

# *Less Of A Stranger*



*Nora Roberts*

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For my friend, Joanne

## Chapter One

He watched her coming. Though she wore jeans and a jacket, with a concealing helmet over her head, Katch recognized her femininity. She rode a small Honda motorcycle. He drew on his thin cigar and appreciated the competent way she swung into the market's parking lot.

Settling the bike, she dismounted. She was tall, Katch noted, perhaps five feet eight, and slender. He leaned back on the soda machine and continued to watch her out of idle curiosity. Then she removed the helmet. Instantly, his curiosity was intensified. She was a stunner.

Her hair was loose and straight, swinging nearly to her shoulders, with a fringe of bangs sweeping over her forehead. It was a deep, rich brunette that showed glints of red and gold from the sun. Her face was narrow, the features sharp and distinct. He'd known models who'd starved themselves to get the angles and shadows that were in this woman's face. Her mouth, however, was full and generous.

Katch recognized the subtleties of cosmetics and knew that none had been used to add interest to the woman's features. She didn't need them. Her eyes were large, and even with the distance of the parking lot between them, he caught the depth of dark brown. They reminded him of a colt's eyes—deep and wide and aware. Her movements were unaffected. They had an unrefined grace that was as coltish as her eyes. She was young, he decided, barely twenty. He drew on the cigar again. She was definitely a stunner.

“Hey, Megan!”

Megan turned at the call, brushing the bangs from her eyes as she moved. Seeing the Bailey twins pull to the curb in their Jeep, she smiled.

“Hi.” Clipping the helmet onto a strap on her bike, Megan walked to the Jeep. She was very fond of the Bailey twins.

Like herself, they were twenty-three and had golden, beach-town complexions, but they were petite, blue-eyed and pertly blonde. The long, baby-fine hair they shared had been tossed into confusion by the wind. Both pairs of blue eyes drifted past Megan to focus on the man who leaned against the soda machine. In reflex, both women straightened and tucked strands of hair behind their ears. Tacitly, they agreed their right profile was the most comely.

“We haven't seen you in a while.” Teri Bailey kept one eye cocked on Katch as she spoke to Megan.

“I've been trying to get some things finished before the season starts.” Megan's voice was low, with the

gentle flow of coastal South Carolina. “How’ve you been?”

“Terrific!” Jeri answered, shifting in the driver’s seat. “We’ve got the afternoon off. Why don’t you come shopping with us?” She, too, kept Katch in her peripheral vision.

“I’d like to”—Megan was already shaking her head—“but I’ve got to pick up a few things there.”

“Like the guy over there with terrific gray eyes?” Jeri demanded.

“What?” Megan laughed.

“And shoulders,” Teri remarked.

“He hasn’t taken those eyes off her, has he, Teri?” Jeri remarked. “And we spent twelve-fifty for this blouse.” She fingered the thin strap of the pink camisole top which matched her twin’s.

“What,” Megan asked, totally bewildered, “are you talking about?”

“Behind you,” Teri said with a faint inclination of her fair head. “The hunk by the soda machine. Absolutely gorgeous.” But as Megan began to turn her head, Teri continued in a desperate whisper, “Don’t turn around, for goodness sake!”

“How can I see if I don’t look?” Megan pointed out reasonably as she turned.

His hair was blond, not pale like the twins’, but dusky and sun-streaked. It was thick and curled loosely and carelessly around his face. He was lean, and the jeans he wore were well faded from wear. His stance was negligent, completely relaxed as he leaned back against the machine and drank from a can. But his face wasn’t lazy, Megan thought as he met her stare without a blink. It was sharply aware. He needed a shave, certainly, but his bone structure was superb. There was the faintest of clefts in his chin, and his mouth was long and thin.

Normally, Megan would have found the face fascinating—strongly sculpted, even handsome in a rough-and-ready fashion. But the eyes were insolent. They were gray, as the twins had stated, dark and smoky. And, Megan decided with a frown, rude. She’d seen his type before—drifters, loners, looking for the sun and some fleeting female companionship. Under her bangs, her eyebrows drew together. He was openly staring at her. As the can touched his lips, he sent Megan a slow wink.

Hearing one of the twins giggle, Megan whipped her head back around.

“He’s adorable,” Jeri decided.

“Don’t be an idiot.” Megan swung her hair back with a toss of her head. “He’s typical.”

The twins exchanged a look as Jeri started the Jeep’s engine. “Too choosy,” she stated. They gave Megan mirror smiles as they pulled away from the curb. “Bye!”

Megan wrinkled her nose at them, but waved before she turned away. Purposefully ignoring the man who loitered beside the concessions, Megan walked into the market.

She acknowledged the salute from the clerk behind the counter. Megan had grown up in Myrtle Beach. She knew all the small merchants in the five-mile radius around her grandfather’s amusement park.

After choosing a basket, she began to push it down the first aisle. Just a few things, she decided, plucking a quart of milk from a shelf. She had only the saddlebags on the bike for transporting. If the truck hadn't been acting up ... She let her thoughts drift away from that particular problem. Nothing could be done about it at the moment.

Megan paused in the cookie section. She'd missed lunch and the bags and boxes looked tempting. Maybe the oatmeal ...

"These are better."

Megan started as a hand reached in front of her to choose a bag of cookies promising a double dose of chocolate chips. Twisting her head, she looked up into the insolent gray eyes.

"Want the cookies?" He grinned much as he had outside.

"No," she said, giving a meaningful glance at his hand on her basket. Shrugging, he took his hand away but, to Megan's irritation, he strolled along beside her.

"What's on the list, Meg?" he asked companionably as he tore open the bag of cookies.

"I can handle it alone, thanks." She started down the next aisle, grabbing a can of tuna. He walked, Megan noted, like a gunslinger—long, lanky strides with just a hint of swagger.

"You've got a nice bike." He bit into a cookie as he strolled along beside her. "Live around here?"

Megan chose a box of tea bags. She gave it a critical glance before tossing it into the basket. "It lives with me," she told him as she moved on.

"Cute," he decided and offered her a cookie. Megan ignored him and moved down the next aisle. When she reached for a loaf of bread, however, he laid a hand on top of hers. "Whole wheat's better for you." His palm was hard and firm on the back of her hand. Megan met his eyes indignantly and tried to pull away.

"Listen, I have ..."

"No rings," he commented, lacing his fingers through hers and lifting her hand for a closer study. "No entanglements. How about dinner?"

"No way." She shook her hand but found it firmly locked in his.

"Don't be unfriendly, Meg. You have fantastic eyes." He smiled into them, looking at her as though they were the only two people on earth. Someone reached around her, with an annoyed mutter, to get a loaf of rye.

"Will you go away?" she demanded in an undertone. It amazed her that his smile was having an effect on her even though she knew what was behind it. "I'll make a scene if you don't."

"That's all right," he said genially, "I don't mind scenes."

He wouldn't, she thought, eyeing him. He'd thrive on them. "Look," she began angrily, "I don't know

who you are, but ...”

“David Katcherton,” he volunteered with another easy smile. “Katch. What time should I pick you up?”

“You’re not going to pick me up,” she said distinctly. “Not now, not later.” Megan cast a quick look around. The market was all but empty. She couldn’t cause a decent scene if she’d wanted to. “Let go of my hand,” she ordered firmly.

“The Chamber of Commerce claims Myrtle Beach is a friendly town, Meg.” Katch released her hand. “You’re going to give them a bad name.”

“And stop calling me Meg,” she said furiously. “I don’t know you.”

She stomped off, wheeling the basket in front of her.

“You will.” He made the claim quietly, but she heard him.

Their eyes met again, hers dark with temper, his assured. Turning away, she quickened her pace to the check-out counter.

“You wouldn’t believe what happened at the market.” Megan set the bag on the kitchen table with a thump.

Her grandfather sat at the table, on one of the four matching maple chairs, earnestly tying a fly. He grunted in acknowledgment but didn’t glance up. Wires and feathers and weights were neatly piled in front of him.

“This man,” she began, pulling the bread from the top bag. “This incredibly rude man tried to pick me up. Right in the cookie section.” Megan frowned as she stored tea bags in a canister. “He wanted me to go to dinner with him.”

“Hmm.” Her grandfather meticulously attached a yellow feather to the fly. “Have a nice time.”

“Pop!” Megan shook her head in frustration, but a smile tugged at her mouth.

Timothy Miller was a small, spare man in his mid-sixties. His round, lined face was tanned, surrounded by a shock of white hair and a full beard. The beard was soft as a cloud and carefully tended. His blue eyes, unfaded by the years, were settled deeply into the folds and lines of his face. They missed little. Megan could see he was focused on his lures. That he had heard her at all was a tribute to his affection for his granddaughter.

Moving over, she dropped a kiss on the crown of his head. “Going fishing tomorrow?”

“Yessiree, bright and early.” Pop counted out his assortment of lures and mentally reviewed his strategy. Fishing was a serious business. “The truck should be fixed this evening. I’ll be back before supper.”

Megan nodded, giving him a second kiss. He needed his fishing days. The amusement parks opened for business on weekends in the spring and fall. In the three summer months they worked seven days a week. The summer kept the town alive; it drew tourists, and tourists meant business. For one-fourth of

the year, the town swelled from a population of thirteen or fourteen thousand to three hundred thousand. The bulk of those three hundred thousand people had come to the small coastal town to have fun.

To provide it, and make his living, her grandfather worked hard. He always had, Megan mused. It would have been a trial if he hadn't loved the park so much. It had been part of her life for as long as she could remember.

Megan had been barely five when she had lost her parents. Over the years, Pop had been mother, father and friend to her. And Joyland was home to her as much as the beachside cottage they lived in. Years before, they had turned to each other in grief. Now, their love was bedrock firm. With the exclusion of her grandfather, Megan was careful with her emotions, for once involved, they were intense. When she loved, she loved totally.

"Trout would be nice," she murmured, as she gave him a last, quick hug. "We'll have to settle for tuna casserole tonight."

"Thought you were going out."

"Pop!" Megan leaned back against the stove and pushed her hair from her face with both hands. "Do you think I'd spend the evening with a man who tried to pick me up with a bag of chocolate chip cookies?" With a jerk of her wrist, she flicked on the burner under the teakettle.

"Depends on the man." She saw the twinkle in his eye as he glanced up at her. Megan knew she finally had his full attention. "What'd he look like?"

"A beach bum," she retorted, although she knew the answer wasn't precisely true. "With a bit of cowboy thrown in." She smiled then in response to Pop's grin. "Actually, he had a great face. Lean and strong, very attractive in an unscrupulous sort of way. He'd do well in bronze."

"Sounds interesting. Where'd you meet him again?"

"In the cookie section."

"And you're going to fix tuna casserole instead of having dinner out?" Pop gave a heavy sigh and shook his head. "I don't know what's the matter with this girl," he addressed a favored lure.

"He was cocky," Megan claimed and folded her arms. "And *heleered* at me. Aren't grandfathers supposed to tote shotguns around for the purpose of discouraging leers?"

"Want to borrow one and go hunting for him?"

The shrill whistling of the kettle drowned out her response. Pop watched Megan as she rose to fix the tea.

She was a good girl, he mused. A bit too serious about things at times, but a good girl. And a beauty, too. It didn't surprise him that a stranger had tried to make a date with her. He was more surprised that it hadn't happened more often. But Megan could discourage a man without opening her mouth, he recalled. All she had to do was aim one of her "I beg your pardon" looks and most of them backed off. That seemed to be the way she wanted it.

Between the amusement park and her art, she never seemed to have time for much socializing. Or didn't

make time, Pop amended thoughtfully. Still, he wasn't certain that he didn't detect more than just annoyance in her attitude toward the man in the market. Unless he missed his guess, she had been amused and perhaps a touch attracted. Because he knew his granddaughter well, he decided to let the subject ride for the time being.

"The weather's supposed to hold all weekend," he commented as he carefully placed his lures in his fishing box. "There should be a good crowd in the park. Are you going to work in the arcade?"

"Of course." Megan set two cups of tea on the table and sat again. "Have those seats been adjusted on the ferris wheel?"

"Saw to it myself this morning." Pop blew his tea to cool it, then sipped.

He was relaxed, Megan saw. Pop was a simple man. She'd always admired his unassuming manner, his quiet humor, his lack of pretensions. He loved to watch people enjoy. More, she added with a sigh, than he liked to charge them for doing so. Joyland never made more than a modest profit. He was, Megan concluded, a much better grandfather than businessman.

To a large extent, it was she who handled the profit-and-loss aspect of the park. Though the responsibility took time away from her art, she knew it was the park that supported them. And, more important, it was the park that Pop loved.

At the moment, the books were teetering a bit too steeply into the red for comfort. Neither of them spoke of it at any length with the other. They mentioned improvements during the busy season, talked vaguely about promoting business during the Easter break and over Memorial Day weekend.

Megan sipped at her tea and half listened to Pop's rambling about hiring summer help. She would see to it when the time came. Pop was a whiz in dealing with cranky machines and sunburned tourists, but he tended to overpay and underwork his employees. Megan was more practical. She had to be.

I'll have to work full-time myself this summer, she reflected. She thought fleetingly of the half-completed sculpture in her studio over the garage. It'll just have to wait for December, she told herself and tried not to sigh. There's no other way until things are on a more even keel again. Maybe next year ... it was always next year. There were things to do, always things to do. With a small shrug, she turned back to Pop's monologue.

"So, I figure we'll get some of the usual college kids and drifters to run the rides."

"I don't imagine that'll be a problem," Megan murmured. Pop's mention of drifters had led her thoughts back to David Katcherton.

Katch, she mused, letting his face form in her mind again. Ordinarily, she'd have cast his type as a drifter, but there had been something more than that. Megan prided herself on her observations, her characterizations of people. It annoyed her that she wasn't able to make a conclusive profile on this man. It annoyed her further that she was again thinking of a silly encounter with a rude stranger.

"Want some more tea?" Pop was already making his way to the stove when Megan shook herself back.

"Ah ... yeah, sure." She scolded herself for dwelling on the insignificant when there were things to do. "I guess I'd better start dinner. You'll want an early night if you're going fishing in the morning."

“That’s my girl.” Pop turned the flame back on under the kettle as he glanced out the window. He cast a quick look at his unsuspecting granddaughter. “I hope you’ve got enough for three,” he said casually. “It looks like your beach-cowboy found his way to the ranch.”

“What?” Megan’s brows drew together as she stood up.

“A perfect description, as usual, Megan,” Pop complimented her as he watched the man approach, loose-limbed with a touch of a swashbuckler, a strong, good-looking face. Pop liked his looks. He turned with a grin as Megan walked to the window to stare out. Pop suppressed a chuckle at her expression.

“It’s him,” she whispered, hardly believing her eyes as she watched Katch approach her kitchen door.

“I thought it might be,” Pop said mildly.

“Of all the nerve,” she muttered darkly. “Of all the *incredible* nerve!”

## Chapter Two

Before her grandfather could comment, Megan took the few strides necessary to bring her to the kitchen door. She swung it open just as Katch stepped up on the stoop. There was a flicker, only a flicker, of surprise in the gray eyes.

“You have a nerve,” she said coolly.

“So I’ve been told,” he agreed easily. “You’re prettier than you were an hour ago.” He ran a finger down her cheek. “There’s a bit of rose under the honey now. Very becoming.” He traced the line of her chin before dropping his hand. “Do you live here?”

“You know very well I do,” she retorted. “You followed me.”

Katch grinned. “Sorry to disappoint you, Meg. Finding you here’s just a bonus. I’m looking for Timothy Miller. Friend of yours?”

“He’s my grandfather.” She moved, almost imperceptibly, positioning herself between Katch and the doorway. “What do you want with him?”

Katch recognized the protective move, but before he could comment, Pop spoke from behind her.

“Why don’t you let the man in, Megan? He can tell me himself.”

“I’m basically human, Meg,” Katch said quietly. The tone of his voice had her looking at him more closely.

She glanced briefly over her shoulder, then turned back to Katch. The look she gave him was a warning. Don’t do anything to upset him.

She noticed something in his eyes she hadn’t expected—gentleness. It was more disconcerting than his earlier arrogance. Megan backed into the kitchen, holding open the door in silent invitation.

Katch smiled at her, casually brushing a strand of hair from her cheek as he walked by and into the



kitchen. Megan stood for a moment, wondering why she should be so moved by a stranger's touch.

"Mr. Miller?" She heard the unaffected friendliness in Katch's voice and glanced over as he held out a hand to her grandfather. "I'm David Katcherton."

Pop nodded in approval. "You're the fellow who called me a couple of hours ago." He shot a look past Katch's shoulder to Megan. "I see you've already met my granddaughter."

His eyes smiled in response. "Yes. Charming."

Pop chuckled and moved toward the stove. "I was just about to make some more tea. How about a cup?"

Megan noticed the faint lift of his brow. Tea, she thought, was probably not his first choice.

"That'd be nice. Thanks." He walked to the table and sat, Megan decided, as if his acquaintance were long-standing and personal. Half reluctant, half defiant, she sat next to him. Her eyes asked him questions behind Pop's back.

"Did I tell you before that you have fabulous eyes?" he murmured. Without waiting for her answer, he turned his attention to Pop's tackle box. "You've got some great lures here," he observed to Pop, picking up a bone squid, then a wood plug painted to simulate a small frog. "Do you make any of your own?"

"That's half the sport," Pop stated, bringing a fresh cup to the table. "Have you done much fishing?"

"Here and there. I'd guess you'd know the best spots along the Grand Strand."

"A few of them," Pop said modestly.

Megan scowled into her tea. Once the subject of fishing had been brought up, Pop could go on for hours. And hours.

"I thought I'd do some surf casting while I'm here," Katch mentioned offhandedly. Megan was surprised to catch a shrewdly measuring expression in his eyes.

"Well now"—Pop warmed to the theme—"I might just be able to show you a spot or two. Do you have your own gear?"

"Not with me, no."

Pop brushed this off as inconsequential. "Where are you from, Mr. Katcherton?"

"Katch," he corrected, leaning back in his chair. "California originally."

That, Megan decided, explained the beachboy look. She drank her cooling tea with a casual air while studying him over the rim.

"You're a long way from home," Pop commented. He shifted comfortably, then brought out a pipe he saved for interesting conversations. "Do you plan to be in Myrtle Beach long?"

“Depends. I’d like to talk with you about your amusement park.”

Pop puffed rapidly on his pipe while holding a match to the bowl. The tobacco caught, sending out cherry-scented smoke. “So you said on the phone. Funny, Megan and I were just talking about hiring on help for the summer. Only about six weeks before the season starts.” He puffed and let the smoke waft lazily. “Less than three until Easter. Ever worked rides or a booth?”

“No.” Katch sampled his tea.

“Well ...” Pop shrugged his inexperience away. “It’s simple enough to learn. You look smart.” Again, Megan caught the flash of Katch’s grin. She set down her cup.

“We can’t pay more than minimum to a novice,” she said dampeningly.

He made her nervous, she was forced to admit. With any luck, she could discourage him from Joyland so that he’d try his luck elsewhere. But something nagged at her. He didn’t look the type to take a job running a roller coaster or hawking a pitch-and-toss for a summer. There were hints of authority in his face, touches of casual power in his stance. Yet there was something not altogether respectable in his raffish charm.

He met her stare with a complete lack of self-consciousness. “That seems reasonable. Do you work in the park, Meg?”

She bit back a retort to his familiarity. “Often,” she said succinctly.

“Megan’s got a good business head,” Pop interjected. “She keeps me straight.”

“Funny,” Katch said speculatively. “Somehow I thought you might be a model. You’ve the face for it.” There was no flirtatiousness in his tone.

“Megan’s an artist,” Pop said, puffing contentedly at his pipe.

“Oh?”

She watched Katch’s eyes narrow and focus on her. Uncomfortable, she shifted in her chair. “We seem to be drifting away from the subject,” she said crisply. “If you’ve come about a job—”

“No.”

“But ... didn’t you say—”

“I don’t think so,” he cut her off again and added a smile. He turned to Pop now, and Megan recognized a subtle change in his manner. “I don’t want a job in your park, Mr. Miller. I want to buy it.”

Both men were intent on each other. Pop was surprised, unmistakably so, but there was also a look of consideration in his eyes. Neither of them noticed Megan. She stared at Katch, her face open and young, and just a little frightened. She wanted to laugh and say he was making a foolish joke, but she knew better. Katch said exactly what he meant.

She’d recognized the understated authority and power beneath the glib exterior. This was business, pure and simple. She could see it on his face. There was a flutter of panic in her stomach as she looked at her

grandfather.

“Pop?” Her voice was very small, and he made no sign that he heard her.

“You’re a surprise,” the old man said eventually. Then he began to puff on his pipe again. “Why my park?”

“I’ve done some research on the amusements here.” Katch shrugged off the details. “I like yours.”

Pop sighed and blew smoke at the ceiling. “I can’t say I’m interested in selling out, son. A man gets used to a certain way of life.”

“With the offer I’m prepared to make, you might find it easy to get used to another.”

Pop gave a quiet laugh. “How old are you, Katch?”

“Thirty-one.”

“That’s just about how long I’ve been in this business. How much do you know about running a park?”

“Not as much as you do.” Katch grinned and leaned back again. “But I could learn fast with the right teacher.”

Megan saw that her grandfather was studying Katch carefully. She felt excluded from the conversation and resented it. Her grandfather was capable of doing this very subtly. She recognized that David Katcherton had the same talent. Megan sat silently; natural courtesy forbade her interrupting private conversation.

