

Prologue

WHEN THE PHONE rang, Rachel Keats was painting sea otters. She was working in oils and had finally gotten the right mix of black for the eyes. There was no way she was stopping to pick up the phone. She had warned Samantha about that.

'Hi! You've reached Rachel, Samantha, and Hope. We're otherwise occupied. Please leave your name and number, and we'll call you back. Thanks.'

Through a series of beeps, she applied a smudge of oil with a round brush. Then came a deep male voice that was too old to be calling for Samantha. Rachel would have pictured a gorgeous guy to go with the voice, but he'd said his name too fast. This man wasn't gorgeous. He was a ticket agent, a friend of a friend, more sleeze than style, but apparently good at his job. 'I have in my hand three tickets for tonight's Garth Brooks concert,' he said. 'San Jose. Gooooood seats. I need to hear from you in five minutes or I'm moving down my list —'

Rachel made a lunging grab for the phone. 'I want them!'

'Heeeey, Rachel. How's my favorite artist?'

'Painting. You need a credit card number, right? Hold on a second.' She put the phone down, ran through the house to the kitchen, and snatched up her wallet. She was breathless reading off the number, breathless returning to the studio. She swallowed hard, looked at the canvas on the easel and six others nearby waiting to be finished, thought of everything else she had to do in the next three weeks, and decided that she was crazy. She didn't have time to go to a concert.

But the girls would be absolutely, positively blown away!

She threw the window open and leaned out into clear, woodsy air.

'*Samantha! Hope!*' They were out there somewhere. She yelled again.

Answering yells came from a distance, then closer.

'*Hurry!*' she yelled back.

Minutes later, they came running through the woods, Samantha looking every bit as young as Hope for once, both with blond hair flying and cheeks pink. Rachel shouted the news to them even before they reached her window. The look on their faces was more than worth the prospect of an all-nighter or two.

'Are you *serious?*' Hope asked. Her eyes were wide, her freckles vibrant, her smile filled with teeth that were still too large for her face. She was thirteen and entirely prepubescent.

Rachel grinned and nodded.

'*Awesome!*' breathed Samantha. At fifteen she was a head taller than Hope and gently curved. Blond hair and all, she was Rachel at that age.

'*Tonight?*' Hope asked.

'Tonight.'

'*Good seats?*' Samantha asked.

'*Great seats.*'

Hope pressed her hands together in excitement. 'Are we doing the whole thing — you know, what we talked about?'

Rachel didn't have the time for it. She didn't have the money. But if her paintings were a hit, the money would come, and as for time, life was too short. 'The whole thing,' she said, because it would be good for Samantha to get away from the phone and Hope to get away from her cat and, yes, maybe even good for Rachel to get away from her oils.

'Omigod, I have to call Lydia!' Samantha cried.

'What you have to do,' Rachel corrected her, 'is anything that needs to be done for school. We leave in an hour.' She was *definitely* crazy. Forget her work. The girls had tons of their own, but...but this was *Garth*.

She returned to her studio for the hour and accomplished as little as she feared her daughters had. Then they piled into her sport utility vehicle and headed north. Having done her research during the someday-we-will stage, she knew just where to go. The store she wanted was on the way to San Jose. It was still open when they got there, and had a perfect selection. Thirty minutes and an obscene amount of money later, they emerged wearing cowboy boots under their jeans, cowboy hats over their hair, and smiles the size of Texas.

Thirty minutes after that, with the smell of McDonald's burgers and fries filling the car, they were flying high toward San Jose.

Nothing they saw when they got there brought them down. There were crowds and crowds of fans, light shows and smoke, sets that rose from nowhere to produce the man himself, who sang hit after hit without a break, longer-than-ever versions of each, and how could Rachel not be into it, with Hope and Samantha dancing beside her? If she was conservative through the first song or two, any self-consciousness was gone by the third. She was on her feet dancing, clapping high, singing. She cheered with Samantha and Hope when familiar chords announced a favorite song, and shouted appreciatively with them at song's end. The three of them sang their hearts out until the very last encore was done, and then left the arena arm in arm, three friends who just happened to be related.

It was a special evening. Rachel didn't regret a minute of it, not even when Samantha said, 'Did you see that girl right in front of us? The tall one with the French braid? Did you see the tattoo on her arm? The rose? If I wanted something like that, what would you say?'

'No,' Rachel said as she drove south through the dark.

'Even a tiny one? A little star on my ankle?'

'No.'

'But it's *way cool*.'

'No.'

