

chapter 1

On this island, I only wear these faded blue jeans. The thread and denim are the only colors I need to paint my world- light blue and a bleached-bare white.

I moved my life to the edge of the ocean to forget about those other colors. I left behind red stop signs and yellow cabs at the corners of endless gray buildings and amber-orange city lights. I found a large, empty beach house and painted it a soft blue to match the water only ten feet from the deck. I cleaned up the edges with an elegant, white trim. I was gripped by a vision of a tasteful beach house sitting invitingly on a tropic shore.

I wanted to sink into some civilized and solitary life of a retired expatriate. I imagined the islanders discussing the old reclusive foreigner who never left his own beach, inventing elaborate rumors that would accomplish far more than any 'private property' sign. I would be a mad millionaire or a notorious drug lord at the edge of the jungle. I would be an escaped international criminal and then, I would be able to live my life out here in peace.

Yes, any explanation that left no room for intrusions- any one would do. I wanted to sit on my new deck for hours and watch the white foam fold steadily over each blue wave. I needed to recline easily on my back and gaze up at an unreachable blue sky and let my mind drift away on each passing white fuzz of cloud.

Leisure. I wanted it. The easy life. Though, I didn't really need to leave California if that was all of it. Life could not be easier than in the ambitious and ever affluent golden state. I had prospered there, at the mouth of progress. Even the world outside America knew it. From the surf along the California coastline, you could catch the wave of the future. Though I'd spent an entire lifetime there, when I considered the magnitude of progress I had witnessed, it felt like two lifetimes. Yet I had come back to my Caribbean to find a life I left fifty years ago. I was grateful it had waited for me.

Growing up, I had watched tropical flowers sprawl and frizz and bloom wildly in the humid air. If I was a flower, as I used to hear so often in the sixties, I knew I belonged in this soil. I wanted to plant my soul here, where it would not have to fight like a weed to break through city sidewalks.

In my earliest memories, there had been this. The islands. Sun and warm sand, swaying palms and a happy heart. Time was kinder here in the islands. It was governed by a slower pendulum, preserving it from the advancements of pummeling development. It did not take long for me to fall in love with the tropics again. I discovered the smooth local beer and I was delighted by the spicy foods covered in curry, cloves and nutmeg. But far more enjoyable than these things, I found that I was able to let go of my self-consciousness and worn out facades. Of course, money was still scarce here, politics were messy, and the humidity still made you sweat. I embraced these terms of life in the third world. Here, I was surrounded by people who only upheld the minimal rules of the low latitudes and it seemed more like freedom than American democracy.

I did not miss my clean-cut suits or clean-shaven beard. I loved that I didn't have to look presentable here. Soon, the beach house evolved from an immaculate vision to something entirely different. I began to live there. It was no longer a bright, new intrusion on the small beach. Actually, to look at the place, the house and the man who lived there had been there for some time. It was my home, and I loved that I couldn't keep the paint from peeling in strips

along the sides of the house. It refused to be presentable either. This close to the ocean, it was impossible. With time, I began to understand that.

I felt the years melt off me. When I closed my eyes, I could almost feel myself in my eight year old body. I must have been about eight when I left, or just a bit younger. Sometimes I really do forget that I've never known exactly how old I am. I suppose I am fifty-five by now, or fifty-seven. Maybe I'm only fifty, but probably not.

I was adopted as an infant, and my adopted parent's didn't celebrate birthdays. They never told me what day I was born, or what year I was born in. On the outskirts of society, my parents created an unconventional world where we all lived in forgetful innocence. Life with them was not ordinary, but it would be years before I ever knew it. I would be sent from my unique home to pursue a chance at liberty and education in America. After my first semester of classes were complete, they planned a visit. On their way to see me, both of them died in a plane crash.

I reacted strongly to the news. I was grief stricken, but there was no time for me to sink into my sorrow. After the accident, it became urgent to dig into my school records. The school was baffled when my files turned up line after line of blank, empty options. Address. Date of birth. Closest living relative. They became exasperated with me when I could not answer the simplest questions about my life. How could I not know the name of where I had grown up? In the end, they would rely on the signature at the bottom of every page to determine everything to follow. Ms. Diana Grey. I had never heard the name before.

In some ways, part of me has been waiting to come back here since then. I could never forget it- growing up in our house right on the beach with my parents, Hana and Daniel. I could never forget their faces or those names. It's just all the fine details lost in the grief of a young boy that escape me. For me, it's just become another mystery layered in the islands of the Caribbean.

People have asked me why I don't go from island to island to try to find the place where I grew up. Eventually some town or building might be familiar. And have I tried the Internet? We are in the age of information, things can be researched- and I'd be amazed what can turn up these days! The problem is, if I Google the name Braijenn Edward Crown, I know exactly what I'm going to turn up. Pryce-Crown Industries, which consists of several agencies representing those in the fields of fine art and photography, our literary agency and our publishing house in San Francisco. I will find that under former President B. Crown, the company also now owns two record labels, and one of the largest advertising firms in New York. I'll find commendations for the innovative non-profit training and outreach programs that I initiated. Only a few clicks away, I can find my Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography. In this piece of work, I chronicled my experiences assisting young artists in their struggle with fame, with drugs, with their craft.

They are all headlines to be proud of. However, the problem still remains, if I start digging, I will have to wade through the life that I have built for myself, every single inch of it, laid out for the world to review.

I will not do that when I've already found what I need here. I've found my home within the walls of my blue beach house with its endearing white trim. There is contentment in the peeling paint, even if it's a little unsightly. I've found my heart out on my little beach where life is lived in ripped jeans.

