

# MARRY AN ANGEL

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## *Prologue*

*San Diego, California*

*September, 2003*

Behind the wheel of her red Corolla, Bryce Langtree crested the hill and winced as her eyes filled with a staggering view of the Pacific. The expansive water - its horizon awash in postcard pink and orange hues - conjured a magnificent scene, but one too similar to another engrained in Bryce's memory; an image of the South Atlantic off the Skeleton Coast of Namibia - viewed from her parent's Ultralite back when she was a little girl and not alone in the world.

Bryce brushed away the tears, annoyed at herself. Why would she even think of it? It was all so long ago. With a glance, she read the words on the canvas bag sitting on her passenger's seat: Scripps Institution of Oceanography. The words cheered her. True, her social life was a big zero, but she loved her work and how it kept her - most of the time - in the company of other SIO staff and students. No reason to be morose, she just needed to get home, do some reading and go to bed; she had to be at the institute early for a planning meeting.

The road continued curving along the ocean. She'd be home in twenty minutes. But

coming up to a beach parking area she caught sight of two kids waving their arms as they struggled through the sand to get up to the lot. Teenagers - a boy and a girl. Except for them, the beach appeared deserted. Bryce turned in, stopped her car next to the opening in the low wall, and jumped out.

“Help us! Oh, God, please help us!”

Bryce squinted, straining to catch sight of a form out in the darkening water. And there he was, a dim shape - barely a speck - out past the breakers, a good thirty yards from the shore.

“Oh, God! It’s my brother! He’s drowning!” the girl cried, running onto the asphalt.

Bryce dropped her keys and tore off her shoes. Riptide. She was sure of it.

“How old is he!” Bryce yelled, running onto the beach.

“Thirteen! He’s thirteen! Oh, God! Oh, God!” The girl’s panic whipped against Bryce’s back, her shrill cries piercing the evening’s quietness.

Bryce peeled out of her jeans as she stumbled across the sand. Reaching its edge, she stomped into the cold water, wading and lunging with all her strength through its heaviness. Then she threw her arms over her head and dove into the waves.

Adrenalin surged through her body as she fought against the breakers. From her work she’d spent many hours in the Pacific; it was as familiar to her as her own bedroom. She had no fear of it. She wouldn’t let it take the kid.

Out past the breaking waves, she surfaced and scanned the water. She spotted the boy, but he wasn’t flailing as much and his cries were getting weaker. Bryce threw herself into a hard swim toward him. After a few strokes, she checked to see him again and felt sure she was going to make it... but then he disappeared. Damn it!

Bryce dove under the water and swam to where he'd been just a moment before. She fished through the dark water with her hands. He was right here! Her lungs burned, but she fought the urge to surface for as long as she could. Where was he! Frustrated as hell, she started upward, but then – thank, God! - she felt the side of her arm touch his body. She turned, grabbed him under the arms, and propelled them both up through the surface.

“Aaahhh! Aaahh, ah, ah!”

Bryce sucked in air as the kid coughed and sputtered, trying to catch his own breath. God, she'd just made it.

She wrapped an arm across the front of him and started swimming in a northerly direction, parallel to the beach. But the current continued pulling them out and, despite all her hours at the gym, Bryce started to tire.

“Hey,” she called out. “You’re gonna have to help me.” She wondered if he could hear her. “Just kick your legs. Come on – try - just start kicking.” In the next moment she lowered her eyes as his legs started moving, easing her burden.

She moved on a while more. Finally, it felt like they were out of it and Bryce turned back toward the beach, tugging the boy along through the cold blackness, steadily closing the distance.

“I think I can make it from here,” the kid muttered.

“You think so, huh?” Bryce said grinning, as she stood them up in the thigh high waves. She kept a hand on him as they trudged up onto the dark beach. Squeals of happiness filled her ears.

“Oh, thank you! Oh, God! Oh, God! Thank you! Thank you!”