'Why *not*?'

'Because she was older than you. When you're twenty-five —'

'She wasn't that old.'

'Okay, when you're twenty-two, you can think about a tattoo. Not now.'

'It has nothing to do with age. It has to do with style.'

'Uh-huh,' said Rachel, confident on this one, 'a style that makes a statement that you may not want to make at twenty-two, if you set your heart on a particular person or thing that doesn't appreciate that kind of statement.'

'Since when are you worried about conformity?'

'Since my fifteen-year-old daughter is heading straight for the real world.'

'Tattoos are hot. All the kids have them.'

'Not Lydia. Not Shelly. Not the ones I see getting off the school bus.'

Samantha crossed her arms and sank lower in her seat, glowering for sure under the brim of her hat. Hope was curled up in the back, sound asleep. Her hat had fallen to the side.

Rachel put in a CD and drove through the dark humming along with the songs they had heard that night. She loved her hat, loved her boots, loved her girls. If she had to fall behind in her work, it was for a good cause.

She wasn't as convinced of it the next morning, when the girls woke up late and cranky. They picked at breakfast on the run and even then nearly missed the bus. Rachel was wildly relieved

when they made it, and wildly apprehensive when, moments later, she stood in her studio and mentally outlined the next three weeks.

She worked feverishly through the day, breaking only to meet the girls at the bus stop and have a snack with them, her lunch. Samantha was still on her tattoo kick, so they reran the argument, verbatim at times, before the girl went off to her room in a huff. Hope hung around longer, holding her cat. Finally she, too, disappeared.

Rachel spent another hour in the studio. Half convinced that the otters were done, she stopped and put dinner in the oven. When she returned to the studio, it was to fill another sort of need. But the otters caught her eye again. She gave herself another hour.

Now that the hour was gone, things were flowing. It was always the way.

One minute more, she told herself for the umpteenth time. With alternating glances at field sketch and photograph, she used the fine edge of her palette knife to add texture to the oil on her canvas. The sea otters were playing in kelp. Her challenge was capturing the wetness of their fur. She had started with raw umber and cobalt blue, and had found it too dark. Using raw umber with ultramarine blue was perfect.

'The buzzer rang, Mom,' Hope called from the door.

'Thanks, honey,' Rachel murmured, adding several last strokes. 'Will you take the casserole out and turn off the gas?'

'I already did.' Hope was at her side now, studying the canvas. 'I thought you were done.'

'Something wasn't right.' She stood back for a longer view and was satisfied.

'Better.' Still eyeing the canvas, she set her palette aside, reached for a solvent cloth, and wiped her hands. 'I'll clean up and be right there.' She looked at Hope. 'Did Samantha set the table?'

'I did.'

'She's on the phone again?'

'Still,' Hope said so dryly that Rachel had to chuckle.

She hooked her baby's neck with an elbow and gave a squeeze. 'Five minutes,' she said and sent her off.

As promised, five minutes later Rachel was in the kitchen doling out lasagna and salad. Twenty minutes after that, digesting her meal along with a blow-by-blow of the late-breaking news that Samantha had received from her friends, Rachel gave out cleanup assignments. Fifteen minutes after that, having showered herself free of paint smells and put on fresh clothes, she ran a brush

through her hair. Then she paused and looked wildly around for the book she had read the weekend before.

She searched the chaos of her bedroom without success. Thinking she might have already set it out, she returned to the kitchen and looked around. 'Is my book in here?'

The girls were doing the dishes, Samantha washing, Hope drying.

'I'd look,' Samantha said with little grace, 'but you told me not to do anything until these were done.'

Rachel shifted a pile of mail, mostly clothing catalogues addressed to the self-same woman-child. 'I was referring to the telephone,' she said, checking in and around cookbooks. She doubled over to search the seats of the chairs pushed in at the table. 'I remember having it in my hand,' she murmured to herself when that search, too, proved fruitless.

'You're not organized,' Samantha charged. Rachel regularly preached the merits of organization.

'Oh, I am,' she mused, but distractedly. She went into the living room and began searching there. 'I just have a lot on my plate right now.'

That was putting it mildly. With her show three weeks away and closing in fast, she was feeling the crunch. Okay. She had finally hit gold with the sea otters. But there was still the background to do for that one and six others, and eighteen in all to frame — which would have been fine if she had nothing but work to do in the next three weeks. But there was a dress to buy with Samantha for her first prom, an end-of-the-year picnic to run for Hope's seventh-grade class, dentist's and doctor's appointments for both girls, a birthday party to throw for Ben Wolfe, who owned the art gallery and was a sometime date, and a share-your-career day to spend with three fifth-graders she didn't know.