“Why do you want to own an amusement park?” Pop asked suddenly. Megan could tell he was interested in David Katcherton. A warning bell began to ring in her head. The last thing she wanted was for her grandfather to become too involved with Katch. He was trouble, Megan was sure of it.

“It’s good business,” Katch answered Pop’s question after a moment. “And fun.” He smiled. “I like things that put fun into life.”

He knows how to say the right thing, Megan acknowledged grudgingly, noting Pop’s expression.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d think about it, Mr. Miller,” Katch continued. “We could talk about it again in a few days.”

And how to advance and retreat, she thought.

“I can’t refuse to think about it,” Pop agreed, but shook his head. “Still, you might take another look around. Megan and I’ve run Joyland for a good many years. It’s home to us.” He looked to his granddaughter teasingly. “Weren’t you two going out to dinner?”

“No!” She flashed him a scowl.

“Exactly what I had in mind,” Katch said smoothly. “Come on, Meg, I’ll buy you a hamburger.” As he rose, he took her hand, pulling her to her feet. Feeling her temper rise with her, Megan attempted to control it.

“I can’t tell you how I hate to refuse such a charming invitation,” she began.

“Then don’t,” Katch cut her off before turning to Pop. “Would you like to join us?”

Pop chuckled and motioned them away with the back of his hand. “Go on. I’ve got to get my gear together for the morning.”

“Want company?”

Pop studied Katch over the bowl of his pipe. “I’m leaving at five-thirty,” he said after a moment. “I have extra gear.”

“I’ll be here.”

Megan was so astonished that she allowed Katch to lead her outside without making another protest. Pop never invited anyone along on his fishing mornings. They were his relaxation, and he enjoyed his solitude too much to share it.

“He never takes anyone with him,” she murmured, thinking aloud.

“Then I’m flattered.”

Megan noticed that Katch still had her hand, his fingers comfortably laced with hers.

“I’m not going out with you,” she said positively and stopped walking. “You might be able to charm Pop into taking you fishing, but—”

“So you think I’m charming?” His smile was audacious as he took her other hand.

“Not in the least,” she said firmly, repressing an answering smile.

“Why won’t you have dinner with me?”

“Because,” she said, meeting his eyes directly, “I don’t like you.”

His smile broadened. “I’d like the chance to change your mind.”

“You couldn’t.” Megan started to draw her hands away, but he tightened his fingers.

“Wanna bet?” Again, she squashed the desire to smile. “If I change your mind, you’ll go to the park with me Friday night.”

“And if I don’t change my mind?” she asked. “What then?”

“I won’t bother you anymore.” He grinned, as persuasive, she noted, as he was confident.

Her brow lifted in speculation. It might, she reflected, it just might be worth it.

“All you have to do is have dinner with me tonight,” Katch continued, watching Megan’s face. “Just a couple of hours.”

“All right,” she agreed impulsively. “It’s a deal.” She wriggled her fingers, but he didn’t release them. “We could shake on it,” she said, “but you still have my hands.”

“So I do,” he agreed. “We’ll seal it my way then.”

With a quick tug, he had her colliding against his chest. She felt a strength there which wasn’t apparent in the lean, somewhat lanky frame. Before she could express annoyance, his mouth had taken hers.

He was skillful and thorough. She never knew whether she had parted her lips instinctively or if he had urged her to do so with the gently probing tip of his tongue.

From the instant of contact, Megan’s mind had emptied, to be filled only with thoughts she couldn’t center on. Her body dominated, taking command in simple surrender. She was melted against him, aware of his chest hard against her breasts . . . aware of his mouth quietly savaging hers. There was nothing else. She found there was nothing to hold on to. No anchor to keep her from veering off into wild water. Megan gave a small, protesting moan and drew away.

His eyes were darker than she’d thought, and too smoky to read clearly. Why had she thought them so decipherable? Why had she thought him so manageable? Nothing was as she had thought it had been minutes before. Her breath trembled as she fought to collect herself.

“You’re very warm,” Katch said softly. “It’s a pity you struggle so hard to be remote.”

“I’m not. I don’t . . .” Megan shook her head, wishing desperately for her heartbeat to slow.

“You are,” he corrected, “and you do.” Katch gave her hands a companionable squeeze before releasing one of them. The other he kept snugly in his as he turned toward his car.

Panic was welling up inside Megan, and she tried to suppress it. *You’ve been kissed before*, she reminded herself. This was just unexpected. It just caught you off guard. Even as the excuse ran through her mind, she knew it for a lie. She’d never been kissed like that before. And the situation was no longer under her control.

“I don’t think I’ll go after all,” she told him in calmer tones.

Katch turned, smiling at her as he opened the car door. “A bet’s a bet, Meg.”

### Chapter Three

Katch drove a black Porsche. Megan wasn’t surprised. She wouldn’t have expected him to drive anything ordinary. It wasn’t difficult to deduce that David Katcherton could afford the best of everything.

He’d probably inherited his money, she decided as she settled back against the silver gray seat cushion. He’d probably never worked a day in his life. She remembered the hard, unpampered feel of his palm. Probably a whiz at sports, she thought. Plays tennis, squash, sails his own yacht. Never does anything worthwhile. Only looks for pleasure. *And finds it*, she thought.

Megan turned to him, pushing her swinging hair back behind her shoulders. His profile was sharply attractive, with the dusky blond hair curling negligently over his ear.

“See something you like?”

Megan flushed in annoyance, aware that she'd been caught staring.

“You need a shave,” she said primly.

Katch turned the rearview mirror toward him as if to check her analysis. “Guess I do.” He smiled as they merged into the traffic. “On our next date I'll be sure to remember. Don't say anything,” he added, feeling her stiffen at his side. “Didn't your mother ever tell you not to say anything if you couldn't say something pleasant?”

Megan stifled a retort.

Katch smiled as he merged into traffic. “How long have you lived here?”

“Always.” With the windows down, Megan could hear the outdoor noises. The music from a variety of car radios competed against each other and merged into a strange sort of harmony. Megan liked the cluttered, indefinable sound. She felt herself relaxing and straightened her shoulders and faced Katch again.

“And what do you do?”

He caught the thread of disdain in the question, but merely lifted a brow. “I own things.”

“Really? What sort of things?”

Katch stopped at a red light, then turned, giving her a long, direct look. “Anything I want.” The light changed and he deftly slid the car into the parking lot.

“We can't go in there,” Megan told him with a glance at the exclusive restaurant.

“Why not?” Katch switched off the ignition. “The food's good here.”

“I know, but we're not dressed properly, and—”

“Do you like doing things properly all the time, Meg?”

The question stopped her. She searched his face carefully, wondering if he was laughing at her, and unsure of the answer.

“Tell you what.” He eased himself out of the car, then leaned back in the window. “Think about it for a few minutes. I'll be back.”

Megan watched him slide through the elegant doors of the restaurant and shook her head. They'll boot him out, she thought. Still, she couldn't help admiring his confidence. There was something rather elusive about it. She crossed her arms over. “Still, I don't really *like* him,” she muttered.

Fifteen minutes later, she decided she liked him even less. How impossibly rude! she fumed as she slammed out of his car. Keeping me waiting out here all this time!

She decided to find the nearest phone booth and call her grandfather to ask him to come pick her up.

She searched the pockets in her jeans and her jacket. Not a dime, she thought furiously. Not one thin dime to my name. Taking a deep breath, she stared at the doors of the restaurant. She'd have to borrow change, or beg their permission to use the house phone. Anything was better than waiting in the car. Just as she pulled open the door of the restaurant, Katch strolled out.

"Thanks," he said casually and moved past her.

Megan stared after him. He was carrying the biggest picnic basket she'd ever seen. After he'd opened the trunk and settled it inside, he glanced back up at her.

"Well come on." He slammed the lid. "I'm starving."

"What's in there?" she asked suspiciously.

"Dinner." He motioned for her to get in the car. Megan stood beside the closed door on the passenger side.

"How did you get them to do that?"

"I asked. Are you hungry?"

"Well, yes . . . But how—"

"Then let's go." Katch dropped into the driver's seat and started the engine. The moment she sat beside him, he swung out of the parking lot. "Where's your favorite place?" he demanded.

"My favorite place?" she repeated dumbly.

"You can't tell me you've lived here all your life and don't have a favorite place." Katch turned the car toward the ocean. "Where is it?"

"Toward the north end of the beach," she said. "Not many people go there, except at the height of the season."

"Good. I want to be alone with you."

The simple directness had butterflies dancing in her stomach. Slowly, she turned to look at him again.

"Anything wrong with that?" The smile was back, irreverent and engaging. Megan sighed, feeling like she was just climbing the first hill of a roller coaster.

"Probably," she murmured.

The beach was deserted but for the crying gulls. She stood for a moment facing west, enjoying the rich glow of the dying sun.

"I love this time of day," she said softly. "Everything seems so still. As if the day's holding its breath." She jumped when Katch's hands came to her shoulders.

“Easy,” he murmured, kneading the suddenly tense muscles as he stood behind her. He looked over her head to the sunset. “I like it just before dawn, when the birds first start to sing and the light’s still soft.

“You should relax more often,” he told her. He slid his fingers lazily up her neck and down again. The pleasure became less quiet and more demanding. When she would have slipped away, Katch turned her to face him.

“No,” she said immediately, “don’t.” Megan placed both her hands on his chest. “Don’t.”

“All right.” He relaxed his hold, but didn’t release her for a moment. Then he stooped for the picnic basket and pulled out a white tablecloth saying briskly, “Besides, it’s time to eat.” Megan took it from him, marveling that the restaurant had given him their best linen.

“Here you go.” With his head still bent over the basket, he handed her the glasses.

And their crystal, she thought, dazed as she accepted the elegant wine glasses. There was china next, then silver.

“Why did they give you all this?”

“They were low on paper plates.”

“Champagne?” She glanced at the label as he poured. “You must be crazy!”

“What’s the matter?” he returned mildly. “Don’t you like champagne?”

“Actually I do, though I’ve only had American.”

“Here’s to the French.” Katch held out a glass to her.

Megan sipped. “It’s wonderful,” she said before experimenting with another sip. “But you didn’t have to ...” she gestured expansively.

“I decided I wasn’t in the mood for a hamburger.” Katch screwed the bottle down into the sand. He placed a small container on the cloth, then dived back into the basket.

“What’s this?” Megan demanded as she opened it. She frowned at the shiny black mass inside. He placed toast points on a plate. “Is it ...” She paused in disbelief and glanced at him. “Is this caviar?”

“Yeah. Let me have some, will you? I’m starving.” Katch took it from her and spread a generous amount on a piece of toast. “Don’t you want any?” he asked her as he took a bite.

“I don’t know.” Megan examined it critically. “I’ve never tasted it before.”

“No?” He offered her his piece. “Taste it.” When she hesitated, Katch grinned and held it closer to her mouth. “Go on, Meg, have a bite.”

“It’s salty,” she said with surprise. She plucked the toast from his hand and took another bite. “And it’s good,” she decided, swallowing.

“You might’ve left me some,” he complained when Megan finished off the toast.



She laughed and, heaping caviar onto another piece, handed it to him. "I wondered how it would sound." Katch took the offering, but his attention was on Megan.

"What?" Still smiling, she licked a bit of caviar from her thumb.

"Your laugh. I wondered if it would be as appealing as your face." He took a bite now, still watching her. "It is."

Megan tried to calm her fluttering pulse. "You didn't have to feed me caviar and champagne to hear me laugh." With a casual shrug, she moved out of his reach. "I laugh quite a bit."

"Not often enough."

She looked back at him in surprise. "Why do you say that?"

"Your eyes are so serious. So's your mouth." His glance swept over her face. "Perhaps that's why I feel compelled to make you smile."

"How extraordinary." Megan sat back on her heels and stared at him. "You barely know me."

"Does it matter?"

"I always thought it should," she murmured as he reached into the hamper again. Megan watched, no longer surprised as he drew out lobster tails and fresh strawberries. She laughed again and, pushing back her hair, moved closer to him.

"Here," she said. "Let me help."

The sun sank as they ate. The moon rose. It shot a shimmering white line across the sea. Megan thought it was like a dream—the china and silver gleaming in the moonlight, the exotic tastes on her tongue, the familiar sound of surf and the stranger beside her, who was becoming less of a stranger every minute.

Already Megan knew the exact movement of his face when he smiled, the precise tonal quality of his voice. She knew the exact pattern of the curls over his ear. More than once, bewitched by moonlight and champagne, she had to restrain her fingers from reaching for them, experimenting with them.

"Aren't you going to eat any cheesecake?" Katch gestured with a forkful, then slid it into his mouth.

"I can't." Megan brought her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. She watched his obvious enjoyment with dessert. "How do you do it?"

"Dedication." Katch took the last bite. "I try to see every project through to the finish."

"I've never had a picnic like this," she told him with a contented sigh. Leaning back on her elbows, she stretched out her legs and looked up at the stars. "I've never tasted anything so wonderful."

"I'll give Ricardo your compliments." Katch moved to sit beside her. His eyes moved from the crown of her head down the slender arch of her neck. Her face was thrown up to the stars.

"Who's Ricardo?" she asked absently. There was no thought of objection when Katch tucked her hair

behind her ear with his fingertip.

“The chef. He loves compliments.”

Megan smiled, liking the way the sound of his voice mixed with the sound of the sea. “How do you know?”

“That’s how I lured him away from Chicago.”

“Lured him away? What do you mean?” It took only an instant for the answer to come to her. “You own that restaurant?”

“Yes.” He smiled at the incredulity in her face. “I bought it a couple of years ago.”

Megan glanced at the white linen cloth scattered with fine china and heavy silver. She recalled that a little more than two years before, the restaurant had been ready to go under. The food had been overpriced and the service slack. Then it had received a face-lift. The interior had been redesigned, boasting, she was told, a mirrored ceiling. Since its reopening, it had maintained the highest of reputations in a town which prided itself on its quality and variety of restaurants.

She shifted her attention back to him. “*You* bought it?”

“That’s right.” Katch smiled at her. He sat Indian-style, facing her as she leaned back on her elbows. “Does that surprise you?”

Megan looked at him carefully: the careless toss of curls, the white knees of his jeans, the frayed sneakers. He was not her conception of a successful businessman. Where was the three-piece suit, the careful hairstyling? And yet . . . she had to admit there was something in his face.

“No,” she said at length. “No, I suppose it doesn’t.” Megan frowned as he shifted his position. In a moment he was close, facing the sea as she did. “You bought it the same way you want to buy Joyland.”

“I told you, that’s what I do.”

“But it’s more than owning things, isn’t it?” she insisted, not satisfied with his offhand answers. “It’s making a success of them.”

“That’s the idea,” he agreed. “There’s a certain satisfaction in succeeding, don’t you think?”

Megan sat up and turned to him. “But you can’t have Joyland, it’s Pop’s whole life. You don’t understand . . .”

“Maybe not,” he said easily. “You can explain it to me later. Not tonight.” He covered her hand with his. “This isn’t a night for business.”

“Katch, you have to—”

“Look at the stars, Meg,” he suggested as he did so himself. “Have you ever tried to count them?”

Her eyes were irresistibly drawn upward. “When I was little. But—”

“Star counting isn’t just for kids,” he instructed in a voice warm and laced with humor. “Do you come here at night?”

The stars were brilliant and low over the sea. “Sometimes,” she murmured. “When a project isn’t going well and I need to clear my head, or just be alone.”

“What sort of artist are you?” His fingers trailed over her knuckles. “Do you paint seascapes? Portraits?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No, I sculpt.”

“Ah.” He lifted her hand, then examined it—one side, then the other—while she watched him. “Yes, I can see that. Your hands are strong and capable.” When he pressed his lips to the center of her palm, she felt the jolt shoot through her entire body.

Carefully, Megan drew her hand away; then, bringing her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around them. She could feel Katch smile without seeing it.

“What do you work in? Clay, wood, stone?”

“All three.” Turning her head, she smiled again.

“Where did you study?”

“I took courses in college.” With a shrug, she passed this off. “There hasn’t been much time for it.” She looked up at the sky again. “The moon’s so white tonight. I like to come here when it’s full like this, so that the light’s silvery.”

When his lips brushed her ear, she would have jerked away, but he slipped an arm around her shoulders. “Relax, Meg.” His voice was a whisper at her cheek. “There’s a moon and the ocean. That’s all there is besides us.”

With his lips tingling on her skin, she could almost believe him. Her limbs were heavy, drugged with wine and the magic of his touch. Katch trailed his mouth down to her throat so that she moaned with the leap of her pulse.

“Katch, I’d better go.” He was tracing her jaw with light kisses. “Please,” she said weakly.

“Later,” he murmured, going back to nuzzle her ear. “Much, much later.”

“No, I . . .” Megan turned her head, and the words died.

Her lips were no more than a breath from his. She stared at him, eyes wide and aware as he bent closer. Still his mouth didn’t touch hers. It hovered, offering, promising. She moaned again, lids lowering as he teased the corners of her lips. His hands never touched her. He had moved his arm so that their only contact was his mouth and tongue on her skin and the mingling of their breath.

Megan felt her resistance peel away, layer by layer until there was only need. She forgot to question the dangers, the consequences. She could only feel. Her mouth sought his. There was no hesitation or shyness now but demand, impatient demand, as she hungered to feel what she had felt before—the delicious confusion, the dark awareness.

When he still didn't touch her, Megan slipped her arms around him. She pulled him close, enjoying his soft sound of pleasure as the kiss deepened. Still, he let her lead, touching her now, but lightly, his fingers in her hair. She could barely hear the hissing of the surf over the pounding of her heart. Finally, she drew away, pulling in a deep breath as their lips separated.

But he wouldn't let her go. "Again?" The question was quiet and seemed to shout through the still night.

Refusal trembled on Megan's tongue. She knew the ground beneath her was far from solid. His hand on the back of her neck brought her a whisper closer.

"Yes," she said, and went into his arms.

This time he was less passive. He showed her there were many ways to kiss. Short and light, long and deep. Tongue and teeth and lips could all bring pleasure. Together, they lowered themselves to the sand.

It was a rough blanket, but she felt only the excitement of his lips on her skin as they wandered to her throat. She ran her fingers through his hair. His mouth returned to hers, harder now, more insistent. She was ready for it, answering it. Craving it.

When his hand took the naked skin of her breast, she murmured in resistance. She hadn't felt him release the zipper of her jacket or the buttons of her shirt. But his hand was gentle, persuasive. He let his fingers trail over her, a whispering touch. Resistance melted into surrender, then heated into passion. It was smoldering just under her skin, threatening to explode into something out of her control. She moved under him and his hands became less gentle.

There was a hunger in the kiss now. She could taste it, a flavor sharper than any she'd known. It was more seductive than soft words or champagne, and more frightening.

"I want you." Katch spoke against her mouth, but the words were not in his easygoing tone. "I want to make love with you."

Megan felt control slipping from her grasp. Her need for him was overpowering, her appetite ravenous. She struggled to climb back to reality, to remember who they were. Names, places, responsibilities. There was more than the moon and the sea. And he was a stranger, a man she barely knew.

"No." Megan managed to free her mouth from his. She struggled to her feet. "No." The repetition was shaky. Quickly, she began to fumble with the buttons of her shirt.

Katch stood and gathered the shirttail in his hands. Surprised, Megan looked up at him. His eyes were no longer calm, but his voice was deadly so. "Why not?"

Megan swallowed. There wasn't lazy arrogance here, but a hint of ruthlessness. She had sensed it, but seeing it was much more potent. "I don't want to."

"Liar," he said simply.

"All right." She nodded, conceding his point. "I don't know you."

Katch inclined his head in agreement but tugged on the tails of her shirt to bring her closer. "You will," he assured her. He kissed her then, searingly. "But we'll wait until you do."

She fought to steady her breathing and stabilize her pulse. “Do you think you should always get what you want?” she demanded. The defiance was back, calming her.

“Yes,” he said and grinned. “Of course.”

“You’re going to be disappointed.” She smacked his hands from her shirt and began doing the buttons. Her fingers were unfaltering. “You can’t have Joyland and you can’t have me. Neither of us is for sale.”

The roughness with which he took her arm had her eyes flying back to his face. “I don’t buy women.” He was angry, his eyes dark with it. The appealing voice had hardened like flint. The artist in her was fascinated by the planes of his face, the woman was uneasy with his harsh tone. “I don’t have to. We’re both aware that with a bit more persuasion I’d have had you tonight.”

Megan pulled out of his hold. “What happened tonight doesn’t mean I find you irresistible, you know.” She zipped up her jacket with one quick jerk. “I can only repeat, you can’t have Joyland and you can’t have me.”

Katch watched her a moment as she stood in the moonlight, her back to the sea. The smile came again, slowly, arrogantly. “I’ll have you both, Meg,” he promised quietly. “Before the season begins.”

#### Chapter Four

The afternoon sun poured into Megan’s studio. She was oblivious to it, and to the bird song outside the windows. Her mind was focused on the clay her hands worked with, or, more precisely, on what she saw in the partially formed mound.

She had put her current project aside, something she rarely did, to begin a new one. The new subject had haunted her throughout the night. She would exorcise David Katcherton by doing a bust of him.

Megan could see it clearly, knew precisely what she wanted to capture: strength and determination behind a surface affability.

Though she had yet to admit it, Katch had frightened her the night before. Not physically—he was too intelligent to use brute force, she acknowledged—but by the force of his personality. Angrily, she stabbed at the clay. Obviously, this was a man who got what he wanted. But she was determined that this time he would not have his way. He would soon find out that she couldn’t be pushed around any more than Pop could. Slowly and meticulously, her fingers worked to mold the planes of his face. It gave her a certain satisfaction to have control over him—if only vicariously with the clay.

