Daring to Dream

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Extract

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Chapter One

When she was eighteen, Margo knew exactly what she wanted. She had wanted the same at twelve. Everything. But now she had made up her mind how to go about attaining it. She was going to trade on her looks, her best and perhaps only talent as far as she was concerned. She thought she could act, or at least learn how. It had to be easier than algebra, or English lit, or any of those other stuffy classes in school. But one way or another, she was going to be a star. And she was going to make it on her own.

She'd made the decision the night before. The night before Laura's wedding. Was it selfish of her to be so miserable that Laura was about to be married?

She'd been nearly this miserable when Mr. and Mrs. T. had taken Laura and Josh and Kate to Europe the summer before for an entire month. And she had stayed home because her

mother had refused the Templetons' offer to take her along. She'd been desperate to go, she remembered, but none of her pleas, nor any of Laura's and Kate's, had budged Ann Sullivan an inch.

''Not your place to traipse off to Europe and stay in fancy hotels,'' Mum had said. ''The Templetons have been generous enough with you without you expecting more.''

So she'd stayed home, earning her keep, as her mother called it, by dusting and polishing and learning to keep a proper house. And she'd been miserable. But that didn't make her selfish, she told herself. It hadn't been as if she hadn't wanted Kate and Laura to have a wonderful time. She'd just ached to be with them.

And it wasn't as if she didn't hope that Laura's marriage would be perfectly wonderful. She just couldn't stand to lose her. Did that make her selfish? She hoped it didn't, because it wasn't just for herself that she was unhappy. It was for Laura too. It was the thought of Laura's tying herself to a man and marriage before she had given herself a chance to live.

Oh, God, Margo wanted to live.

So her bags were already packed. Once Laura flew off on her honeymoon, Margo intended to be on her way to Hollywood.

She would miss Templeton House, and Mr. and Mrs. T., and, oh, she would miss Kate and Laura, even Josh. She would miss her mother, though she knew there would be ugliness between them before the door closed. There had already been so many arguments.

College was the bone of contention between them now. College and Margo's unbending refusal to continue her education. She knew she would die if she had to spend another four years with books and classrooms. And what did she need with college when she'd already decided how she wanted to live her life and make her fortune?

Her mother was too busy for arguments now. As housekeeper, Ann Sullivan had wedding reception on her mind. The wedding would be held at church, then all the limousines would stream along Highway 1, like great, glinting white boats, and up the hill to Templeton House.

Already the house was perfect, but she imagined her mother was off somewhere battling with the florist over arrangements. It had to be beyond perfect for Laura's wedding. She knew how much her mother loved Laura, and she didn't resent it. But she did resent that her mother wanted her to be like Laura. And she never could. Didn't want to.

Laura was warm and sweet and perfect. Margo knew she was none of those things. Laura never argued with her mother the way Margo and Ann flew at each other like cats. But then, Laura's life was already so settled and smooth. She never had to worry about her place, or where she would go. She'd already seen Europe, hadn't she? She could live in Templeton House forever if she chose. If she wanted to work, the Templeton hotels were there for her—she could pick her spot.

Margo wasn't like Kate either, so studious and goal-oriented. She wasn't going to dash off to Harvard in a few weeks and work toward a degree so that she could keep books and read tax law. God, how tedious! But that was Kate, who'd rather read the *Wall Street Journal* than pore over the glamorous pictures in *Vogue*, who could discuss, happily, interest rates and capital gains with Mr. T. for hours.

No, she didn't want to be Kate or Laura, as much as she loved them. She wanted to be Margo Sullivan. And she intended to revel in being Margo Sullivan. One day she would have a house as fine as this, she told herself as she came slowly down the main stairs, trailing a hand along the glassy mahogany banister.

The stairs curved in a long, graceful sweep, and high above, like a sunburst, hung a sparkling Waterford chandelier. How

many times had she seen it shoot glamorous light onto the glossy white and peacock blue marble tiles of the foyer, sparkle elegance onto the already elegant guests who came to the wonderful parties the Templetons were famous for?