She had splurged last night. She shouldn't be going anywhere tonight.

But last night had been for the girls and their mother. Book club was just for her. She loved the women, loved the books. Even if it added pressure to an already hectic work schedule, she wasn't missing a meeting.

Hope materialized at her shoulder. 'I think it's in your studio.'

Closing her eyes, Rachel conjured up the studio, which lay at a far end of her rambling house. She had left it for the day, then returned for an unexpected little while. And before returning? Yes, she'd had the book in her hand. She had carried it there and set it down.

'Thanks, sweetheart.' She cupped Hope's chin. 'Are you okay?'

The child looked forlorn.

'Guinevere will be fine,' Rachel said softly. 'She ate, didn't she?'

Hope nodded.

'See there, That's a good sign.' She kissed Hope's forehead. 'I'd better get the book. I'm running late.'

'Want me to get it?' Hope asked.

But Rachel remembered what she had been drawing before the otters had recaptured her eye. She wanted to make sure that that drawing was put safely away.

'Thanks, sweetheart, but I'll do it.' When Hope looked reluctant to let her go, she begged, 'Help Sam. Please,' and set off.

The book was where she had left it, on a corner of the large worktable. Hope had arrived while she was at the easel. The drawing — a charcoal sketch — still lay on the desk by the window.

Rachel lifted it now and carefully slipped it into a slim portfolio. As she did, her mind's eye re-created the image her sliver of charcoal had made, that of a man sprawled in a tangle of sheets. Even handling the heavy paper, she felt his trim hips, the slope of his spine, and widening above it, dorsal muscle, triceps, deltoid. Had it not been for the hair, it might have been an innocent exercise in drawing the human form. The hair, though, was dark and just a little too long on the neck. The identity was unmistakable; this figure had a name. Better the girls shouldn't see.

Taking care to tuck that last portfolio behind the desk, she retrieved the book and hurried back through the house. She gave the girls quick kisses, promised to be home by eleven, and went out to her car.

Chapter One

WHEN JACK MCGILL'S phone rang at two in the morning, the sound cut sharply into the muted world of a soupy San Francisco night. He had been lying in bed since twelve, unable to sleep. His mind was too filled, too troubled. The sudden sound jolted already jittery nerves.

In the time that it took him to grab for the phone, a dozen jarring thoughts came and went. 'Yes?'

'Is this Jack McGill?' asked a voice he didn't know. It was female and strained.

'Yes.'

'I'm Katherine Evans, one of Rachel's friends. There's been an accident. She's at the hospital in Monterey. I think you should come.'

Jack sat up. 'What kind of accident?'

'Her car was hit and went off the road.'

His stomach knotted. 'What road? Were the girls with her?'

'Highway One, and, no, she was alone.' Relief. The girls were safe, at least. 'She was near Rocky Point, on her way to Carmel. A car rammed her from behind. The impact pushed her across the road and over the side.'

His feet hit the floor. The knot in his stomach tightened.

'She's alive,' the friend went on. 'Only a few broken bones, but she hasn't woken up. The doctors are worried about her brain.'

'Worried how?'

'Bruising, swelling.'

He pushed a hand through his hair. The disquieting thoughts about work that had kept him awake were gone, replaced by a whole different swarm. 'The girls --'

'— are still home. Rachel was on her way to book group. When nine o'clock came and she hadn't shown up, I called the house. Samantha said she'd left at seven, so I called the state police. They told me there'd been an accident, and ID'd her car. They were still trying to get her out of it at that point and didn't know how she was, so I called her neighbor, Duncan Bligh. He went down to sit with the girls. I called them a little while ago to say she's okay, but I didn't tell them about the head injury, and I didn't know whether to tell Duncan to drive them up here to the hospital. That's not my decision to make.'

No. It was Jack's. Divorce or no divorce, he was the girls' father. Clamping the phone between shoulder and jaw, he reached for his jeans. 'I'm on my way. I'll call Samantha and Hope from the car.'

'Rachel's in Emergency now. Check in there.'

'Right. Thanks.' He hung up realizing that he couldn't remember her name, this friend of Rachel's, but it was the least of his worries, the very least. 'Unbelievable,' he muttered as he zipped his jeans and reached for a shirt. Things were bad at the office and bad in the field. He was living an architect's nightmare, needed in both places come morning, and then there was Jill. Tonight was the charity dinner that she had been working on for so long. He had deliberately planned business trips around this date, knowing how much it meant to her. His tux was pressed and waiting. She was expecting him at five. Five — and he hadn't slept a wink. And he was heading south to God only knew what, for God only knew how long.