“Sure,” Bryce mumbled, lying back on the wet sand. She started shivering, but she felt euphoric for having gotten the kid out and sparing his family the agony of losing him, knowing too well herself the pain of losing a loved one.

## Chapter 1

*San Diego, California*

*August, 2004*

Jim grimaced, the muscles in his face twitching and his body twisting to the side, while his eyes remained closed as the dream played out.

It was the autopsy again. The examiners cut her chest open, then bent over it, peering into the cavity, studying the thing that was suppose to be her heart with intense medical curiosity.

It had been a rare, undetected heart defect, but was a lot more harshly depicted in Jim's twisted dream.

Horribly mis-shapened, it resembled more a three-year-old's Play-Doh creation; red in color, but bizarre in form with several odd shapes stuck together. "Look, Mommy, it's a scare crow holding a pumpkin," the child would say, with "scare" being the only word with meaning in Jim's dream.

The examiners looked at each other and shook their heads in dismay. The thing in the woman's body was so mangled, hell, how she'd ever lived a day was a wonder. One of them, a bald man wearing glasses, looked at his watch, then turned away, motioning for the assistant to close her up and wheel her out. It wasn't worth finishing the procedure, she was too much of a mess; any trained monkey could see why she'd dropped dead at the ripe old age of thirty...

Jim's eyes opened and he sat up, his face showing the anguish he felt from the dream. He grabbed the box of Kleenex from the nightstand and placed them in his lap, but tears fell down

his cheeks and onto his hands before he even got a tissue pulled out. He usually managed to hold it all back, but not this time.

The features of his face scrunched together and he raised a hand, rubbing his eye hard, fighting against the emotions, but then his shoulders began to quake up and down as a well of tears streamed down his face.

God, he hated that dream.

Them cutting open his beautiful wife, looking at the ugly thing in her chest, and waving her away like she was just a pile of junk that needed to be trucked to the dump.

“Damn it,” he scowled, sniffing back the last of his tears. With the storm over, he dried his face with the tissues and wiped his nose.

It hadn’t been that way of course.

Sarah’s autopsy had been performed with meticulous care and precision; the obscure defect identified, studied, and thoroughly understood before she was released to the mortuary to be dressed up for her funeral, with Jim receiving a formal copy of the thirty-nine-page report, printed on crisp, heavy-weight, paper, embossed with the coroner’s seal.

He got up, discarded the tissues in the toilet, and washed his hands before grabbing up the phone on his dresser and punching in the speed dial number to his office.

“Jim Grierden,” he said flatly, “any messages?”

“Oh, yes. Good morning, Dr. Grierden...”

His conversation with the secretary lasted only a couple minutes. His earliest appointment had been canceled, leaving him time to go to the gym for a workout. He’d started

working out after losing Sarah, lifting weights until his muscles threatened to collapse, trying to exorcise the grief from his body.

He dropped the phone back on the dresser, went back into the bathroom, and washed his face. As he dried off, he caught his reflection in the mirror. He looked old. He'd really aged since Sarah's death. He frowned as he turned away, hanging the towel back on the rack.

After putting on a pair of shorts and t-shirt, he sat on the bed to lace up his sneakers. It would be two years next month since his wife died and he was getting tired of his alone-ness. He needed to start dating, but the thought sickened him, he just wanted Sarah back. He never seemed to get over the cruelty of it - his being a physician, hell, a heart surgeon - he should've been able to save her, but she'd died before he'd ever known she was sick.

He selected a pair of neatly pressed pants and dress shirt from his closet, pulled them out on their hangers, snatched up his gym bag and phone, and left the room.

Outside, he unlocked his Maserati and put his things in, hanging his clothes on the hook, still thinking about Sarah. God, he missed her. But he was never going to get her back and the thought of being alone the rest of his life wasn't appealing. But how would he go about meeting somebody new? Maybe he'd check into one of those damn dating services. It was an idea he'd had a couple times before, but he couldn't help thinking that his profile would immediately attract a gaggle of gold diggers. It made him sick thinking of it.