From the sand, when I turn around, I can see the long dirt road that leads to the house. I refused to pave it. I insisted that the same dirt driveway have small royal palms planted down

the entire length of it on either side. I laughed at the gardener who told me how much it was going to cost to have it that way. I did it anyway. But I would've spent a million dollars for the tall coconut palms that grow wild on my private beach. I can look forward to any morning with those palms. I love every evening when they bow a little more towards the setting sun. We talk about the day, and the coming night. We talk about the mystery of it. For the last five years, I have shared my tears with only them. We are the best of friends, my palms and I.

In fact, when I moved from the East to the West Coast in the height of a gold Californian summer, nothing won my heart over so quickly as the palms.

I was one of many new agents who had been invited to transfer departments that summer. Years ago, Pryce-Crown Industries, which was only Pryce Industries back then, had invested in property along the elite Palo Alto coastline. It was an ambitious setting, overlooking the rolling waves of the blue Pacific, situating itself in a beauty that strived to set itself apart from the corporations sprouting around Silicon Valley. We were invited to stay on property until we had finalized our living arrangements. A company conference was scheduled for the last weekend in July and I had decided to stay on until then.

The mix of agents, talent, executives and their families came in waves about two days before. The weekend was hosted by company President Jared Pryce himself annually. There would be conferences involving the company's new strategies and outlooks for the fall launches. It offered an essential forum to meet other agents, and make necessary business connections. Though the premise had entirely honorable intentions, the whole affair inevitably became a frenzied exchange of the latest company gossip. I tried to escape the endless debate of who was basking in fleeting limelight or wallowing in public disgrace. Rumors spread, as speculation circled as to who would acquire the highly coveted upper rungs of the company ladder. I had avoided the main dinner gatherings in a feeble attempt to prolong becoming part of the loop. I had taken advantage of being able to have small meals pool side at the north end of the property.

I felt that circumstances had forced the odds against me. Jared had shoved me into this promotion, overlooking the favored candidate for the position. No one had a clue where I'd come from- and wherever it was, I was left with the unmistakable impression that they wished I'd go back there. When my survival instincts flared and I tried to back out of it, Jared had overruled and silenced me. The main contenders for Senior Agent of the San Francisco Agency had all endured rigorous interviews and evaluation. Jared believed the West Coast branch was heading in the wrong direction. Was I more qualified? No. Jared had chosen to ignore that because of 'such spirited attempts to follow lofty ideals.' Though I was unclear what he was actually referring to, I accepted the job and that settled the matter. Whoever I was, I was Jared's man and whoever had a problem with that was free to take it up with him.

Of course, there was also the scandalous matter of Michael Fairbanks. Wonder-boy from an upstanding family of East Coast millionaires, he had sensationally turned down every top agents of our West Coast Firm. Buzz on the street was that he actually sent Marc Davis a dozen bouquets of babies-breath rigged up with electronic microphones and a note "Because you love to hear yourself talk." His antics had spread over the top executives like some sexual rash. Pryce Industries had followed in the footsteps of several prominent agencies bending over backwards to entice the young artist to sign. He had resisted the ridiculous groveling with extraordinary resilience, until recently. Of course, we had landed him in the end. Who had closed the unlikely deal? Actually, it had been some brand new nobody who was moving out to San Francisco. That nobody was me.

I was looking forward to seeing him again. Every time I looked into his young, bright blue eyes, I saw his latest painting *Baby-blue Hell*. The twelve foot canvas of perfectly rendered waves about to foam like the fires of hell around two young lovers. It might rip them apart. It might bring them together. It was hard to tell.

I walked from the library across to the Grand Ballroom. Many of the buildings displayed bronze plaques that declared them historical structures in the state of California. I had to agree. This beauty warranted protection. The Spanish Colonial Revival architecture gave the property an exotic atmosphere. When you wandered through the courtyards, you could feel the grace of the Spanish culture that lingered from an era gone by.

The ballroom had been crafted in a more modern style, but it continued to evoke the spirit of the past. It sat at the regal center of the entire estate overlooking the breathtaking coast. The interior boasted several gleaming chandeliers that promised to make any evening a glamorous occasion. Jared had to twist my arm to get me to promise I would attend the final Black & White Celebration Gala, but not too hard. How could I not spend at least one night in this charming grandeur?

Early and alone, I dodged the catering squad outfitting the ballroom. I wandered out to explore the gardens where the sun was beginning to set. Colorful bougainvillea hedges crawled along winding pathways and through clusters of palm trees. Not a blade of grass was out of place, and it glinted magnificently above a rough evening tide that crashed around the surrounding stone wall. I saw another young man like myself, sitting on a bench in his crisp tuxedo. Something struck me as out of place- the two of us, these black and white people on such green, green grass.

The sun had become so red that it made his white shirt appear almost pink. I watched as a tall, slender blonde walked up to him. The sun shone through her brilliant white dress and it cast a similar pink glow around her. He would probably say something foolish like "you look like an angel" and she would laugh at him. She might never know that at that moment she really did.

It was the clouds. People said that with so many clouds, it was going to rain. It seemed impossible in July. The sunset stretched in every direction giving the world a soft, rosy glow.

As I wandered closer to the edge, I could see the light on the water, and hear the roar of the waves. I wandered into a row of small, squat palms. They were not much taller than myself. I walked between them, and felt their smooth trunks as I used to do when I was a boy. They were not the long skinny coconut palms of my youth, but they had the same fronds that swayed easily in the wind. As a child I used to lay on my back and gaze up at those unreachable leaves. When I had lifted my arms, I had loved the trick of the eye that made it seem easy to touch those distant leaves and even the sky far beyond them.