Almost without thinking, she shaped a careless curl over the high brow. She stepped back to survey it. Somehow, she had caught a facet of his nature. He was a rogue, she decided. The old-fashioned word suited him. She could picture him with boots and six-guns, dealing cards for stud poker in a Tucson saloon; with a saber, captaining a ship into the Barbary Coast. Her fingers absently caressed the clay curls. He would laugh in the face of the wind, take treasure and women where he found them. *Women.* Megan’s thoughts zeroed in on the night before ... On the feel of his lips on hers, the touch of his hand on her skin. She could remember the texture of the sand as they had lain together, the scent and sounds of the sea. And she remembered how the moonlight had fallen on his hair, how her hands had sought it while his lips had wandered over her. How thick and soft it had felt. How ...

Megan stopped, appalled. She glanced down to see her fingers in the clay replica of Katch’s hair. She

swore, and nearly, very nearly, reduced the clay to a formless mass. Controlling herself, she rose, backing away from the forming bust. I should never allow myself to be distracted from my work by petty annoyances, she thought. Her evening with Katch belonged in that category. Just a petty annoyance. Not important.

But it was difficult for Megan to convince herself this was true. Both her intuition and her emotions told her that Katch was important, far more important than a stranger should be to a sensible woman.

And *I am* sensible, she reminded herself. Taking a long breath, she moved to the basin to rinse the clay from her hands. She had to be sensible. Pop needed someone around to remind him that bills had to be paid. A smile crept across her mouth as she dried her hands. Megan thought, as she did from time to time, that she had been almost as much of a savior to her grandfather as he had been to her.

In the beginning, she'd been so young, so dependent upon him. And he hadn't let her down. Then, as she had grown older, Megan had helped by assuming the duties her grandfather had found tiresome: accounts and bank reconciliations. Often, Megan suppressed her own desires in order to fulfill what she thought of as her duty. She dealt with figures, the unromantic process of adding and subtracting. But she also dealt with the illusionary world of art. There were times, when she was deep in her work, that she forgot the rules she had set up for day-to-day living. Often she felt pulled in two directions. She had enough to think about without David Katcherton.

Why a man virtually unknown to her should so successfully upset the delicate balance of her world, she didn't know. She shook her head. Instead of dwelling on it, she decided, she would work out her frustration by finishing the bust. When it was done, perhaps she would be able to see more clearly exactly how she perceived him. She returned to her work.

The next hour passed quickly. She forgot her irritation with Katch for going fishing with her grandfather. How annoying to have seen him so eager and well rested when she had peeked through her bedroom curtain at five-thirty that morning! She'd fallen back into her ruffled bed to spend another hour staring, heavy-eyed, at the ceiling. She refused to remember how appealing his laugh had sounded in the hush of dawn.

The planes of his face were just taking shape under her hands when she heard a car drive up. Katch's laugh was followed by the more gravelly tones of her grandfather's.

Because her studio was above the garage, Megan had a bird's-eye view of the house and drive. She watched as Katch lifted their fishing cooler from the back of the pickup. A grin was on his face, but whatever he said was too low for Megan to hear. Pop threw back his head, his dramatic mane of white flying back as he roared his appreciation. He gave Katch a companionable slap on the back. Unaccountably, Megan was miffed. They seemed to be getting along entirely too well.

She continued to watch the man as they unloaded tackle boxes and gear. Katch was dressed much as he had been the day before. The pale blue T-shirt had lettering across the chest, but the words were faded and the distance was too great for Megan to read them. He wore Pop's fishing cap, another source of annoyance for Megan. She was forced to admit the two of them looked good together. There was the contrast between their ages and their builds, but both seemed to her to be extraordinarily masculine men. Their looks were neither smooth nor pampered. She became engrossed with the similarities and difference between them. When Katch looked up, spotting her at the window, Megan continued to stare down, oblivious, absorbed with what she saw in them.

Katch grinned, pushing the fishing cap back so that he had a clearer view. The window was long, the sill

coming low at her knees. It had the effect of making Megan seem to be standing in a full-size picture frame. As was her habit when working, she had pulled her hair back in a ribbon. Her face seemed younger and more vulnerable, her eyes wider. The ancient shirt of Pop's she used as a smock dwarfed her.

Her eyes locked on Katch's, and for a moment she thought she saw something flash in them—something she'd seen briefly the night before in the moonlight. A response trembled along her skin. Then his grin was arrogant again, his eyes amused.

"Come on down, Meg." He gestured before he bent to lift the cooler again. "We brought you a present." He turned to carry the cooler around the side of the house.

"I'd rather have emeralds," she called back.

"Next time," Katch promised carelessly, before turning to carry the cooler around the side of the house.

She found Katch alone, setting up for the cleaning of the catch. He smiled when he saw her and set down the knife he held, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly, to her utter astonishment. It was a kiss of casual ownership rather than passion, but it elicited a response that surprised her with its force. More than a little shaken, Megan pushed away.

"You can't just ..."

"I already did," he pointed out. "You've been working," Katch stated as if the searing kiss had never taken place. "I'd like to see your studio."

It was better, Megan decided, to follow his lead and keep the conversation light. "Where's my grandfather?" she asked as she moved to the cooler and prepared to lift the lid.

"Pop's inside stowing the gear."

Though it was the habit of everyone who knew him to refer to Timothy Miller as Pop, Megan frowned at Katch.

"You work fast, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I like your grandfather, Meg. You of all people should understand how easy that is to do."

Megan regarded him steadily. She took a step closer, as if testing the air between them. "I don't know if I should trust you."

"You shouldn't." Katch grinned again and ran a finger down the bridge of her nose. "Not for a second." He tossed open the lid of the cooler, then gestured to the fish inside. "Hungry?"

Megan smiled, letting herself be charmed despite the warnings of her sensible self. "I wasn't. But I could be. Especially if I don't have to clean them."

"Pop told me you were squeamish."

“Oh, *hedid*, did he?” Megan cast a long, baleful look over her shoulder toward the house. “What else did he tell you?”

“That you like daffodils and used to have a stuffed elephant named Henry.”

Megan’s mouth dropped open. “He told you that?”

“And that you watch horror movies, then sleep with the blankets over your head.”

Megan narrowed her eyes as Katch’s grin widened. “Excuse me,” she said crossly, pushing Katch aside before racing through the kitchen door. She could hear Katch’s laughter behind her.

“Pop!” She found him in the narrow room off the kitchen where he stored his fishing paraphernalia. He gave her an affectionate smile as she stood, hands on hips, in the doorway.

“Hi, Megan. Let me tell you, that boy knows how to fish. Yessiree, he knows how to fish.”

His obvious delight with Katch caused Megan to clench her teeth. “That’s the best news I’ve had all day,” she said, stepping into the room. “But exactly why did you feel it necessary to tell *that boy* that I had a stuffed elephant and slept with the covers over my head?”

Pop lifted a hand, ostensibly to scratch his head. It wasn’t in time, however, to conceal the grin. Megan’s brows drew together.

“Pop, really,” she said in exasperation. “Must you babble about me as if I were a little girl?”

“You’ll always be my little girl,” he said maddeningly, and kissed her cheek. “Did you see those trout? We’ll have a heck of a fish fry tonight.”

“I suppose,” Megan began and folded her arms, “*he*’s going to eat with us.”

“Well, of course.” Pop blinked his eyes. “After all, Meg, he caught half the fish.”

“That’s just peachy.”

“We thought you might whip up some of your special blueberry tarts.” He smiled ingenuously.

Megan sighed, recognizing defeat.

Within minutes, Pop heard the thumping and banging of pans. He grinned, then slipped out of the room, moving noiselessly through the house and out the front door.

“Whip up some tarts,” Megan muttered later as she cut shortening into the flour. “*Men.*”

She was bending over to slip the pastry shells into the oven when the screen door slammed shut behind her. Turning, she brushed at the seat of her pants and met the predictable grin.

“I’ve heard about your tarts,” Katch commented, setting the cleaned, filleted fish on the counter. “Pop said he had a few things to see to in the garage and to call him when dinner’s ready.”

Megan glared through the screen door at the adjoining building. “Oh, he did, did he?” She turned back



to Katch. "Well, if you think you can just sit back and be waited on, then you're in for a disappointment."

"You didn't think I'd allow you to cook my fish, did you?" he interrupted.

She stared at his unperturbed face.

"I always cook my own fish. Where's the frying pan?"

Silently, still eyeing him, Megan pointed out the cabinet. She watched as he squatted down to rummage for it.

"It's not that I don't think you're a good cook," he went on as he stood again with the cast-iron skillet in his hand. "It's that I know I am."

"Are you implying I couldn't cook those pathetic little sardines properly?"

"Let's just say I just don't like to take chances with my dinner." He began poking into cupboards. "Why don't you make a salad," he suggested mildly, "and leave the fish to me?" There was a grunt of approval as he located the cracker meal.

Megan watched him casually going through her kitchen cupboards. "Why don't you," she began, "take your trout and ..."

Her suggestion was interrupted by the rude buzz of the oven timer.

"Your tarts." Katch walked to the refrigerator for eggs and milk.

With supreme effort, Megan controlled herself enough to deal with the pastry shells. Setting them on the rack to cool, she decided to create the salad of the decade. It would put his pan-fried trout to shame.

For a time there were no words. The hot oil hissed as Katch added his coated trout. Megan tore the lettuce. She sliced raw vegetables. The scent from the pan was enticing. Megan peeled a carrot and sighed. Hearing her, Katch raised a questioning eyebrow.

"You had to be good at it, didn't you?" Megan's smile was reluctant. "You had to do it right."

He shrugged, then snatched the peeled carrot from her hand. "You'd like it better if I didn't?" Katch took a bite of the carrot before Megan could retrieve it. Shaking her head, she selected another.

"It would have been more gratifying if you'd fumbled around and made a mess of things."

Katch tilted his head as he poked at the sizzling fish with a spatula. "Is that a compliment?"

Megan diced the carrot, frowning at it thoughtfully. "I don't know. It might be easier to deal with you if you didn't seem so capable."

He caught her off guard by taking her shoulders and turning her around to face him. "Is that what you want to do?" His fingers gently massaged her flesh. "Deal with me?" When she felt herself being drawn closer, she placed her hands on his chest. "Do I make you nervous?"

"No." Megan shook her head with the denial. "No, of course not." Katch only lifted a brow and drew

her closer. "Yes," she admitted in a rush, and pulled away. "Yes, blast it, you do." Stalking to the refrigerator, she yanked out the blueberry filling she had prepared. "You needn't look so pleased about it," she told him, wishing she could work up the annoyance she thought she should feel.

"Several things make me nervous." Megan moved to the pastry shells and began to spoon in the filling. "Snakes, tooth decay, large unfriendly dogs." When she heard him chuckle, Megan turned her head and found herself grinning at him. "It's difficult to actively dislike you when you make me laugh."

"Do you have to actively dislike me?" Katch flipped the fish expertly and sent oil sizzling.

"That was my plan," Megan admitted. "It seemed like a good idea."

"Why don't we work on a different plan?" Katch suggested, searching through a cupboard again for a platter. "What do you like? Besides daffodils?"

"Soft ice cream," Megan responded spontaneously. "Oscar Wilde, walking barefoot."

"How about baseball?" Katch demanded.

Megan paused in the act of filling the shells. "What about it?"

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," she considered, smiling. "As a matter of fact, I do."

"I knew we had something in common." Katch grinned. He turned the flame off under the pan. "Why don't you call Pop? The fish is done."

\* \* \*

There was something altogether too cozy about the three of them sitting around the kitchen table eating a meal each of them had a part in providing, Megan thought. She could sense the growing affection between the two men and it worried her. She was sure that Katch was still as determined as ever to buy Joyland. Yet Pop was so obviously happy in his company. Megan decided that, while she couldn't trust Katch unreservedly, neither could she maintain her original plan. She couldn't dislike him or keep him from touching their lives. She thought it best not to dwell on precisely how he was touching hers.

"Tell you what." Pop sighed over his empty plate and leaned back in his chair. "Since the pair of you cooked dinner, I'll do the dishes." His eyes passed over Megan to Katch. "Why don't you two go for a walk? Megan likes to walk on the beach."

"Pop!"

"I know you young people like to be alone," he continued shamelessly.

Megan opened her mouth to protest, but Katch spoke first. "I'm always willing to take a walk with a beautiful woman, especially if it means getting out of KP," he said.

"You have such a gracious way of putting things," Megan began.

"Actually, I'd really like to see your studio."

“Take Katch up, Megan,” Pop insisted. “I’ve been bragging about your pieces all day. Let him see for himself.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Megan decided it was simpler to agree. Certainly she didn’t mind showing Katch her work. And, there was little doubt that it was safer to let him putter around her studio than to walk with him on the beach.

“All right.” She rose. “I’ll take you up.”

As they passed through the screen door, Katch slipped his arm over her shoulders. “This is a nice place,” he commented. He looked around the small trim yard lined with azalea shrubs. “Very quiet and settled.”

The weight of his arm was pleasant. Megan allowed it to remain as they walked toward the garage. “I wouldn’t think you’d find something quiet and settled terribly appealing.”

“There’s a time for porch swings and a time for roller coasters.” Katch glanced down at her as she paused at the foot of the steps. “I’d think you’d know that.”

“I do,” she said, knowing her involvement with him was beginning to slip beyond her control. “I wasn’t aware you did.” Thoughtfully, Megan climbed the stairs. “It’s rather a small-scale studio, I suppose, and not very impressive. It’s really just a place to work where I won’t disturb Pop and he won’t disturb me.”

Megan opened the door, flicking on the light as the sun was growing dim.

There was much less order here than she permitted herself in other areas of her life. The room was hers, personally, more exclusively than her bedroom in the house next door. There were tools—calipers, chisels, gouges, and an assortment of knives and files. There was the smock she’d carelessly thrown over a chair when Katch had called her downstairs. Future projects sat waiting inside, untouched slabs of limestone and chunks of wood. There was a precious piece of marble she hoarded like a miser. Everywhere, on shelves, tables and even the floor, were samples of her work.

Katch moved past her into the room. Strangely, Megan felt a flutter of nerves. She found herself wondering how to react if he spoke critically, or worse, offered some trite compliment. Her work was important to her and very personal. To her surprise she realized that she cared about his opinion. Quietly, she closed the door behind her, then stood with her back against it.

Katch had gone directly to a small walnut study of a young girl building a sand castle. She was particularly pleased with the piece, as she had achieved exactly the mood she had sought. There was more than youth and innocence in the child’s face. The girl saw herself as the princess in the castle tower. The half-smile on her face made the onlooker believe in happy endings.

It was painstakingly detailed, the beginnings of a crenellated roof and the turrets of the castle, the slender fingers of the girl as she sculpted the sand. Her hair was long, falling over her shoulders and wisping into her face as though a breeze teased it. Megan had felt successful when the study had been complete, but now, watching Katch turn it over in his hands, his mouth oddly grave, his eyes intent, she felt a twinge of doubt.

“This is your work?” Because the silence had seemed so permanent, Megan jerked when Katch spoke.

“Well, yes.” While she was still searching for something more to say, Katch turned away to prowl the room.

He picked up piece after piece, examining, saying nothing. As the silence dragged on, minute upon minute, Megan became more and more tense. If he’d just say something, she thought. She picked up the discarded smock and folded it, nervously smoothing creases as she listened to the soft sound of his tennis shoes on the wood floor.

“What are you doing here?”

She whirled, eyes wide. Whatever reaction she had expected, it certainly hadn’t been anger. And there was anger on his face, a sharp, penetrating anger which caused her to grip the worn material of the smock tighter.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Megan’s voice was calm, but her heart had begun to beat faster.

“Why are you hiding?” he demanded. “What are you afraid of?”

She shook her head in bewilderment. “I’m not hiding, Katch. You’re not making any sense.”

“I’m not making sense?” He took a step toward her, then stopped, turning away to pace again. She watched in fascination. “Do you think it makes sense to create things like this and lock them up in a room over a garage?” He lifted polished limestone which had been formed into a head-and-shoulders study of a man and a woman in each other’s arms. “When you’ve been given talent like this, you have an obligation. What are you going to do, continue to stack them in here until there isn’t any more room?”

His reaction had thrown Megan completely off-balance. She looked around the room. “No, I . . . I take pieces into an art gallery downtown now and then. They sell fairly well, especially during the season, and—”

Katch’s pungent oath cut her off. Megan gave her full attention back to him. Was this furious, disapproving man the same one who had amiably prepared trout in her kitchen a short time ago?

“I don’t understand why you’re so mad.” Annoyed with herself for nervously pleating the material of the smock, Megan tossed it down.

“Waste,” he said tersely, placing the limestone back on the shelf. “Waste infuriates me.” He came to her, taking her deliberately by the shoulders. “Why haven’t you done anything with your work?” His eyes were direct on hers, demanding answers, not evasions.

“It’s not as simple as that,” she began. “I have responsibilities.”

“Your responsibilities are to yourself, to your talent.”

“You make it sound as though I’ve done something wrong.” Confused, Megan searched his face. “I’ve done what I know how to do. I don’t understand why you’re angry. There are things, like time and money, to be considered,” she went on. “A business to run. And reality to face.” Megan shook her head. “I can hardly cart my work to a Charleston art gallery and demand a showing.”

“That would make more sense than cloistering it up here.” He released her abruptly, then paced again.

He was, Megan discovered, much more volatile than her first impression had allowed. She glanced at the clay wrapped in the damp towel. Her fingertips itched to work while fresh impressions were streaming through her brain.

“When’s the last time you’ve been to New York?” Katch demanded, facing her again. “Chicago, L.A.?”

“We can’t all be globetrotters,” she told him. “Some are born to other things.”

He picked up the sand-castle girl again, then strode over to the limestone couple. “I want these two,” he stated. “Will you sell them to me?”

They were two of her favorites, though totally opposite in tone. “Yes, I suppose. If you want them.”

“I’ll give you five hundred.” Megan’s eyes widened. “A piece.”

“Oh, no, they’re not worth—”

“They’re worth a lot more, I imagine.” Katch lifted the limestone. “Have you got a box I can carry them in?”

“Yes, but, Katch.” Megan paused and pushed the bangs from her eyes. “A thousand dollars?”

He set down both pieces and came back to her. He was still angry; she could feel it vibrating from him. “Do you think it’s safer to underestimate yourself than to face up to your own worth?”

Megan started to make a furious denial, then stopped. Uncertain, she made a helpless gesture with her hands. Katch turned away again to search for a box himself. She watched him as he wrapped the sculptures in old newspapers. The frown was still on his face, the temper in his eyes.

“I’ll bring you a check,” he stated, and was gone without another word.

## Chapter Five

There was a long, high-pitched scream. The roller coaster grumbled along the track as it whipped around another curve and tilted its passengers. Lights along the midway were twinkling, and there was noise. Such noise. There was the whirl and whine of machinery, the electronic buzz and beeps from video games, the pop of arcade rifles and the call of concessionaires.

Tinny music floated all over, but for the most part, there was the sound of people. They were laughing, calling, talking, shouting. There were smells: popcorn, peanuts, grilled hot dogs, machine oil.

Megan loaded another clip into the scaled-down rifle and handed it to a would-be Wyatt Earp. “Rabbits are five points, ducks ten, deer twenty-five and the bears fifty.”

The sixteen-year-old sharpshooter aimed and managed to bag a duck and a rabbit. He chose a rubber snake as his prize, to the ensuing screams and disgust of his girl.

Shaking her head, Megan watched them walk away. The boy slipped his arm around the girl’s shoulders, then pursued the romance by dangling the snake in front of her face. He earned a quick jab in the ribs.

The crowd was thin tonight, but that was to be expected in the off-season. Particularly, Megan knew, when there were so many other parks with more rides, live entertainment and a more sophisticated selection of video games. She didn't mind the slack. Megan was preoccupied, as she had been since the evening Katch had seen her studio. In three days, she hadn't heard a word from him. At first, she had wanted badly to see him, to talk about the things he'd said to her. He had made her think, made her consider a part of herself she had ignored or submerged most of her life.

Her desire to speak with Katch had faded as the days had passed, however. After all, what right did he have to criticize her lifestyle? What right did he have to make her feel as if she'd committed a crime? He'd accused, tried and condemned her in the space of minutes. Then, he'd disappeared.

Three days, Megan mused, handing another hopeful deadeye a rifle. Three days without a word. And she'd watched for him—much to her self-disgust. She'd waited for him. As the days had passed, Megan had taken refuge in anger. Not only had he criticized and scolded her, she remembered, but he'd walked out with two of her favorite sculptures. A thousand dollars my foot, she mused, frowning fiercely as she slid a fresh clip into an empty rifle. Just talk, that's all. Talk. He does that very well. It was probably all a line, owning that restaurant. *But why?* Men like that don't need logical reasons, she decided. It's all ego.

"Men," she muttered as she handed a rifle to a new customer.

"I know what you mean, honey." The plump blond woman took the rifle from Megan with a wink.

Megan pushed her bangs back and frowned deeper. "Who needs them?" she demanded.

The woman shouldered the rifle. "We do, honey. That's the problem."

Megan let out a long sigh as the woman earned 125 points. "Nice shooting," she congratulated. "Your choice on the second row."

"Let me have the hippo, sweetie. It looks a little like my second husband."

Laughing, Megan plucked it from the shelf and handed it over. "Here you go." With another wink, the woman tucked the hippo under her arm and waddled off.

