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Call It Love

CHAPTER ONE

The slender figure of a young woman moved gracefully along the edge of the water, hands pushed deeply into the front pockets of her jeans, bare toes abstractedly scuffing the surface of the sand. The ever-present breeze from the Gulf of Mexico playfully ruffled her short honey-blond hair while the hot Texas sun blazed down in typical July fashion. Close by several low-flying gulls swooped and gave their strident cry; but the woman ignored them, just as she ignored the voice that called from a distance.

"JoAnna! Wait! Please!"

JoAnna kept walking, her delicate features set in stiff lines.

"You've got to listen to me, JoAnna! You don't understand!"

She still didn't pause; the only sign of her having heard was the further tightening of her soft lips.

Soon heavy footfalls thudded on the damp sand behind her and hard fingers reached out to bite into the tender flesh of her upper arm, turning her about abruptly.

JoAnna tensed, a deep burning anger glowing in the depths of her brilliant green eyes as she lifted them to face the man who had stopped her. "Just what am I not supposed to understand, Philip?" she demanded. "How you used me?" With one disgusted jerk her arm was free.

She started to turn away but the man took a step forward, blocking her movement. His breath was still short from his run and his usually perfectly styled dark hair was in disorder.

"It's not like you think, JoAnna! Not at all! You've got to let me explain! I'm getting a divorce. As soon as it's humanly possible, I'm getting a divorce!"

Almond-shaped eyes rejected the classical good looks of the man standing so close to her. Melissa had been right all along, she thought grimly. Her friend had tried to warn her about trusting a man like Philip Cole. But at the time her infatuation had been so great that she had not wanted to listen. Philip had come into her well-ordered life and turned it upside down. For months she had wandered around in a daze – until this morning, that was.

"Now that is an interesting bit of news," she jeered. "And since *I* know, why don't you try telling your wife! Oh, but remember to do it carefully. It may come as quite a shock . . . her being pregnant and all."

"She told you *that*?" Philip looked like a man who had been hit, hard, in the stomach.

"Along with a few other things," JoAnna confirmed coldly. In a gesture of mingled contempt and dismissal, she turned her back and started to walk away.

Philip lunged forward, once again impeding her progress. "I won't let you do this, JoAnna!"

"You don't have a choice, Philip! All along you lied to me. You told me you were already divorced – that you had been for the past year. And I believed you!"

"I lied because I knew you wouldn't have anything to do with me if I didn't! Alice and I were as good as

divorced. There was nothing left of our marriage. We were like two strangers!"

"Two *strangers* don't have babies, Philip! Or are you trying to tell me that the child isn't yours?"

Philip's dark eyes could not leave the smoldering anger of her own. Finally he choked out, "No, it's mine--but Alice tricked me! She knew I was seeing someone else and she's spiteful enough not to want to let me be happy."

Several seconds passed before JoAnna questioned softly, "What happened? Did she rape you?"

The man winced visibly under her taunting. Then a look of desperation settled on his chiseled features and his hands shot out to pull her tightly against his body.

"I don't want to lose you, JoAnna. I can't lose you! I love you!"

Instinctively JoAnna tried to push away. "You don't know what love *is*, Philip."

"I know that I don't want to live without you!"

A harsh laugh escaped JoAnna's lips. "Oh, I think you'll manage to survive. From what Alice told me, you've had yourself quite a time since you married her – one affair after another." She caught her breath sharply. "Do you have any idea of how I felt with her sitting there, telling me so sweetly and with such understanding that I was only one in a *line*?" Tears of remembered humiliation flooded JoAnna's eyes and she lowered her chin quickly, not wanting Philip to see.

But Philip did see and was quick to take advantage of her seeming weakness. He put his mouth close to her ear and whispered urgently, "But you're different, JoAnna. Okay, yes," he rushed on when he felt her stiffen. "I admit it. There have been others. But with you it *is* different! I love you and I want you – you almost drive me insane with wanting you!" He buried his mouth against her neck, his lips moving along the sensitive skin as he breathed achingly. "I want you now."

JoAnna tried again to free herself, the degree of revulsion she was experiencing from his attempt at lovemaking shaking her. How could she have ever thought she loved this man? She must have been temporarily insane! But her struggles did no good. Uncaring of the hurt he inflicted, Philip used his superior strength to counteract her every move. When finally he raised his head, his dark eyes were glistening with arrogant confidence, as if sure his brand of persuasion would prove effective in the end.