I reached my hand along the spine of one of the larger swaying leaves hanging above me now. I leaned my head back and traced it almost to the base which was a little higher than I could reach. They were rough but pliable like I imagined. I let my fingers drift through the leaves. I was far out of sight, and I didn't feel foolish letting my fingers strum each frond, like some secret musical instrument.

I stood under those palms for a long time thinking.

Some odd mixture of the ocean and the sunshine made being happy seem indisputable in California. I was wary of being happy here, and I was trying to adjust to the idea. I had two very different worlds conflicting in me and I wanted to find a way to bring them together. I had always stood firmly as a nonconformist, a firm believer in free ideas, but I was definitely a

businessman now. Moving away from my old home had been one thing, but I was more worried that I was moving away from my old ideals.

I'd moved countless times before, though. Moving had always been part of my life, and each time I'd moved, I'd carried my lessons with me. I told myself that this future did not have to take my past away. Building a new home here did not have to erase my old one. Nothing could do that. From the very beginning, when I lost my first home, I realized that. I would always have it, even if I could not find exactly where it had been, or ever return to it.

A tragedy had occurred in my past, and when I dwelled on it, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was living without part of myself. Would I be incomplete forever? That was no way to live my life. I had to cling to what I had. After all, I had moments like these that transported me back there. Whether it was a palm tree, a spicy smell, or the sound of the waves- it all led to a place in my heart that would not fade.

Of course, there was no way to freeze these moments and return to them whenever I might need them. It was unfair. I wanted to have a souvenir like a man who goes on a trip and always has the postcard to remind him of where he's been. I was unreasonably sad that I couldn't have it. It didn't exist, and it wasn't even something one should come to expect. No one can catch time in a bottle.

When I looked back at the Grand Ballroom, the crystal chandeliers had become brighter than the twilight sky. It was time for me to head in. As I walked up the wide staircase, I could hear a low indiscernible hum of voices forming.

Inside, it was a sea of white tablecloths and sparkling glass. I found my table, which was near the action, as they say. It was not my first big company event, but California was already delivering a glamorous spin on the occasion. Bigger, brighter, it was easy to see that Jared had spared no expense. It was odd to remember amidst all this, that I had first met company President Jared Pryce as a scruffy sailor down in Florida. Tonight I would see him in a role that was so easy to forget he had.

The rest of the people at the table all came at once. There were introductions and handshakes. I had seen Senior Marketing Executive Lilly Tarbouche on the tour of my new office building. Tonight she was in glittering white sequins and a smile to match. She was a chatty blonde database and affectionately imposed an immediate friendship that was useless to combat. On her arm was Thomas Tarbouche, Director of Finances. They arrived with several other Senior Executives. From what I could overhear, business didn't really stop, even tonight.

It was hardly a minute before I saw Michael striding towards the table.

Tonight was the formal black and white dinner ball for the company, but Michael had taken advantage of being an artist and come with his frayed edges. His hair glinted under the lights, probably from a considerable amount of gel, and it stuck out in all directions. He wore a faded black leather jacket and faded black jeans with two holes at his knees. In contrast, his shirt looked starched and pressed. It was a gleaming white and he had donned a brilliant white silk tie. Tall, with everything fitted tightly to his thin frame, he was an alluring mix of boy and man. I think a diamond earring glinted in his left ear.

"What a wonderful present, Jared. This shirt fits like a dream. Like it was made for me, really."

Jared turned around and looked him up and down with a raised eyebrow before he broke into a laugh. "You're a punk, you know that?"

"Well, a promise is a promise." He winked. "No red this year..." he smiled as he reached for my hand and pulled me up into a hug.

Jared seemed resigned. "I suppose you're forgiven, since you're the only one who can pull something like that off and manage to look dashing." And he did. As handsome as a picture.

"My good looks to the rescue again." He pulled the chair out for Jared. He was an odd mix of rebellion and manners. Probably why Jared loved him. All eyes were on him, as he stood with the head of the company in his ripped jeans. He kept his grace too easily.

"You are under strict orders not to corrupt this man, Michael," Jared commanded as he patted me firmly on the shoulder. He wandered back to mingle in the crowd.

Michael turned to me with wide, inquisitive eyes.

"So, you still need corrupting after three whole weeks? That's just fascinating, Braijenn. There really must be something special about you. I worry about you in the glittering world of Pryce Industries." He leaned in, as if to inspect me. "Tell me, is this really what you want? This place... it never changes. You think you can be happy here, Braijenn?" he whispered softly while peering directly into my eyes. He leaned back and shook his head without waiting for any kind of response.

"You clean up nice, and that's a start. I think you can make it work. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd even say you were from our side of the tracks." He broke into a kiddish giggle as he took his seat.

"I'm teasing you, Braij. For God's sake, will you lighten up? You'd think it was your wedding day or something." He looked like I had unsatisfied him somehow.

"Look," I motioned to the people around us. "They don't even know me and they hate me. Jared picked me for this job over Marc Davis who has been working with them for years. He deserved it. They're angry, offended, and waiting to tear me to shreds at the first available opportunity. I have a mark over my head, Michael- and of course, Jared just keeps insisting that he doesn't have to explain his decision to anyone. I'm just trying not to make anything worse, for the time being."

"Braijenn. Listen. The point is to get them to talk about you behind your back and spread all manner of viscous and scandalous lies." He leaned in earnestly, as if about to divulge a grave matter.

"You know why? Because they'll be talking about you- Braijenn. Man of the hour!" He pushed his index finger into my chest as he said it.

I started to say something in protest. He waived his hand.