Megan settled back while two kids tried their luck. The exchange had been typical of the informality enjoyed by people in amusement parks. She smiled, feeling less grim, if not entirely mollified by the woman's remarks. But she doesn't know Katch, Megan reflected, again exchanging a rifle for a quarter. And neither, she reminded herself, do I.

Automatically, Megan made change when a dollar bill was placed on the counter. "Ten shots for a quarter," she began the spiel. "Rabbits are five, ducks ten . . ." Megan pushed three quarters back as she reached for a rifle. The moment the fingers pushed the change back to her, she recognized them.

"I'll take a dollar's worth," Katch told her as she looked up in surprise. He grinned, then leaned over to press a quick kiss to her lips. "For luck," he claimed when she jerked away.

Before Megan had pocketed the quarters, Katch had bull's-eyed every one of the bears.

"Wow!" The two boys standing next to Katch were suitably impressed. "Hey, mister, can you do it again?" one asked.

“Maybe.” Katch turned to Megan. “Let’s have a reload.” Without speaking, she handed him the rifle.

“I like the perfume you’re wearing,” he commented as he sighed. “What is it?”

“Gun oil.”

He laughed, then blasted the hapless bears one by one. The two boys gave simultaneous yelps of appreciation. A crowd began to gather.

“Hey, Megan.” She glanced up to see the Bailey twins leaning over the counter. Both pairs of eyes drifted meaningfully to Katch. “Isn’t he the ...”

“Yes,” Megan said shortly, not wanting to explain.

“Delicious,” Teri decided quietly, giving Katch a flirtatious smile when he straightened.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jeri agreed with a twin smile.

Katch gave them a long, appreciative look.

“Here.” Megan shoved the rifle at him. “This is your last quarter.”

Katch accepted the rifle. “Thanks.” He hefted it again. “Going to wish me luck?”

Megan met his eyes levelly. “Why not?”

“Meg, I’m crazy about you.”

She dealt with the surge his careless words brought her as he picked off his fourth set of bears. Bystanders broke into raucous applause. Katch set the rifle on the counter, then gave his full attention to Meg.

“What’d I win?”

“Anything you want.”

His grin was a flash, and his eyes never left her face. She blushed instantly, hating herself. Deliberately, she stepped to the side and gestured toward the prizes.

“I’ll take Henry,” he told her. When she gave him a puzzled look, he pointed. “The elephant.” Glancing up, Megan spotted the three-foot lavender elephant. She lifted it down from its perch. Even as she set it on the counter for him, Katch took her hands. “And you.”

She made her voice prim. “Only the items on display are eligible prizes.”

“I love it when you talk that way,” he commented.

“Stop it!” she hissed, flushing as she heard the Bailey twins giggle.

“We had a bet, remember?” Katch smiled at her. “It’s Friday night.”

Megan tried to tug her hands away, but his fingers interlocked with hers. "Who says I lost the bet?" she demanded. The crowd was still milling around the stand so she spoke in an undertone, but Katch didn't bother.

"Come on, Meg, I won fair and square. You're not going to welch, are you?"

"Shh!" She glanced behind him at the curious crowd. "I never welch," she whispered furiously. "And even if I did lose, which I never said I did, I can't leave the stand. I'm sure you can find somebody else to keep you company."

"I want you."

She struggled to keep her eyes steady on his. "Well, I can't leave. Someone has to run the booth."

"Megan." One of the part-timers slipped under the counter. "Pop sent me to relieve you." He smiled innocently when she gave him a disgusted look.

"Perfect timing," she mumbled, then stripped off the change apron and stuffed it in his hands. "Thanks a lot."

"Sure, Megan."

"Hey, keep this back there for me, will you?" Katch dumped the elephant into his arms and captured Megan's hands again as she ducked under the counter. As she straightened, he tugged, tumbling her into his arms.

The kiss was long and demanding. When Katch drew her away, her arms were around his neck. She left them there, staring up into his face with eyes newly aware and darkened.

"I've wanted to do that for three days," he murmured, and rubbed her nose lightly with his.

"Why didn't you?"

He lifted a brow at that, then grinned when her blush betrayed the impetuosity of her words.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," Megan began, dropping her arms and trying to wriggle away.

"Yes you did," he countered. Katch released her but dropped a friendly arm over her shoulder. "It was nice, don't spoil it." He took a sweeping glance of the park. "How about a tour?"

"I don't know why you want one. We're not selling."

"We'll see about that," he said, as maddeningly confident as ever. "But in any case, I'm interested. Do you know why people come here? To a place like this?" He gestured with his free arm to encompass the park.

"To be entertained," Megan told him as she followed the movement of his arm.

"You left out two of the most important reasons," he added. "To fantasize and to show off."

They stopped to watch a middle-aged man strip out of his jacket and attempt to ring the bell. The



hammer came down with a loud thump, but the ball rose only halfway up the pole. He rubbed his hands together and prepared to try again.

“Yes, you’re right.” Megan tossed her hair back with a move of her head, then smiled at Katch. “You ought to know.”

He tilted his head and shot her a grin. “Want me to ring the bell?”

“Muscles don’t impress me,” she said firmly.

“No?” He guided her away with his arm still around her. “What does?”

“Poetry,” Megan decided all at once.

“Hmm.” Katch rubbed his chin and avoided a trio of teenagers. “How about a limerick? I know some great limericks.”

“I bet you do.” Megan shook her head. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Coward.”

“Oh? Let’s ride the roller coaster, then we’ll see who’s a coward.”

“You’re on.” Taking her hand, he set off in a sprint. He stopped at the ticket booth, and gratefully she caught her breath.

I might as well face it, she reflected as she studied his face. I enjoy him. There isn’t any use in pretending I don’t.

“What are you thinking?” Katch demanded as he paid for their ride.

“That I could learn to like you—in three or four years. For short periods of time,” she added, still smiling.

Katch took both her hands and kissed them, surprising Megan with the shock that raced up her arms. “Flatterer,” he murmured, and his eyes laughed at her over their joined hands.

Distressed by the power she felt rushing through her system, Megan tried to tug her hands from his. It was imperative, for reasons only half-formed in her brain, that she keep their relationship casual.

“You have to hold my hand.” Katch jerked his head toward the roller coaster. “I’m afraid of heights.”

Megan laughed. She let herself forget the tempestuous instant and the hint of danger. She kept her hand in his.

Katch wasn’t satisfied with only the roller coaster. He pulled Megan to ride after ride. They were scrambled on the Mind Maze, spooked in the Haunted Castle and spun lazily on the Ferris wheel.

From the top of the wheel, they watched the colored lights of the park, and the sea stretching out to the right. The wind tossed her hair into her face. Katch took it in his hand as they rose toward the top again. When he kissed her, it felt natural and right . . . a shared thing, a moment which belonged only to them.

The noise and people below were of another world. There was only the gentle movement of the wheel and the dance of the breeze. And the touch of mouth on mouth. There was no demand, only an offering of pleasure.

Megan relaxed against him, finding her head fit naturally in the curve of his shoulder. Held close beside him, she watched the world revolve. Above, the stars were scattered and few. A waning moon shifted in and out of the clouds. The air was cool with a hint of the sea. She sighed, utterly content.

“When’s the last time you did this?”

“Did what?” Megan tilted her head to look at him. Their faces were close, but she felt no danger now, only satisfaction.

“Enjoyed this park.” Katch had caught the confusion on her face. “Just enjoyed it, Megan, for the fun.”

“I . . .” The Ferris wheel slowed, then stopped. The carts rocked gently as old passengers were exchanged for new. She remembered times when she had been very young. When had they stopped? “I don’t know.” Megan rose when the attendant lifted the safety bar.

This time, as she walked with Katch, she looked around thoughtfully. She saw several people she knew; locals out for an evening’s entertainment mixed with tourists taking a preseason vacation.

“You need to do this more often,” Katch commented, steering her toward the east end of the park. “Laugh,” he continued as she turned her head to him. “Unbend, relax those restrictions you put on yourself.”

Megan’s spine stiffened. “For somebody who barely knows me, you seem remarkably certain of what’s good for me.”

“It isn’t difficult.” He stopped at a concession wagon and ordered two ice-cream cones. “You haven’t any mysteries, Meg.”

“Thank you very much.”

With a laugh, Katch handed her a cone. “Don’t get huffy, I meant that as a compliment.”

“I suppose you’ve known a lot of sophisticated women.”

Katch smiled, then his arm came around her as they began to walk again. “There’s one, her name’s Jessica. She’s one of the most beautiful women I know.”

“Really?” Megan licked at the soft swirl of vanilla.

“That blond, classical look. You know, fair skin, finely chiseled features, blue eyes. Terrific blue eyes.”

“How interesting.”

“Oh, she’s all of that,” he continued. “And more: intelligent, a sense of humor.”

“You sound very fond of her.” Megan gave the ice cream her undivided attention.

“A bit more than that actually. Jessica and I lived together for a number of years.” He dropped the bomb matter-of-factly. “She’s married now and has a couple of kids, but we still manage to see each other now and again. Maybe she can make it down for a few days, then you can meet her.”

“Oh, really!” Megan stopped, incensed. “Flaunt your relationship somewhere else. If you think I want to meet your—your ...”

“Sister,” Katch supplied, then crunched into his cone. “You’d like her. Your ice cream’s dripping, Meg.”

They walked to the entrance gates of the park.

“It’s a very nice park,” Katch murmured. “Small but well set up. No bored-faced attendants.” He reached absently in his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper.

“I forgot to give you your check.”

Megan stuffed it into her pocket without even glancing at it. Her eyes were on Katch’s face. She was all too aware of the direction his thoughts had taken. “My grandfather’s devoted his life to this park,” she reminded him.

“So have you,” Katch said.

“Why do you want to buy it?” she asked. “To make money?”

Katch was silent for a long moment. By mutual consent, they cut across the boardwalk and moved down the sloping sand toward the water. “Is that such a bad reason, Megan? Do you object to making money?”

“No, of course not. That would be ridiculous.”

“I wondered if that was why you haven’t done anything with your sculpting.”

“No. I do what I’m capable of doing, and what I have time for. There are priorities.”

“Perhaps you have them wrong.” Before she could comment, he spoke again. “How would it affect the park’s business if it had some updated rides and an expanded arcade?”

“We can’t afford ...”

“That wasn’t my question.” He took her by the shoulders and his eyes were serious.

“Business would improve, naturally,” Megan answered. “People come here to be entertained. The more entertainment provided, the slicker, the faster the entertainment, the happier they are. And the more money they spend.”

Katch nodded as he searched her face. “Those were my thoughts.”

“It’s academic because we simply haven’t the sort of money necessary for an overhaul.”

“Hmm?” Though he was looking directly at her, Megan saw that his attention had wandered. She

watched it refocus.

“What are you thinking?” she demanded.

The grip on her shoulder altered to a caress. “That you’re extraordinarily beautiful.”

Megan pulled away. “No, you weren’t.”

“It’s what I’m thinking now.” The gleam was back in his eyes as he put his hands to her waist. “It’s what I was thinking the first time I saw you.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She made an attempt to pull away, but he caught her closer.

“I’ve never denied that. But you can’t call me ridiculous for finding you beautiful.” The wind blew her hair back, leaving her face unframed. He laid a soft, unexpected kiss on her forehead. Megan felt her knees turn to water. She placed her hands on his chest both for support and in protest. “You’re an artist.” He drew her fractionally closer, and his voice lowered. “You recognize beauty when you see it.”

“Don’t!” The protest was feeble as she made no attempt to struggle out of his gentle hold.

“Don’t what? Don’t kiss you?” Slowly, luxuriously, his mouth journeyed over her skin. “But I have to, Meg.” His lips touched hers softly, then withdrew, and her heart seemed to stop. The flavor of his lips as they brushed against hers overwhelmed her. They tempted, then ruled. With a moan of pleasure, Megan drew him close against her.

Something seemed to explode inside her as the kiss deepened. She clung to him a moment, dazed, then terrified by the power of it. Needs, emotions and new sensations tumbled together too quickly for her to control them. As panic swamped her, Megan struggled in his arms. She would have run, blindly, without direction, but Katch took her arms and held her still.

“What is it? You’re trembling.” Gently, he tilted her chin until their eyes met. Hers were wide, his serious. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. I’m sorry.”

The gentleness was nearly her undoing. Love, so newly discovered, hammered for release. She shook her head, knowing her voice would be thick with tears if she spoke. Swallowing, Megan prayed she could steady it.

“No, it’s ... I have to get back. They’re closing.” Behind him, she could see the lights flickering off.

“Meg.” The tone halted her. It was not a demand this time, but a request. “Have dinner with me.”

“No—”

“I haven’t even suggested an evening,” he pointed out mildly. “How about Monday?”

Megan stood firm. “No.”

“Please.”

Her resolution dissolved on a sigh. “You don’t play fair,” she murmured.

“Never. How about seven?”

“No picnics on the beach,” she compromised.

“We’ll eat inside, I promise.”

“All right, but just dinner.” She stepped away from him. “Now, I have to go.”

“I’ll walk you back.” Katch took her hand and kissed it before she could stop him. “I have to get my elephant.”

## Chapter Six

Megan held Katch’s face in her hands. With totally focused absorption, she formed his cheekbones. She had thought when she had first begun to work on this bust that morning that it would be good therapy. To an extent, she’d been right. The hours had passed peacefully, without the restless worry of the past two nights. Her mind was centered on her work, leaving no spaces for the disturbing thoughts that had plagued her all weekend.

She opened and closed her hands slowly, using the muscles until the cramping was a dull ache. A glance at her watch told her she had worked for longer than she’d intended. Late afternoon sun poured through the windows. Critically, as she pulled on each finger to soothe it, Megan studied her work.

The model was good, she decided, with just the proper touches of roughness and intelligence she had aimed for. The mouth was strong and sensuous, the eyes perceptive and far too aware. The mobility of the face which Megan found fascinating could only be suggested. It was a face that urged one to trust against better judgment and common sense.

Narrowing her eyes, she studied the clay replica of Katch’s face. There are certain men, she thought, who make a career out of women—winning them, making love to them, leaving them. There are other men who settle down and marry, raise families. How could she doubt what category Katch fell into?

Megan rose to wash her hands. Infatuation, she reflected. It’s simply infatuation. He’s different, and I can’t deny he’s exciting. I wouldn’t be human if I weren’t flattered that he’s attracted to me. I’ve overreacted, that’s all. She dried her hands on a towel and tried to convince herself. A person doesn’t fall in love this quickly. And if they do, it’s just a surface thing, nothing lasting. Megan’s eyes were drawn to the clay model. Katch’s smile seemed to mock all her sensible arguments. She hurled the towel to the floor.

“It can’t happen this fast!” she told him furiously. “Not this way. Not to me.” She swung away from his assured expression. “I won’t let it.”

It’s only the park he wants, she reminded herself. Once he’s finally convinced he can’t have it, he’ll go away. The ache was unexpected, and unwelcome. That’s what I want, she thought. For him to go away and leave us alone. She tried not to remember the new frontiers she had glimpsed while being held in his arms.

With a brisk shake of her head, Megan pulled the tie from her hair so that it tumbled back to brush her shoulders. I’ll start in wood tomorrow, she decided, and covered the clay model. Tonight, I’ll simply enjoy a dinner date with an attractive man. It’s that simple.

With a great deal more ease than she was feeling, Megan took off her work smock and left her studio.

“Hi, sweetheart.” Pop pulled the truck into the driveway just as Megan reached the bottom step.

She noticed the weariness the moment he climbed from the cab. Knowing he hated fussing, she said nothing, but walked over and slipped an arm around his waist.

“Hi, yourself. You’ve been gone a long time.”

“A problem or two at the park,” he told her as they moved together toward the house.

That explained the weariness, Megan thought as she pushed open the back door. “What sort of problem?” Megan waited for him to settle himself at the kitchen table before she walked to the stove to brew tea.

“Repairs, Megan, just repairs. The coaster and the Octopus and a few of the smaller rides.” He leaned back in his chair as Megan turned to face him.

“How bad?”

Pop sighed, knowing it was better to tell her outright than to hedge. “Ten thousand, maybe fifteen.”

Megan let out a long, steady breath. “Ten thousand dollars.” She ran a hand under her bangs to rub her brow. There was no purpose in asking if he was sure. If he’d had any doubt, he’d have kept the matter to himself.

“Well, we can come up with five,” she began, lumping the check she had just received from Katch into their savings. “We’ll have to have a more exact amount so we can decide how big a loan we’ll need.”

“Banks take a dim view of lending great lumps of money to people my age,” Pop murmured.

Because she saw he was tired and discouraged, she spoke briskly. “Don’t be silly.” She walked back to the stove to set on the kettle. “In any case, they’d be lending it to the park, wouldn’t they?” She tried not to think of tight money and high interest rates.

“I’ll go see a few people tomorrow,” he promised, reaching for his pipe as if to indicate their business talk was over. “You’re having dinner with Katch tonight?”

“Yes.” Megan took out cups and saucers.

“Fine young man.” He puffed pleasantly on his pipe. “I like him. Has style.”

“He has style all right,” she grumbled as the kettle began to sing. Carefully, she poured boiling water into cups.

“Knows how to fish,” Pop pointed out.

“Which, of course, makes him a paragon of virtue.”

“Well, it doesn’t make me think any less of him.” He spoke genially, smiling into Megan’s face. “I couldn’t help noticing the two of you on the wheel the other night. You looked real pretty together.”

“Pop, really.” Feeling her cheeks warm, Megan walked back to fiddle with the dishes in the sink.

“You seemed to like him well enough then,” he pointed out before he tested his tea. “I didn’t notice any objections when he kissed you.” Pop sipped, enjoying. “In fact, you seemed to like it.”

“Pop!” Megan turned back, astonished.

“Now, Meg, I wasn’t spying,” he said soothingly, and coughed to mask a chuckle. “You were right out in public, you know. I’d wager a lot of people noticed. Like I said, you looked real pretty together.”

Megan came back to sit at the table without any idea of what she should say. “It was just a kiss,” she managed at length. “It didn’t mean anything.”

Pop nodded twice and drank his tea.

“It didn’t,” Megan insisted.

He gave her one of his angelic smiles. “But you do like him, don’t you?”

Megan dropped her eyes. “Sometimes,” she murmured. “Sometimes I do.”

Pop covered her hand with his and waited until she looked at him again. “Caring for someone is the easiest thing in the world if you let it be.”

“I hardly know him,” she said quickly.

“I trust him,” Pop said simply.

Megan searched his face. “Why?”

After a shrug, Pop drew on his pipe again. “A feeling I have, a look in his eyes. In a people business like mine, you get to be a good judge of character. He has integrity. He wants his way, all right, but he doesn’t cheat. That’s important.”

Megan sat silently for a moment, not touching her cooling tea. “He wants the park,” she said quietly.

Pop looked at her through a nimbus of pipe smoke. “Yes, I know. He said so up front. He doesn’t sneak around either.” Pop’s expression softened a bit as he looked into Megan’s eyes. “Things don’t always stay the same in life, Megan. That’s what makes it work.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Do you . . . are you thinking of selling him the park?”

Pop heard the underlying hint of panic and patted her hand again. “Let’s not worry about that now. The first problem is getting the rides repaired for the Easter break. Why don’t you wear the yellow dress I like tonight, Meg? The one with the little jacket. It makes me think of spring.”

Megan considered questioning him further, then subsided. There was no harder nut to crack than her grandfather when he had made up his mind to close a subject. “All right. I think I’ll go up and have a

bath.”

“Megan.” She turned at the door and looked back at him. “Enjoy yourself. Sometimes it’s best to roll with the punches.”

When she walked away, he looked at the empty doorway and thoughtfully stroked his beard.

An hour later, Megan looked at herself in the yellow dress. The shade hinted at apricot and warmed against her skin. The lines were simple, suiting her willow-slim figure and height. Without the jacket, her arms and shoulders were bare but for wispy straps. She ran a brush through her hair in long, steady strokes. The tiny gold hoops in her ears were her only jewelry.

“Hey, Megan!”

The brush paused in midair as she watched her own eyes widen in the mirror. He wasn’t really standing outside shouting for her!

“Meg!”

Shaking her head in disbelief, Megan went to the window. Katch stood two stories down. He lifted a hand in salute when she appeared in the window.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Open the screen.”

“Why?”

“Open it,” he repeated.

“If you expect me to jump, you can forget it.” Out of curiosity, she leaned out the window.

“Catch!”

Her reflexes responded before she could think. Megan reached for the bundle he tossed up to her, and found her hands full of daffodils. She buried her face in the bouquet.

“They’re beautiful.” Her eyes smiled over the blooms and down at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he returned. “Are you coming down?”

“Yes.” She tossed her hair behind her shoulder. “Yes, yes, in a minute.”

Katch drove quickly and competently, but not toward Restaurant Row as Megan had anticipated. He turned toward the ocean and headed north. She relaxed, enjoying the quieting light of dusk and his effortless driving.

She recognized the area. The houses there were larger, more elaborate than those in and on the very outskirts of town. There were tall hedges to assure privacy both from other houses and the public



beaches. There were neatly trimmed lawns, willows, blossoming crepe myrtle, and asphalt drives. Katch pulled into one set well away from the other homes and bordered by purplish shrubbery.

The house was small by the neighborhood standards, and done in the weathered wood Megan invariably found attractive. It was a split-level building, with an observation deck crowning the upper story.

“What’s this?” she asked, liking the house immediately.

“This is where I live.” Katch leaned across her to unlatch her door, then slid out his own side.