The house always rang with laughter and music at Templeton parties, she remembered, whether guests were seated formally at the long, graceful table in the dining room under twin chandeliers or wandered freely through the rooms, chatting as they sipped champagne or cozied up on a love seat.

She would give wonderful parties one day, and she hoped she would be as warm and entertaining a hostess as Mrs. T. Did such things comes through the blood, she wondered, or could they be learned? If they could be learned, then she would learn.

Her mother had taught her how to arrange flowers just so—the way those gleaming white roses in a tall crystal vase graced the Pembroke table in the foyer. See the way they reflect in the mirror, she thought. Tall and pure with their fanning greens.

Those were the touches that made home, she reminded herself. Flowers and pretty bowls, candlesticks and lovingly polished wood. The smells, the way the light slanted through the windows, the sounds of grand old clocks ticking. It was all that she would remember when she was far away. Not just the archways that allowed one room to flow into another, or the complex and beautiful patterns of mosaics around the tall, wide front door. She would remember the smell of the library after Mr. T. had lighted one of his cigars and the way the room echoed when he laughed.

She'd remember the winter evenings when she and Laura and Kate would curl up on the rug in front of the parlor fire—the rich gleam of the lapis mantel, the feel of the heat on her cheeks, the way Kate would giggle over a game when she was winning.

She'd imagine the fragrances of Mrs. T.'s sitting room. Powders and perfumes and candlewax. And the way Mrs. T. smiled when Margo came in to talk with her. She could always talk to Mrs. T.

Her own room. How the Templetons had let her pick out the new wallpaper when she turned sixteen. And even her mother had smiled and approved of her choice of pale green background splashed with showy white lilies. The hours she'd spent in that room alone, or with Laura and Kate. Talking, talking, talking. Planning. Dreaming.

Am I doing the right thing? she wondered with a quick jolt of panic. How could she bear to leave everything, everyone she knew and loved?

''Posing again, duchess?'' Josh stepped into the foyer. He wasn't dressed for the wedding yet, but wore chinos and a cotton shirt. At twenty-two he'd filled out nicely, and his years at Harvard sat comfortably on him.

Margo thought disgustedly that he would look elegant in cardboard. He was still the golden boy, though his face had lost its innocent boyishness. It was shrewd, with his father's gray eyes and his mother's lovely mouth. His hair had darkened to bronze, and a late growth spurt in his last year of high school had shot him to six two.

She wished he was ugly. She wished looks didn't matter. She wished he would look at her, just once, as if she wasn't simply a nuisance.

''I was thinking,'' she told him, but stayed where she was, on the stairs, with one hand resting casually on the banister. She knew she'd never looked better. Her bridesmaid's dress was the most glorious creation she'd ever owned. That was why she'd dressed early, to enjoy it as long as she possibly could.

Laura had chosen the summer blue to match Margo's eyes, and the silk was as fragile and fluid as water. The long sweep

of it highlighted her frankly lush figure, and the long, sheer sleeves showcased her creamy ivory skin.

''Rushing things, aren't you?'' He spoke quickly because whenever he looked at her the punch of lust was like a flaming fist in his gut. It had to be only lust because lust was easy. ''The wedding's not for two hours.''

''It'll take nearly that long to put Laura together. I left her with Mrs. T. I thought they . . . well, they needed a minute or two alone.''

''Crying again?''

''Mothers cry on their daughters' wedding day because they know what they're getting into.''

He grinned and held out a hand. ''You'd make an interesting bride, duchess.''

She took his hand. Their fingers had twined hundreds of times over their years together. This was no different. ''Is that a compliment?''

''An observation.'' He led her into the parlor, where silver candlesticks held slim white tapers and sumptuous arrangements of flowers were decked. Jasmine, roses, gardenias. All white on white and heady with scent in the room where sunlight streamed through high, arched windows.

