



Angel's
TOUCH

SIRI CALDWELL

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BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Megan McLaren didn't know how long she had been sitting at the bar alone chugging cranberry juice, watching the door, waiting for Amelia to show up, but she had just about had enough. One more song and she was going home.

"Want to dance?"

Stellar. She was such a loser that her friend Gwynne was taking pity on her.

"You don't have to do this."

Gwynne thrashed her hips in that charmingly goofy way of hers she called dancing. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I ask myself the same question." Amelia knew she wasn't a fan of the Sand Bar. And yet, she had insisted on meeting her here instead of at Megan's house.

Neutral ground—that's what it was. Never a good sign.

She should never have said yes.

Megan jumped off her barstool and followed Gwynne to the two-person dance floor, which was as claustrophobic as the rest of the bar. Anything was better than hooking her flip-flops

around that barstool and giving herself a cramp in the shins while she tried not to check her watch.

“Amelia stand you up?”

What do you know, she did have a cramp. “I thought dancing with you was going to distract me from that.”

“Is it working?”

“Not really.”

Gwynne attempted an airborne spin and stumbled the landing. Laughing, she recovered by throwing her arms overhead in what might be considered a dance pose. “I could teach you this new move I just invented,” she wheedled, as if her jump/spin/flail combo were a bribe no sane woman could resist.

“I’ll pass.”

“You don’t know where she is,” Gwynne observed. “Do you?”

“I’m guessing she’s stuck in traffic.” Where else could she be? Piper Beach was at least a three-hour drive from Washington, DC, and Friday-after-work beach traffic was never fun, especially on Memorial Day weekend.

“She hasn’t called?”

Megan gritted her teeth. No, Amelia hadn’t called. And no, it wasn’t like her not to call. She wasn’t picking up her phone, either. But no, she didn’t think she’d been in an accident. She unclenched her jaw and bobbed her shoulders with an ease she didn’t feel. Gwynne didn’t need to hear about it.

“Trouble in paradise?”

Yup, Gwynne Abernathy could still read her mind. Unfortunately.

Megan sighed. “I have a feeling she’s planning to dump me.”

“You need to dump her first, then.”

“I’m not sure I’ve reached that point yet.”

“Why not? You have the advantage here. You know what’s coming. Why not save yourself some grief?”

“I want to give this relationship a chance.”

“Oh, come on. She has the aura of a toad. I don’t know why you ever went out with her in the first place.”

“Excuse me, we haven’t broken up yet. You don’t get to trash

my girlfriend until *after* we break up. And she does *not* have the aura of a toad.”

“My mistake.” Gwynne ruined her apology with a wink. “Toads have lovely auras. Very green and healthy.”

Typical.

Gwynne managed to insert a spin into her flailing movements without losing the beat, and looked so pleased with herself that Megan had to laugh. Even if dancing with friends was not the plan. Not with friends who were also exes, and who, by the way, had also dumped her.

It had been easier to know what to do with Gwynne. And even then, when it was obvious to both of them that they'd be better off as friends, she hadn't had the heart to break it off. Gwynne, of course, had read her mind and dumped her first.

“I'm trying to remember what it was you liked so much about Amelia.”

“We haven't broken up yet, remember?”

“I was looking forward to it so much that I forgot that bizarre detail. She makes you miserable.”

“That's not true.” Amelia wasn't always the most considerate person in the world, but she meant well. And they had that connection—that zing in the aura when they got close. Not that she could tell Gwynne that. She and Gwynne had strict unspoken rules about what topics they would and would not discuss. Zinging auras did not get the ex-girlfriend seal of approval. “I'm sure there's a cosmic reason why we met.”

“Karmic computer malfunction?”

“Karma doesn't malfunction.”

“Speaking of malfunctions...” Gwynne nodded in the direction of the entrance.

Amelia Barnett stood just inside the doorway a few yards away, scanning the room. She must have driven straight from the office, because she was still in her work clothes. Her suit was rumpled and her lipstick was long gone, but her short blond hair was still perfectly in place, shellacked into submission.

And someone was with her.

Amelia leaned over to whisper in the other blonde's ear. She

didn't touch her at all—not her shoulder, not her arm, not the back of her waist, and definitely not her ass—but the way they were drifting into each other's personal space, she might as well have.

There was no way Amelia would cheat on her in front of her. Was there? She was imagining things. Maybe Amelia gave a friend a ride.

And maybe that friend had thanked her while they were stuck in traffic at the Chesapeake Bay Bridge toll plaza by chewing off her lipstick.