“You live here?”

Katch smiled at the surprised doubt in her voice. “I have to live somewhere, Meg.”

She wandered farther along the stone path that led to the house. “I suppose I really didn’t think about you buying a house here. It suggests roots.”

“I have them,” he told her. “I just transplant them easily.”

She looked at the house, the widespread yard. “You’ve picked the perfect spot.”

Katch took her hand, interlocking fingers. “Come inside,” he invited.

“When did you buy this?” she asked as they climbed the front steps.

“Oh, a few months ago when I came through. I moved in last week and haven’t had a lot of time to look for furniture.” The key shot into the lock. “I’ve picked up a few things here and there, and had others sent down from my apartment in New York.”

It was scantily furnished, but with style. There was a low, sectional sofa in biscuit with a hodgepodge of colored pillows and a wicker throne chair coupled with a large hanging ivy in a pottery dish. A pair of étagères in brass and glass held a collection of shells; on the oak planked floor lay a large sisal rug.

The room was open, with stairs to the right leading to the second level, and a stone fireplace on the left wall. The quick survey showed Megan he had not placed her sculptures in the main room. She wondered fleetingly what he had done with them.

“It’s wonderful, Katch.” She wandered to a window. The lawn sloped downward and ended in tall hedges that gave the house comfortable privacy. “Can you see the ocean from the top level?”

When he didn’t answer, she turned back to him. Her smile faded against the intensity of his gaze. Her heart beat faster. This was the part of him she had to fear, not the amiable gallant who had tossed her daffodils.

She tilted her head back, afraid, but wanting to meet him equally. He brought his hands to her face, and she felt the hardness of his palms on her skin. He brushed her hair back from her face as he brought her closer. He lowered his mouth, pausing only briefly before it claimed hers, as if to ascertain the need mirrored in her eyes. The kiss was instantly deep, instantly seeking.

She had been a fool—a fool to believe she could talk herself out of being in love with him. A fool to think that reason had anything to do with the heart.

When Katch drew her away, Megan pressed her cheek against his chest, letting her arms wind their way around his waist. His hesitation was almost too brief to measure before he gathered her close. She felt his lips in her hair and sighed from the sheer joy of it. His heartbeat was quick and steady in her ear.

“Did you say something?” he murmured.

“Hmm? When?”

“Before.” His fingers came up to massage the back of her neck. Megan shivered with pleasure as she tried to remember the world before she had been in his arms.

“I think I asked if I could see the ocean from the top level.”

“Yes.” Again he took his hands to her face to tilt it back for one long, searing kiss. “You can.”

“Will you show me?”

The grip on her skin tightened and her eyes closed in anticipation of the next kiss. But he drew her away until only their hands were touching. “After dinner.”

Megan, content with looking at him, smiled. “Are we eating here?”

“I hate restaurants,” Katch said, leading her toward the kitchen.

“An odd sentiment from a man who owns one.”

“Let’s say there are times when I prefer more intimate surroundings.”

“I see.” He pushed open the door to the kitchen and Megan glanced around at efficiency in wood and stainless steel. “And who’s doing the cooking this time?”

“We are,” he said easily, and grinned at her. “How do you like your steak?”

There was a rich, red wine to accompany the meal they ate at a smoked-glass table. A dozen candles flickered on a sideboard behind them, held in small brass holders. Megan’s mood was as mellow as the wine that waltzed in her head. The man across from her held her in the palm of his hand. When she rose to stack the dishes, he took her hand. “Not now. There’s a moon tonight.”

Without hesitation, she went with him.

They climbed the stairs together, wide, uncarpeted stairs which were split into two sections by a landing. He led her through the main bedroom, a room dominated by a large bed with brass head- and footboards. There were long glass doors which led to a walkway. From there, stairs ascended to the observation deck.

Megan could hear the breakers before she moved to the rail. Beyond the hedgerow, the surf was turbulent. White water frothed against the dark. The moon’s light was thin, but was aided by the power of uncountable stars.

She took a long breath and leaned on the rail. “It’s lovely here. I never tire of looking at the ocean.”

There was a click from his lighter, then tobacco mixed pleasantly with the scent of the sea.

“Do you ever think about traveling?”

Megan moved her shoulders, a sudden, restless gesture. “Of course, sometimes. It isn’t possible right now.”

Katch drew on the thin cigar. “Where would you go?”

“Where would I go?” she repeated.

“Yes, where would you go if you could?” The smoke from his cigar wafted upward and vanished. “Pretend, Meg. You like to pretend, don’t you?”

She closed her eyes a moment, letting the wine swim with her thoughts. “New Orleans,” she murmured. “I’ve always wanted to see New Orleans. And Paris. When I was young I used to dream about studying in Paris like the great artists.” She opened her eyes again. “You’ve been there, I suppose. To New Orleans and to Paris?”

“Yes, I’ve been there.”

“What are they like?”

Katch traced the line of her jaw with a fingertip before answering. “New Orleans smells of the river and swelters in the summer. There’s music at all hours from open nightclubs and street musicians. It moves constantly, like New York, but at a more civilized pace.”

“And Paris?” Megan insisted, wanting to see her wishes through his eyes. “Tell me about Paris.”

“It’s ancient and elegant, like a grand old woman. It’s not very clean, but it never seems to matter. It’s best in the spring; nothing smells like Paris in the spring. I’d like to take you there.” Unexpectedly he took her hair in his hand. His eyes were intense again and direct on hers. “I’d like to see the emotions you control break loose. You’d never restrict them in Paris.”

“I don’t do that.” Something more than wine began to swim in her head.

He tossed the cigar over the rail, then his free hand came to her waist to press her body against his. “Don’t you?” There was a hint of impatience in his voice as he began to slide the jacket from her shoulders. “You’ve passion, but you bank it down. It escapes into your work, but even that’s kept closed up in a studio. When I kiss you, I can taste it struggling to the surface.”

He freed her arms from the confines of the jacket and laid it over the rail. Slowly, deliberately, he ran his fingers over the naked skin, feeling the warmth of response. “One day it’s going to break loose. I intend to be there when it does.”

Katch pushed the straps from her shoulders and replaced them with his lips. Megan made no protest as the kisses trailed to her throat. His tongue played lightly with the pulse as his hand came up to cup her breast. But when his mouth came to hers, the gentleness fled, and with it her passivity. Hunger incited hunger.

When he nipped her bottom lip, she gasped with pleasure. His tongue was avid, searching while his

hands began a quest of their own. He slipped the bodice of her dress to her waist, murmuring with approval as he found her naked breasts taut with desire. Megan allowed him his freedom, riding on the crest of the wave that rose inside her. She had no knowledge to guide her, no experience. Desire ruled and instinct followed.

She trailed her fingers along the back of his neck, kneading the warm skin, thrilling to the response she felt to her touch. Here was a power she had never explored. She slipped her hands under the back of his sweater. Their journey was slow, exploring. She felt the muscles of his shoulders tense as her hands played over them.

The quality of the kiss changed from demanding to urgent. His passion swamped her, mixing with her own until the combined power was more than she could bear. The ache came from nowhere and spread through her with impossible rapidity. She hurt for him. Desire was a pain as sharp as it was irresistible. In surrender, in anticipation, Megan swayed against him.

“Katch.” Her voice was husky. “I want to stay with you tonight.”

She was crushed against him for a moment, held so tightly, so strongly, there was no room for breath. Then, slowly, she felt him loosen his hold. Taking her by the shoulders, Katch looked down at her, his eyes dark, spearing into hers. Her breath was uneven; shivers raced along her skin. Slowly, with hands that barely touched her skin, he slipped her dress back into place.

“I’ll take you home now.”

The shock of rejection struck her like a blow. Her mouth trembled open, then shut again. Quickly, fighting against the tears that were pressing for release, she fumbled for her jacket.

“Meg.” He reached out to touch her shoulders, but she backed away.

“No. No, don’t touch me.” The tears were thickening her voice. She swallowed. “I won’t be patted on the head. It appears I misunderstood.”

“You didn’t misunderstand anything,” he tossed back. “And don’t cry, damn it.”

“I have no intention of crying,” she said. “I’d like to go home.” The hurt was in her eyes, shimmering behind the tears she denied.

“We’ll talk.” Katch took her hand, but she jerked it away.

“Oh, no. No, we won’t.” Megan straightened her shoulders and looked at him squarely. “We had dinner; things got a bit beyond what they should have. It’s as simple as that, and it’s over.”

“It’s not simple or over, Meg.” Katch took another long look into her eyes. “But we’ll drop it for now.”

Megan turned away and walked back down the stairs.

## Chapter Seven

Amusement parks lose their mystique in the light of day. Dirt, scratched paint and dents show up. What is shiny and bright under artificial light is ordinary in the sunshine. Only the very young or the very young-hearted can believe in magic when faced with reality.

Megan knew her grandfather was perennially young. She loved him for it. Fondly, she watched him supervising repairs on the Haunted Castle. His ghosts, she thought with a smile, are important to him. She walked beside the track, avoiding her own ghost along the way. It had been ten days since Pop had told her of the repair problems. Ten days since she had seen Katch. Megan pushed thoughts of him from her mind and concentrated on her own reality—her grandfather and their park. She was old enough to know what was real and what was fantasy.

“Hi,” she called out from behind him. “How are things going?”

Pop turned at the sound of her voice, and his grin was expansive. “Just fine, Megan.” The sound of repairs echoed around his words. “Quicker than I thought they would. We’ll be rolling before the Easter rush.” He swung an arm around her shoulder and squeezed. “The smaller rides are already back in order. How about you?”

She made no objection when he began to steer her outside. The noise made it difficult to hear. “What about me?” she replied. The sudden flash of sunlight made her blink. The spring day had all the heat of midsummer.

“You’ve that unhappy look in your eyes. Have had, for more than a week.” Pop rubbed his palm against her shoulder as if to warm her despite the strength of the sun. “You know you don’t hide things from me, Megan. I know you too well.”

She was silent a moment, wanting to choose her words carefully. “I wasn’t trying to hide anything, Pop.” Megan shrugged, turning to watch the crew working on the roller coaster. “It’s just not important enough to talk about, that’s all. How long before the coaster’s fixed?”

“Important enough to make you unhappy,” he countered, ignoring her evasion. “That’s plenty important to me. You haven’t gotten too old to talk to me about your problems now, have you?”

She turned dark apologetic eyes on him. “Oh no, Pop, I can always talk to you.”

“Well,” he said simply, “I’m listening.”

“I made a mistake, that’s all.” She shook her head and would have walked closer to inspect the work crew had he not held her to him with a firm hand.

“Megan.” Pop placed both hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. As they were nearly the same height, their eyes were level. “I’m going to ask you straight,” he continued. “Are you in love with him?”

“No,” she denied quickly.

Pop raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t have to mention any names, I see.”

Megan paused a moment. She had forgotten how shrewd her grandfather could be. “I thought I was,” she said more carefully. “I was wrong.”

“Then why are you so unhappy?”

“Pop, please.” She tried to back away, but again his broad hands held her steady.

“You’ve always given me straight answers, Meg, even when I’ve had to drag them out of you.”

She sighed, knowing evasions and half-truths were useless when he was in this mood. “All right. Yes, I’m in love with him, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Not a very bright statement from a bright girl like you,” he said with a gentle hint of disapproval. Megan shrugged. “Why don’t you explain why being in love doesn’t matter,” he invited.

“Well, it certainly doesn’t work if you’re not loved back,” Megan murmured.

“Who says you’re not?” Pop wanted to know. His voice was so indignant, she felt some of the ache subside.

“Pop.” Her expression softened. “Just because you love me doesn’t mean everyone else does.”

“What makes you so sure he doesn’t?” her grandfather argued. “Did you ask him?”

“No!” Megan was so astonished, she nearly laughed at the thought.

“Why not? Things are simpler that way.”

Megan took a deep breath, hoping to make him understand. “David Katcherton isn’t a man who falls in love with a woman, not seriously. And certainly not with someone like me.” The broad gesture she made was an attempt to enhance an explanation she knew was far from adequate. “He’s been to Paris, he lives in New York. He has a sister named Jessica.”

“That clears things up,” Pop agreed, and Megan made a quick sound of frustration.

“I’ve never been anywhere.” She dragged a hand through her hair. “In the summer I see millions, literally millions of people, but they’re all transient. I don’t know who they are. The only people I really know are ones who live right here. The farthest I’ve been away from the beach is Charleston.”

Pop brushed a hand over her hair to smooth it. “I’ve kept you too close,” he murmured. “I always told myself there’d be other times.”

“Oh no, Pop, I didn’t mean it that way.” She threw her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder. “I didn’t mean to sound that way. I love you, I love it here. I wouldn’t change anything. That was hateful of me.”

He laughed and patted her back. The subtle scent of her perfume reminded him forcefully that she was no longer a girl but a woman. The years had been incredibly quick. “You’ve never done a hateful thing in your life. We both know you’ve wanted to see a bit of the world, and I know you’ve stuck close to keep an eye on me. Oh yes,” he said, anticipating her objection. “And I was selfish enough to let you.”

“You’ve never done anything selfish,” she retorted and drew away. “I only meant that Katch and I have so little common ground. He’s bound to see things differently than I do. I’m out of my depth with him.”

“You’re a strong swimmer, as I recall.” Pop shook his head at her expression and sighed. “All right, we’ll let it lie awhile. You’re also stubborn.”

“Adamant,” she corrected, smiling again. “It’s a nicer word.”

“Just a fancy way of saying pigheaded,” Pop said bluntly, but his eyes smiled back at her. “Why aren’t you back in your studio instead of hanging around an amusement park in the middle of the day?”

“It wasn’t going very well,” she confessed, thinking of the half-carved face that haunted her. “Besides, I’ve always had a thing for amusement parks.” She tucked her arm in his as they began to walk again.

“Well, this one’ll be in apple-pie order in another week,” Pop said, looking around in satisfaction. “With luck, we’ll have a good season and be able to pay back a healthy chunk of that ten thousand.”

“Maybe the bank will send us some customers so they’ll get their money faster,” Megan suggested, half listening to the sound of hammer against wood as they drew closer to the roller coaster.

“Oh, I didn’t get the money from the bank, I got it from—” Pop cut himself off abruptly. With a cough and a wheeze, he bent down to tie his shoe.

“You didn’t get the money from the bank?” Megan frowned at the snowy white head in puzzlement. “Well, where in the world did you get it then?”

His answer was an unintelligible grunt.

“You don’t know anybody with that kind of money,” she began with a half-smile. “Where . . .” The smile flew away. “No. No, you didn’t.” Even as she denied it, Megan knew it had to be the truth. “You didn’t get it from him?”

“Oh now, Megan, you weren’t to know.” Distress showed in his eyes and seemed to weaken his voice. “He especially didn’t want you to know.”

“Why?” she demanded. “Why did you do it?”

“It just sort of happened, Meg.” Pop reached out to pat her hand in his old, soothing fashion. “He was here, I was telling him about the repairs and getting a loan, and he offered. It seemed like the perfect solution.” He fiddled with his shoestrings. “Banks poke around and take all that time for paperwork, and he isn’t charging me nearly as much interest. I thought you’d be happy about that . . .” He trailed off.

“Is everything in writing?” she asked, deadly calm.

“Of course.” Pop assumed a vaguely injured air. “Katch said it didn’t matter, but I know how fussy you are, so I had papers drawn up, nice and legal.”

“Didn’t matter,” she repeated softly. “And what did you use as collateral?”

“The park, naturally.”

“Naturally,” she repeated. Fury bubbled in the single word. “I bet he loved that.”

“Now, don’t you worry, Megan. Everything’s coming along just fine. The repairs are going well, and we’ll be opening right on schedule. Besides,” he added with a sigh, “you weren’t even supposed to know. Katch wanted it that way.”

“Oh, I’m sure he did,” she said bitterly. “I’m sure he did.”

Turning, she darted away. Pop watched her streak out of sight, then hauled himself to his feet. She had the devil’s own temper when she cut loose, that girl. Brushing his hands together, he grinned. That, he decided, pleased with his own maneuvering, should stir up something.

Megan brought the bike to a halt at the crest of Katch’s drive, then killed the engine. She took off her helmet and clipped it on the seat. He was not, she determined, going to get away with it.

Cutting across the lawn, she marched to the front door. The knock was closer to a pound but still brought no response. Megan stuffed her hands into her pockets and scowled. Her bike sat behind his black Porsche. Ignoring amenities, she tried the knob. When it turned, she didn’t hesitate. She opened the door and walked inside.

The house was quiet. Instinct told her immediately that no one was inside. Still, she walked through the living room looking for signs of him.

A watch, wafer-thin and gold, was tossed on the glass shelves of the étagère. A Nikon camera sat on the coffee table, its back open and empty of film. A pair of disreputable tennis shoes were half under the couch. A volume of John Cheever lay beside them.

Abruptly, she realized what she had done. She’d intruded where she had no right. She was both uncomfortable and fascinated. An ashtray held the short stub of a thin cigar. After a brief struggle with her conscience, she walked toward the kitchen. She wasn’t prying, she told herself, only making certain he wasn’t home. After all, his car was here and the door had been unlocked.

There was a cup in the sink and a half pot of cold coffee on the stove. He had spilled some on the counter and neglected to wipe it up. Megan curtailed the instinctive move to reach for a dish towel. As she turned to leave, a low mechanical hum from outside caught her attention. She walked to the window and saw him.

He was coming from the south side of the lawn, striding behind a power mower. He was naked to the waist, with jeans low and snug at his hips. He was tanned, a deep honey gold that glistened now with the effort of manual labor. She admired the play of muscles rippling down his arms and across his back.

Stepping back from the window with a jerk, she stormed through the side kitchen door and raced across the lawn.

The flurry of movement and a flash of crimson caught his eye. Katch glanced over as Megan moved toward him in a red tailored shirt and white jeans. Squinting against the sun, he wiped the back of his hand across his brow. He reached down and shut off the mower as she came to him.

“Hello, Meg,” he said lightly, but his eyes weren’t as casual.

“You have nerve, Katcherton,” she began. “But even I didn’t think you’d take advantage of a trusting old man.”

He lifted a brow and leaned against the mower’s handle. “Once more,” he requested, “with clarity.”



“You’re the type who has to poke your fingers into other people’s business,” she continued. “You just had to be at the park, you just had to make a magnanimous offer with your tidy little pile of money.”

“Ah, a glimmer of light.” He stretched his back. “I didn’t think you’d be thrilled the money came from me. It seems I was right.”

“You knew I’d never allow it,” she declared.

“I don’t believe I considered that.” He leaned on the mower again, but there was nothing restful in the gesture. “You don’t run Pop’s life from what I’ve seen, Meg, and you certainly don’t run mine.”

She did her best to keep her tone even. “I have a great deal of interest in the park and everything that pertains to it.”

“Fine, then you should be pleased that you have the money for the repairs quickly, and at a low rate of interest.” His tone was cool and businesslike.

“Why?” she demanded. “Why did you lend us the money?”

“I don’t,” Katch said after a long, silent moment, “owe you any explanation.”

“Then I’ll give you one,” Megan tossed back. There was passion in her voice. “You saw an opportunity and grabbed it. I suppose that’s what people do in your sort of world. Take, without the least thought of the people involved.”

“Perhaps I’m confused.” His eyes were slate, opaque and unreadable. His voice matched them. “I was under the impression that I gave something.”

“Lentsomething,” Megan corrected. “With the park as collateral.”

“If that’s your problem, take it up with your grandfather.” Katch bent down, reaching for the cord to restart the mower.

“You had no right to take advantage of him. He trusts everyone.”

Katch released the cord again with a snap. “A shame it’s not an inherited quality.”

“I’ve no reason to trust you.”

“And every reason, it appears, to mistrust me since the first moment.” His eyes had narrowed as if in speculation. “Is it just me or a general antipathy to men?”

She refused to dignify the question with an answer. “You want the park,” she began.

“Yes, and I made that clear from the beginning.” Katch shoved the mower aside so that there was no obstacle between them. “I still intend to have it, but I don’t need to be devious to get it. I still intend to have you.”

She stepped back but he was too quick. His fingers curled tightly around her upper arm. “Maybe I made a mistake by letting you go the other night.”

“You didn’t want me. It’s just a game.”

“Didn’t want you?” She made another quick attempt to pull away and failed. “No, that’s right, I didn’t want you.” He pulled her against him and her mouth was crushed and conquered. Her mind whirled with the shock of it. “I don’t want you now.” Before she could speak, his mouth savaged hers again. There was a taste of brutality he had never shown her. “Like I haven’t wanted you for days.” He pulled her to the ground.

“No,” she said, frightened, “don’t.” But his lips were silencing hers again.

There was none of the teasing persuasion he had shown her before, no light arrogance. These were primordial demands, eliciting primordial responses from her. He would take what he wanted, his way. He plundered, dragging her with him as he raced for more. Then his lips left hers, journeying to her throat before traveling downward. Megan felt she was suffocating, suffused with heat. Her breath caught in her lungs, emerging in quick gasps or moans. His fingers ran a bruising trail over her quivering flesh. He ran his thumb over the point of her breast, back and forth, until she was beyond fear, beyond thought. His mouth came back to hers, fever hot, desperate. She murmured mindlessly, clinging to him as her body shuddered with waves of need.

Katch lifted his head, and his breath was warm and erratic on her face. Megan’s lids fluttered open, revealing eyes dazed with passion, heavy with desire. Silently, she trembled. If words had been hers, she would have told him that she loved him. There was no pride in her, no shame, only soaring need and a love that was painful in its strength.