JoAnna stared up at him, seeing him clearly for the first time. He was an extremely handsome man: His hair so dark and smoothly textured it looked like black mink, his thin patrician features almost too perfect, he had a charm so practiced and easy that he was hard to resist. Yes, he had everything – all the attributes a woman could want in a man. All except truth, fidelity, honor. . . . Suddenly her stomach lurched and she had to swallow hard before she could speak.

"What you don't seem to understand, Philip, is that *I* don't want *you*."

An ugly expression settled over Philip's features as he saw the depth of her determination. "That's not what you said last night," he reminded her roughly.

JoAnna firmed her chin. "Last night was last night. Things change."

"Not that much they don't! Last night you wanted me, you wanted me so badly you almost let me take you right here on the beach. And for a woman like you, that has to *mean* something." There was a nasty edge to his voice.

"No!" JoAnna denied, not wanting to be reminded.

"I can make you feel that way again, JoAnna." He pretended not to hear her. "Let me make you feel that way again." His arms tightened with purpose as he lowered his head.

JoAnna began to struggle in earnest, twisting, turning, making it hard for him to contain her, deflecting the touch

of his lips. But her continued resistance only served to infuriate Philip, and he shook her with some force.

"I'll get a divorce, I tell you! I'll even marry you if I have to!"

JoAnna couldn't help the peal of laughter that escaped her. It was a high, mocking sound that grated even on her ears. "My, you are getting desperate," she taunted.

Philip swore viciously. "I'll make you love me!"

Repugnance burned in JoAnna's expressive eyes as she spat, "Go to hell, Philip!"

A tremor shuddered through the man's long form and his mouth tightened into a thin line. "You little bitch," he rasped softly. "You tormenting, desirable little bitch." Roughly he jerked her forward, his lips fastening onto hers, grinding her tender skin against her teeth until she tasted the salty tang of blood,

Philip's breathing was ragged when finally he lifted his head, and his dark eyes glittered with aroused desire. "I've wanted you for too long to let you go now. I've held back more with you than I have any woman, waiting for you to make up your mind. But I'm not waiting any longer. I'm at least going to get something out of the months I've wasted!"

He plucked her from the sand and began to walk away, carrying her. JoAnna fought him with all her strength, but as before, it did no good.

"Put me down, Philip!" she cried, for the first time experiencing fear. Philip paid her no mind, making his way up the beach and only stopping when close to the sheltering sanddunes with their tall needlelike grass. "Put me down – now!" she commanded, but her voice broke on the last word.

Philip's laugh was disdainful. "All right, my sweet, I will!" He lowered her onto the soft sand and stretched out beside her, all in one fluid motion.

JoAnna attempted to roll away as soon as she felt the first grains of sand beneath her but Philip stopped her

escape with the weight of his body. Frantically she turned her face away from his hot, moist kisses, rejecting what only yesterday she had found desirable. She uttered a cry of both outrage and fear as the material of her old cotton shirt was torn open, leaving the creamy, rounded swells of her breasts exposed to his view.

"You're *so* beautiful," he whispered, bending to hungrily devour the rosy-tipped peaks. JoAnna fought with increasing fervor, the intimate touch of his lips abhorrent to her.

Then he sat astride her, the strong muscles of his legs holding her straining body as effectively as his one hand held her arms above her head. A primitive whimper of terror passed JoAnna's lips as he reached down to pull at the snap to her jeans.

"No, Philip! *No!*" she cried, desperately working against the bruising pressure of the hand that held her wrists. If she could only pull at his hair or rake his face with her fingernails. He was like a crazed demon! She had never suspected he could be so ruthless. And she had never known herself capable of the hatred she now felt for him. Love was akin to hate, she had once heard. Now she knew it to be true. She wanted to bite, to scratch, to hurt. If she had a gun, she would use it. . . .

"Hold still, damn you!"

Philip was finding it difficult to loosen her jeans with only one hand free and her unyielding body inhibiting his every try. But his persistence was finally rewarded and the snap gave. The zipper followed immediately.