Whoever she was, she followed the direction of Amelia's outstretched arm and headed for the restrooms. Amelia stalked to Megan's side.

"Definitely not green and healthy," Gwynne announced as she made her escape.

"What was that all about?" Amelia watched Gwynne's retreat for a couple seconds before snapping her attention back to Megan. "I need to talk to you."

Megan ignored her unease and reached for her. "Hug first."

Amelia's shoulders softened at her touch. Encouraged, Megan rubbed the muscles between her shoulder blades. Amelia let her head roll back and closed her eyes with a deep sigh of relief.

But when Amelia touched the small of Megan's back, instead of pulling her closer, she straightened, dug her fingers a little too hard into her back, and braced herself.

And Megan knew.

Amelia was going to break up with her. Here, in public. She wasn't even going to apologize for being late tonight and making her worry.

Megan's arms dropped to her sides.

Amelia took her elbow and led her to the bar. She asked the bartender for two of whatever was on tap, skipping her usual rant about their lack of Belgian beer. At least Megan would never again have to remind her that she didn't like beer—Amelia pretended to forget, as if that would magically change anything.

"I don't want to hurt you," her soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend

said, more gently than she had expected. "I know you think we have a past life thing going on—"

Megan cut her off. "I know you don't believe me." Now that it was happening, she just wanted to get it over with.

"Nobody believes that stuff, baby."

Gee, thanks. What happened to *I don't want to hurt you*? Of course, she'd left an important word off the end of that sentence. What she'd meant was, *I don't want to hurt you, but...*

Amelia took a deep breath. "I can't do this anymore. I need to move on."

One good thing about Amelia, she did like to come straight to the point. When she stabbed you with a knife, it was quick. Very humane.

Megan almost didn't feel it.

Amelia took the two beers and joined her new friend at an intimate table in the corner.

Megan watched, stunned.

She wondered if the new girl liked beer.

CHAPTER TWO

When you were new in town, nobody warned you the annual Race to the Beach in Piper Beach, Delaware, was the Race *on* the Beach, because it was so much fun to screw with the tourists.

Kira Wagner's wristwatch beeped, reminding her she was lagging behind her personal best, posted last year at the Seagull 10K. So much for improving on her time. She dodged a wave and put on some speed. Maybe she should start a new list of personal bests for races run under adverse conditions. Sand... mountains...running the Marine Corps Marathon in borrowed combat boots. Maybe she'd include charming a friendly female marine out of her boots as part of the challenge.

She'd have enjoyed *this* challenge if her outer thigh hadn't cramped. At first it was just a twinge, but now that she was nearing the finish line it was becoming harder to ignore. Looked like the visit she'd planned to make to the massage tent was going to be more than just a networking opportunity.

Onlookers applauded as she crossed the finish line. She sagged with disgust at her finish time and followed the seagulls

toward the snack table, helped herself to three bananas and a bottle of water, and then stopped by the first aid station for an ice pack to put on her thigh.

She'd been telling herself for months to try a massage, but never gotten around to it. Now was the perfect opportunity. About time, too, because if she was going to open a spa here in Piper Beach, she really ought to know more about the business than just the financials. Somehow she always found time to do the on-the-phone research, but never the hands-on research. The someone-else's-hands-on-her-body research, to be precise. It just didn't sound all that relaxing. She couldn't imagine lying down for an hour without feeling antsy. But it was time to get it over with. The tent was right here. She'd get rid of her cramp, and if she liked the therapist, she'd multitask and ask her if she was interested in applying for a new job.

When Kira reached the head of the line she could see right into the massage tent. Runners lay fully dressed—if you could call running shorts and a jog bra fully dressed—side by side in closely packed rows of massage tables covered in plastic sheeting. Not exactly a spa experience. She bet they were sweaty and sandy, too, like she was—also not a spa experience. But everyone who emerged was starry-eyed. That reaction was exactly what she wanted for her customers. For herself, she'd be happy if someone could get rid of this cramp.

“Any of those massage therapists happen to be Megan McLaren?” she asked the woman organizing the line of waiting runners. Mrs. Jacoby at Smooth Sailing had been quite clear that Megan McLaren was out of her league, but Kira wasn't convinced. The best massage therapist she'd ever met, Mrs. Jacoby had claimed. That didn't mean she wouldn't work for her.

“Right over there.” The woman pointed Megan out as a preteen in two lopsided braids brushed past Kira's legs and begged the race volunteer—clearly her mother—for ice cream.

