. Now they're trying to take you."

Sheila frowned. "No one is trying to take me from you."



"Aren't they?" Brad mocked bitterly. "Now that your parents know we want to get married, they're going to try to poison you against me. They'll pay people to tell you lies about me until you believe them. Wait and see."

"That's not true. My parents aren't like that."

"I suppose they are as pure and lily white as you are." Scorn was etched in the line of his mouth, contemptuous and vaguely savage.

"They certainly aren't the monsters you are painting them to be," Sheila snapped.

"You are either blind or incredibly naïve. I --"

The sentence wasn't finished as an impatient male voice called, "Brad!"

Brad didn't attempt to disguise his annoyance at the interruption. "What do you want, Tom?" he glared at the intruder, the same co-worker as before.

"I can't cover for you all night," he said. "You'd better get in there before you are fired."

"I'll be right there," Brad agreed with an irritated sigh.

"You'd better be," came the parting shot.

Sheila was glad for the interruption. She couldn't bear Brad's sarcastic comments and his unjustified accusations against her parents. She felt sick at heart and wanted only to get away and sort things out for herself.

"Go on in, Brad," she murmured dispiritedly. "It's time I left, anyway."

"Don't go, Sheila." He held her fast and placed a hand on her other shoulder to turn her back to him.

She continued to avoid his gaze. "There isn't any point in staying. There is nothing left to say."

"Sheila." He seemed to search desperately for a reason, then laughed shortly. "I think we've just had our first real quarrel."

"I certainly didn't start it." She could find none of the twisted humor that Brad had in the discovery.

"It's miserable, isn't it?" he said. Releasing her arm, he started to stroke her cheek in a soothing caress, but Sheila drew away from his touch, unable to make the same sudden transition from anger to affection. "I never meant for us to quarrel like this," Brad murmured apologetically. "I just lost my head, that's all."

"That was enough," she answered tightly.

"Sheila, look at me." When she didn't obey, he caught her chin and forced her to comply. His handsome, golden features pleaded for her forgiveness. "How can I make you understand the way I feel?"

"You have," Sheila assured him. "You've made it clear that you don't believe I really love you and you think my parents are conspiring against you."

"No, that's not it at all. Don't you see?" Brad gazed earnestly into her wary eyes. "You are the only thing in

my life that means anything to me, Sheila. I'm afraid of losing you. I --"

A frown of concern creased his forehead, disappearing beneath a lock of blond hair. His sincerity reached out to invisibly touch Sheila.

"Brad," she whispered, responding to his plea.

Amusement born of self-derision glittered briefly in his velvet-brown eyes. "You don't understand, do you? You think I'm wrong to feel that way."

"No one can take me away from you." A half-smile curved her lips.

"I've asked you to be my wife, Sheila," he began.

"And I have accepted," she reminded him.

"Yes." Brad nodded. "But I don't have anything to offer you except my love. I'm asking you to give up everything for nothing."

His thumb was caressing her collarbone in rhythmic circles. Sheila felt the magic of his touch begin to take effect.

"It isn't such a bad exchange, darling." She smiled.

"Love can't put a roof over our heads or food in our mouths," he reminded her. "It takes money, which I haven't got."

"Ssh!" Sheila pressed silencing fingers against his lips. "I don't want to hear that word again."

Brad kissed her fingertips, then held them lightly in his hands. "I don't want to say it again, but money is one of the unchangeable facts of life. It can't be avoided simply because it's unpleasant."

"I don't care." Sheila slipped her fingers from his hand and softly brushed the hair from his forehead. "Tell me you love me, Brad."

"I love you." He kissed her long and hard to reinforce his words. "A year," Brad groaned when he lifted his head. "I can't wait a year."

Sheila rubbed her forehead against his jaw in a feline gesture and sighed. "I know." Reluctantly, she strained against his embrace. "And you can't stay out here any longer or you will lose your job."

He withdrew his arms from around her, briefly kissing her once. "If it's not busy at the desk, I'll call you tonight."

"I'll be home," Sheila promised.

"And you'd better be there alone." Brad growled the mock threat.

"I'll think about it." She laughed and moved away without kissing him again. It would only have prolonged a moment that had already stretched too far.

As Sheila slid behind the wheel of her Thunderbird and started the motor, Brad was still standing where she

had left him. He raised his hand in a good-bye when she reversed out of the stall. Sheila waved back, feeling very contented.

Driving onto the street, she was surprised to discover she was humming the tune of a sad love song. The melancholy lyrics were about a love that had gone wrong. Sheila gripped the steering wheel in irritation, blaming the song for reminding her of the argument instead of its satisfactory conclusion.

Money. What a stupid thing to argue about, she thought. Sheila wondered if poor people were naturally prouder, or if Brad was simply obsessed by it. For a few minutes during the quarrel, she had thought he was paranoid and had felt a twinge of uncertainty.

The car windows were rolled down and Sheila shook her head, letting the wind play over her face. Everything was going to be all right. She was positive of it. Brad was a rough diamond in need of some polishing to fit into her world. That was all. Once she accomplished that, they would make such a stunning couple. With her money and her parents' connections, the sky would be the only limit to their future. Bright, shining, and cloudless.

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## **Users Review**

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