

TOMORROW'S PROMISE

by
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PROLOGUE

Come on in, the party's just getting started," the blond exclaimed. She kissed the dark-haired youth in the low-riding ragged jeans and scuffed leather jacket on the lips for perhaps a moment longer than was customary for a casual greeting. "Hey, I heard that you were long gone, but I didn't believe it."

"Still here." The newcomer shrugged nonchalantly while casting an appraising eye over the women and men already gathered in the shabby-chic living room of one of the mixed-gender college houses. "Did I miss anything?"

"You mean did you miss *anyone*, don't you?" Charlene Belvedere coyly rested her fingers on the boyish young woman's hip, stroking her blatantly as they stepped out of the path of other arriving guests.

"Is she here?" Tanner Whitley ignored the caress. She'd been pointedly avoiding Charlene's hints all fall, but it hadn't seemed to put a damper on the blond's interest.

"Uh-uh. Word has it she left the minute the two of you were released. I knew it would take more than a night in jail to run *you* out of town, though."

Tanner's stomach clenched at the not-so-subtle reminder of her most recent brush with notoriety, but her face revealed nothing. There wasn't any point in explaining that she had only been detained, not actually arrested. The rumors had already become legend. "Well, it's almost mid-semester break anyhow. I guess she decided to go home early."

"Her parents showed up yesterday morning and practically packed her belongings themselves, then hustled her into the car. All rush-rush," Charlene continued, unperturbed by the sudden stiffening of the muscled leg under her fingertips or the blaze of anger that leapt to Tanner's dark eyes. "I don't think Grace will be coming back to

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Bennington in January.” She laughed a little maliciously. “God, if they ever figure out that she was actually *screwing* you, they’ll probably send her to a convent.”

“Did Grace say we were sleeping together?” Tanner asked, feigning confusion. She knew Charlene was just trolling for information. Grace would never have mentioned what had transpired between them—not because she was ashamed, but because she was private about her personal life. Tanner liked that about Grace Weston. She didn’t pry, and she respected the same desire for privacy in others. Charlene, for all her good looks and brains, was incredibly insecure about both and loved nothing better than reveling in other people’s misfortune.

“Well, I just assumed...” Charlene whispered knowingly, leaning close enough that her breasts brushed Tanner’s arm. A steady stream of students arriving for the party had forced them back against the wall in the small entrance alcove, but she wasn’t complaining about the contact. Tanner Whitley was hot, rich, and wild. She’d been trying to get a date with her for weeks, but she never seemed able to catch the always-in-demand Tanner between women. Someone had actually said Tanner had been dating an English prof, but no one could say who it was for sure. “What woman would pass up the chance at you, and it’s not like you’re tied down to anyone. So, when I heard the two of you were going out...”

“Grace never gave me a second look,” Tanner lied. If Grace was in trouble because of her, she wasn’t going to add fuel to the fire. Let them all wonder. “I was still working on getting her attention.”

“Oh, so that’s the reason you took her to that *très* elegant place in the Berkshires for the weekend. You were trying to get her attention?” Charlene’s tone suggested that she didn’t believe Tanner for a second. She took Tanner’s hand and led her into the living room. “Tell me another one.”

Tanner shrugged. She had no intention of discussing her love life with anyone, least of all someone who was likely to repeat every word she said before morning to anyone who would listen. “You have to start somewhere.”

“Well,” Charlene pronounced with finality, “she’s yesterday’s news now. Almost, anyhow. I suppose walking away from a totaled Mercedes and getting busted for public intoxication will be topics for discussion for another week or so. But at least she wasn’t driving.”

“Yeah,” Tanner remarked vaguely as she attempted to follow a group of jostling partygoers toward the rear of the house. The bar must be back that way, because it was definitely the area with the most activity. *“At least she wasn’t driving.” So that’s what everyone thinks. Good, let them. Grace doesn’t need that kind of baggage following her around for the rest of her life.*

“What about you?” Charlene clung persistently to Tanner’s arm in the crowd. “Are you in any trouble?”