There were silver-framed photos on the mantel. She was there, Margo thought, accepted as part of the family. On the piano sat the Waterford compote that she had recklessly spent her savings on for the Templetons' twenty-fifth anniversary.

She tried to take it in, every piece of it. The soft colors of the Aubusson carpet, the delicate carving on the legs of the Queen Anne chairs, the intricate marquetry on the music cabinet.

''It's so beautiful,'' she murmured.

''Hmm?'' He was busy tearing the foil off a bottle of champagne he'd snatched from the kitchen.

''The house. It's so beautiful.''

''Annie's outdone herself,'' he said, referring to Margo's mother. ''Should be a hell of a wedding.''

It was his tone that drew her gaze back to him. She knew him so well, every nuance of expression, every subtle tone of voice. ''You don't like Peter.''

Josh shrugged, uncorked the bottle with an expert press of thumb. ''I'm not marrying Ridgeway, Laura is.''

She grinned at him. ''I can't stand him. Stuffy, superior snot.''

He grinned back at her, at ease again. ''We usually agree on people, if little else.''

Because he hated it, she patted his cheek. ''We'd probably agree on more if you didn't enjoy picking on me so much.''

''It's my job to pick on you.'' He snagged her wrist, annoying her. ''You'd feel neglected if I didn't.''

''You're even more revolting now that you've got a degree from Harvard.'' She picked up a glass. ''At least pretend you're a gentleman. Pour me some.'' When he studied her, she rolled her eyes. ''For Christ's sake, Josh, I'm eighteen. If Laura's old enough to get married to that jerk, I'm old enough to drink champagne.''

''One,'' he said, the dutiful older brother. ''I don't want you weaving down the aisle later.'' He noted with amused frustration that she looked as though she'd been born with a champagne flute in her hands. And men at her feet.

''I suppose we should drink to the bride and groom.'' She pursed her lips as she studied the bubbles rising so frothily in her glass. ''But I'm afraid I'll choke, and I hate to waste this.'' She winced, lowered the glass. ''That's so damn mean. I hate being mean, but I can't seem to help it.''

''It's not mean, it's honest.'' He moved a shoulder. ''We might as well be mean and honest together. To Laura, then. I hope to hell she knows what she's doing.''

''She loves him.'' Margo sipped and decided that cham-

pagne would be her signature drink. ''God knows why, or why she thinks she has to marry him just to sleep with him.''

''Nice talk.''

''Well, be realistic.'' She wandered to the garden door, sighed. ''Sex is a stupid reason to get married. The fact is, I can't think of a single good one. Of course, Laura isn't marrying Peter just for sex.'' Impatient, she tapped her fingers against the glass, listened to the ring. ''She's too romantic. He's older, more experienced, charming if you like that sort. And of course, he's in the business, so he can slip right into the Templeton empire and reign right here so she can stay at the house, or choose something close by. It's probably perfect for her.''

''Don't start crying.''

''I'm not, not really.'' But she was comforted by the hand he laid on her shoulder, and she leaned into him. ''I'm just going to miss her so much.''

''They'll be back in a month.''

''I'm not going to be here.'' She hadn't meant to say it, not to him, and now she turned quickly. ''Don't say anything to anyone. I need to tell everyone myself.''

''Tell them what?'' He didn't like the clutching feeling in his stomach. ''Where the hell are you going?''

''To L.A. Tonight.''

Just like her, he mused and shook his head. ''What wild hair is this, Margo?''

''It's not a wild hair. I've thought about it a lot.'' She sipped again, wandered away from him. It was easier to be clear when she couldn't lean on him. ''I have to start my life. I can't stay here forever.''

''College—''

''That's not for me.'' Her eyes lit, the cold blue fire at the center of a flame. She was going to take something for herself. And if it was selfish, then by God, so be it. ''That's what

Mum wants, not what I want. And I can't keep living here, the housekeeper's daughter.''