#

A salty aroma filled the air. Only a couple tables stood vacant and the girls moved to one that had just been bussed, each tugging out a white plastic chair.

“Did you see those guys over there?” Becky asked in a low voice, giving space for her friend Patsy to squeeze into a seat by the wall.

Bryce, sitting down across from them, stayed silent, not sure if the question had been to her. But looking up and seeing them both staring at her, she murmured, “Which guys?”

Her fanny pack pushed against her back. She looked down to her stomach, undid it, and laid it on the chair beside her.

“Those guys behind us - but on that side,” Becky said, tilting her head in a pointing gesture. “At the table back there.” She kept her lips still as she spoke, making the lunch get-together feel like a clandestine meeting of international spies.

“The one in the green shirt is so...” Patsy whispered, filling in her missing word with a lick of her chops.

Yes, he is, Bryce agreed in her mind, studying the blond, tan, and nicely built guy.

“Jim?” Becky said to Patsy.

After turning and getting another look at the guy, Patsy mumbled back, “Yeah...”

“What’s that?” Bryce asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Becky said. “They were checking you out, Bryce. Weren’t they, Patsy? You saw it, didn’t you?”

“*I would say so,*” Patsy said. Her tone sounded like Elaine on Seinfeld.

“What do you think, Bryce? Want us to go say something to them?”

Bryce flinched like she’d just been jabbed in the stomach. “What?”

“You know... bet I could get a phone number...”

Although the two girls were younger than her, they were obviously braver - when it came to guys at least. No, she definitely did not want them approaching the cute guys on her behalf. But the table in question was directly in her view and she relaxed in her seat as two females approached it, freeing her from having to turn down Becky's brazen offer. "I don't doubt it, but I'm afraid their girlfriends just showed up."

Both girls turned to look. "Men," Patsy smirked, turning back around. "Such low life forms."

"Careful, Patsy, Bryce's whole life is the study of low life forms."

Bryce grinned.

They were lunching at Point Loma Seafoods. Bryce didn't get out much and was glad for Becky inviting her along. All three were in shorts with Bryce sporting a silky tank top while Becky and Patsy both wore short-cropped t-shirts. On Patsy's gray one were the words University of California San Diego.

Through the open doors, sounds from the boat docks and cries of seagulls filtered in, adding to the noise of the diners.

"What do you do at Scripps?" Patsy asked. "Becky's only told me a little bit of it..."

The question was in reference to Bryce's work as a graduate student at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. She only had a year to go in fulfilling her dream of becoming a marine biologist. She'd met Becky there over the summer during the younger girl's internship.

"We're studying the effects of pollution on coral reefs. It's possible in the next twenty to thirty years - if things continue as they are - there will be no more healthy Caribbean reefs at all."

"Oh, I didn't know." Patsy said. "So what do you do - how do you study it?"

“We collect samples and we have an aquarium that can accommodate up to four-hundred at once and - using it - we can mimic the conditions of the reef. And then we expose the coral to various stresses - concentrations of chemicals and bacteria from different types of pollutants - and study the effects.”

“Bryce, your order is ready,” announced a voice over the speakers.

A few minutes later, they all began digging into their lunches of fish and crab cakes.

“This is delicious,” Bryce said, squeezing another lemon over her plate.

After a few bites, Becky asked, “Do you have plans for tonight?”

“We’re going on a mission,” Patsy said.

“Mission?”

“You know – clubs – checking out the guys...”

Both girls sat grinning at her, but then Becky’s smile faded as she dropped her eyes and ran her fingers through the condensation on her glass.

Patsy frowned at her then turned back to Bryce. “We’re going out because she needs the distraction. Ben, her boyfriend in high school, he left - football scholarship at UNC - you know - the Tar Heels.”

“Oh.” Bryce said. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah,” Becky sighed. She picked up a French fry, but dropped it back to her plate without eating it. “How ‘bout you, Bryce?”