“Me?” Tanner asked in mock surprise, flashing a grin that didn’t quite reach her eyes. With her smoky dark gaze, thick black hair that slashed across her forehead, and devil-may-care good looks, she resembled James Dean at his finest. “No. It’s not a problem.”

Not much *was* with a cadre of lawyers at her disposal. As much as she resented the corporate superstructure that loomed in her background like a black hole waiting to suck her into high-powered institutional obscurity, she’d been glad of its presence when she’d found herself behind bars facing a slew of felony charges, including DUI, reckless endangerment, and resisting arrest.

Still, better her than Grace, who’d been too drunk to remember any of the details of the car wreck and couldn’t contradict Tanner’s explanation of just how they had ended up off the road halfway down a mountainside in Vermont. Grace had been accepted to Yale Law School and couldn’t afford this kind of fuck-up on her record.

Tanner figured it was the least she could do to take the rap for her, considering that she had been the one to buy the last bottle of champagne, at which point neither of them had been exactly sober. Besides, *she* didn’t have any grand designs on the future, so what did it matter? She’d always known what the shape of her life would be—at least she had once she’d passed beyond the blissful ignorance of childhood.

She was a Whitley. In fact, she was the last Whitley, and it was her destiny to continue the tradition as head of the Whitley family empire. The fact that business dealings and venture capitalism left her absolutely cold was never an issue. Her only goal at the moment, however, was to avoid being swallowed by the giant gaping mouth of the Whitley company monster. So far, she had succeeded, but she knew her days were numbered.

“Uh...scotch, I guess, double up,” she said to the guy pouring drinks

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with both hands behind a makeshift counter in the kitchen. She didn't want to think about what awaited her after college, or to remember why she would be assuming the mantle of leadership many years too soon. Somehow, though, she had a feeling it was going to take more than the scotch to make her forget it. She needed something to engage all her restless energy, not just dim her memories. Glancing at the woman still glued to her side, she asked, "Want something?"

"You know I do." Charlene softly parted her lips in a seductive smile. "Just say when."

"Go, Tanner," the bartender muttered, and both women laughed.

"As in *to drink*?" Tanner repeated, but her hand was on Charlene's waist now. What the hell. The lithe blond was gorgeous and willing, and the night would be long and cold if she had to sleep alone. So, why not? Tanner slugged the scotch and waited.

"Wine now," Charlene whispered. "You later."

Why not?

CHAPTER ONE

Four Years Later

“Hello? Anybody here?” Adrienne Pierce called into the open bay of the small roadside gas station. She glanced at her watch. Seven p.m. already. Damn. “Excuse me—hello?”

“Ayuh,” a voice answered from somewhere inside the repair area. A thin, friendly-looking man in his late fifties dressed in stained coveralls came out of the building. He wiped his hands casually on a grease-spattered rag and smiled at Adrienne expectantly. “Help you?”

“I hope so,” Adrienne replied. “I’m looking for the turnoff to Whitley Point. My directions said it should be near here, but I can’t seem to find it.”

“Traveling long?” he inquired conversationally, his broad New England accent contrasting sharply with Adrienne’s clipped, precise cadence. Busying himself with cleaning the road grit from the windshield of her blue mid-sized rental, he studied her from the corner of his eye. He knew the type—seen them enough on their way to the island—another wealthy summer visitor, most likely. Golden-blond hair just beyond short, subtly layered and carelessly pushed back from her face. Tall, trim—very elegant even in casual chinos and a pressed cotton shirt. Yep, stylish, the way Hepburn and Stanwyck were—cool beauty and a core of iron. “Not from around here then, are you?”