''Don't be ridiculous.'' He could brush that off like a stray mote of lint. ''You're family.''

She couldn't dispute that, and yet . . . ''I want to start my life,'' she said stubbornly. ''You've started yours. You're going to law school, Kate's going off to Harvard a full year early, thanks to her busy little brain. Laura's getting married.''

Now he had it, and sneered at her. ''You're feeling sorry for yourself.''

''Maybe I am. What's wrong with that?'' She poured more champagne into her glass, defying him. ''Why is it such a sin to feel a little self-pity when everyone you care about is doing something they want and you're not? Well, I'm going to do something I want.''

''Go to L.A. and what?''

''I'm going to get a job.'' She sipped again, seeing it, seeing herself, perfectly. Centered in the light of excitement. ''I'm going to model. My face is going to be on the cover of every important magazine there is.''

She had the face for it, he thought. And the body. They were killers. Criminally stunning. ''And that's an ambition?'' he said, with a half laugh. ''Having your picture taken?''

She lifted her chin and seared him with a look. ''I'm going to be rich, and famous, and happy. And I'm going to make it on my own. Mommy and Daddy won't be paying for my life. I won't have a cozy trust fund to bounce on.''

His eyes narrowed dangerously. ''Don't get bitchy with me, Margo. You don't know what it is to work, to take responsibility, to follow through.''

''Oh, and you do? You've never had to worry about anything but snapping your fingers so a servant can buff up the silver platter you're served on.''

As hurt as he was insulted, he crossed to her. ''You've eaten off the same damn platter most of your life.''

Her color rose at that, shaming her. ''That may be true, but from now on I'm buying my own platters.''

''With what?'' He cupped her face in tensed fingers. ''Your looks? Duchess, beautiful women clog the streets in L.A. They'll gobble you up and spit you out before you know what hit you.''

''The hell they will.'' She jerked her head free. ''I'm going to do the gobbling, Joshua Conway Templeton. And no one's going to stop me.''

''Why don't you do us all a favor and think for once in your life before you jump into something we'll have to pull you out of? This is a hell of a time to start acting up like this.'' He set his glass down so he could push his hands into his pockets. ''Laura's wedding day, my parents half crazy because they're worried she's too young. Your own mother running around with her eyes all red from crying.''

''I'm not going to spoil Laura's wedding day. I'm waiting until after she's left on her honeymoon.''

''Oh, that's damn considerate of you.'' Fuming, he spun around. ''Have you thought how Annie's going to feel about this?''

Margo bit hard on her bottom lip. ''I can't be what she wants. Why can't anyone understand that?''

''How do you think my parents are going to feel, thinking about you alone in L.A.?''

''You won't make me feel guilty,'' she murmured, feeling exactly that. ''I've made up my mind.''

''Goddamn it, Margo.'' He grabbed her arms, throwing her off-balance so that she toppled against him. In her heels she was eye to eye with him.

Her heart thudded hurtfully against her ribs. She thought—she felt—something was going to happen. Right here. Right

now. ''Josh.'' She said it quietly, her voice shaky and hoarse. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, and everything churned inside her, yearning.

The rude clatter on the stairs had them both springing back. When she managed to draw a breath, he was glaring at her. Kate clomped into the room.

''I can't believe I have to wear something like this. I feel like an idiot. Stupid long skirts are impractical and just get in the way.'' Kate stopped plucking at the elegant silk dress and frowned at Margo and Josh. She thought they looked like two sleek cats about to spring. ''Do you two have to fight now? I'm having a crisis. Margo, is this dress supposed to look like this, and if so, why? Is that champagne? Can I have some?''

Josh's gaze remained on Margo's for another humming moment. ''I'm taking it up to Laura.''

''I just want a sip before— Jeez!'' Pouting now, Kate stared as Josh strode out of the room. ''What's with him?''