“What?”

“When’s the last boyfriend you had?”

“If we get too nosy just say so,” Patsy added.

“Actually...” Bryce hesitated, picking up her napkin and wiping her fingers before looking back up at the girls. “I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

Both girls’ eyes grew big and round. Bryce gnawed her lower lip with her teeth finding it hard to keep eye contact with them.

“Really?” Patsy said.

“Gee,” Becky followed.

“Well... I grew up in Africa. We were pretty isolated.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about your parents,” Patsy said.

“Yes, thank you,” Bryce said. The comment stirred sad feelings, but Bryce pushed them away. “I tried going on a couple dates, but it was always pretty much... a disaster - so then I just started avoiding all that.”

“Gee.”

“What was so bad about the dates?” Patsy asked.

Bryce winced. “Just me. I’d be nervous the whole time and... really make a moron of myself.” She’d chosen her words carefully, leaving the worst of it unsaid.

The conversation went quiet. Bryce looked at her watch feeling ready for the get-together to end. She could tell from their silence what they thought of her admission that she basically had no life. She sighed and began piling the remnants of her lunch together on her tray.

“We’re gonna have to work on this,” Patsy said. “Take you out on missions with us.”

“Yeah, but not bars... how ‘bout...” Becky mumbled.

“Beaches - like Mission beach - there’s tons of guys.”

“Yeah - what do you think, Bryce?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, forcing a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

Bryce trudged out to her car feeling grim. She was well aware of her non-existent love life, but hearing herself say the words out loud to Becky and Patsy made it seem even more dismal. She longed to have a boyfriend - to experience having someone in her life - it’d been just her for so long. But the thought of meeting someone and going on dates was so intimidating.

Bad memories stirred in her mind, but she dismissed them, since what they were about had nothing to do with having a *real* relationship.

Pulling her keys out, she unlocked her car and got in, tossing her fanny pack onto the passenger’s seat. She switched on the ignition and re-ran the Matt Damon scene over in her mind. She’d watched *The Bourne Identity* the previous Saturday, replaying the love scene several times. Jesus, he was so sexy. But backing her car out she smirked at herself; she really needed to work on the reality of her life - getting off on movie actors was only so satisfying. Maybe she’d take ‘em up on their offer and go out with Becky and Patsy on one of their *missions*. She grinned at the funny term, but then her stomach became a knot of nerves just thinking about it.

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Maryanne Meyers reached across her island and placed her kitchen phone back on its rest. With a sigh, she set her gaze out the window, fumbling with the damp kitchen towel she held in her hands.

“Hi, Mom,” came her daughter’s voice from behind her.

“Oh, hi, Rebecca.” Maryanne turned around and tried to smile. “I didn’t know you were here. Guess you’re coming home for dinner tonight, huh?”

“Nick sent me an email - that you’re making chicken-cacciatore. No way I’m gonna miss that.”

“He did, uh?” Nick was her older son. Neither of them lived at home anymore; Nick had moved out a couple years before and Rebecca now lived at the dorm. She wondered when the day would ever come that she’d be able to stop cooking for them all. “Gwen’s coming too I suppose?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Becky said, shrugging off her backpack. “I’m going out with Patsy later.”

“Good thing I made lots - I guess.” Maryanne wondered for the thousandth time if Gwen, Nick’s live-in girlfriend, ever cooked anything.

“Yeah, well, Mom, if you want us to stop coming to dinner -” Becky paused, snuffing in a big whiff of the aromas filling the kitchen, “- mmm, smells delicious - you’re gonna have to do something about your cooking - you know - start making it taste yucky.”

Maryanne laughed.

“So what’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“What was it on the phone? You looked so sad when you hung up.”

“Oh, it was Angela at the office.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Jim,” Maryanne sighed, getting out a cutting board and laying it on the island. “She said when he called this morning it sounded like he’d been crying.”