“I guess that’s pretty obvious.” Adrienne smiled, a smile tinged with sadness. “I’m from the West Coast, but I just drove up from Philadelphia today.” Had it really only been twelve hours since she had awakened in her childhood bedroom, a room she hadn’t slept in for twenty years until a week ago? The landscape of her life was changing so quickly she barely knew where she was any longer.

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“Why do you want to spend the summer by yourself?” her mother asked, unable to hide her hurt. “You know we want you here—especially now.”

“It’s been good to be here, it has,” Adrienne said as calmly as she could manage. She didn’t want to add to the hurt by explaining that she was suffocating under her mother’s well-meant attentions and her father’s awkward silences. “I need to make some decisions. Sort some things out.”

“Why?” her mother repeated anxiously. “Why now? You said everything was all right.”

“Yes, it is,” Adrienne assured her quickly, ignoring the small kernel of fear that never quite left her mind. Fear, her new companion.

“Then why?”

“I’m sorry. I need to go. I’ll call you.”

“You’re pretty far from home, I’ll say that,” he said, reaching into his pocket for a cigarette.

You have no idea how far:

“Got friends on the Point?” He seemed not to mind that she hadn’t answered. He leaned against the bumper, rolling the cigarette idly between his fingers, appearing for all the world to be settling in for a long chat.

Adrienne looked at him, struggling between annoyance and amusement. Obviously, he wasn’t in any hurry, and, since she *had* come all this way to relax and leave the turmoil of the last few months behind, she might as well get used to it. Striving to put a conversational tone in her voice, she replied, “I don’t know a soul at Whitley Point. I’m leasing a house there for the next three months, and I’d really like to find it before dark.”

“I’m trying to quit, so I only smoke them halfway down,” he offered as if he needed to explain. He gave a last swipe at the spotted windshield and stubbed his half-smoked cigarette out with the toe of his reinforced boot. “It’s a real pretty place, Whitley Point. I used to work out there when I was a boy, back when Charles Whitley, Sr. was still alive. Only the family summered there then, before the island was developed.”

“I thought the island was privately owned by the Whitleys.” She’d read some of this while researching the place. A realtor’s ad she had

come across by chance in a magazine had described houses for rent on the island, and it had seemed the perfect solution to her current anchorless state.

“Still is,” he continued. “The whole north half of the island is the Whitley family estate, but there are a handful of private homes, too, on the southern end.”

“Isn’t the younger Whitley dead now, too?” Adrienne was interested in spite of her urgency to get back on the road. The idea of a family dynasty as powerful as the Whitleys’ intrigued her. It was far different than her own experience growing up in a comfortable, though hardly affluent, middle-class family, and it was partly that fascination that had prompted her to rent the house on Whitley Point. At the time, the idea of a remote island off the coast of Maine had seemed romantic in a *Wuthering Heights* kind of way, and about as far away from her memories as she could get.

“Yep, Whitley Jr.’s gone, too,” her companion informed her. “Died almost ten years ago in a freak storm out at sea. They found his body way down the coast days later. Never could understand how he let himself get caught so far out to sea in gale weather. Any native knows how fast those storms blow in—and Whitley was a mighty fine sailor. Maybe it was fate. Anyhow, now his daughter manages things on the island, although I hear she leaves most of the business matters to the corporation.” He squinted up at the quickly setting sun. “Well, I guess you’ll want to be gettin’ on.”

“Yes.” Adrienne suppressed a smile and nodded solemnly. “Perhaps I should.”

“So,” her new acquaintance advised, pointing the way, “the sign for Whitley Point is about two miles further down the road. You can’t miss it. Once you make the turn off the mainland and cross over the causeway, you ought to reach the southern end of the Point in less than half an hour.”

“Thank you.” Adrienne said goodbye with some reluctance. She couldn’t remember the last time she had held a conversation that hadn’t been filled with embarrassed pauses or uncomfortable silences. It was good to be treated like an ordinary person again. She waved as she pulled out of the parking lot, suddenly eager to reach a safe haven.

Safe haven. Is there really such a place for me?