''The same as always. He's an arrogant know-it-all. I just hate him,'' Margo said between gritted teeth.

''Oh, well, if that's all, let's talk about me. Help.'' She spread her arms.

''Kate.'' Margo pressed her fingers to her temples, then sighed. ''Kate, you look fabulous. Except for the incredibly bad haircut.''

''What are you talking about?'' Kate ran her hair through the ruthlessly short black cap. ''The hair's the best thing. I barely have to comb it.''

''Obviously. Well, we'll cover it up with the hat anyway.''

''I wanted to talk about the hat—''

''You're wearing it.'' Instinctively, Margo held out her champagne to share. ''It makes you look very chic, Audrey Hepburnish.''

''I'll do it for Laura,'' Kate muttered, then dropped with little grace onto a chair and swung her silk-draped legs over

the arm. ''I gotta tell you, Margo, Peter Ridgeway gives me a pain.''

''Join the club.''

Her thoughts revolved back to Josh. Had he actually been about to kiss her? No, that was ridiculous. More likely he'd been about to shake her like a frustrated boy whose toy wasn't working to his liking. ''Kate, don't sit like that, you'll wrinkle the dress.''

''Hell.'' She rose reluctantly, a pretty, coltish girl with oversized eyes. ''I know Uncle Tommy and Aunt Susie aren't happy about all this. They're trying to be because Laura's so happy she's practically sending off radiation. I want to be happy for her, Margo.''

''Then we will be.'' She shook off worries of Josh, of later, of L.A. Now was for Laura. ''We have to stand by the people we love, right?''

''Even when they're screwing up.'' Kate sighed and handed Margo the champagne flute. ''I guess we should go up and stand by her then.''

They started up the stairs. At the door to Laura's room, they paused, joined hands. ''I don't know why I'm so nervous,'' Kate murmured. ''My stomach's jumping.''

''Because we're in this together.'' Margo gave her hand a squeeze. ''Just like always.''

She opened the door. Laura sat at the vanity, putting the finishing touches on her makeup. In the long white robe she already looked the perfect bride. Her golden hair was swept up, curls falling flirtily around her face. Susan stood behind her, already dressed for the ceremony in a deep-rose gown touched with lace.

''The pearls are old,'' she said, her voice raw. In the shining mirror framed in carved rosewood, her eyes met her daughter's. ''Your Grandmother Templeton's.'' She handed Laura

the lovely eardrops. ''She gave them to me on my wedding day. Now they're yours.''

''Oh, Mom, I'll start crying again.''

''None of that now.'' Ann Sullivan stepped forward. She looked lovely and restrained in her best navy dress, her deep-blond hair in short, quiet waves. ''No swollen eyes on our bride today. You need something borrowed, so I thought . . . you could wear my locket under your gown.''

''Oh, Annie.'' Laura sprang up to hug her. ''Thank you. Thank you so much. I'm so happy.''

''May you stay half so happy for the rest of your life.'' Feeling her eyes well, Ann cleared her throat, smoothed the already smooth floral coverlet on Laura's four-poster bed. ''I'd best go down and see if Mrs. Williamson is dealing with the caterers.''

''Mrs. Williamson is fine.'' Susan took Ann's hand, knowing their longtime cook could handle the most fussy of caterers. ''Ah, here are the ladies-in-waiting now, just in time to dress the bride. And how lovely they look.''

''That they do.'' Ann turned to run a critical eye over her daughter and Kate. ''Miss Kate, you could use more lipstick, and Margo, you less.''

''We'll have a drink first.'' Susan picked up the champagne. ''Since Josh was thoughtful enough to bring up a bottle.''

''We brought along a glass,'' Kate said, shrewdly omitting they'd already had some. ''Just in case.''

''Well, I suppose it's an occasion. Just half a glass,'' Ann warned. ''They'll be tippling at the reception if I know these girls.''