“This isn’t the place for you.” His voice was rough as he rolled over on his back. They lay there a moment, side by side, without touching. “And this isn’t the way.”

Her mind was fogged, and her blood surging. “Katch,” Megan managed his name and struggled to sit up. His eyes lingered on her form, then slid up slowly to brood on her face. It was flushed and aware. She wanted to touch him but was afraid.

For a moment their eyes met. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head in denial. Her body ached with longing.

“Go home then.” He rose, giving her a last, brief glance. “Before I do.” He turned and left her.

Megan heard the slam of the kitchen door.

## Chapter Eight

It was difficult for Megan to cope with the two-week influx of tourists and sun seekers. They came, as they did every Easter, in droves. It was a preview of what the summer would hold. They came to bake on the beach and impress those left at home with a spring tan. They came to be battered and bounced around by the waves. They came to have fun. And what better place to find it than on white sand beaches or in an ocean with a gentle undertow and cresting waves? They came to laugh and sought their entertainment on spiraling water slides, in noisy arcades or crowded amusement parks.

For the first time in her life, Megan found herself resenting the intrusion. She wanted the quiet, the solitude that went with a resort town in its off-season. She wanted to be alone, to work, to heal. It seemed her art was the only thing she could turn to for true comfort. She was unwilling to speak of her

feelings to her grandfather. There was still too much to be sorted out in her own mind.

Knowing her, and her need for privacy, Pop didn't question.

The hours she spent at the park were passed mechanically. The faces she saw were all strangers. Megan resented it. She resented their enjoyment when her own life was in such turmoil. She found solace in her studio. If the light in her studio burned long past midnight, she never noticed the time. Her energy was boundless, a nervous, trembling energy that kept her going.

It was afternoon at the amusement park. At the kiddie cars Megan was taking tickets and doing her best to keep the more aggressive youngsters from trampling others. Each time the fire engines, race cars, police cruisers and ambulances were unloaded, she pushed the lever which sent the caravan around in its clanging, roaring circle. Children grinned fiercely and gripped steering wheels.

One toddler rode as fire chief with eyes wide with stunned pleasure. Even though she'd been on duty nearly four hours, Megan smiled.

"Excuse me." Megan glanced over at the voice, prepared to answer a parental question. The woman was an exquisite blonde, with a mane of hair tied back from a delicately molded face. "You're Megan, aren't you? Megan Miller?"

"Yes. May I help you?"

"I'm Jessica Delaney."

Megan wondered that she hadn't seen it instantly. "Katch's sister."

"Yes." Jessica smiled. "How clever of you—but Katch told me you were. There is a family resemblance, of course, but so few people notice it unless we're standing together."

Megan's artist eyes could see the similar bone structure beneath the surface differences. Jessica's eyes were blue, as Katch had said, and the brows above them more delicate than his, but there were the same thick lashes and long lids.

"I'm glad to meet you." Megan reached for something to say. "Are you visiting Katch?" She didn't look like a woman who would patronize amusement parks, more likely country clubs or theaters.

"For a day or so." Jessica gestured to the adjoining ride where children flew miniature piper cubs in the inevitable circle. "My family's with me. Rob, my husband." Megan smiled at a tall man with a straight shock of dark hair and an attractive, angular face. "And my girls, Erin and Laura." She nodded to the two caramel-haired girls of approximately four and six riding double in a plane.

"They're beautiful."

"We like them," Jessica said comfortably. "Katch didn't know where I might find you in the park, but he described you very accurately."

"Is he here?" Megan asked, trying without much success to sound offhanded even as her eyes scanned the crowd.

“No, he had some business to attend to.”

The timer rang, signaling the ride’s end. “Excuse me a moment,” Megan murmured. Grateful for the interruption, she supervised the unloading and loading of children. It gave her the time she needed to steady herself. Her two final customers were Katch’s nieces. Erin, the elder, smiled at her with eyes the identical shade of her uncle’s.

“I’m driving,” she said positively as her sister settled beside her. “She only rides.”

“I do not.” Laura gripped the twin steering wheel passionately.

“It runs in the family,” Jessica stated from behind her. “Stubbornness.” Megan hooked the last safety belt and returned to the controls. “You’ve probably noticed it.”

Megan smiled at her. “Yes, once or twice.” The lights and noise spun and circled behind her.

“I know you’re busy,” Jessica stated, glancing at the packed vehicles.

Megan gave a small shrug as she followed her gaze. “It’s mostly a matter of making certain everyone stays strapped in and no one’s unhappy.”

“My little angels,” Jessica said, “will insist on dashing off to the next adventure the moment the ride’s over.” She paused. “Could we talk after you’re finished here?”

Megan frowned. “Well, yes, I suppose . . . I’m due relief in an hour.”

“Wonderful.” Jessica’s smile was as charming as her brother’s. “I’d like to go to your studio, if that suits you. I could meet you in an hour and a half.”

“At my studio?”

“Wonderful!” Jessica said again and patted Megan’s hand. “Katch gave me directions.”

The timer rang again, recalling Megan to duty. As she started yet another round of junior rides she wondered why Jessica had insisted on a date in her studio.

With a furrowed brow, Megan studied herself in the bedroom mirror. Would a man who admired Jessica’s soft, delicate beauty be attracted to someone who seemed to be all planes and angles? Megan shrugged her shoulders as if it didn’t matter. She twirled the stem of the brush idly between her fingers. She supposed that he, like the majority of people who came here, was looking for some passing entertainment.

“You are,” she said softly to the woman in the glass, “such a fool.” She closed her eyes, not wanting to see the reflected accusation. Because you can’t let go, her mind continued ruthlessly. Because it doesn’t really matter to you why he wanted you with him, just that he wanted you. And you wish, you wish with all your heart that he still did.

She shook her head, disturbing the work she had done with the brush. It was time to stop thinking of it.

Jessica Delaney would be arriving any moment.

Why? Megan set down her brush and frowned into middle distance. Why was she coming? What could she possibly want? Megan still had no sensible answer. I haven't heard from Katch in two weeks, she reflected. Why should his sister suddenly want to see me?

The sound of a car pulling into the drive below interrupted her thoughts. Megan walked to the window in time to see Jessica get out of Katch's Porsche.

Megan reached the back stoop before Jessica, as she had been taking a long, leisurely look at the yard. "Hello." Megan felt awkward and rustic. She hesitated briefly before stepping away from the door.

"What a lovely place." Jessica's smile was so like Katch's that Megan's heart lurched. "How I wish my azaleas looked like yours."

"Pop—my grandfather babies them."

"Yes." The blue eyes were warm and personal. "I've heard wonderful things about your grandfather. I'd love to meet him."

"He's still at the park." Her sense of awkwardness was fading. Charm definitely ran in the Katcherton family. "Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

"Maybe later. Let's go up to the studio, shall we?"

"If you don't mind my asking, Mrs. Delaney—"

"Jessica," she interrupted cheerfully and began to climb the open back stairs.

"Jessica," Megan agreed, "how did you know I had a studio, and that it was over the garage?"

"Oh, Katch told me," Jessica said breezily. "He tells me a great many things." She stood to the side of the door and waited for Megan to open it. "I'm very anxious to see your work. I dabble in oil from time to time."

"Do you?" Jessica's interest now made more sense. Artistic kinship.

"Badly, I'm afraid, which is a constant source of frustration to me." Again the Katcherton smile bloomed on her face.

Megan's reaction was unexpectedly sharp and swift. She fumbled for the doorknob. "I've never had much luck on canvas," she said quickly. She needed words, lots of words to cover what she feared was much too noticeable. "Nothing seems to come out the way I intend," she continued as they entered the studio. "It's maddening not to be able to express yourself properly. I do some airbrushing during the summer rush, but ..."

Jessica wasn't listening. She moved around the room much the same way her brother had—intently, gracefully, silently. She fingered a piece here, lifted a piece there. Once, she studied a small ivory unicorn for so long, Megan fidgeted with nerves.

What was she doing? she wondered. *And why?*

Sunlight stippled the floor. Dust motes danced in the early evening light. Too late, Megan recalled the bust of Katch. One slanted beam of sun fell on it, highlighting the planes the chisel had already defined. Though it was still rough hewn and far from finished, it was unmistakably Katch. Feeling foolish, Megan walked over to stand in front of it, hoping to conceal it from Jessica's view.

"Katch was right," Jessica murmured. She still held the unicorn, stroking it with her fingertips. "He invariably is. Normally that annoys me to distraction, but not this time." The resemblance to Katch was startling now. Megan's fingers itched to make a quick sketch even as she tried to follow the twisting roads in Jessica's conversation.

"Right about what?"

"Your extraordinary talent."

"What?" Meg's eyes widened.

"Katch told me your work was remarkable," she went on, giving the unicorn a final study before setting it down. "I agreed when I received the two pieces he sent up to me, but they were only two, after all." She picked up a chisel and tapped it absently against her palm while her eyes continued to wander. "This is astonishing."

"He sent you the sculptures he bought from me?"

"Yes, a few weeks ago. I was very impressed." Jessica set down the chisel with a clatter and moved to a nearly completed study in limestone of a woman rising from the sea. It was the piece Megan had been working on before she had set it aside to begin Katch's bust. "This is fabulous!" Jessica declared. "I'm going to have to have it as well as the unicorn. The response to the two pieces Katch sent me has been very favorable."

"I don't understand what you're talking about." Try as she might, Megan couldn't keep up with Jessica's conversation. "Whose response?"

"My clients'," said Jessica. "At my gallery in New York." She gave Megan a brilliant smile. "Didn't I tell you I run my own gallery?"

"No," Megan answered. "No, you didn't."

"I suppose I thought Katch did. I'd better start at the beginning then."

"I'd really appreciate it if you would," Megan told her, and waited until she had settled herself in the small wooden chair beside her.

"Katch sent me two of your pieces a few weeks ago," Jessica began briskly. "He wanted a professional opinion. I may only be able to dabble in oil, but I know art." She spoke with a confidence that Megan recognized. "Since I knew I'd never make it as a working artist, I put all the years of study to good use. I opened a gallery in Manhattan. *Jessica's*. Over the past six years, I've developed a rather nice clientele." She smiled. "So naturally, when my wandering brother saw your work, he sent it off to me. He always has his instincts verified by an expert, then plunges along his own way notwithstanding." She sighed indulgently. "I happen to know he was advised against building that hospital in Central Africa last year but he did it anyway. He does what he wants to."

“Hospital.” Megan barely made the jump to Jessica’s new train of thought.

“Yes, a children’s hospital. He has a soft spot for kids.” Jessica tried to speak teasingly, but the love came through. “He did some astonishing things for orphaned refugees after Vietnam. And there was the really fabulous little park he built in New South Wales.”

Megan sat dumbly. Could they possibly be speaking about the same David Katcherton? Was this the man who had brashly approached her in the local market?

She remembered with uncomfortable clarity that she had accused him of trying to cheat her grandfather. She had told herself that he was an opportunist, a man spoiled by wealth and good looks. She’d tried to tell herself he was irresponsible, undependable, a man in search of his own pleasure.

“I didn’t know,” she murmured. “I didn’t know anything about it.”

“Oh, Katch keeps a low profile when he chooses,” Jessica told her. “And he chooses to have no publicity when he’s doing that sort of thing. He has incredible energy and outrageous self-confidence, but he’s also very warm.” Her gaze slipped beyond Megan’s shoulder. “But then, you appear to know him well.”

For a moment, Megan regarded Jessica blankly. Then she twisted her head and saw Katch’s bust. In her confusion, she had forgotten her desire to conceal it. Slowly, she turned her head back, trying to keep her voice and face passive.

“No. No, really I don’t think I know him at all. He has a fascinating face. I couldn’t resist sculpting it.”

She noted a glint of understanding in Jessica’s eyes. “He’s a fascinating man,” Jessica murmured.

Megan’s gaze faltered.

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said immediately. “I’ve intruded, a bad habit of mine. We won’t talk about Katch. Let’s talk about your showing.”

Megan lifted her eyes again. “My what?”

“Your showing,” Jessica repeated, dashing swiftly up a new path. “When do you think you’ll have enough pieces ready? You certainly have a tremendous start here, and Katch mentioned something about a gallery in town having some of your pieces. I think we can shoot for the fall.”

“Please, Jessica, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” A note of panic slipped into Megan’s voice. It was faint, almost buried, but Jessica detected it. She reached over and took both of Megan’s hands. The grip was surprisingly firm.

“Megan, you have something special, something powerful. It’s time to share it.” She rose then, urging Megan up with her. “Let’s have that coffee now, shall we? And we’ll talk about it.”

An hour later, Megan sat alone in the kitchen. Darkness was encroaching, but she didn’t rise from the table to switch on the light. Two cups sat, her own half-filled with now cold coffee, Jessica’s empty but for dregs. She tried to take her mind methodically over what had happened in the last sixty minutes.

A showing at Jessica's, an art gallery in Manhattan. New York. A public show. Of her work.

It didn't happen, she thought. I imagined it. Then she looked down at the empty cup across from her. The air still smelled faintly of Jessica's light, sophisticated scent.

Half-dazed, Megan took both cups to the sink and automatically began rinsing them. How did she talk me into it? she wondered. I was agreeing to dates and details before I had agreed to do the showing. Does anyone ever say no to a Katcherton? She sighed and looked down at her wet hands. I have to call him. The knowledge increased the sense of panic. *I have to.*

Carefully, she placed the washed cups and saucers in the drainboard. I have to thank him. Nerves fluttered in her throat, but she made a pretense, for herself, of casually drying her damp hands on the hips of her jeans. She walked to the wall phone beside the stove.

"It's simple," she whispered, then bit her lip. She cleared her throat. "All I have to do is thank him, that's all. It'll only take a minute." Megan reached for the phone, then drew her hand away. Her mind raced on with her heartbeat.

She lifted the receiver. She knew the number. Hadn't she started to dial it a dozen times during the past two weeks? She took a long breath before pushing the first digit. It would take five minutes, and then, in all probability, she'd have no reason to contact him again. It would be better if they erased the remnants of their last meeting. It would be easier if their relationship ended on a calmer, more civilized note. Megan pressed the last button and waited for the click of connection, the whisper of transmitters and the ring.

It took four rings—four long, endless rings before he picked up the phone.

"Katch." His name was barely audible. She closed her eyes.

"Meg?"

"Yes, I . . ." She fought herself to speak. "I hope I'm not calling you at a bad time." How trite, she thought desperately. How ordinary.

"Are you all right?" There was concern in the question.

"Yes, yes, of course." Her mind fretted for the simple, casual words she had planned to speak. "Katch, I wanted to talk to you. Your sister was here—"

"I know, she got back a few minutes ago." There was a trace of impatience in his tone. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong." Her voice refused to level. Megan searched for a quick way to end the conversation.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, I . . ."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"No." Megan ran a frustrated hand through her hair. "No, please—"



“Ten minutes,” he repeated and broke the connection.

## Chapter Nine

Megan stared at the dead receiver for several silent moments. How had she, in a few uncompleted sentences, managed to make such a mess of things? She didn't want him to come. She never wanted to see him again. *That is a lie.*

Carefully, Megan replaced the receiver. I do want to see him, she admitted, have wanted to see him for days. It's just that I'm afraid to see him. Turning, she gazed blindly around the kitchen. The room was almost in complete darkness now. The table and chairs were dark shadows. She walked to the switch, avoiding obstacles with the knowledge of years. The room flooded with brightness. That's better, she thought, more secure in the artificial light. Coffee, she decided, needing something, anything, to occupy her hands. I'll make fresh coffee.

Megan went to the percolator and began a step-by-step preparation, but her nerves continued to jump. In a few moments, she hoped, she'd be calm again. When he arrived, she would say what she needed to say, and then they would part.

The phone rang, and she jolted, juggling the cup she held and nearly dropping it. Chiding herself, Megan set it down and answered the call.

“Hello, Megan.” Pop's voice crackled jovially across the wire.

“Pop . . . are you still at the park?” What time is it? she wondered distractedly and glanced down at her watch.

“That's why I called. George stopped by. We're going to have dinner in town. I didn't want you to worry.”

“I won't.” She smiled as the band of tension around her head loosened. “I suppose you and George have a lot of fish stories to exchange.”

“His have gotten bigger since he retired,” Pop claimed. “Hey, why don't you run into town, sweetheart? We'll treat you.”

“You two just want an audience,” she accused and her smile deepened with Pop's chuckle. “But I'll pass tonight, thanks. As I recall, there's some leftover spaghetti in the fridge.”

“I'll bring you back dessert.” It was an old custom. For as long as Megan could remember, if Pop had dinner without her, he'd bring her back some treat. “What do you want?”

“Rainbow sherbet,” she decided instantly. “Have a good time.”

“I will, darling. Don't work too late.”

As she hung up the phone, Megan asked herself why she hadn't told her grandfather of Katch's impending visit. Why hadn't she mentioned Jessica or the incredible plans that had been made? It has to wait until we can talk, she told herself. Really talk. It's the only way I'll be certain how he really feels—and how everything will affect him.

It's probably a bad idea. Megan began to fret, pushing a hand through her hair in agitation. It's a crazy idea. How can I go to New York and—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the glaring sweep of headlights against the kitchen window. She struggled to compose herself, going deliberately to the cupboard to close it before heading to the screen door.

Katch stepped onto the stoop as she reached for the handle. For a moment, in silence, they studied each other through the mesh. She heard the soft flutter of moths' wings on the outside light.

Finally he turned the knob and opened the door. After he had shut it quietly behind him, he reached up to touch her cheek. His hand lingered there while his eyes traveled her face.

"You sounded upset."

Megan moistened her lips. "No, no, I'm fine." She stepped back so that his palm no longer touched her skin. Slowly, his eyes on hers, Katch lowered his hand. "I'm sorry I bothered you—"

"Megan, stop it." His voice was quiet and controlled. Her eyes came back to his, a little puzzled, a little desperate. "Stop backing away from me. Stop apologizing."

Her hands fluttered once before she could control the movement. "I'm making coffee," she began. "It should be ready in a minute." She would have turned to arrange the cups and saucers, but he took her arm.

"I didn't come for coffee." His hand slid down until it encircled her wrist. Her pulse vibrated against his fingers.

"Katch, please, don't make this difficult."

Something flared in his eyes while she watched. Then it was gone, and her hand was released. "I'm sorry. I've had some difficulty the past couple of weeks dealing with what happened the last time I saw you." He noted the color that shot into her cheeks, but she kept her eyes steady. He slipped his hands into his pockets. "Megan, I'd like to make it up to you."

Megan shook her head, disturbed by the gentleness in his voice, and turned to the coffee pot.

"Don't you want to forgive me?"

The question had her turning back, her eyes darkened with distressed confusion. "No ... that is, yes, of course."

"Of course you don't want to forgive me?" There was a faint glimmer of a smile in his eyes and the charm was around his mouth. She could feel herself sinking.

"Yes, of course I forgive you," she corrected and this time did turn to the coffee. "It's forgotten." He laid his hands on her shoulders, and she jumped.

"Is it?" Katch turned her until they were again face-to-face. The glimpse of humor in his eyes was gone. "You can't seem to abide my touching you. I don't much like thinking I frighten you."

She made a conscious effort to relax under his hands. "You don't frighten me, Katch," Megan murmured. "You confuse me. Constantly."

She watched his brow lift in consideration. "I don't have any intention of confusing you. I am sorry, Megan."

"Yes." She smiled, recognizing the simple sincerity. "I know you are."

He drew her closer. "Can we kiss and make up then?"

Megan started to protest, but his mouth was already on hers, light and gentle. Her heart began to hammer in her throat. He made no attempt to deepen the kiss. His hands were easy on her shoulders. Against all the warnings of her mind, she relaxed against him, inviting him to take whatever he chose. But he took no more.

Katch drew her away, waiting until her heavy lids fluttered open before he touched her hair. Without speaking, he turned and paced to the window. Megan struggled to fill the new gap.

"I wanted to talk to you about your sister." She busied her hands with the now noisy percolator. "Or, more accurately, about what Jessica came to see me about."

Katch turned his head, watching her pour the coffee into the waiting cups. He walked to the refrigerator and took out the milk.

"All right." Standing beside her now, he poured milk into one cup and, at her nod, into the second.

"Why didn't you tell me you were sending my work to your sister?"

"I thought it best to wait until I had her opinion." Katch sat beside Megan and cradled the cup in both hands. "I trust her . . . And I thought you'd trust her opinion more than mine. Are you going to do the showing? Jessica and I didn't have time to talk before you called."

She shifted in her chair, studied her coffee, then looked directly at him. "She's very persuasive. I was agreeing before I realized it."

"Good," Katch said simply and drank.

"I want to thank you," Meg continued in a stronger voice, "for arranging things."

"I didn't arrange anything," he responded. "Jessica makes her own decisions, personal and professional. I simply sent her your sculptures for an opinion."

"Then I'll thank you for that, for making a move I might never have made for the hundreds of reasons which occurred to me five minutes after she'd left."

Katch shrugged. "All right, if you're determined to be grateful."

"I am," she said. "And I'm scared," she continued, "really terrified at the thought of putting my work on public display." Megan let out a shaky breath at the admission. "I may despise you when all this is over and art critics stomp all over my ego, so you'd better take the gratitude now."

Katch crossed to her, and her heart lifted dizzily, so sure was she that he would take her into his arms. He merely stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "When you're a smashing success, you can give it to me again." He smiled at her, and the world snapped into sharp focus. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how dull everything had been without him.