She had come three thousand miles in search of one.

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After crossing the causeway, a narrow two-lane road surrounded by water that connected the island to the mainland, she followed the coastal road that wound north on the ocean side, marveling as she drove at how untouched by the modern world the surrounding shore appeared. Only her headlights broke the descending darkness as she carefully followed the twisting road. Occasionally, she caught glimpses of lights through the trees, but she couldn't make out any structures from the moving car. The sea breeze gusted in through her open windows, bringing with it a sudden pang of nostalgia. How she missed the ocean! Despite her melancholy, being near the water soothed her, and even after many hours on the road, she felt strangely rested.

Her mind drifted, lulled by the sounds of the sea, and she almost passed the small painted sign that announced the turnoff to Eagle Lane. Braking quickly, she negotiated the turn faster than she had intended, feeling the chassis shake. Heart racing, she pulled the car out of a near-spin on the unpaved, rutted road.

I'd better stay awake if I'm going to get there in one piece. After all this, it would be rotten luck to die in a car crash.

She drove with all her attention on the road until she found the house, looming up in the darkness against a moonlit sky, all angles and edges. Then she sat in her car for a few moments, staring. It was huge. She could make out a wide porch bordered by pines and what looked to be a top-floor deck winding around one side toward the rear. The ground level was comprised of a garage and a semi-enclosed storage area with the main living space actually on the floor above—a precaution against tidal floods, she imagined.

Finally, she gathered her suitcases, maneuvered them up the front steps, and dropped them inside the front door. Despite her fatigue, she was anxious to explore her new home.

The spacious master bedroom, she discovered to her delight, was in the rear and opened onto the deck she had seen from the driveway. She immediately opened the sliding glass doors to admit a breeze and stood in the doorway, looking past the shore a hundred yards below to the endless expanse of sea, black beneath the purple sky. It was a beautiful setting, and for a fleeting instant, she wished she had someone with whom to share it. She quickly banished that thought, as she had done so many times in the last months. That, too, was part of her past.

Suddenly weary, she kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the

bed, fully clothed. Within seconds, she was asleep, and mercifully, she did not dream.



Five miles up the road, Tanner slammed the door of her seaside bungalow and sprinted toward her Jaguar. Gunning the powerful engine, she roared from the drive amidst a shower of gravel, tearing down the coast road, her headlights slashing through the night. Had she left ten minutes earlier, she would have passed the summer visitor's car on the road. As it was, she saw no one as she hurtled toward her destination. Despite the chill night air, she had the top down on the sleek convertible and the radio turned up, all six speakers blasting. Drumming her fingers impatiently against the steering wheel, humming snatches of the melody, she maneuvered the twisting turns from memory, having driven the road thousands of times.

When she pulled into a hidden driveway near the south end of the island, careening to a stop behind a long line of sports cars and roadsters, the party was already in full swing. All of the second-floor windows of the large cedar and glass house were open, loud music mixing with the din of voices pulsating into the night.

Tanner sauntered through the crowd of people gathered on the wide front stairs and made her way inside, nodding to friends who called a greeting as she passed. She edged between jostling bodies toward the bar that was set into an alcove on one side of the spacious living area.

"Tanner!" a young flaxen-haired man shouted as he came up beside her, trying to be heard over the pounding music and roar of animated conversations. "Heard you were home. Glad you could make it. What are you drinking?"

"Scotch." She accepted the drink from him a moment later, and they both turned to survey the other guests.

"Great, huh?" he enthused. "Everybody's here."

"Yeah. Great."

It was a familiar sight. Most of the island's younger set was present, all of them eager to initiate the summer season with abandon. For three months, there would be an endless stream of house parties, dances, and barbecues as the wealthy gathered to escape the heat of the cities and the demands of their professions, just as had been the custom

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for a hundred years. Most of the faces she recognized—they were the women and men she had known since childhood, some home for the summer from exclusive universities, others simply idling away time.