"It's the only way. Do not argue with me. I am telling you that it is the only way out here. You will have to come to terms with that sooner or later. Besides all of which, aren't you that guy who landed that hot, young thing from New York?"

His confidence confounded me once more. I was the intimidated and nervous kid here, and he was the confident rising businessman.

People were taking their seats. A heavily tanned fellow in a dressy white linen suit joined us and sat across from me. His gold skin was covered in gold hair and he had a bright Australian accent. I guessed he must be a close friend to be sitting at the same table as the President of the company. Of course, that was the only reason I was sitting here. Michael wasn't an Executive or a Pryce, but Jared had known him since he was born and insisted that he was his prodigal son.

As a server filled my glass with deep red wine, I saw her across the room. She was late and lovely. Her ivory silk dress was simple. She wore it with ease, as comfortable as a kid in blue jeans. When she turned, I could see loose long curls down her bare back. The fabric shimmered like a gown, or like women's lingerie. Running between the tables, she arrived a little out of breath. She kissed Jared lightly on the cheek. He turned to the table and announced,

"My darling niece, who has been spending the summer with me. Leovana, I'd like you to meet the people who keep me away from you far too much of the time, I'm afraid."

"Good evening. Gentlemen, Ms. Lilly, I trust you'll keep it up. He needs to be kept out of house. He is absolutely insufferable when he tries to sit around at home with me. He doesn't know how to be on vacation."

Everyone laughed, and I didn't, for no particular reason.

She glared at me, I think.

She knew everyone at the table and had clearly known them for years. As a Pryce, most of them were her family. Michael said "Hey baby," and leaned in to kiss her cheek. They knew each other well, and I wondered how much more there was to it. Michael sat on the left hand side of me, and she took the seat opposite him. Jared was at the head of the table between them.

The Australian was called Simon Lumbe. He was a famous photographer of rare gems that had started off with Pryce Industries over twenty years ago. I noticed as he leaned in to greet her, he whispered something in her ear that made her laugh softly. The gesture seemed to be intimate. I was not the only one who noticed.

"Don't you fill her head full of any rot now, Simon. I don't know which one of you I don't trust more. You are both prone to the same hair-brained schemes. Leovana, of course, still has a chance to be sensible. As for you, Simon-"

"Uncle Jared, really! Stop attacking him. For your information, I am interested in him. Strictly research. I made him promise not to lie, either. So far, he has seemed genuine."

"Genuine, hey? Well, of course he's genuine lass. Those photographs speak for themselves. The rarest gems on earth, and they just keep coming back to you, don't they?"

"Just back from Bangkok, two weeks ago, Jared."

"That right? They invited you back after that stunt you pulled. Taking that sapphire out to the beach without security to get some natural lighting. Poor suckers."

"Oh, posh man. Those pics were five grand a pop. They loved it. They're begging for more."

"What kind of research, Lay-oh-vana?" I had stumbled on her name. It seemed so exotic. I wondered who had named her that. She seemed to weigh her answer, but before she could reply, I realized the table had gone silent. I think my voice had been loud. Michael sighed and shook his head slowly at me.

"She's got it in her head to be a photographer." Jared stated.

"Come now, Jared," Simon interrupted, "National Geo has published two of her spreads now. She's a girl who's got all the right connections. Nothing should stop her. Besides, she's already an obsessed photographer. Takes one to know one."

"Thanks, Simon. Uncle Jared is having some trouble adjusting."

"Can you blame me? Last thing I remember she was a tyke asking me to go sailing. Now, she's back from school, first semester of college, and photography. Working with Shane, you met him, over at LineLight."

"Better grab her for our team, Jared. She's gonna be big stuff. Just like this kid," the Australian remarked. Michael looked up and winked.

"Honestly Simon, you tell Uncle. It's not the photography, you know that as well as I. Go on, tell him," she exclaimed, as she pounded her hand on the table.

"Now Jared, you can't expect the girl to stand around taking pictures with tourists on the corner of Market and Powell. An artist must go where they can find their art."

"Well, for the time being, I think some more school can provide the training and supervision of responsible and experienced professionals. There's nothing wrong with a little more education." Jared replied evenly.

"You see, he wants me to suffer! They don't teach me what I need to know there. I'm experimenting with aperture and I'm surrounded by these new digital cameras from Sony. Besides, I'm tired of living in the city and I have to live there if I continue with school. I want to buy a boat and sail wherever the wind takes me. I can take pictures of whatever comes across my path."

"In time, Leovana." Jared said. "Taking care of a boat is a big job for one person."

"You say that to me like you don't remember that I've been sailing since I was three, Uncle."

"Yeah, even if we did tie you to the mast. Remember that?" intercepted Michael.

She ignored him.

"You're still too young." Jared said firmly.

"You mean I'm too pretty, as always. I wish I'd been born a heavyset girl with freckles and moles all over."

"You've got a few freckles yet, Leovana," he said reproachfully.

"Not enough. Clearly." Her voice had become sharp.

"Jared, you should give it a chance. You urged me to spend those months sailing from Florida down to Trinidad. We had a great crew, and those were good times for me." I remembered those days on the boat. I had needed them, the space they gave me. She sounded like she needed some space and some time away.

"She won't sail with any crew, and I—" Jared looked exasperated, and as if he refused to say anymore.

"You don't know me at all or you would know I don't need a crew. I can sail a 28 footer on my own. The point is that I would be free to be out on the ocean, to hear the waves, and take my pictures. I would be able to leave this wretched place. I hate everything to do with this city, and this corporation, and these people. It's a trap!"

It went dead silent at the table. Everyone was looking at their plates, and thankfully, the servers brought the food then.