But Rachel was hurt. *You're not married to her anymore*, his alter ego said, but he didn't miss a beat stuffing his shirt into his jeans and his feet into loafers. *You don't owe her a thing, man. She was the one who walked out.*

But she was hurt, and he had been called, and depending on what he found in Monterey, there would be arrangements to make for the girls. They would have to be told how she was, for starters. They were too old to be sent to bed with empty reassurances, too young to face this possible nightmare alone. Rachel was their caretaker, companion, confidant. The three were thick as thieves.

The doctors are worried about her brain, the friend had said. Well, of course, they would worry until things checked out.

He tossed cold water on his face and brushed his teeth. Minutes later he entered his studio — and in a moment's dismay wondered why he still called it that. It had become more a place of business than of art. What few drawings he had done were buried under proposals, spec sheets, contracts, and correspondence — the refuse of an insane number of construction projects in various stages. The place reeked of pressure.

Using the slate gray of dawn that filtered through the skylights, he crammed his briefcase with his laptop and as many vital papers as would fit, and his portfolio with multiple versions of the Montana design. Tucking both under in arm, he strode down the darkened hall to the kitchen. He didn't need a light. The place was streamlined and minimal. Grabbing his keys from the granite island and a blazer from the coat tree by the door, he set the alarm and went down to the garage below. Within minutes, he was backing out the BMW and speeding down Filbert. His headlights cut a pale gray swath in the smoky night, lighting little of Russian Hill. Other than the occasional street corner lump that could as easily be a homeless person sleeping as trash waiting for pickup, San Francisco was one big foggy cocoon.

Pressing numbers by feel on his car phone, he called information. He was heading south on Van Ness by the time he got through to the hospital in Monterey. 'This is Jack McGill. My wife, Rachel Keats, was brought in a little while ago. I'm on my way there. Can you give me an update?'

'Hold on, please.' Several nerve-wracking minutes later, he connected with a nurse in the emergency room. 'Mr. McGill? She's in surgery. That's about all we know at this point.'

'Is she conscious?'

'She wasn't when they took her upstairs.'

The doctors are worried about her brain. 'What's the surgery for?'

'Would you hold on a minute?'

'I'd rather not —' The sudden silence at the other end said he had no choice. He'd had no choice when Rachel had moved out six years ago, either. She had said she was going, had packed up the girls and their belongings while he was away on business. He had come home to an echoing house, feeling as thwarted and helpless then as he felt now. Then, armored in anger, he had sold the house and moved to one that didn't echo. But now, there was no such out. Her face came to

him with every shift of the fog, an urban Rorschach in which her features were beautiful one minute, bruised the next. His nervous heart was beating up a storm.

He pushed the car faster.

'Mr. McGill?' came a male voice, choppy over the speaker but audible. 'I'm Dr. Conley. I treated your wife when she arrived.'

'What's the surgery for?' he shouted, gripping the steering wheel.

'To set her left leg. Compound fractures, both femur and tibia. They'll be inserting pins —'

'I was told there were head injuries,' he cut in. A person didn't die from a broken leg. 'Has she regained consciousness?'

'No. There's some cranial swelling. We don't yet know what direction it'll take.'

'I want a specialist called.'

'Our man is on his way. When will you be here?'

'I'm just leaving San Francisco.'

'Two hours, then?'

'Less,' Jack said and, slowing but barely, sailed through a red light. 'Here's my cell number.' He rattled it off. 'Call me if there's any change, will you?' When the doctor agreed, Jack punched out another set of numbers. He wasn't as quick to press *send* this time, though. He didn't know what to say to the girls. They weren't babies anymore. And teenagers today were a different breed from the ones he had known. Add the fact that he no longer lived with them, and that they were *girls*, and he was at a *triple* disadvantage.

But this time he couldn't pass the buck. There was no one else to take it.

Katherine. That was the friend's name. Katherine.

Rachel had never mentioned her, but then, Rachel never mentioned anything that didn't deal directly with the girls. The girls had spoken of her, though. He thought he remembered that.

They definitely had mentioned Duncan Bligh, and more than once. He was the rancher who shared Rachel's canyon. The sloping meadow where his herd grazed lay above her redwood forest. Both meadow and forest were part of the Santa Lucias, rising east of the Big Sur coast.