"I hate you – I hate you!" JoAnna cried over and over.

Just as Philip began to tug the jeans lower, a low voice came from close beside them, making his hand freeze.

"I believe the lady has made her feelings known, don't you . . . friend?"

A dull red surged up Philip's neck as he raised his head and stared blankly at the man standing so still not two feet away.

JoAnna turned wide eyes to the stranger. Her first impression was of his size. From her prone position, he fairly towered over them. Next she became aware of hard, bronzed muscles – a broad expanse of muscular chest roughened by a sprinkling of dark, curling hair and narrowing down to a flat, hard stomach. His taut, lean hips were encased in faded cut-off jeans and showed a long length of well-muscled legs above bare feet. To her dazed mind he looked exactly like some kind of avenging god who had been sent to earth with the express mission of rescuing her. If he had raised his hand and lightning had struck from a clear sky, she would have been unsurprised. But strangely, it was his quiet, almost deceptive air of calm that magnified the impression of tremendous power – a power that was momentarily being held in check. JoAnna swallowed convulsively.

The stranger's leashed violence must not have filtered through to Philip's consciousness because he began to sputter. "Look here, this is none of your business –"

The hard voice interrupted cuttingly. "You *made* it my business, friend, when you decided to use my front yard for your fun and games." He gave a slight motion of his dark head toward the derelict beach house positioned directly behind them. It was a companion to JoAnna's own, but she had not known that it was occupied. For years it had sat unattended, wind and weather taking their toll.

Finally the precarious position he was in must have found its way through the fog in Philip's brain, because he released JoAnna and began to scuttle away, so resembling a sand crab that if she had not experienced such upset in the last few minutes, she would have laughed aloud. As it was she bit down on her abused bottom lip and tried to cover herself with the remnants of her torn blouse.

After a moment, the man's pale eyes came to rest on her, their smoky mixture of gray and blue a startling contrast to his tanned skin. "You want me to hold him for

the police?" he asked, watching her steadily yet knowing exactly where Philip was, ready to spring toward him if need be.

JoAnna stared up at him, at the ruggedness of his features – at the high cheekbones, straight masculine nose, and thinly drawn mouth that were too compelling, too strong to be termed merely handsome. She tore her eyes away to look at Philip, who was now sitting hunched over, his complexion a sickly shade of greenish gray. "No. Just so long as he leaves," she whispered. She didn't want to see Philip again – ever.

The man transferred his gaze to Philip. "You heard what the lady said. Get going."

Philip's head jerked up, hectic color standing out in two vivid spots on his cheeks. His dark eyes flashed with both shame and defiance but in the end his self-serving character won out. "She's no lady!" he spat out. "Far from it! Ask her how she's led me on, how she gets me to where I can't think any more and then changes her mind!" He turned his handsome face toward JoAnna, and it was so contorted with malevolence that she flinched. "Deep down you're a cold-hearted, selfish little bitch! And no man – no real man – is ever going to put up with you." He actually began to shake his finger at her, laying all the blame squarely on her shoulders, conveniently forgetting his own duplicity. "There's a name for women like you –"

The stranger took several quick steps until he was standing above Philip, who had swung about to watch his approach with all the fascination of a rabbit watching a snake. One large bronzed hand shot out to grip Philip's collar, pulling him up, almost bringing him to his knees.

"I think that's about enough out of you," the man breathed menacingly before thrusting the shaking Philip away. "Go on--clear out – before I change my mind and beat the hell out of you."

Without another look at JoAnna, Philip stumbled to his feet and hurried back to the car he had left parked in her driveway.

The stranger watched him go, his lips a thin line and his jaw tight. When he glanced back around, he found JoAnna sitting up, one hand keeping the edges of her shirt together, the other wiping away a tear that spilled down over her cheek. She was trembling now, reaction setting in.

"Do you think you can walk?" The deep voice startled her.

"I—yes, I think so."

"Come on then." The stranger extended a hand to help her up.

It was several moments before JoAnna allowed herself to accept it. Men had never frightened her before—growing up with three older brothers had seen to that. But today her confidence had received a decided jolt.