''I already feel drunk.'' Laura watched the bubbles rise in her glass. ''I want to make the toast, please. To the women in my life. My mother, who's shown me that love makes a marriage bloom. My friend,'' she said, turning to Ann, ''who al-

ways, always listened. And my sisters, who gave me the best of families. I love you all so much.''

''That's done it.'' Susan sniffed into her wine. ''My mascara's shot again.''

''Mrs. Templeton, ma'am.'' A maid came to the door, all eyes as she peeked in at Laura. Later, she would tell the downstairs staff that it had been like a vision, all those lovely women standing in a room with the sun streaming patterns through fluttering lace curtains. ''Old Joe the gardener is arguing with the man who's come to set up the tables and chairs in the garden.''

''I'll see to it,'' Ann began.

''We'll both see to it.'' Susan touched Laura's cheek. ''It'll keep me too busy to blubber. Margo and Kate will help you dress, baby. That's how it should be.''

''Don't wrinkle those gowns,'' Ann ordered, then slipped an arm around Susan's shoulders and murmured something quietly as they left the room.

''I don't believe it.'' Margo's smile spread. ''Mum was so distracted she left the bottle. Drink up, ladies.''

''Maybe one more,'' Kate decided. ''My stomach's so jittery I'm afraid I'll throw up.''

''You do, and I'll kill you.'' Margo recklessly tossed back the champagne. She liked the exotic sensation of it tickling her throat, bubbling through her brain. She wanted to feel just like this for the rest of her life. ''Okay, Laura, let's get you into that incredible dress.''

''It's really happening,'' Laura murmured.

''Right. But if you want to change your mind—''

''Change my mind?'' She laughed at Kate as Margo reverently slipped the full-skirted ivory silk gown out of its protective bag. ''Are you crazy? This is everything I've ever dreamed of. My wedding day, the beginning of my life with the man I love.'' Eyes misty, she circled as she slipped off

the robe. ''He's so sweet, so handsome, so kind and patient.''

''She means he didn't pressure her to do the big deed,'' Margo commented.

''He respected the fact that I wanted to wait until our wedding night.'' Laura's prim expression collapsed into wild glee. ''I can't wait.''

''I told you it's not that big a deal.''

''It will be when you're in love.'' She stepped carefully into the dress as Margo held it for her. ''You weren't in love with Biff.''

''No, but I was wildly in lust, which counts for something. I'm not saying it wasn't nice, it was. But I think it takes practice.''

''I'll get lots of practice.'' Laura's bride's heart fluttered at the thought. ''As a married woman. Oh, look at me.'' Stunned, Laura stared at herself in the chevel glass. Yards of ivory silk were sparkling with tiny seed pearls. Romantic sleeves puffed at the shoulders, then tapered to snugness. When Kate and Margo finished attaching the train, Kate arranged it in an artful spill of embroidered silk.

''The veil.'' Margo blinked back tears. With her advantage of height, she slid the pearl circlet smoothly around the neat bun, then fluffed the yards of tulle. Her oldest friend, she thought as a tear snuck through. The sister of her heart. At a turning point. ''Oh, Laura, you look like a princess in a fairy tale. You really do.''

''I feel beautiful. I feel absolutely beautiful.''

''I know I kept saying it was too fussy.'' Kate managed a watery smile. ''I was wrong. It's perfect. I'm going to get my camera.''

''As if there aren't going to be half a million pictures by the time it's over,'' Margo said when Kate dashed from the room. ''I'll go get Mr. T. Then I guess I'll see you in church.''

''Yes. Margo, one day I know you and Kate are going to

be as happy as I am now. I can't wait to be a part of that.''

''Let's get done with you first.'' She stopped at the door, turned again, just to look. She was afraid that nothing and no one would ever make her feel whatever it was that put that soft light in Laura's eyes. So, she thought as she quietly closed the door, she would settle for fame and fortune.