Other than the fact that she was a year-round resident of the island and not just a summer visitor, Tanner was no different. She had just returned from a six-week tour of Europe that she had found repetitive and boring, but it had been better than the alternative—being locked in a boardroom with humorless representatives of the Whitley Corporation.

“So, what are your plans?” the handsome blond asked when they had finally found a quiet corner where they could hear each other.

“Plans?” She shrugged, then sipped her drink, not really tasting it. She simply waited for the burning to dissolve into a few hours of numbness. After Bennington, she had dutifully moved into a corner office right on schedule. She was born to it as much as she was born to the island and tied to it in some deep way that defied rationale. Fortunately, her presence mattered more than her participation, and she came and went as she pleased. Unfortunately, keeping apathy at bay was a losing proposition. “No plans.”

“Still waiting for Princess Charming?” Todd Barrow prodded good-naturedly. He had known Tanner since they were children, and they’d even dated semi-seriously during high school. Both their families had assumed that they would someday marry. It seemed like a natural match. Even after Tanner had told him she wasn’t interested in anything other than friendship, and why, they had remained friends. Todd regarded her now with a mixture of bewilderment and fondness.

“Afraid not.” She laughed bitterly. “I’ve outgrown fairy tales.”
About ten years ago.

“Really? I thought the young and the innocent were your favorite types,” he responded flippantly.

“Innocence is the last thing I want.” Her voice was strangely hollow. *Let them find out from someone else that tomorrow is just a myth and that dreams don’t come true.*

“Are you getting cynical in your old age?” His tone was still light but his eyes serious. It was a rare thing for Tanner to admit she had doubts or reservations about anything. Despite their long friendship, they hadn’t talked intimately in years. Tanner had always been an intensely private person, and perhaps the reason they had remained

friends for so long was that he never pried. If she wanted people to believe that she was no more than the rich playgirl she appeared to be, Todd saw no reason to challenge that image. But he remembered the nights lying beside her out on the beach, watching the stars, sharing their hopes and their fears. Once upon a time, she had dreamed.

"I don't know what you'd call it," Tanner admitted, turning from him to face the open window at her shoulder, seeking comfort in the night. The feeling of emptiness had been a part of her for so long she didn't even think about it any longer and certainly didn't try to explain it. It was easier just to ignore it, or obliterate it. "I just don't find the chase quite as much fun anymore."

"Too easy?" He knew from his own experience that it was often his money and status that attracted others, not him personally. He'd seen the same thing with Tanner—girls wanted her because of who she was. Of course, it was more than that, too. Tanner, good-looking to a fault in her faded jeans, boots, and signature white shirt, was the epitome of indifference, which made her nearly irresistible to a lot of girls. *She* never seemed to believe it was anything but her name that attracted attention, though. "No challenge any longer?" he teased.

"Not that so much," she continued with unaccustomed reflection. "I just don't enjoy winning anymore." Impatiently, she laughed at herself, shaking her thick, unruly dark hair out of her eyes. "Come on—let's go find some other kind of action. This is a party, right?" She didn't feel like being serious tonight, and she most definitely didn't feel like thinking about the women that she had left in tears or the broken hearts she had never wanted in the first place.

"I know just what you need," Todd said with a grin, slipping his arm around her waist. "Come on."

She followed him to another room filled with women and men, some of whom passed a joint while others sat around a low table where lines of white powder were carefully arranged. Conversation flowed as people casually sampled the various substances available.

"What's your pleasure?" Todd asked.

"I'll stick with this," Tanner replied, raising her glass as she sat down with several friends and returned their greetings.

She stayed a while and then followed the exodus of people outside onto the expansive deck. She picked up another scotch on the way and settled comfortably into a lounge chair, feeling the soothing effects

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of the alcohol and wondering why she had been so bothered earlier. Nothing ever really changed, and she was a fool to expect anything different.