Jack had a bad feeling about Duncan. He didn't like the affectionate way the girls described his cabin, his beard, or his sheep. He didn't like the way they grinned when he asked if Rachel was dating him. Oh sure, he knew they were trying to make him jealous. The problem was that he

could see Rachel with a man like that. Mountain men had a kind of rugged appeal. Not that Jack was a slouch. He was tall. He was fit. He could hammer a nail with the best of the carpenters who built what he designed, but he didn't chop down the trees from which the two-by-fours came, and he didn't shear sheep or shoot deer.

Did he want to talk to Duncan Bligh in the middle of the night? No. Nor, though, could he let his daughters think that the rancher was the only man around.

He pressed *send*.

The first ring was barely done when there came a fast and furious 'Hello?'

He lifted the phone. 'Hi, Sam. It's Dad. Are you guys okay?'

'How's Mom?'

'She's okay.' He kept his voice light. 'I'm on my way to the hospital. I just talked with the doctor. They've taken her into surgery. It sounds like she smashed up her leg pretty good.'

'Katherine said it was her ribs, too.'

'It may be, but the leg is the thing that needs setting. Refresh my memory, Sam. Who is Katherine?'

'Mom's best friend,' Samantha said impatiently. 'I gave her your number.'

'You could have called me yourself.'

She grew defensive. 'I didn't know if you were around, and if you weren't, you'd have had to book a flight and wait at the airport, and then if you missed a connection, you'd have taken forever to get here. Besides, Katherine says Mom has good doctors, so what can *you* do?'

'I can *be* there,' he said, but the words were no sooner out than he imagined her retort. So he added a fast 'Let's not argue, Samantha. This isn't the time.'

'Are you telling me the truth? Is Mom really okay?'

'That's the truth as I heard it. Is your sister sleeping?'

'She was until the phone rang. We knew it had to be about Mom. *My* friends wouldn't call in the middle of the night,' she said with such vehemence that Jack suspected they had done it more than once. 'Dad, we want to go to the hospital, but Duncan won't take us.'

'Is he there now?'

'He's asleep on the chair. Asleep at a time like this. Can you believe it? Wait, I'll put him on. Tell him to drive us up.' She shouted away from the phone, and even then it hurt Jack's ears, 'Duncan! Pick up the phone! It's my father!'

'*Samantha!* Jack called to get her back.

Her reply was muffled. 'No, Mom is *not* dead, but that cat will be if you don't let her go. You're holding her too tight, Hope. You'll *hurt* her.' She returned to Jack. 'Here. Hope wants to talk.'

'Daddy?' The voice was a fragile wisp.

Jack's heart shifted. 'Hi, Hope. How're you doin', sweetie?'

'Scared.'

'I figured that, but your mom's doing fine right now. I'm on my way to the hospital. I'll know more when I get there.'

'Come *here*,' begged the small voice.

'I will,' he said, melting at the idea that at least one of his girls needed him. 'But the hospital's on the way, so I'll stop there first. Then I'll have more to report when I see you.'

'Tell Mom --' She stopped.

What, sweetie?'

Samantha came on. 'She's crying again. Here's Duncan.'

'Duncan Bligh here.' The voice was curt. 'What's the word?'

Jack wanted Hope back. But it wasn't his night. 'The word is that I don't know much. I'll be at the hospital within the hour. Don't drive them up.'

'I wasn't about to.'

There was a muted protest in the background, then an aggrieved Samantha returned. 'Daddy, it's sick sitting around here while she's there.'

'It's the middle of the night.'

'Like we can *sleep* with her there? She's our *mother*. What if she *asks* for us?'

'She's in surgery, Samantha. Even if you were at the hospital, you wouldn't be able to see her. Look, if you want to do something, help your sister. She sounds upset.'

'And I'm not?'

Jack could hear the tight panic that was taking her voice a step beyond brash. But Samantha wasn't Hope. Two years apart in age, they were light-years apart in personality. Samantha was fifteen going on thirty, a little know-it-all who didn't take kindly to being treated like a child. Thirteen-year-old Hope was sensitive and silent. Samantha would ask the questions. Hope would see every nuance of the answers.

'I'm sure you're upset, too,' he said, 'but you're older than she is. Maybe if you help her, she'll help you. Give each other strength, y'know?'

'I keep thinking about Highway One, Dad. Some of those places, if you go over the side, you fall hundreds of feet straight down, right onto rocks. Was that what happened to Mom?'