I held her eyes.

"It's not like I can't pay my own way, Brai-ee-jenn." She had faltered too. They were tricky names, I guess. She paid no attention to the plate that had been placed in front of her. "I'm not asking for any favors. Even if I didn't have a dime, I'm not the type of girl who would let money stop her."

I unwrapped my silverware, without responding.

"Brai-jenn" She tried it again. "You're an agent. Have you ever seen my photographs? What do you think they're really worth?"

She stared at me.

"You can be honest. Just an honest opinion... from your *extensive* experience?" she grinned mischievously.

I took a bite of my lobster, trying to gather my thoughts.

"Why, sure. But the truth is I really haven't seen any of your work. I'd be more than happy to take a look at it at some point." I looked away from her to Jared. "This is magnificent." I motioned to my plate. "So tender. What a treat."

I was practically inhaling the food, but I didn't care.

"It's true Jared, girl could get a couple thou for some more of that light-filtered series with the vagrants. It's an open market still."

"Enough of business, Simon." Jared would not offend the photographer, it was clear.

"I should say a few words now," and he slid out of his chair. It was obvious that he wanted to cut the conversation short. He stopped at several tables, slowly making his way to the front. He climbed up the stairs and the background music that I had not even noticed, stopped when his feet touched the stage. Everyone started to applaud.

It was still hard for me to think of Jared as the President of such a large company. He was only fifty-five. His energy seemed young and enthusiastic. With him, it was a young company instead of an established corporation.

"Thank you. All of you. It's been quite a weekend so far. Twenty-five years of striving towards excellence in creative fields has brought us together tonight. Pryce Industries which started with our initial launches from the platforms of fine art and photography has branched out into the exciting world of publishing in this last year. For the first time, we are free to offer our own artists and photographers a chance to showcase their work in the form of a book. As President, I believe this direction allows our company to continue to provide the public with an honest representation of the current art generated in our society. I am proud to be a part of a company that is not afraid to explore the range of the imagination. This company is an established dance of fine agents and fine talent. Tonight is a celebration of that, and in celebration, that is just what I encourage you to do. Dance. Yes, feel free to get your connections, but the art of life is what brings us together in the company. Do not forget to participate in life, my friends. If you will raise your glasses- To the art of life."

Glasses raised and then drunk, the table clapped. The room thundered. Leovana stared at him. She turned to me. I sipped my wine. She placed her glass on the table. Her eyes glistened oddly in the chandelier light. My eyes went down to her throat. She had taken a big swallow. Michael, elbowed me.

"Don't." He whispered it under his breath.

Don't what? I looked at him and his bright blue eyes. I looked back to her and she held a questioning look.

"I was just admiring your necklace, I-"

"Oh brother! Here. There you are!" She took it off and almost threw it at me.

"It's a 24 karat cast design of an old Clipper ship. That's a real diamond above the mast connected by gold wire, meant to be the north star." Jared said while taking his seat again.

"Diamond. Hmm, let me have a looksee..." said Simon. I handed it to him.

Simon held it under the light, turning it to different angles.

"Just beautiful, Leovana. A treasure. Wherever did you-?" he was interrupted.

"You think I spend this kind of money for my health?" Jared boomed and slapped his hand on the table, possibly a family trait. "If you people don't get out on that dance floor right this minute, I'm going to start cutting positions."

Most everyone laughed as they stood up.

"Jared is right. I didn't wear these sequins to pretend I'm at the office. Come on Thomas, take me dancing." Lilly had him by the hand.

"Ah, my marketing and financial sales directors. Match made in heaven. Don't you kids get fresh out there. I expect you to keep that love-hate relationship," Jared reprimanded playfully.

"Not a problem, darling." Lilly kissed him and took the silent, thin, Thomas out to the dance floor.

"Michael?" Jared said demandingly. Michael looked up and Leovana looked at him quite threateningly.

"I fear the lady should be able to make her own decision, Jared. Instead of having a clumsy, artist forced on her. I would only step on her feet."

"Too smooth, kid." He looked sternly at the girl. "Fine, Leovana. You are young, and your knees don't bother you yet. You have to enjoy things like dancing while you can. There's that Phillips kid here, somewhere..."

She didn't hesitate.

"Braijenn." She said it flawlessly.

"Braijenn. Of course. He'd be honored."

I stared at them both.

"Oh, I don't actually dance. I mean, I don't know. This music, I've never-"

Michael coughed into his napkin, and nudged me with his foot. Manners. There were no objections for the President of the company, unless I could manage to be as clever as he had been. We both knew I could not.

"Honored. Of course." I stood up, and took her hand. Jared went back to talking immediately.

The music had slowed into a faint unfamiliar melody. We slipped easily enough into step. I felt a roar in my ears. I had not had cause to dance that often. She spoke softly, as her fingers sunk into my shoulder. I held her apart from me, and she still seemed too close. I closed my eyes and tried to hear the music, it was almost inaudible to a soft ringing in my ears.

"Thank you," she said softly in my ear, which made me open my eyes. Her voice had cleared the ringing. I could hear everything better. I tried to keep in step with the other couples moving around us.

"Oh," she sighed, and stepped back to look at me. "You really don't know how to dance, do you?" She almost smiled. "That's okay. Just follow my lead."

"I... I-", I sighed. What could be said?

"I know. Was it awful to make you dance with me? Especially when you can't even say no. I can't stand to dance with Michael."

I looked back towards the table.

"No, don't say it. He's wonderful. I know. A creative genius, and somebody who's really going to be... somebody! Everybody is somebody here. They're all kids with passion, potential. I've been dancing with endless versions of Michael for years. Well, not quite Michael. I know him. We're friends. I do love him. He's also gay."