Off to the right, in the row of tables, was a massage therapist who had her back turned to her as she worked. Like all the other massage therapists, she wore shorts paired with an official white

T-shirt with a fluorescent green handprint logo on the back, but unlike the others, she was barefoot in the sand. The wind blowing in off the ocean through the canvas tent's open flaps whipped through her long brown hair and had its way with it. Kira watched, mesmerized. That was going to be one heck of a rat's nest to comb through and untangle at the end of the day.

Kira gulped down the last of her water and tossed the bottle in a convenient recycling bin. "I heard she has a good reputation," she told the volunteer.

"Megan's a sweetheart."

"Is there any way I could get her?" Kira smiled her best I'm-harmless-please-do-me-a-favor smile.

The woman dug out some money for her daughter and sent her running off. "You'd have to wait," she told Kira.

"I don't mind."

She pulled Kira out of the line. "Stand here," she ordered.

Kira waited patiently, trying to look inconspicuous. She scanned the tables to see if she recognized any of the massage therapists from the scouting she'd been doing around town, but her eyes kept returning to Megan McLaren. There was something fascinating about the way she swayed back and forth as she glided her hands up and down her client's legs. Each time she shifted her weight, her whole body moved in a sweeping, primal wave. Kira'd had no idea massage could be so graceful.

It wasn't long before Megan was done with that runner. Kira caught the attention of her guard, who nodded and raised her hand to tell her to wait one more minute. Megan squirted her table with disinfectant and wiped it down, then stashed her towel inside a milk crate tucked under the table. She turned and waved to show she was ready for her next victim.

Kira froze.

That face...

She knew that face. Wow, that was weird. She thought she'd forgotten what the girl in her childhood dreams looked like—dreams that left her flushed and confused. Heat rose to her face as she struggled to push the surprisingly vivid memory aside.

No one had ever measured up to that goddess. Which

was dumb, because, well, she was a *dream*. Something her subconscious made up. How could anyone possibly compete with that?

Sure, Megan had a halo of tangled dark hair framing a round, makeup-free face, just like the girl in her dreams. She had the same quirky elfin eyebrows, the same friendly nose, the same inviting mouth. And no doubt the same amazing body... But there was no way. She must have seen her around town, spotted her in the Piper Beach women's bar or stood in line behind her at the grocery store, and now her face looked familiar and her brain had gotten mixed up. It was some kind of *déjà vu*. The brain misfiring. No big deal.

"Okay, you can go over there now." The volunteer touched Kira's arm to prod her in the right direction.

Kira wiped her hands on her shorts. They might be moisture-wicking on the inside, but on the outside, the techno fabric certainly wasn't doing anything for her sweaty palms. She considered wiping her hands on her bare skin or on a socially acceptable inch of her soaked jog bra, but that wasn't going to do the trick, either. She made her way over, still trying in vain to wipe the sweat off on her shorts.

She'd be all right. *Déjà vu* could be disorienting, but it would pass. Before she knew it she was saying hello and lying faceup on plastic sheeting that was just as clammy as it looked.

Megan stood at the foot of the table and enveloped Kira's feet in a sure grip, her hands like miniature hot water bottles. Despite the sweltering air temperature, the heat of her hands was exactly what her body needed. She massaged her arches and her toes, soothed her ankles, and worked the outside of her shins, finding tight muscles Kira never knew she had.

She was too beautiful not to watch. Kira could see the muscles working in her arms, but nothing else betrayed any effort at all. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths and Kira's own breathing fell into sync with it, pulling her into a state of deep relaxation.

When it occurred to her that she was staring, Kira forced herself to look away and study the pattern of the tent poles

overhead until it was time to turn over and lie facedown. What was wrong with her, anyway? It was an embarrassing dream and she was glad she hadn't thought of it in years. No need to act like a jerk.

But it was hard not to let herself get disoriented again, because that touch...there was nothing casual about that touch. Gentle, yes, but wholly deliberate. Megan slid her hands up Kira's exhausted legs with efficient but gentle strokes, flushing the soreness out of first her calves, then her thighs, without any faltering shyness that might have turned her hand on Kira's bare thigh into something intimate. She showed no hesitation as she teased out her sore spots, pushing into them over and over again with a no-nonsense attitude that had Kira closing her eyes and surrendering her body to her. Megan pushed into one particularly sore spot in her hamstrings yet again and Kira almost shivered from the pleasant agony.

She was going to be a wreck by the end of her ten minutes.

"Time's up," Megan said at last, close to Kira's ear. "You can get up when you're ready."

Kira swung her legs off the table and sat up abruptly, relieved to be back in control of her body and anxious to put some distance between her ear and Megan's mouth. She lowered herself onto her feet and immediately noticed how much lighter she felt. Her legs weren't worn-out dead weight anymore. She rose on her toes experimentally, clenching her calves and quadriceps to see if they would cramp. They didn't.