'I don't know the details of the accident.'

'She might have fallen into water, but that'd be nearly as bad. Like, what if she was stuck underwater in the car —'

'Sam, she didn't drown.'

'You don't know that. You don't know whether the only thing that's keeping her alive is a bunch of machines.'

'Samantha.' She was nearly as creative as Rachel, without the maturity to channel it. 'Your mother has a broken leg.'

'But you don't know what *else*,' she cried. 'Call the troopers. They'll tell you what happened.'

'Maybe later. The doctor has my cell number. I want to leave the line open in case he tries to call. And I want you to go to bed. It doesn't do anyone any good if you start imagining what *might* have happened. Imagination's always worse. So calm down. I'm in control of things here. And don't sit up waiting for the phone to ring, because I'm not calling you again until after the sun comes up.

'I'm not going to school.'

'We'll discuss that later. Right now, the one thing you can do to help your mother most is to reassure your sister. And get some sleep. Both of you.'

'Yeah, right,' she muttered.

* * *

JACK CONCENTRATED on driving. The fog had stayed in the city, leaving the highway dark and straight. He pressed his middle in the hope that the warmth of his hand would ease the knot

there, but his palm was cold and the knot stayed tight. Nerves did that to him every time. Lately, it seemed the knot was there more often than not.

He willed the phone to ring with the news that Rachel had awoken from surgery and was just fine. But the phone remained still, the interior of the car silent save the drone of the engine. He tried to distract himself with thoughts of all he had been agonizing over in bed less than two hours before — contract disputes, building delays, personnel losses — but he couldn't connect with those problems. They were distant, back in the city fog.

He would have calls to make, come morning. There were meetings to reschedule.

Or if Rachel woke up, he might be back in the office by noon.

That was likely, the more he thought about it. Rachel was the strongest, healthiest woman he knew — strongest, healthiest, most independent and self-sufficient. She didn't need him. Never had. Six years ago, she had reached a fork in the road of her life and gone off in a different direction from him. Her choice. Her life. Fine.

So why was he heading south? Why was he postponing even one meeting to run to her bedside? She had left him. She had taken ten years of marriage and crumpled it up, like a sketch on yellow trace that was so far off the mark it was worthless.

Why *was* he heading south?

He was heading south because her friend had called him. And because it was his job as a father to help out with the girls. And because he was terrified that Rachel might die. His life with her had been better than anything before or since. He was heading south because he felt that he still owed her for that.

* * *

THE VERY FIRST time Jack had laid eyes on Rachel, he decided that she wasn't his type. Oh, he liked blond hair, and she had endless waves of that, but he usually went for model types. Rachel Keats didn't fit that bill. She looked too pure. No long eyelashes, no glossy mouth, no flagrant sexuality, just dozens of freckles scattered over a nose and cheeks that were vaguely sunburned, and eyes that were focused intently on the most boring professor Jack had ever heard.

The subject was rococo and neoclassic art. The professor, renowned in his field, was the man whose grant was paying for Jack's architectural degree. In exchange for that, Jack graded exams and papers and helped with research and correspondence to do with the textbook for which the grant had been given.

Jack was only marginally interested in rococo and neoclassic art and even less interested in moving from Manhattan to Tucson, but the slot had been the only one open that offered a full ride plus a stipend. Being penniless, Jack needed both.

The job wasn't taxing. The professor in question had been delivering the same lectures, from the same printed lesson plan, for twenty-plus years. Since Jack read the lectures beforehand, his presence in the lecture hall was more for the sake of fetching water or a forgotten book or paper for the professor than anything educational for himself. He sat far off to the professor's side, where he could be easily accessed. It was a perfect spot from which to view the fifty-some-odd students who attended a given class, out of three times that many enrolled in the course.

Rachel Keats attended every class, listened raptly, took notes. Jack told himself that his eye sought her out for the simple constancy of her presence. It didn't explain, though, why he noted that she went from class to lunch at the smallest campus cafe, where she sat alone, or that she drove an old red VW bug and put a sunshade on the dash that was surely hand-painted, since he had never in his life seen as large or vividly colored a *bug* sitting behind the wheel of a car as her sunscreen hilariously depicted.

She was an art major. She lived in an apartment complex not far from his. She was a loner by all accounts and, if the easygoing expression she wore meant anything, was content.