"I'm so glad you came," she whispered and, unable to resist, slipped her arms around him, pressing her face into his shoulder. After a moment, he rested his hands lightly at her waist. "I'm sorry for the things I said ... about the loan. I didn't mean any of it really, but I say horrible things when I lose my temper."

"Is this your turn to be penitent?"

He made her laugh. "Yes." She smiled and tilted back her head. Her arms stayed around him. He kissed her and drew away. Reluctantly, she let him slip out of her arms. Then he stood silently, staring down at her.

"What are you doing?" she asked with a quick, self-conscious smile.

"Memorizing your face. Have you eaten?"

She shook her head, wondering why it should come as a surprise that he continued to baffle her. "No, I was going to heat up some leftovers."

"Unacceptable. Want a pizza?"

"Mmm,I'd love it, but you have company."

"Jessica and Rob took the kids to play miniature golf. I won't be missed." Katch held out his hands. "Come on."

His eyes were smiling, and her heart was lost. "Oh wait," she began even as she put her hand into his. Quickly, Megan scrawled a message on the chalkboard by the screen door.

## OUT WITH KATCH

It was enough.

### Chapter Ten

Katch drove along Ocean Boulevard so they could creep along in the traffic filled with tourists and beachers. Car radios were turned up high and windows rolled down low. Laughter and music poured out everywhere. The lights from a twin Ferris wheel glittered red and blue in the distance. People sat out on their hotel balconies, with colorful beach towels flapping over the railings, as they watched the sluggish flow of cars and pedestrians. To the left, there were glimpses of the sea in between buildings.

Sleepily content after pizza and Chianti, Megan snuggled deeper into the soft leather seat. "Things'll quiet down after this weekend," she commented. "Until Memorial Day."

“Do you ever feel as though you’re being invaded?” Katch asked her with a gesture at the clogged traffic.

“I like the crowds,” she said immediately, then laughed. “And I like the winter when the beaches are deserted. I suppose there’s something about the honky-tonk that appeals to me, especially since I know I’m going to have a few isolated months in the winter.”

“That’s your time,” Katch murmured, glancing back at her. “The time you give yourself for sculpting.”

She shrugged, a bit uncomfortable with the intense look. “I do some in the summer, too—when I can. Time’s something I forgot when Jessica was talking about a showing and making all those plans . . .” Megan trailed off, frowning. “I don’t know how I can possibly get things ready.”

“Not backing out, are you?”

“No, but—” The look in his eyes had her swallowing excuses. “No,” she said more firmly. “I’m not backing out.”

“What’re you working on now?”

“I, ah . . .” Megan looked fixedly out the window, thinking of the half-formed bust of Katch’s head. “It’s just . . .” She shrugged and began to fiddle with the dial of the radio. “It’s just a wood carving.”

“Of what?”

Megan made a few inarticulate mumbles until Katch turned to grin at her. “A pirate,” she decided as the light from a street lamp slanted over his face, throwing it into planes and shadows. “It’s the head of a pirate.”

His brow lifted at the sudden, narrow-eyed concentration with which she was studying him. “I’d like to see it.”

“It’s not finished,” she said quickly. “I’ve barely got the clay model done. In any case, I might have to put it off if I’m going to get the rest of my pieces organized for your sister.”

“Meg, why don’t you stop worrying and just enjoy it?”

Confused, she shook her head and stared at him. “Enjoy it?”

“The show,” he said, ruffling her hair.

“Oh, yes.” She fought to get her thoughts back into some kind of order. “I will . . . after it’s over,” she added with a smile. “Do you think you’ll be in New York, then?”

As the rhythm of the traffic picked up, he shifted into third. “I’m considering it.”

“I’d like you to be there if you could arrange it.” When he laughed, shaking his head, she continued, “It’s just that I’m going to need all the friendly faces I can get.”

“You’re not going to need anything but your sculptures,” Katch corrected, but the amusement was still in

his eyes. "Don't you think I'd want to be around the night of your opening so that I can brag I discovered you?"

"Let's just hope we both don't live to regret it," Megan muttered, but he only laughed again. "You just can't consider the possibility that you might have made a mistake," she accused testily.

"You can't consider the possibility that you might be successful," he countered.

Megan opened her mouth, then shut it again. "Well," she said after a moment, "we're both right." Waiting until they were stopped in traffic again, Megan touched his shoulder. "Katch?"

"Hmm?"

"Why did you build a hospital in Central Africa?"

He turned to her then, a faint frown between his brows. "It was needed," he said simply.

"Just that?" she persisted, though she could see he wasn't pleased with her question. "I mean, Jessica said you were advised against it, and—"

"As it happens, I have a comfortable amount of money." He cut her off with an annoyed movement of his shoulder. "I do what I choose with it." Seeing her expression, Katch shook his head. "There are things I want to do, that's all. Don't canonize me, Meg."

She relaxed again and found herself brushing at the curls over his ear. "I wouldn't dream of it." He'd rather be thought of as eccentric than benevolent, she mused. And how much simpler it was to love him, knowing that one small secret. "You're much easier to like than I thought you'd be when you made a nuisance of yourself in the market."

"I tried to tell you," he pointed out. "You were too busy pretending you weren't interested."

"I wasn't interested," Megan insisted, "in the least." He turned to grin at her and she found herself laughing. "Well, not very much anyway." When he swung the car onto a side street, she looked back at him in question. "What are you doing?"

"Let's go out on the boardwalk." Expertly, he slid the Porsche into a parking space. "Maybe I'll buy you a souvenir." He was already out of the car—primed, impatient.

"Oh, I love rash promises," Megan crowed as she joined him.

"I said maybe."

"I didn't hear that part. And," she added as she laced her fingers with his, "I want something extravagant."

"Such as?" They jaywalked, maneuvering around stopped cars.

"I'll know when I see it."

The boardwalk was crowded, full of people and light and noise. The breeze off the ocean carried the scent of salt to compete with the aroma of grilling meat from concessions. Instead of going into one of the

little shops, Katch pulled Megan into an arcade.

“Big talk about presents and no delivery,” Megan said in disgust as Katch exchanged bills for tokens.

“It’s early yet. Here.” He poured a few tokens into her hand. “Why don’t you try your luck at saving the galaxy from invaders?”

With a smirk, Megan chose a machine, then slipped two tokens into the slot. “I’ll go first.” Pressing the start button, she took the control stick in hand and began systematically to vaporize the enemy. Brows knit, she swung her ship right and left while the machine exploded with color and noise with each hit. Amused, Katch dipped his hands into his pockets and watched her face. It was a more interesting show than the sophisticated graphics.

She chewed her bottom lip while maneuvering into position, narrowing her eyes when a laser blast headed her way. Her breath hissed through her teeth at a narrow escape. But all the while, her face held that composed, almost serious expression that was so much a part of her. Fighting gamely to avoid being blown up in cross fire, Megan’s ship at last succumbed.

“Well,” Katch murmured, glancing at her score as she wiped her hands on the back of her jeans. “You’re pretty good.”

“You have to be,” Megan returned soberly, “when you’re the planet’s last hope.”

With a chuckle, he nudged her out of the way and took the control.

Megan acknowledged his skill as Katch began to blast away the invaders with as much regularity as she had, and a bit more dash. He likes to take chances, she mused as he narrowly missed being blown apart by laser fire in order to zap three ships in quick succession. As his score mounted, she stepped a bit closer to watch his technique.

At the brush of her arm against his, Megan noticed a quick, almost imperceptible break in his rhythm. Now, that was interesting, she reflected. Feeling an irrepressible surge of mischief, she edged slightly closer. There was another brief fluctuation in his timing. Softly, she touched her lips to his shoulder, then smiled up into his face. She heard rather than saw the explosion that marked his ship’s untimely end.

Katch wasn’t looking at the screen either, but at her. She saw something flash into his eyes—something hot, barely suppressed, before his hand released the control to dive into her hair.

“Cheat,” he murmured.

For a moment, Megan forgot the cacophony of sound, forgot the crowds of people that milled around them. She was lost somewhere in those smoky gray eyes and her own giddy sense of power.

“Cheat?” she repeated, and her lips stayed slightly parted. “I don’t know what you mean.”

The hand on her hair tightened. He was struggling, she realized, surprised and excited. “I think you do,” Katch said quietly. “And I think I’m going to have to be very careful now that you know just what you can do to me.”

“Katch.” Her gaze lowered to his mouth as the longings built. “Maybe I don’t want you to be careful anymore.”

Slowly, his hand slid out of her hair, over her cheek, then dropped. “All the more reason I have to be,” he muttered. “Come on.” He took her arm and propelled her away from the machine. “Let’s play something else.”

Megan flowed with his mood, content just to be with him. They pumped tokens into machines and competed fiercely—as much with each other as with the computers. Megan felt the same lighthearted ease with him that she’d experienced that night at the carnival. Spending time with him was much like a trip on one of the wild, breathless rides at the park. Quick curves, fast hills, unexpected starts and stops. No one liked the windy power of a roller coaster better than Megan.

Hands on hips, she stood back as he consistently won coupons at Skee Ball. She watched another click off on the already lengthy strip as he tossed the ball neatly into the center hole.

“Don’t you ever lose?” she demanded.

Katch tossed the next ball for another forty points. “I try not to make a habit of it. Wanna toss the last two?”

“No.” She brushed imaginary lint from her shirt. “You’re having such a good time showing off.”

With a laugh, Katch dumped the last two balls for ninety points, then leaned over to tear off his stream of coupons. “Just for that, I might not turn these in for your souvenir.”

“These?” Megan gave the ream of thin cardboard an arched-brow look. “You were supposed to *buy* me a souvenir.”

“I did.” He grinned, rolling them up. “Indirectly.” Slipping an arm companionably around her shoulder, he walked to the center counter where prizes were displayed. “Let’s see . . . I’ve got two dozen. How about one of those six-function penknives?”

“Just who’s this souvenir for?” Megan asked dryly as she scanned the shelves. “I like that little silk rose.” She tapped the glass counter to indicate a small lapel pin. “I have all the tools I need,” she added with an impish grin.

“Okay.” Katch nodded to the woman behind the counter, then tore off all but four of the tickets. “That leaves us these. Ah . . .” With a quick scan of the shelves, he pointed. “That.”

Thoughtfully, Megan studied the tiny shell figure the woman lifted down. It seemed to be a cross between a duck and a penguin. “What’re you going to do with that?”

“Give it to you.” Katch handed over the rest of the tickets. “I’m a very generous man.”

“I’m overwhelmed,” she murmured. Megan turned it over in the palm of her hand as Katch pinned the rose to the collar of her shirt. “But what is it?”

“It’s a mallard.” Draping his arm over her shoulder again, he led her out of the arcade. “I’m surprised at your attitude. I figured, as an artist, you’d recognize its aesthetic value.”

“Hmm.” Megan took another study, then slipped it into her pocket. “Well, I do recognize a certain winsome charm. And,” she added, rising on her toes to kiss his cheek, “it was sweet of you to spend all



your winnings on me.”

Smiling, Katch ran a finger down her nose. “Is a kiss on the cheek the best you can do?”

“For a shell penguin it is.”

“It’s a mallard,” he reminded her.

“Whatever.” Laughing, Megan slipped an arm around his waist as they crossed the boardwalk and walked down the slope to the beach.

The moon was only a thin slice of white, but the stars were brilliant and mirrored in the water. There was a quiet swish of waves flowing and ebbing over the sand. Lovers walked here and there, arm in arm, talking quietly or not speaking at all. Children dashed along with flashlights bobbing, searching the sand and the surf for treasures.

Bending, Megan slipped out of her shoes and rolled up the hem of her jeans. In silent agreement, Katch followed suit. The water lapped cool over their ankles as they began to walk north, until the laughter and music from the boardwalk was only a background echo.

“Your sister’s lovely,” Megan said at length. “Just as you said.”

“Jessica was always a beauty,” he agreed absently. “A little hardheaded, but always a beauty.”

“I saw your nieces at the park.” Megan lifted her head so that the ocean breeze caught at her hair. “They had chocolate all over their faces.”

“Typical.” He laughed, running a hand up and down her arm as they walked. Megan felt the blood begin to hum beneath her flesh. “Before they left tonight, they were out digging for worms. I’ve been drafted to take them fishing tomorrow.”

“You like children.”

He twisted his head to glance down at her, but Megan was looking out to sea. “Yes. They’re a constant adventure, aren’t they?”

“I see so many of them in the park every summer, yet they never cease to amaze me.” She turned back then with her slow, serious smile hovering on her lips. “And I see a fair number of harassed or long-suffering parents.”

“When did you lose yours?”

He saw the flicker of surprise in her eyes before she looked down the stretch of beach again. “I was five.”

“It’s difficult for you to remember them.”

“Yes. I have some vague memories—impressions really, I suppose. Pop has pictures, of course. When I see them, it always surprises me how young they were.”

“It must have been hard on you,” Katch murmured. “Growing up without them.”

The gentleness in his voice had her turning back to him. They'd walked far down the beach so that the only light now came from the stars. His eyes caught the glitter of reflection as they held hers. "It would have been," Megan told him, "without Pop. He did much more than fill in." She stopped to take a step further into the surf. The water frothed and bubbled over her skin. "One of my best memories is of him struggling to iron this pink organdy party dress. I was eight or nine, I think." With a shake of her head, she laughed and kicked the water. "I can still see him."

Katch's arms came around her waist, drawing her back against him. "So can I."

"He was standing there, struggling with frills and flounces—and swearing like a sailor because he didn't know I was there. I still love him for that," she murmured. "For just that."

Katch brushed his lips over the top of her hair. "And I imagine you told him not long afterward that you didn't care much for party dresses."

Surprised, Megan turned around. "How did you know that?"

"I know you." Slowly, he traced the shape of her face with his fingertip.

Frowning, she looked beyond his shoulder. "Am I so simple?"

"No." With his fingertip still on her jaw, he turned her face back to his. "You might say I've made a study of you."

She felt her blood begin to churn. "Why?"

Katch shook his head and combed his fingers through her hair. "No questions tonight," he said quietly. "I don't have the answers yet."

"No questions," she agreed, then rose on her toes to meet his mouth with hers.

It was a soft, exploring kiss—a kiss of renewal. Megan could taste the gentleness. For the moment, he seemed to prize her, to find her precious and rare. He held her lightly, as though she would break at the slightest pressure. Her lips parted, and it was she who entered his mouth first, teasing his tongue with hers. His sound of pleasure warmed her. The water swayed, soft and cool, on her calves.

She ran her hands up his back, letting her strong, artist's fingers trail under his hair to caress the nape of his neck. There was tension there, and she murmured against his lips as if to soothe it. Megan felt both his resistance and the tightening of his fingers against her skin. Her body pressed more demandingly into his.

Passion began to smolder quietly. Megan knew she was drawing it from him without his complete consent. The wonder of her own power struck her like a flash. He was holding back, letting her set the pace, but she could feel the near-violence of need in him. It tempted her. She wanted to undermine his control as he had undermined hers. She wanted to make him need as blindly as she needed. It wasn't possible to make him love her, but she could make him want. If it was all she could have from him, then she would be satisfied with his desire.

Megan felt his control slipping. His arms tightened around her, drawing her close so they were silhouetted as one. The kiss grew harder, more urgent. He lifted a hand to her hair, gripping it, pulling her head back as if now he would take command. There was fire now, burning brightly. Heat rose in her,

smoking through her blood. She caught his bottom lip between her teeth and heard his quiet moan. Abruptly, he drew her away.

“Meg.”

She waited, having no idea what she wanted him to say. Her head was tossed back, her face open to his, her hair free to the breeze. She felt incredibly strong. His eyes were nearly black, searching her face deeply. She could feel his breath feather, warm and uneven, on her lips.

“Meg.” He repeated her name, bringing his hands back to her shoulders slowly. “I have to go now.”

Daring more than she would have believed possible, Megan pressed her lips to his again. Hers were soft and hungry and drew instant response from him. “Is that what you want?” she murmured. “Do you want to leave me now?”

His fingers tightened on her arms convulsively, then he pulled her away again. “You know the answer to that,” he said roughly. “What are you trying to do, make me crazy?”

“Maybe.” Desire still churned in her. It smoldered in her eyes as they met his. “Maybe I am.”

He caught her against him, close and tight. She could feel the furious race of his heart against hers. His control, she knew, balanced on a razor’s edge. Their lips were only a whisper apart.

“There’ll be a time,” he said softly, “I swear it, when it’ll just be you and me. Next time, the very next time, Meg. Remember it.”

It took no effort to keep her eyes level with his. The power was still flowing through her. “Is that a warning?”

“Yes,” he told her. “That’s just what it is.”

## Chapter Eleven

It took two more days for Megan to finish the bust of Katch. She tried, when it was time, to divorce herself from emotion and judge it objectively.

She’d been right to choose wood. It was warmer than stone. With her tongue caught between her teeth, she searched for flaws in her workmanship. Megan knew without conceit it was one of her better pieces. Perhaps the best.

The face wasn’t stylishly handsome, but strong and compelling. Humor was expressed in the tilt of the brows and mouth. She ran her fingertips over his lips. An incredibly expressive mouth, she mused, remembering the taste and texture. I know just how it looks when he’s amused or angry or aroused. And his eyes. Hers drifted up to linger. I know how they look, how they change shades and expression with a mood. Light for pleasure, turning smoky in anger, darker in passion.

I know his face as well as my own . . . but I still don’t know his mind. That’s still a stranger. With a sigh she folded her arms on the table and lowered her chin to them.

Would he ever permit me to know him? she wondered. Tenderly, she touched a lock of the disordered hair. Jessica knows him, probably better than anyone else. If he loved someone . . .

What would happen if I drew up the courage to tell him that I love him? What would happen if I simply walked up to him and said *I love you*? Demanding nothing, expecting nothing. Doesn't he perhaps have the right to know? Isn't love too special, too rare to be closed up? Then Megan imagined his eyes with pity in them.

"I couldn't bear it," she murmured, lowering her forehead to Katch's wooden one. "I just couldn't bear it." A knock interrupted her soul-searching. Quickly, Megan composed her features and swiveled in her chair. "Come in."

Her grandfather entered, his fishing cap perched jauntily on his mane of white hair. "How do you feel about fresh fish for supper?" His grin told her that his early morning expedition had been a success. Megan cocked her head.

"I could probably choke down a few bites." She smiled, pleased to see his eyes sparkling and color in his cheeks. She sprang up and wound her arms around his neck as she had done as a child. "Oh, I love you, Pop!"

"Well, well." He patted her hair, both surprised and pleased. "I love you too, Megan. I guess I should bring you home trout more often."

She lifted her face from the warm curve of his neck and smiled at him. "It doesn't take much to make me happy."

His eyes sobered as he tucked her hair behind her ear. "No . . . It never has." His wide, blunt hand touched her cheek. "You've given me so much pleasure over the years, Megan, so much joy. I'm going to miss you when you're in New York."

"Oh, Pop." She buried her face again and clung. "It'll only be for a month or two, then I'll be home." She could smell the cherry-flavored scent of the tobacco he carried in his breast pocket. "You could even come with me; the season'll be over."

"Meg." He stopped her rambling and drew her up so that their eyes met. "This is a start for you. Don't put restrictions on it."

Shaking her head, Megan rose to pace nervously. "I'm not. I don't know what you mean . . ."

"You're going to make something of yourself, something important. You have talent." Pop glanced around the room at her work until his eyes rested on the bust of Katch. "You've got a life to start. I want you to go after it at full speed."

"You make it sound as if I'm not coming home." Megan turned and, seeing where his eyes rested, clasped her hands together. "I've just finished that." She moistened her lips and struggled to keep her voice casual. "It's rather good, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think it's very good." He looked at her then. "Sit down, Megan, I need to talk to you."

She recognized the tone and tensed. Without a word, she obeyed, going to the chair across from him. Pop waited until she was settled, then studied her face carefully.

"Awhile back," he began, "I told you things change. Most of your life, it's been just the two of us. We

needed each other, depended on each other. We had the park to keep a roof over our heads and to give us something to work for.” His tone softened. “There hasn’t been one minute in the eighteen years I’ve had you with me that you’ve been a burden. You’ve kept me young. I’ve watched you through all the stages of growing up, and each time, you’ve made me more proud of you. It’s time for the next change.”

Because her throat was dry as dust, Megan swallowed. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me.”

“It’s time you moved out into the world, Megan, time I let you.” Pop reached in the pocket of his shirt and took out carefully folded papers. After spreading them out, he handed them to Megan.

She hesitated before accepting them, her eyes clinging to his. The instant she saw the papers, she knew what they were. But when she read, she read each sentence, each word, until the finish. “So,” she said, dry-eyed, dry-voiced. “You’ve sold it to him.”

“When I sign the papers,” Pop told her, “and you witness it.” He saw the look of devastation in her eyes. “Megan, hear me out. I’ve given this a lot of thought.” Pop took the papers and set them on the table, then gripped her hands. “Katch isn’t the first to approach me about selling, and this isn’t the first time I’ve considered it. Everything didn’t fit the way I wanted before; this time it does.”

“What fits?” she demanded, feeling her eyes fill.

“It’s the right man, Meg, the right time.” He soothed her hands, hating to watch her distress. “I knew it when all those repairs fell on me. I’m ready to let it go, to let someone younger take over so I can go fishing. That’s what I want now, Megan, a boat and a rod. And he’s the man I want taking over.” He paused, fumbling in his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his eyes. “I told you I trusted him and that still holds. Managing the park for Katch won’t keep me from my fishing, and I’ll have the stimulation without the headaches. And you,” he continued, brushing tears from her cheeks, “you need to cut the strings. You can’t do what you’re meant to do if you’re struggling to balance books and make payroll.”