Getting to her feet proved to be no problem, especially with the aid of the man's strong arm; staying there was. Her knees felt like so much Jell-O and were shaking so badly that they refused to support her weight. She swayed and was instantly scooped up to be held against a muscular chest that was as solid as rock. Only the warmth of his skin and the steady rise and fall of his breathing gave evidence that it was flesh.

Instinctively JoAnna stiffened. The man paused to look down at her, a smile momentarily softening the harshness of his features.

"Relax," he murmured. "I've never found it necessary to use force on a woman, and I certainly don't plan to start now."

JoAnna stared at him, at the pale eyes and dark mane of brown hair that waved slightly in the breeze. What he said could in no way be construed as a boast. Even shaken as she was, she could see that. With those hard, rugged features, lean, powerful body, and that air of danger combined with a disturbing brand of masculine

sensuality – women probably made fools of themselves with boring regularity trying to gain the smallest measure of his attention.

JoAnna promptly dismissed the idea. She had had enough of men and their desires for one day. What she wanted now was to go home and lick her wounds in private. Her day had started early for a Saturday, with Alice Cole dragging her out of a sound sleep at seven thirty and talking almost nonstop for the next half hour. Then her showdown with Philip. Her stomach dropped at the vision of what most certainly would have occurred if the stranger had not appeared.

He covered the distance to her beach house in no time, then the long flight of exterior stairs that led to the front verandah, her slight weight seeming to mean nothing to him. The door was ajar so they moved unimpeded into the shaded coolness of the small living room. There the man hesitated, the sudden change from the outside brightness momentarily blinding him. Then he moved across the room to lower her onto the sofa.

"I think what you need is a drink. Got anything that would do?"

JoAnna motioned toward the kitchen cabinets that could be seen through the open breakfast bar. "I think there's something in there, but I don't –"

He moved away without waiting for her to finish. In the kitchen he made himself totally at home, going through her cabinets searching for what he wanted. When he returned, he held out a glass that contained an extra measure of a rich amber liquid.

"Here, drink this."

JoAnna did as she was told, the full strength of the liquor making her cough but the warmth of it coursing through her numbed limbs and making her feel stronger. As she finished the last sip, she felt his pale eyes searching her face.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked finally.

JoAnna raised her eyes to meet the unfathomable expression in his.

"N-no – not really." Forcibly, she stilled the trembling that once again set in at the reminder of what had almost happened. It would take more than a double neat whiskey to make her completely insensitive. Her green eyes darkened and she played with the glass that was still in her hand, unconsciously twisting it around and around. "I never thanked you for helping me." Her voice was low and husky.

The man shrugged the powerful muscles of his shoulders. "At first I wasn't sure that you needed help." At her puzzled look he explained, "Some women like to put up a fight just to heighten the enjoyment of the moment."

As the meaning of his words became clear, a deep flush rose up into JoAnna's cheeks. At twenty-five and in this day and age, she should be accustomed to blunt speech in sexual matters. But somehow, coming from this man, it only flustered her.

"Yes . . . well . . ." she stumbled; then, on seeing his slow smile, she looked away, her fingers automatically tightening on the remaining fabric that was attempting to cover her breasts. Her embarrassment increased as she suddenly became aware of her state of near undress and she rose quickly to her feet. But to her dismay, as she did, her loosened jeans started to slide down over her hips. With a startled gasp she made a grab for them; but by saving herself from one disaster, she created another. The remnants of her shirt fell apart and it was several seconds before she could jerk the material back together – enough time to afford the man standing across from her a rich display of her nakedness.

Her cheeks were a fiery red as she mumbled stiffly, "I need to change." She was stating the obvious but could think of nothing else to say.

"Can you make it on your own?"

JoAnna nodded shortly. Right now her only wish was that he would go away! She appreciated the help he had given her, but they could further their acquaintance another time – if what he had said about living next door was true.

The man did not seem to share in her opinion because at that moment he was lowering his large frame into a chair and sitting back comfortably.

"I'll wait here," he decided.

"You don't have to," JoAnna replied a trifle desperately.

"No problem. I haven't anything else to do at the moment."

JoAnna sent him a harried look before scurrying from the room.

When she returned after throwing what was left of her shirt into a wicker trash basket and donning a fresh blouse, the man was still resting comfortably in the chair. His gaze flickered over her, watching her graceful movements as she crossed in front of him to resume her previous position on the sofa.