Not only wasn't she his type, but he was dating someone who was. Celeste was tall and leggy, loaded up top and sweet down below, asked precious few questions and made precious few demands, liked the sex enough that he could do what he wanted when he wanted in between. She cooked and cleaned his bathroom, but he hadn't been able to con her into doing his laundry. That was why he found himself in the laundromat on a Tuesday night when Rachel came through the door.

Those waves of blond hair were gathered up in a turquoise ribbon that clashed with her purple tank top, but her shorts and sandals were white and as fresh as the blush that stained those sun-stained cheeks when she saw him there.

In the extra-long heartbeat that she spent at the door, he could have sworn she was debating turning and leaving. Not wanting her to do that, he said, 'Hey! How're you doing?'

She smiled. 'Great.' The blush remained. She sucked in her lips, raised her brows, and seeming self-conscious, hugged an overstuffed laundry bag as she looked down the row of washers for raised lids. 'Ah, she said, spotting two side by side. She smiled at him again and headed toward them.

Jack's heart was pounding. He didn't know why. All she'd done was smile. There hadn't been anything remotely sexual in it. She wasn't his type *at all*. But he slid off the dryer he'd been sitting on, and following her, he leaned up against the machine that backed on one of those she had chosen.

'Rococo and neoclassic art?' he prompted. He didn't want her to think this was a blind pickup, because it wasn't a pickup at all. She wasn't his type. He assumed that was why she intrigued him. It was safe. No risk. Just an innocuous hello.

She acknowledged the connection with a simple 'Uh-huh.' She was blushing still, pushing dirty laundry from the mouth of her laundry bag into the mouth of the washer.

He watched her for a minute, then said, 'Mine's in the dryer.'

It was probably the dumbest line he'd ever handed a woman. But he couldn't tell her that she was pushing reds and whites together into her machine. He couldn't ask if the reds were shirts, bras, or briefs. He couldn't even look directly at those things, because she would have been mortified. Besides, he couldn't take his eyes from hers. They were hazel with gold flecks, and more gentle than any he had seen.

'You're Obermeyer's TA,' she said as she filled the second machine with things that went way beyond red. Her current outfit was conservative by comparison. 'Are you training to teach?'

'No. I'm in architecture.'

She smiled. 'Really?'

'Really,' he said, smiling back. She really was a sweet thing, smiling like that. The sweetness remained even when she suddenly opened her mouth and looked around — left, right, down, back.

Jack returned to his own possessions and offered her his box of soap powder.

He was rewarded with another blush and a soft-murmured 'Thanks.' When she had both machines filled with soap, fed with quarters, and started, she asked, 'What kind of things do you want to build?'

The question usually came from his parents and was filled with scorn. But Rachel Keats seemed genuinely interested.

'Homes, for starters,' he said. 'I come from a two-bit town, one little box after another. I used to pass those little boxes on the way to school and spend my class time doodling them into something finer. Those doodles didn't help my math grade much.'

'No. I wouldn't think it.' She shot a glance at the text that lay open on his dryer. 'Is the book on home designs?'

'Not yet. Right now we're into arches. Do you know how many different kinds of arches there are? There are flat arches, round arches, triangular arches, pointed arches. There are hand arches, back arches, groin arches. There are depressed arches. There are diminished arches. There are horseshoe arches.'

She was laughing, the sound as gentle as her eyes. 'I don't think I want to know what some of those are.' She paused for the briefest time, said almost shyly, 'I was a doodler, too.'

He liked the shyness. It made him feel safe. 'Where?'

'Chicago, then Atlanta, then New York. My childhood was mobile. My dad takes old businesses and turns them around. We move when he sells. How about you?'

'Oregon. You won't have heard of the town. It doesn't make it onto maps. What did you doodle?'

'Oh, people, birds, animals, fish, anything that moves. I like doing what a camera does, capturing an instant.'

'Are you still doodling?' he asked in response to her use of the present tense.

She lifted a shoulder, shy, maybe modest. 'I like to think it's more. I'm hoping to paint for a living.'

'With or without a day job?' Jack asked. The average artist barely earned enough to eat. Unless Rachel was significantly better than average, she would have a tough time paying the bills.

She wrapped her arms around her middle. Quietly, almost sadly, she said, 'I'm lucky. Those businesses keep selling. My mom heads one of them now. They think I'm crazy to be here doing this. Art isn't business. They want me back in the city wearing designer dresses with a designer handbag and imported boots.' She took a fresh breath. 'Do you have siblings?'

'Five brothers and a sister,' he said, though it had nothing to do with anything. He rarely talked about family. The people he was with rarely asked.