I was surprised.

"Don't tell me that sort of thing matters to you." It was challenge. I shook my head.

"Anyway, that's not why I didn't want to dance with him," she continued. "I just don't want to be a kid dancing with another kid tonight. Or worse, I could have chosen Simon. We've talked for hours, you know."

I didn't know that.

"Dancing with him is worse, because I admire him, and he thinks I'm a darling little girl. I think I did dance with him years ago when I was eleven or twelve. It was terrible. I wanted to kiss him, and he wouldn't let me. He asked me if I had ever heard the word lawsuit. He was kind enough to explain the details."

I bet. I laughed and nodded. I couldn't think of anything polite to say in response to that. Besides, I had thought people weren't supposed to really talk when they were dancing.

"No, I can't take it tonight. It's better for my soul to be dancing with you, right now."

I didn't understand what she meant, but didn't question her. She chose to answer me anyway.

"Because with you I am..." she tilted her head so her curls fell over my fingers on her back, "something else... maybe something more, isn't that right?"

She went silent, and I remained silent, though we were still moving to the music. What was she to me? What kind of question was that? She moved forward as if she wanted to lay her head on my shoulder. My arms stiffened and I turned her around in a step, spinning away from me.

"Thought you were going to follow my lead, Braijenn," she said, as she came back into my arms. "You want to be a gentleman, don't you. I can see in your eyes that you weren't raised that way. There's something wild. There's nothing tame there. But here you are, sitting at our table. You want to be tamed. You want to engage in polite conversation. Why don't you say something! You're afraid to say anything that might be indecent. That, or you don't have the heart to break it to me that I am just a kid you're being forced to dance with."

Suddenly, her small arms locked around me, and I felt the breath go out of me.

"No. I won't believe that." Her hands pulled me close and I stalled, unable to move. "You can't hide it from me!" She suddenly crushed herself into my arms, forcing her ear to my chest. She was everywhere in my arms, as I tried to take a breath. She held me fiercely, tight in her grip.

"There!" she shoved me away angrily and accusingly. "I can hear it, and it beats too fast. It beats too fast to be polite."

"Leovana, I-" the instruments deafened in a finale and then abruptly stopped.

It beats? My heart. "Look, why-?" is what I started to ask before she turned her head away from me.

"You..." her voice caught and her eyes misted over again. "People probably love that about you." She squeezed my hand as she said it. Then, she looked up at me, as if I had tricked her. She was angry with me. She scoffed loudly and strangely and dropped my hand. I reached for her, but she shoved me away. She ran past me into the sea of tables.

I tried to go around and cut her off before I realized my mistake. She was not headed for our table. She was headed for the door. She did not look back.

My eyes returned to our table. Jared had risen to his feet. He had seen it all. He turned to me with an exhausted expression and waved his hands, ushering me to return to him and the others. Do not follow. Let it go.

I walked back slowly, my mind busy with what I could say to explain.

"Don't even try, Braijenn. I understand more than you, probably. She's temperamental right now. Easily offended. Complicated. What can I say? She's a seventeen year old girl!" he laughed.

Seventeen. That was news.

The servers brought an impressive selection of delicacies for dessert. Mango and passion fruit sorbet, Bavarian chocolate topped with Tahitian coconut and Mediterranean figs with caramel. I decided to enjoy it, as best I could. The conversation had moved to the other side of the table, and I was glad to get to know more of the different heads of department. When it was over, I had ten new business cards.

I lingered as the evening came to a close until finally, it was just Michael and I.

"I've known her since I was five. It's got nothing to do with her being seventeen, I should warn you. She's always been that way."

"Why is she with Jared? Where are her own parents?" I asked.

"Who knows. They keep it to themselves. He's the President. They don't want the gossip to get around. She went to boarding schools most her life like me. We'd all go yachting in the summer. In retrospect, we both knew from early on, we weren't going to be like the other kids. They were trying so hard, you know. Kind of like you tonight, all dressed up and trying to make their parents proud. We stood out like sore thumbs. She didn't have a mother hounding her to impress the society circles, and I wasn't interested in impressing the right people either. It was that simple."

"And now?" I wanted to press him further.

"Now, I don't know." He seemed to hold back. "She's Jared's only heir, and she wants nothing to do with the company. I'm just glad she hasn't run away." He seemed lost in his own thoughts for a moment.

"Look, it's late." He rose from the table. "It's a long story, Braijenn, and one not meant for tonight. I'm glad you came." He leaned over and kissed my forehead as if I were an infant he was tucking into bed, "Have a good night."

I watched him leave, trying to absorb what he had said. He had told me a lot, but I still felt like I knew nothing. It was late. Late enough that I knew that I should get to my room before I collapsed. Instead, as I saw Michael leave, I sank back into my chair.

I stared at the empty table. Someone at the end of the table had either never unfolded their napkin or refolded it. There were half full wine glasses- varying dark red, clear white, and somebody's bubbly champagne. Probably Lilly.

The server smiled at me, as she cleared the table. She did not ask me to get up. She would not speak. The bridge was too far between us. I wanted to point out to her that I'd had to work hard tonight too. My job description was a little different, and I was in a different uniform, but we were both still in black and white, weren't we?

I drained my own wineglass and pushed it to the side.

My eyes halted at a shimmer of gold on a white napkin. For a moment, I simply stared at it like it was just another part of the table. It was her necklace. She had taken it off to show me and it had never found its way back to her. How awful.

It sat in front of me gleaming.

I took it.