“If it’s what you want,” Megan began, but Pop cut her off.

“No, it has to be what you want. That’s why the last lines are still blank.” He looked at her with his deep-set eyes sober and quiet. “I won’t sign it, Megan, unless you agree. It has to be what’s best for both of us.”

Megan stood again, and he released her hands to let her walk to the window. At the moment, she was unable to understand her own feelings. She knew agreeing to do a show in New York was a giant step away from the life she had led. And the park was a major part of that life. She knew in order to pursue her own career, she couldn’t continue to tie herself to the business end of Joyland.

The park had been security—her responsibility, her second home—as the man behind her had been both mother and father to her. She remembered the look of weariness on his face when he had come to tell her that the park needed money. Megan knew the hours and endless demands that summer would bring.

He was entitled to live his winter years as he chose, she decided. With less worry, less responsibility. He was entitled to fish, and to sleep late and putter around his azaleas. What right did she have to deny him that because she was afraid to cut the last tie with her childhood? He was right, it was time for the change.

Slowly, she walked to her workbox and searched out a pen. Going to Pop, Megan held it out to him. "Sign it. We'll have champagne with the trout."

Pop took the pen, but kept his eyes on her. "Are you sure, Meg?"

She nodded, as sure for him as she was uncertain for herself. "Positive." She smiled and watched the answering light in his eyes before he bent over the paper.

He signed his name with a flourish, then passed her the pen so that she could witness his signature. Megan wrote her name in clear, distinct letters, not allowing her hand to tremble.

"I suppose I should call Katch," Pop mused, sighing as though a weight had been lifted. "Or take the papers to him."

"I'll take them." Carefully, Megan folded them again. "I'd like to talk to him."

"That's a good idea. Take the pickup," he suggested as she headed for the door. "It looks like rain."

Megan was calm by the time she reached Katch's house. The papers were tucked securely in the back pocket of her cutoffs. She pulled the truck behind his car and climbed out.

The air was deadly still and heavy, nearly shimmering with restrained rain. The clouds overhead were black and bulging with it. She walked to the front door and knocked as she had many days before. As before, there was no answer. She walked back down the steps and skirted the house.

There was no sign of him in the yard, no sound but the voice of the sea muffled by the tall hedges. He'd planted a willow, a young, slender one near the slope which led to the beach. The earth was still dark around it, freshly turned. Unable to resist, Megan walked to it, wanting to touch the tender young leaves. It was no taller than she, but she knew one day it would be magnificent . . . sweeping, graceful, a haven of shade in the summer. Instinct made her continue down the slope to the beach.

Hands in his pockets, he stood, watching the swiftly incoming tide. As if sensing her, he turned.

"I was standing here thinking of you," he said. "Did I wish you here?"

She took the papers and held them out to him. "It's yours," she told him calmly. "Just as you wanted."

He didn't even glance down at the papers, but she saw the shift of expression in his eyes. "I'd like to talk to you, Meg. Let's go inside."

"No." She stepped back to emphasize her refusal. "There really isn't anything more to say."

"That might be true for you, but I have a great deal to say. And you're going to listen." Impatience intruded into his tone. Megan heard it as she felt the sudden gust of wind which broke the calm.

"I don't want to listen to you, Katch. This is what Pop wants, too." She thrust the papers into his hands as the first spear of lightning split the sky. "Take them, will you?"

"Megan, wait." He grabbed her arm as she turned to go. The thunder all but drowned out his words.

"I will not wait!" she tossed back, jerking her arm free. "And stop grabbing me. You have what you

wanted; you don't need me anymore."

Katch swore, thrust the papers in his pocket and caught her again before she'd taken three steps. He whirled her back around. "You're not that big an idiot."

"Don't tell me how big an idiot I am." She tried to shake herself loose.

"We have to talk. I have things to say to you. It's important." A gust of wind whipped violently across Megan's face.

"Don't you understand a simple no?" she shouted at him, her voice competing with pounding surf and rising wind. She struggled against his hold. "I don't want to talk. I don't want to hear what you have to say. I don't *care* about what you have to say."

The rain burst from the clouds and poured over them. Instantly, they were drenched.

"Tough," he retorted, every bit as angry as she. "Because you're going to hear it. Now, let's go inside."

He started to pull her across the sand, but she swung violently away and freed herself.

Rain gushed down in torrents, sheeting around them. "No!" she shouted. "I won't go inside with you."

"Oh yes you will," he corrected.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded. "Drag me by the hair?"

"Don't tempt me." Katch took her hand again only to have her pull away. "All right," he said. "Enough." In a swift move that caught her off guard, he swept her up into his arms.

"Put me down." Megan wriggled and kicked, blind with fury. He ignored her, dealing with her struggles by shifting her closer and climbing the slope without any apparent effort. Lightning and thunder warred around them. "Oh, I hate you!" she claimed as he walked briskly across the lawn.

"Good. That's a start." Katch pushed open the door with his hip, then continued through the kitchen and into the living room. A trail of rain streamed behind them. Without ceremony, he dumped her on the sofa. "Sit still," he ordered before she could regain her breath, "and just be quiet a minute." He walked to the hearth. Taking a long match, he set fire to the paper waiting beneath kindling and logs. Dry wood crackled and caught almost instantly.

Regaining her breath, Megan rose and bounded for the door. Katch stopped her before her fingers touched the knob. He held her by the shoulders with her back to the door. "I warn you, Meg, my tolerance is at a very low ebb. Don't push me."

"You don't frighten me," she told him, impatiently flipping her dripping hair from her eyes.

"I'm not trying to frighten you. I'm trying to reason with you. But you're too stubborn to shut up and listen."

Her eyes widened with fresh fury. "Don't you talk to me that way! I don't have to take that."

"Yes, you do." Deftly, he reached in her right front pocket and pulled out the truck keys. "As long as I

have these.”

“I can walk,” she tossed back as he pocketed them himself.

“In this rain?”

Megan hugged her arms as she began to shiver. “Let me have my keys.”

Instead of answering, he pulled her across the room in front of the fire. “You’re freezing. You’ll have to get out of those wet clothes.”

“I will not. You’re crazy if you think I’m going to take off my clothes in your house.”

“Suit yourself.” He stripped off his own sopping T-shirt and tossed it angrily aside. “You’re the most hardheaded, single-minded, stubborn woman I know.”

“Thanks.” Barely, Megan controlled the urge to sneeze. “Is that all you wanted to say?”

“No.” He walked to the fire again. “That’s just the beginning; there’s a lot more. Sit down.”

“Then maybe I’ll have my say first.” Chills were running over her skin, and she struggled not to tremble. “I was wrong about you in a lot of ways. You’re not lazy or careless or glory-seeking. And you were certainly honest with me.” She wiped water from her eyes, a mixture of rain and tears. “You told me up front that you intended to have the park, and it seems perhaps for the best. What happened between then and now is my fault for being foolish enough to let you get to me.” Megan swallowed, wanting to salvage a little pride. “But then you’re a difficult man to ignore. Now you have what you wanted, and it’s over and done.”

“I only have part of what I wanted.” Katch came to her and gathered her streaming hair in his hand. “Only part, Meg.”

She looked at him, too tired to argue.

“Can’t you just let me be?” she asked.

“Let you be? Do you know how many times I’ve walked that beach at three in the morning because wanting you kept me awake and aching? Do you know how hard it was for me to let you go every time I had you in my arms?” The fingers in her hair tightened, pulled her closer.

Her eyes were huge now while chills shivered over her skin. *What was he saying?* She couldn’t risk asking, couldn’t risk wondering. Abruptly, he cursed her and dragged her into his arms.

Thin wet clothes were no barrier to his hands. He molded her breasts even while his mouth ravished hers. She made no protest when he lowered her to the floor, as his fingers worked desperately at the buttons of her blouse. Her chilled wet skin turned to fire under his fingertips. His mouth was hungry, hot as it roamed to her throat and downward.

There was only the crackle of wood and the splash of rain on the windows to mix with their breathing. A log shifted in the grate.

Megan heard him take a long, deep breath. “I’m sorry. I wanted to talk; there are things I need to tell



you. But I need you. I've kept it pent up a long time."

Need. Her mind centered on the word. Need was infinitely different than want. Need was more personal—still apart from love—but she let her heart grip the word.

"It's all right." Megan started to sit up, but he leaned over her. Sparks flicked inside her at the touch of naked flesh to naked flesh. "Katch ..."

"Please, Meg. Listen to me."

She searched his face, noting the uncharacteristically grave eyes and mouth. Whatever he had to say was important to him. "All right," she said, quieter now, ready. "I'll listen."

"When I first saw you, the first minute, I wanted you. You know that." His voice was low, but without its usual calm. Something boiled just under the surface. "The first night we were together, you intrigued me as much as you attracted me. I thought it would be a simple matter to have you ... a casual, pleasant affair for a few weeks."

"I know," she spoke softly, trying not to be wounded by the truth.

"No—shh." He lay a finger over her lips a moment. "You don't know. It stopped being simple almost immediately. When I had you here for dinner, and you asked to stay ..." He paused, brushing wet strands of hair from her cheeks. "I couldn't let you, and I wasn't completely sure why. I wanted you—wanted you more than any woman I'd ever touched, any woman I'd ever dreamed about; but I couldn't take you."

"Katch ..." Megan shook her head, not certain she was strong enough to hear the words.

"Please." She had closed her eyes, and Katch waited until she opened them again before he continued. "I tried to stay away from you, Meg. I tried to convince myself I was imagining what was happening to me. Then you were charging across the lawn, looking outraged and so beautiful I couldn't think of anything. Just looking at you took my breath away." While she lay motionless, he lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. The gesture moved her unbearably.

"Don't," she murmured. "Please."

Katch stared into her eyes for a long moment, then released her hand. "I wanted you," he went on in a voice more calm than his eyes. "Needed you, was furious with you because of it." He rested his forehead on hers and shut his eyes. "I never wanted to hurt you, Meg—to frighten you."

Megan lay still, aware of the turmoil in him. Firelight played over the skin on his arms and back.

"It seemed impossible that I could be so involved I couldn't pull away," he continued. "But you were so tangled up in my thoughts, so wound up in my dreams. There wasn't any escape. The other night, after I'd taken you home, I finally admitted to myself I didn't want an escape. Not this time. Not from you." He lifted his head and looked down at her again. "I have something for you, but first I want you to know I'd decided against buying the park until your grandfather came to me last night. I didn't want that between us, but it was what he wanted. What he thought was best for you and for himself. But if it hurts you, I'll tear the papers up."

"No." Megan gave a weary sigh. "I know it's best. It's just like losing someone you love: Even when

you know it's the best thing, it still hurts." The outburst seemed to have driven out the fears and the pain. "Please, I don't want you to apologize. I was wrong, coming here this way, shouting at you. Pop has every right to sell the park, and you have every right to buy it." She sighed, wanting explanations over. "I suppose I felt betrayed somehow and didn't want to think it all through."

"And now?"

"And now I'm ashamed of myself for acting like a fool." She managed a weak smile. "I'd like to get up and go home. Pop'll be worried."

"Not just yet." When Katch leaned back on his heels to take something from his pocket, Megan sat up, pushing her wet, tangled hair behind her. He held a box, small and thin. Briefly, he hesitated before offering it to her. Puzzled, both by the gift and by the tension she felt emanating from him, Megan opened it. Her breath caught.

It was a dark, smoky green emerald, square cut and exquisite in its simplicity. Stunned, Megan stared at it, then at Katch. She shook her head wordlessly.

"Katch." Megan shook her head again. "I don't understand . . . I can't accept this."

"Don't say no, Meg." Katch closed his hand over hers. "I don't handle rejection well." The words were light, but she recognized, and was puzzled by, the strain in the tone. A thought trembled in her brain, and her heart leaped with it.

She tried to be calm and keep her eyes steady on his. "I don't know what you're asking me."

His fingers tightened on hers. "Marry me. I love you."

Emotions ran riot through her. He must be joking, she thought quickly, though no hint of amusement showed in his eyes. His face was so serious, she reflected, and the words so simple. Where were the carelessly witty phrases, the glib charm? Shaken, Megan rose with the box held tightly in her hand. She needed to think.

Marriage. Never had she expected him to ask her to share a lifetime. What would life be like with him? *Like the roller coaster*. She knew it instantly. It would be a fast, furious ride, full of unexpected curves and indescribable thrills. And quiet moments too, she reflected. Precious, solitary moments which would make each new twist and turn more exciting.

Perhaps he had asked her this way, so simply, without any of the frills he could so easily provide because he was as vulnerable as she. What a thought that was! She lifted her fingers to her temple. David Katcherton vulnerable. And yet . . . Megan remembered what she had seen in his eyes.

I love you. The three simple words, words spoken every day by people everywhere, had changed her life forever. Megan turned, then walking back, knelt beside him. Her eyes were as grave, as searching as his. She held the box out, then spoke quickly as she saw the flicker of desperation.

"It belongs on the third finger of my left hand."

Then she was caught against him, her mouth silenced bruisingly. "Oh, Meg," he murmured her name as he rained kisses on her face. "I thought you were turning me down."

“How could I?” She wound her arms around his neck and tried to stop his roaming mouth with her own. “I love you, Katch.” The words were against his lips. “Desperately, completely. I’d prepared myself for a slow death when you were ready to walk away.”

“No one’s going to walk away now.” They lay on the floor again, and he buried his face in her rain-scented hair. “We’ll go to New Orleans. A quick honeymoon before you have to come back and work on the show. In the spring, we’ll go to Paris.” He lifted his face and looked down on her. “I’ve thought about you and me in Paris, making love. I want to see your face in the morning when the light’s soft.”

She touched his cheek. “Soon,” she whispered. “Marry me soon. I want to be with you.”

He picked up the box that had fallen beside them. Drawing out the ring, he slipped it on her finger. Then, gripping her hand with his, he looked down at her.

“Consider it binding, Meg,” he told her huskily. “You can’t get away now.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She lifted her mouth to meet his kiss.

## Epilogue

Nervously, Megan twisted the emerald on her finger and tried to drink the champagne Jessica had pushed into her hand. She felt as though the smile had frozen onto her face. People, she thought. She’d never expected so many people. What was she doing, standing in a Manhattan gallery pretending she was an artist? What she wanted to do was creep into the back room and be very, very sick.

“Here now, Meg.” Pop strolled over beside her, looking oddly distinguished in his best—and only—black suit. “You should try one of these—tasty little things.” He held out a canape.

“No.” Megan felt her stomach roll and shook her head. “No, thanks. I’m so glad you flew up for the weekend.”

“Think I’d miss my granddaughter’s big night?” He ate the canape and grinned. “How about this turnout?”

“I feel like an impostor,” Megan murmured, smiling gamely as a man in a flowing cape moved past her to study one of her marble pieces.

“Never seen you look prettier.” Pop plucked at the sleeve of her dress, a swirl of watercolored silk. “’Cept maybe at your wedding.”

“I wasn’t nearly as scared then.” She made a quick scan of the crowd and found only strangers. “Where’s Katch?”

“Last time I saw him he was cornered by a couple of ritzy-looking people. Didn’t I hear Jessica say you were supposed to mingle?”

“Yes.” Megan made a small, frustrated sound. “I don’t think I can move.”

“Now, Meg, I’ve never known you to be chicken-hearted.”

With her mouth half-opened in protest, she watched him walk away. *Chicken-hearted*, she repeated silently. Straightening her shoulders, she drank some champagne. All right then, she decided, she wouldn't stand there cowering in the corner. If she was going to be shot down, she'd face it head on. Moving slowly, and with determined confidence, Megan walked toward the buffet.

"You're the artist, aren't you?"

Megan turned to face a striking old woman in diamonds and black silk. "Yes," she said with a fractional lift of her chin. "I am."

"Hmmm." The woman took Megan in with a long, sweeping glance. "I noticed the study of the girl with the sand castle isn't for sale."

"No, it's my husband's." After two months, the words still brought the familiar warmth to her blood. *Katch, my husband*. Megan's eyes darted around the room to find him.

"A pity," the woman in black commented.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said it's a pity; I wanted it."

"You—" Stunned, Megan stared at her. "You wanted it?"

"I've purchased 'The Lovers,' " she went on as Megan only gaped. "An excellent piece, but I want to commission you to do another sand castle. I'll contact you through Jessica."

"Yes, of course." *Commission?* Megan thought numbly as she automatically offered her hand. "Thank you," she added as the woman swept away.

"Miriam Tailor Marcus," a voice whispered beside her ear. "A tough nut to crack."

Megan half turned and grabbed Katch's arm. "Katch, that woman, she—"

"Miriam Tailor Marcus," he repeated and bent down to kiss her astonished mouth. "And I heard. I've just been modestly accepting compliments on my contribution to the art world." He touched the rim of his glass to hers. "Congratulations, love."

"They like my work?" she whispered.

"If you hadn't been so busy trying to be invisible, you'd know you're a smashing success. Walk around with me," he told her as he took her hand. "And look at all the little blue dots under your sculptures that mean SOLD."

"They're buying?" Megan gave a wondering laugh as she spotted sale after sale. "They're really buying them?"

"Jessica's frantically trying to keep up. Three people've tried to buy the alabaster piece she bought from you herself—at twice what you charged her. And if you don't talk to a couple of the art critics soon, she's going to go crazy."

“I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it.” He brought Megan’s hand to his lips. “I’m very proud of you, Meg.”

Tears welled up, threatening to brim over. “I have to get out of here for a minute,” she whispered. “Please.”

Without a word, Katch maneuvered his way through the crowd, taking Megan into the storage room and shutting the door behind them.

“This is silly,” she said immediately as the tears rolled freely down her cheeks. “I’m an idiot. I have everything I’ve ever dreamed of and I’m crying in the back room. I’d have handled failure better than this.”

“Megan.” With a soft laugh, he gathered her close. “I love you.”

“It doesn’t seem real,” she said with a quaver in her voice. “Not just the showing . . . it’s everything. I see your ring on my finger and I keep wondering when I’m going to wake up. I can’t believe that—”

His mouth silenced her. With a low, melting sigh, she dissolved against him. Even after all the days of her marriage, and all the intimate nights, he could still turn her to putty with only his mouth. The tears vanished as her blood began to swim. Pulling him closer, she let her hands run up the sides of his face and into his hair.

“It’s real,” he murmured against her mouth. “Believe it.” Tilting his head, he changed the angle of the kiss and took her deeper. “It’s real every night when you’re in my arms, and every morning when you wake there.” Katch drew her away slowly, then kissed both her damp cheeks until her lashes fluttered up. “Tonight,” he said with a smile, “I’m going to make love to the newest star in the New York art world. And when she’s still riding high over the reviews in the morning papers, I’m going to make love to her all over again.”

“How soon can we slip away?”

Laughing, he caught her close for a hard kiss. “Don’t tempt me. Jessica’d skin us both if we didn’t stay until the gallery closes tonight. Now, fix your face and go bask in the admiration for a while. It’s good for the soul.”

“Katch.” Megan stopped him before he could open the door. “There’s one piece I didn’t put out tonight.”

Curious, he lifted a brow. “Oh?”

“Yes, well . . .” A faint color rose to her cheeks. “I was afraid things might not go well, and I thought I could handle the criticism. But this piece—I knew I couldn’t bear to have anyone say it was a poor attempt or amateurish.”

Puzzled, he slipped his hands into his pockets. “Have I seen it?”

“No.” She shook her head, tossing her bangs out of her eyes. “I’d wanted to give it to you as a wedding present, but everything happened so fast and it wasn’t finished. After all,” she added with a grin, “we were only engaged for three days.”

“Two days longer than if you’d agreed to fly to Vegas,” he pointed out. “All in all, I was very patient.”

“Be that as it may, I didn’t have time until later to finish it. Then I was so nervous about the showing that I couldn’t give it to you.” She took a deep breath. “I’d like you to have it now, tonight, while I’m feeling—really feeling like an artist.”

“Is it here?”

Turning around, Megan reached up on the shelf where the bust was carefully covered in cloth. Wordlessly, she handed it to him. Katch removed the cloth, then stared down into his own face.

Megan had polished the wood very lightly, wanting it to carry that not-quite-civilized aura she perceived in the model. It had his cockiness, his confidence and the warmth the artist had sensed in him before the woman had. He stared at it for so long, she felt the nerves begin to play in her stomach again. Then he looked up, eyes dark, intense.

“Meg.”

“I don’t want to put it out on display,” she said hurriedly. “It’s too personal to me. There were times,” she began as she took the bust from him and ran a thumb down a cheekbone, “when I was working on the clay model, that I wanted to smash it.” With a half-laugh, she set it down on a small table. “I couldn’t. When I started it, I told myself the only reason I kept thinking about you was because you had the sort of face I’d like to sculpt.” She lifted her eyes then to find his fixed on hers. “I fell in love with you sitting in my studio, while my hands were forming your face.” Stepping forward, Megan lifted her hands and traced her fingers over the planes and bones under his flesh. “I thought I couldn’t love you more than I did then. I was wrong.”

“Meg.” Katch brought his hands to hers, pressing her palms to his lips. “You leave me speechless.”

“Just love me.”

“Always.”

“That just might be long enough.” Megan sighed as she rested her head against his shoulder. “And I think I’ll be able to handle success knowing it.”

Katch slipped an arm around her waist as he opened the door. “Let’s go have some more champagne. It’s a night for celebrations.”

Less of a Stranger

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