Not only had Rachel asked, but those wonderful eyes of hers lit up with his answer. 'Six? That's great. I don't have any.'

'That's why you think it's great. There were seven of us born in ten years, living with two parents in a three-bedroom house. I was the lucky one. Summers, I got the porch.'

'What are the others doing now? Are they all over the country? Are any of them out here?'

'They're back home. I'm the only one who made it out.'

Her eyes grew. 'Really? Why you? *How?*'

'Scholarship. Work-study. Desperation. I had to leave. I don't get along with my family.'

'Why not?' she asked in such an innocent way that he actually answered.

'They're negative. Always criticizing to cover up for what they lack, but the only thing they really lack is ambition. My dad coulda done anything he wanted — he's a bright guy — only, he got stuck in a potato processing plant and never got out. My brothers are going to be just like

him, different jobs, same wasted potential. I went to college, which makes what they're doing seem smaller. They'll never forgive me for that.'

'I'm so sorry.'

He smiled. 'Not your fault.'

'Then you don't go home much?'

'No. And you? Back to New York?'

She crinkled her nose. 'I'm not a city person. When I'm there, I'm stuck doing all the things I hate.'

'Don't you have friends there?'

'A few. We talk. I've never had to go around with a crowd. How about you? Got a roommate?'

'Not on your life. I had enough of those growing up to never want another one, at least not of the same sex. What's your favorite thing in Tucson?'

'The desert. What's yours?'

'The Santa Catalinas.'

Again those eyes lit, gold more than hazel. 'Do you hike?' When he nodded, she said, 'Me, too. When do you have time? Are you taking a full course load? How many hours a week do you have to give to Obermeyer?'

Jack answered her questions and asked more of his own. When she answered those without seeming to mind, he asked more again, and she asked her share right back. She wasn't judgmental, just curious.

She seemed as interested in where he'd been, what he'd done, what he liked and didn't like as he was in her answers. They talked nonstop until Rachel's clothes were clean, dry, and folded. When, arms loaded, they finally left the laundromat, he knew three times as much about her as he knew about Celeste.

Taking that as a message of some sort, he broke up with Celeste the next day, called Rachel, and met her for pizza. They picked right up where they had left off at the laundromat.

Jack was fascinated. He had never been a talker. He didn't like baring his thoughts and ideas, held them close to the vest, but there was something about Rachel that felt...safe, there it was again. She was gentle. She was interested. She was smart. Being as much of a loner as he was, she seemed just as startled as he to be opening up to a virtual stranger, but they gave each other permission. He trusted her instinctively. She seemed to trust him the same way right back.

As simply as that, they became inseparable. They ate together, studied together, sketched together. They went to movies. They hiked. They huddled before class and staked out their favorite campus benches, but it was a full week before they made love.

In theory, a week was no time at all. In practice, in an age of free sex with two people deeply attracted to each other, it was an eternity, and they were definitely attracted to each other. No doubt about that. Jack was hit pretty fast by the lure of an artist's slender fingers and graceful arms. He didn't miss the way her shorts curved around her butt or the enticing flash of midriff when she leaned a certain way. The breasts under her tank tops were small but exquisitely formed. At least, that was the picture he pieced together from the shadow of shapes and the occasional nob of a nipple. The fact that he didn't know for sure kept him looking.

Was she attracted to him? Well, there was that nipple, tightest when he was closest. There was the way she leaned into him, so subtle, when they went to a campus concert, and the way her breath caught when he came close to whisper something in her ear. All that, even without her eyes, which turned warm to hot at all the appropriate times. Oh, yes, she wanted him. He could have taken her two days after the laundromat.

He didn't because he was afraid. He had never had a relationship like this with a woman before. Physical, yes. But not emotional, not psychological, not heart-to-heart. Rachel made him feel comfortable enough to say what he thought and felt. Not knowing how sex would mix with that, he avoided taking her to his apartment or going to her apartment, avoided even kissing her.

A week of that was *more* than an eternity. He'd had it with avoidance by the time she invited him over for dinner, and apparently she had, too. He was barely inside the door when that first kiss came. It was a scorcher, purity in flames, hotter and hotter as they slid along the wall to her room and fell on the bed. There was a mad scramble to get clothes off and be close and inside — and it was heaven for Jack, the deepest, most overwhelming lovemaking he had ever in his life dreamed could take place.

When it was done, she sat on the bed with pencil and paper and drew him, and what emerged said it all. With her hands, her mind, her heart she made him into something finer than he had ever been before. She was his angel, and he was in love.

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