There was a faint drizzle outside, and I was surprised again, even though I had been told it was going to rain. A night of surprises, I suppose.

I wished I had not heard that she was in the small cottage on the west side of the property. Who had even said that? I wished she had been responsible for her own jewelry. God, it was priceless. How could she be so careless? I owned nothing that could compare to it.

The cottage. It was unthinkable to go there, but I was thinking of it. She was right. She had brought out something wild in me. She had seen it and seized on it, and it had flared at her poking. I wanted the chance to defend it.

If I went to the door, a kind maid or butler would answer. Maybe she would answer. I would hand her the necklace. I didn't trust that it would find a way back to her any other way. I wanted to see that it got back to her myself. I would say that I could not come in. I would say that tomorrow was a big day. I would not mention the dance. She was just a girl. Seventeen.

I walked along the outside path till I came to a small, waist-high swinging white gate. There was a plaque that read "Eleonore's cottage." Another historic building. I wondered if there was anyone on the property now who had known Eleonore. Maybe Jared. He knew things like that. There were lights on upstairs and downstairs. I would knock. Could I slip it through the mail slot? No. I was being impractical. It was too expensive. What if I damaged it?

I knocked again and called out. No answer. I walked to the side window. The ground was turning quickly to mud, as the rain grew more steady. I was about to be soaked. I should turn back, and find Jared in the morning. He would give it to her. He was family. Still, all the lights were on. I heard noises through the door. The rain came quicker, and I opened the door handle expecting it to be locked so that I could go home and forget all about this.

I turned the doorknob and it pushed in easily. I yelled in. How could the door be unlocked? I paused. I could hear music more clearly now. I called out once more. I looked back at the pouring rain and slid into the entryway.

Inside, a staircase led upstairs and two hallways curved around in opposite directions. I took off my shoes that were wet from the path. I had already come too far, but I decided to follow the music a little further. As I walked down the dim hallway, I saw framed maps and nautical charts. There was a blown-up photograph of a woman with flaming red hair on an old boat. Her mother? I didn't know. On the left, I passed a sitting room with a single lamp on, but it was empty. Only a few steps away, I saw another faint glow from a small doorway ahead of me. I could hear the strange music drifting clearly out into the hall now. It was some celtic-afro-techno blend of world music. It was flutes and drums. I stood in the doorway for a minute thinking. What was I thinking.

I looked into a room that was covered in deep reds and dark browns. Something about the room smelled like home, as if there was a taste of sea-salt in the air. She had fallen asleep on the dark brown leather couch half-wrapped in a dark red silk comforter. I could see that she was still in her dress from earlier in the evening. She had placed her amber droplet earrings on the coffee table beside her. They sat next to a black, metal Nikon camera. The two seemed a peculiar sight next to each other- one so delicate and old-fashioned and the other so severe and modern.

As I began to take in the rest of the room, there was something strange I couldn't put my finger on. Leather bound journals and a still inlaid globe sat in the corner. Was this Jared's study? It was an educated man's study, but it didn't have Jared's character at all.

There were more old maps and charts framed on these walls and a thick old curled rope hanging on a hook. The room definitely had a nautical theme. Near the window, sat a desk that was some kind of redwood, rosewood I think, so red that it matched the royal red oriental carpet underneath it. I walked up to the desk. Next to the lamp sat a very old Sexton, very rare nowadays. I picked up the blank, textured stationary next to the calligraphic pens. It was fine and rough between my fingers, like old papyrus, or like the new recycled paper they made. I lifted it to my nose. Scented? The paper smelled like wild roses. Now, that was odd stationary indeed.

I looked at the organizer open underneath it. Leovana Pryce.

It was an educated man's study. She had made it that way. I knew it had been her. I had not met one California daughter who did not have their own expense account. Of course, she had not spent it on extravagant jewelry, high-fashion clothes or a flashy car. Of course, she had not.

This room was full of her. I saw it more and more. The talk at the table had not been some passing idle teenage phase. There was too much passion here.

I flinched silently. The room had been too much to absorb mentally. I had been idling at the desk for several minutes now, just staring. The necklace drove itself back into my mind. I placed it as quietly as I could on the coffee table next to her. It made the slightest noise as it fell against the polished wood. She stirred. I felt panic and fear flush through me. Good lord, I was trespassing. If caught, I would not be able to explain myself. I stood stock still. Everything remained motionless in the room, and with the girl. Only the soft music dared to play on.

I ran my hand across my forehead. I was damp from the rain, but I had also begun to sweat. I ran my hands through my hair and leaned my head back and tried to steady myself, and catch my breath. I had not noticed that most of the ceiling was a mirror over the room. I saw my face clearly in its reflection, and it was quite sobering. As I continued to stare at myself, I became disoriented as I caught sight of myself in two places.

I looked around the room. I could see nothing. I was confused by what I had seen, and I looked back up to make sense of it. I walked softly around to the other side of the couch where Leovana was sleeping. I knelt down to the floor. I saw it there, on top of a mess of papers on the floor. My face stared back at me from an open magazine, open to the full page spread I had done for GQ. I lifted the magazine from the pile of papers. My photo took up the entire page with the words "Talent is like lost treasure these days. As an agent, I have to be a modern pirate stealing it for Pryce Industries." Great. They had put the quote in bright, green letters. Picture wasn't bad, though.

I hadn't even seen a copy of it yet. When I put it back on the floor, my eyes fell to the ground again, to the papers underneath the magazine. It was twenty maybe even thirty large photographs. The prints were shuffled on top of each other. I sifted through them. It took me a minute to understand what I was seeing. I saw my face, blown up from the left and from the right. In fact, I was dressed in the clothes I had on. They must have been taken tonight? Tonight at sunset. In the garden.