She found Mr. T. in his bedroom, muttering curses and fumbling with his formal tie. He looked so dashing in the dove gray morning coat that matched the Templeton eyes. He had broad shoulders a woman could lean on, she thought, and that wonderfully masculine height, which Josh had inherited. He was frowning now as he mumbled to himself, but his face was so perfect, the straight nose and tough chin, the crinkles around his mouth.

A perfect face, she thought as she stepped in. A father's face.

''Mr. T., when are you going to learn how to deal with those ties?''

His frown turned to a grin. ''Never, as long as there's a pretty woman around to fuss with it for me.''

Obligingly, she moved over to tidy the mess he'd made of it. ''You look so handsome.''

''Nobody's going to give me or any other man a second glance with my girls around. You look more beautiful than a wish, Margo.''

''Wait until you see Laura.'' She saw the worry flicker into his eyes and kissed his smoothly shaven cheek. ''Don't fret, Mr. T.''

''My baby's grown up on me. It's hard to let him take her away from me.''

''He could never do that. No one could. But I know. It's hard for me, too. I've been feeling sorry for myself all day, when I should be happy for her.''

Footsteps sounded in the hall, rushing. Kate with her cam-

era, Margo thought, or a servant hurrying to take care of some last-minute detail. There were always people in Templeton House, she mused, filling it with sound and light and movement. You never felt alone there.

Her heart hitched again at the thought of leaving, of being alone. Yet mixed with the fears was such dizzy anticipation. Like a first sip of champagne, when the rich fizz of it exploded on the tongue. A first kiss, that soft, sultry meeting of lips.

There were so many firsts she yearned to experience.

''Everything's changing, isn't it, Mr. T.?''

''Nothing stays the same forever, however much you'd like it to. In a few weeks you and Kate will be off to college, Josh will be back at law school. Laura will be a wife. Susie and I will be rattling around this house like a bunch of old bones.'' Which was one of the reasons he and his wife were thinking of relocating to Europe. ''The house won't be the same without you.''

''The house will always be the same. That's what's so wonderful about it.'' How could she tell him she was leaving that very night? Running toward something she could see as clearly as her own face in the mirror. ''Old Joe will keep on guarding his rosebushes, and Mrs. Williamson will be lording it over everyone in the kitchen. Mum will go on polishing the silver because she doesn't think anyone else can do it properly. Mrs. T. will drag you out to the tennis court every morning and trounce you. You'll be on the phone scheduling meetings or barking orders.''

''I never bark,'' he said with a gleam in his eye.

''You always bark, that's part of your charm.'' She wanted to weep, for the childhood that had gone so fast though she had thought it would never end. For the part of her life that was behind her now, though she had strained so hard to pull away. For the coward that lived inside her that shrank from telling him she was leaving. ''I love you, Mr. T.''

''Margo.'' Misreading her, he pressed his lips to her brow. ''Before too much longer I'll be walking you down the aisle, giving you to some handsome young man who couldn't possibly be good enough for you.''

She made herself laugh, because crying would spoil everything. ''I'm not getting married to anyone unless he's exactly like you. Laura's waiting for you.'' She drew back, reminding herself that this was Laura's father. Not hers. This was Laura's day. Not hers. ''I'll go see if the cars are ready.''

She hurried downstairs. And there was Josh, staggering in his formal wear, frowning at her as she paused breathlessly. ''Don't start on me,'' she ordered. ''Laura's coming down in a minute.''

''I'm not going to start on you. But we're going to talk later.''

''Fine.'' She had no intention of talking with him. The minute the last grain of rice was thrown, she would make a quick and quiet exit. She carried the hat she'd brought down from her room to the mirror, instinctively arranging the wide blue brim to the most flattering advantage.

There's my fame, she thought, studying her face. And my fortune. By God, she would make it work. Lifting her chin, she met her own eyes and willed it to begin.