"You have a nice place here," he commented, his gaze moving around the room only to stop momentarily on the large collection of shells and driftwood that was spread out on a work table in front of the double windows facing the Gulf.

"Thank you." JoAnna's color was still not back to normal. The man continued to unnerve her.

The silence between them lengthened. Finally JoAnna, who had been fiddling with the fringe of a throw pillow, broke it by asking, "I take it you really are my new neighbor?"

"You take it right."

"Did you just move in?" Her laugh was a bit strained. "I mean, I haven't seen you around before."

"I moved in yesterday – if you could call it moving in. Just myself and a suitcase."

"Oh."

Silence settled between them again. But this time JoAnna was completely devoid of ideas to further their conversation. How much longer was he planning to stay? Surely he could see that she wanted to be by herself!

"Was he your boyfriend?"

JoAnna jumped at the sudden question. She shot a startled look at the man's bronzed face. He was watching her steadily.

"I—I thought he was."

"Under the circumstances, I don't think it would be a good idea for you to see him again."

JoAnna shuddered slightly at the understatement. "I won't," she assured him.

"He may not agree with that."

"He'll have to!"

The man's pale eyes narrowed and he spoke slowly, carefully. "From what I saw last night, he might have cause to think you're playing with him — and that maybe you didn't like it that I interfered today." JoAnna gasped but he went on as if unaware of the shock his words had dealt. "Do you always prefer to do your lovemaking on the beach?"

JoAnna sat in stunned amazement, the blood draining from her face. She couldn't believe what she had just heard. She looked at him as if he were a viper who had been biding his time to strike. Who had been waiting — *waiting*--for the proper moment. She jumped to her feet and ordered, "Get out!" He was a stranger; he didn't know her. What right did he have to question her?

Amusement played about the man's sensual mouth as he leisurely uncoiled his long length from the chair. "I'm not condemning, mind you. Making love in the out-of-doors can be very . . . stimulating. I'm just asking if you ever do it conventionally — in a bed."

JoAnna stamped her foot in outraged dignity. "I said get out!"

"I'm going." The maddening smile disappeared at last and he started to move away.

But as he did, something made JoAnna demand: "Why did you stop him? If you thought that about us, why did you do it?"

The man halted halfway to the door and the gaze he directed toward her was level. "Let's just say it was because I wasn't sure."

"Well, thank you for that at least!" JoAnna snapped.

The man dipped his dark head in acknowledgment.

JoAnna was tired of men – all men – and when he continued to stand there and look at her, she raised her chin a degree and reminded him coolly, "I've asked you to leave."

"I will. In a minute. But first there's something I want you to know. If you mean to go on the way you have been, keep away from the front of my house. I'm not a prude – far from it – but I don't appreciate looking out my window and seeing you lying on the sand with one of your boyfriends in various stages of the sex act!"

More shocked than she had ever been before in her life, JoAnna retorted through clenched teeth, "The beaches in Texas are free. They're public domain. You can't stop me from doing what I like, where I like." She didn't care what he thought of her now. He was the most hateful human being she had ever met!

"I can for the purposes you're using them. Ever hear of public indecency?"

JoAnna almost exploded. Never – ever--had anyone talked to her in this way. And never--ever – had she experienced a day like today. First Alice Cole, then Philip, and now this man who claimed to be her neighbor! And it wasn't even noon yet!

With barely contained fury in every step, JoAnna stalked past him to open the door. Once there she glared at him.

The man smiled slightly, a half smile that was filled with derision as his gaze made a leisurely tour of her rigidly held body. "For new neighbors, I'd say we've gotten off to a pretty bad start," he commented dryly.

Holding his gaze defiantly, JoAnna refused to make a reply.

"And since we're the *only* neighbors for miles around, we have to be either good friends or bad enemies."

JoAnna's emerald eyes flashed a heated message, letting him know in no uncertain terms her answer to his implied question.

The man shrugged and moved on, remarking as if to himself, "Oh, well, can't win 'em all, I guess."

As soon as he was barely clear of the door, JoAnna slammed it shut with all the force she could muster, hoping that he would suffer the aftershock of her displeasure. Somehow, in some way, she felt as if she had to strike back at a day that had been so hurtful and at the man who had been the last emissary of that hurt.

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