I pulled out one of the larger pictures at the bottom of the pile. The shot was a silhouette of my figure reaching up and running my hands along the spine of the wispy palms. The sky looked just as orange. That moment. My moment. My postcard.

She cleared her throat behind me, and I froze. I stood and turned to face her, picture in hand. Her eyes held a light anger in them, and then, they fell to the picture in my hand.

"Give it back." She said it firmly.

I looked at it again. My mind raced with questions. What is the meaning of this? Why do you have these? What do you want from me? She was a frustrating girl. She was a mystery. I had never met anyone like her before.

"Still searching for appropriate words, I see" as she slipped out of the comforter and walked around to meet me. I took a step back from her, and she slid the picture right out of my fingers. Why are you taking this from me?

The silence stretched between us. Somehow, she had hurt me. She had hurt me? Maybe I had already been hurt. Whatever the reason, I turned to leave without a word.

"I'm sorry I said that. You don't have to say anything. Don't leave. Please. Wait. I don't know what's wrong with me." She reached my shoulder to stop me. When I turned around, her gold and green eyes were closer than before, full and intimate in the light.

I was terrified by her, I think, as her lips pressed quickly into mine. It was stunning, soft and too suddenly passionate. She paralyzed me with her intensity as her kisses moved urgently from my mouth to my cheeks and eyes and throat. The kiss was endless, and unnerving. It seemed time stopped for it, and I felt as if my heart would stop from it, as if my breath would stop from it. Her thumb slipped under my belt and she pressed against the button there, turning it up and down with her thumb. It seemed an innocent gesture. She could not know the riot it caused in me.

"Braijenn," it was a whisper as she pressed deeper into my arms.

My heart beat harder, distracting me, like some steady rhythm of it was broken. I did not pull away as she slipped her fingers firmly into my hands to pull me closer.

And then, a deep and steady voice called her name.

"Leovana." Jared had spoken it calmly from the doorway. She held my gaze as we pulled away. I left her eyes to look at Jared.

What words were going to explain this? I searched for them.

He stood silently for a moment, until his gaze shifted to our hands.

They were still locked. I looked at her again and let go. In that moment, all I could think was how very beautiful she was, and how I had just met her about five hours ago.

"We have a meeting tomorrow," Jared began.

I had no idea what to say.

He sighed.

"It's at one o'clock, but I think I had better see you at twelve Braijenn," he said as he stepped aside for me to pass.

"Yes. Twelve," and I walked past him with barely any breath.

I walked out the door and closed it firmly behind me. I had not dared to look back at her.

I walked back to my room through the dark night and through the steady rain.

All my clothes were wet, but I just hung them up dripping behind the bathroom door when I got home. I took a hot shower even though it was late. I felt light-headed as the warm water tingled over my skin. I crawled into clean sheets and fell shamefully into a deep, sound sleep.

It was hours upon hours of the best sleep I've ever had. In the morning, I felt as if five good years had vanished in the night. It still might be one of the best nights of sleep I've ever had. I can feel rested just thinking about it now.

It doesn't feel like forty years ago.

From my beach house, I wander in and out of these memories of her as the weekend approaches. I return to that night- only one of countless nights where she burns in my memory. I wander back and forth between fiery sunsets on my beach and that first blaze of California summer. Our story is caught there- somewhere between steady rays of afternoon and evening light.

I've been caught there too. I came to St. Vincent to escape the endless corporate agenda of the Pryce-Crown empire and to reach for a distant vision in my past, but I also fled the city to escape her. I know it now. I left San Francisco because I thought I'd never be able to escape the thought of her there. Now, I'm a million miles away, years apart, and she's still right here. Salt tides flow over my bare feet, and I lift my eyes to meet the hazy horizon. I can see her sailing her little boat out on this bay. I can see her waving across this sunset. I see her swimming in the turquoise water, and I don't need to escape her anymore. At dusk, we wander back to the beach house together. We sleep together in the hammock. We talk over a bottle of this Caribbean rum. No more cultured Napa valley crap. It was never meant for us.

I went to the morning market for last time today, before my trip. I bought fresh avocados and peppers and plantain. In the middle of cooking, the phone erupts loudly.

It can only be Michael. He's the only one who has the number, but I'm still surprised to hear his voice on the other end of the line. He's calling to make sure I have everything I need to travel. He's making sure that I'm still coming to San Francisco. We don't talk about the fresh food I have in front of me. We don't address the fact that I haven't left St. Vincent in seven years. We don't mention that some of my last words to him were that I would never be back to California. He asks me if I have a warm jacket. I assure him that I am fine. He says that he'll be at the airport to pick me up, and that he'd probably bring a jacket for me anyway.

We hang up.

Should I have asked him about Brian? Yes. No. I will see for myself soon enough. I will see the boy with the brave words and bright eyes that I left behind with a foolish promise years ago. I had every faith I would never hear from him again.

California- and my San Francisco. It's easy to believe the city itself has a blueprint of my past over its mapped streets. I left so much of it there. Why do I feel like my memories have waited on the street corner for me? Everyone says San Francisco is full of ghosts. The city remembers too much- and, I remember too much of this city. I lived in so many of the buildings and ate in so many of the restaurants. I know too many of the street names. I walked them too many times.

Seven sweet years have passed under the hot Caribbean sun, with my ripped jeans and my weathered old beach house and my bare feet. I have been warm and carefree in their passing. Of course, it might be nice to see the bright blue Pacific again. Though, I was going to have to dress differently to enjoy the wind off the water there. Which was okay. Michael would be bringing a jacket.