She was impressed. She should definitely try to hire this woman for her spa. Either that or start getting regular massages from her.

Sure. Dream or no dream, that was so not what she wanted from her.

"Hope that helped." Megan rummaged in a tote bag under her table. "I forgot to bring my business cards, but if you're interested in massage I could write my name and number on a piece of paper for you."

She really should tell her she already had her phone number. It was sitting on her desk in her office where, despite

Mrs. Jacoby's warning that Megan would never leave her own successful business to go work for someone else, Kira had placed her at the top of her list of people to contact.

Megan emerged from under the table with a pen. "No paper, but I could write it on your hand."

Writing on her hand—how high school. How...sweet. Instead of ending this charade and telling her she didn't need her number, Kira held out her hand.

She bit her lip at the warmth of Megan's small hand on hers and again at the tickle of her pen across her palm. Pitiful. She was an adult, for God's sake, and had been for quite some time. The touch of a pen shouldn't affect her like this.

And to make it worse, something in her stomach was jumping and cheering and waving a banner, because if the rumors were true and there was no chance of hiring her, then there was no reason not to ask her out on a date. Not that that would really have stopped her. If she had to choose one, hiring Megan was not going to win.

She cleared her throat, feeling a little motion sick from all that gastrointestinal celebration. "I've heard of you."

"Good things, I hope."

"Great things. Well-deserved."

"Thank you."

Kira cleared her throat again. Why did Megan have to look so much like the girl from her dream? Would've made it so much easier. Asking women out didn't usually make her ill. "I know this is probably way out of line, but would you be interested in going out to dinner with me sometime?"

The male massage therapist at the next table turned to look at Kira in surprise, then raised his eyebrows at Megan, no doubt eager to hear her shoot her down.

"I'm sorry." Megan's brusque, businesslike tone made it clear this was how she responded to all wayward clients' requests for dinner, no emotion required.

The flush that appeared in her cheeks betrayed her, though.

Kira felt like a jerk for embarrassing her in front of her colleagues. She glanced at the man at the next table to see what

his reaction was, but instead of providing Megan with backup, he had looked away and was pretending to mind his own business. Was that all the effort he was willing to make? Not even a dirty look in Kira's direction? With talent like Megan's—not to mention that sexy, tousled hair—she ought to have someone around who was a bit more on the ball to ward off her admirers.

To be fair, maybe he didn't think Kira was a threat—what with her being a woman and all. Was Megan even gay? Maybe. She hadn't responded with a "What the hell?" but all that meant was that she wasn't shocked by Kira's proposition, and how surprising was that in a place like Piper Beach?

She had to apologize. "Please forget I said anything."

"It's forgotten."

Now that was a nice thing to say. Kira had been about to bend down to retrieve her shoes from underneath the table, but Megan's reply made her look up. What a mistake. She had the most amazing eyes, so full of light they made you wonder if maybe magic fairies were real. She didn't look angry at all. Flustered had given way to apologetic and then to curious.

And so luminous. If Kira were a deer, she'd have been hit by a car by now. Straight women didn't let their feminine power blaze through when they made eye contact. Straight women didn't make her forget where she was, or make her say stupid things like "Really?"

Shit. Did it have to come out high-pitched and breathless like that? Of all the stupid, useless, girly...

Megan didn't drop her gaze. Kira felt behind her for the support of the massage table. It was quite possible that oxygen was no longer reaching her brain.

"Really," Megan said, finally.

No word about changing her mind about dinner. So, okay. She would leave before she made things any worse.

As soon as Megan stopped staring into her eyes and giving her hope.

"Really," Megan whispered, and looked away. Kira thought she saw regret flutter across her face. But when Megan met her gaze again, her eyes had lost that otherworldly look and become

cool and distant, the way you glanced at a stranger before gazing past them.

Now it was easy to look away. Kira felt numb. She was being dismissed. People were waiting outside the tent for her to leave so they could have their turn.

“Don’t forget your shoes,” said the man working at the next table.

She obediently bent to pick up her shoes and socks and caught Megan glaring at him. Kira straightened. Was Megan defending her?

Maybe...

Hope jumped in her chest. “My name’s Kira Wagner. I bought the old Starfish Hotel. You can find me there if—”

Megan’s eyes remained glacial.

Kira backpedaled. “Ignore me. Thank you for the wonderful massage. It was a pleasure meeting you.” She turned and left before she made things any more awkward.

Maybe Megan would track her down.

She seriously doubted it.