Eyes half-closed, she sought solace from the sea. Starlight illuminated the sky, and moonlight glinted off cresting waves like splinters of glass, lethally beautiful. Surf thundered distantly against pristine shorelines, the ocean's power tamed and finally captured. Even though she had seen it thousands of times, it stirred her still, and for one brief moment, she longed to escape onto the water. She could be at the marina in ten minutes.

A young redhead she had never seen before leaned over her and offered a joint. Tanner accepted automatically, then passed it back.

"Great party, isn't it?" The girl exhaled the smoke in a long thin stream.

"Sure," Tanner replied, her starkly handsome features flickering with dark amusement. "First time out here?" The shapely youth looked to be eighteen—maybe.

"How did you know?" the redhead asked in surprise. Sliding onto the chaise, she rested her hand casually on Tanner's bare forearm below her rolled-up cuff, stroking very lightly.

Tanner shifted to make room, eying the trim figure and pretty features appreciatively. Grinning, she replied, "Because I know everyone on this island, and I've never seen you before. I'm sure I'd remember if I had."

"Well, I know who *you* are," her companion responded coyly, turning so that she was very nearly reclining against Tanner's side. Her nipples, tight beneath the thin silk of her scoop top, brushed against Tanner's arm. "I saw you at the Davises' beach party last year. Except then you weren't alone."

"Really?" Tanner played the game that was second nature to her. "Well, I am tonight. What's your name?"

"Jeanette."

The girl's hand fell in a practiced move to Tanner's thigh, and the caress of her fingers along the inside of her leg made Tanner's breath quicken. Noting the eager look in the redhead's eyes, she allowed herself to imagine how it would feel to have her naked. How easy it would be...and how pointless. She shook her head, ignoring the pulse of arousal beating between her thighs, not wanting to pursue that thought.

Her body was eager, but the conquest didn't interest her, even with such an attractive partner. And that was new.

"You should be careful, Jeanette." Tanner gently pushed the hand from her leg. "Sometimes you get more than you bargained for at these parties."

"I know what *I'm* bargaining for," Jeanette whispered, her lips very close to Tanner's neck. "Do you?"

"Nothing, tonight."

"Look me up later—if you change your mind," Jeanette urged as she finally moved from the lounge chair. By the time she slipped away into the crowd, she was already looking for the next interesting face.

Tanner closed her eyes, imagined the sway of the boat under her feet and the sound of the wind whipping the sails. The water surrounded her—so beautiful, so peaceful...so deadly.

"Find what you were looking for in Europe?" A low sultry voice very near her ear stirred Tanner from her reverie.

Her eyes still cloudy with memory, she looked up at an older brunette in a very revealing black sheath. In a tone languid and rich, she asked, "What makes you think I was looking for anything at all?"

"Because you've been looking for something for years. I'm just glad you didn't try to find it with that cute little piece of jailbait." The woman laughed, settling herself on the chaise and placing her hand deliberately on Tanner's leg in very nearly the same spot that Jeanette's had just vacated. "But that's why you never stay in one place for long. And why you never stay with one person either."

"You make me sound very mysterious." Tanner drained her scotch and traced a finger along the older woman's hand.

"Just hard to please."

"I never noticed you had much trouble in that department," Tanner responded playfully. The woman was so close her breath warmed the skin on Tanner's neck. Here was a heart she didn't need to worry about breaking.

"I didn't think you remembered." Slowly, she edged her hand higher.

"I haven't forgotten, but my memory could use a little refreshing." Tanner shifted so that her companion's hand rested against her crotch. Already aroused, she found the teasing strokes enticing and pleasant but not nearly enough to satisfy.

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The woman searched for a sign of welcome in Tanner's dark eyes but found them as unreadable as the ocean's depths. She didn't have any trouble reading her body though—the subtle rise of Tanner's hips beneath her fingers told her all she needed to know. She stood, tugging on a willing hand. "Let's go for a ride. Maybe I can improve your recollections."