“Oh, that is bad.”

“Yes. Since you’re here, you can help make the salad while I set the table - but wash your hands first.”

“Okay,” Becky went to the sink and turned on the water. “Is he coming over tonight?” Becky always loved to see Jim. Even though he was old, she and Patsy considered him killer good-looking. They’d even started a game where every time they saw a cute guy they’d decide if Jim was still the hottest. Becky smiled at the thought, but then lowered her expression as she thought about what her mom said, that he’d been crying.

“No, I don’t think he’s really keen on hanging out with us all the time.” Maryanne laid the towel on the counter and went through the entryway into the dining room. “He did agree to come with us to the cottage next month,” she called out, as she cleared some mail and papers off the table.

“Oh, that’s cool.”

“Yes,” she said, coming back into the kitchen, “as long as he and your father can both clear their schedules. Hopefully, no emergencies will come up.”

“Yeah, hope not.”

“But I wish we could...”

“Wish we could what?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” Referring to the cucumber, she said, “Peel it some before you slice it.” Becky went to the sink and began peeling. Maryanne opened one of the cupboards and started pulling out dishes.

“So you wish we could what?”

Maryanne set the plates down and leaned against the counter. “That we could... if we just knew of somebody that we could - you know - fix him up with.”

“Oh.”

“Some nice girl and we could invite her too - to come to Cambria. That’s what I wish. But I don’t know how to find such a person.”

After a moment, Becky turned to her with a big smile spread across her face.

“What?”

“Mom, I know the perfect girl.”

“You do? Who? Where do you know her from?”

“I met her at Scripps. She’s a graduate student. Mom, *she’s perfect.*”

“Oh, I don’t know, Rebecca. How old is she?”

“I think she’s around twenty-five.”

“Well, that’s a pretty big age difference don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t think it’s too much. How old’s Jim?”

“He must be about thirty-eight.”

“Well, that’s not... too much. Really, Mom, she’s perfect. She’s really, really pretty - you wouldn’t believe it. And get this - she told me and Patsy that she’s *never* had a boyfriend.”

Becky stared at her with eyes wide like she’d just revealed a profound secret of the universe.

“Sounds a little odd, don’t you think?”

“No, she’s just had a weird life. She grew up in Africa - really isolated. Her parents were wildlife researchers. They made documentaries - stuff like that. But then they got killed and she came here to go to UCSD. I think she doesn’t even have any other family.”

“Oh, gracious.”

“Mom, really... the thing is, Jim wouldn't want to get together with a woman his age.”

“Oh, why's that?”

“Because - you know - he's probably still hoping to have children. A woman his age would be too... old.” Maryanne frowned at her, but then lifted her finger to her mouth and clicked her teeth with her long fingernail. “It's true. You know Sarah was pregnant when she -”

“Yes, I know. Such a shame.”

“How 'bout this - I'll bring her over for dinner one night and you can meet her and see what you think.”

“Alright. You bring her over and we'll all check her out.”

“Well, gosh, Mom, don't be -”

“Don't worry, I'll be subtle. She'll never know. So she's really pretty, huh?” she said, picking up the plates and walking to the dinning room. “Tell me more about her. What's her name?”

## Chapter 2

Bryce smiled and caught her breath as another shiver of happiness washed over her.

From the passenger seat, she picked up her hand written directions again and glanced at them. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too hard to find.

She was driving up to Cambria to spend the weekend with the Meyers in their beach house. Maryanne had told her to get there at least by six for dinner. Finishing with the work she'd had to do, she'd left as early as she could - anxious to get there – hopefully she'd make it by five o'clock.

They were the nicest people. Becky had invited her for dinner one evening and she'd met all of them. Her father, Frank - who she found out was a big-time heart surgeon - her mom and her brother and his girlfriend. She liked all of them, Frank especially. From his height, gray hair, and kindly, handsome face he reminded her of Sean Connery. And he had a heck of a sense of humor that she wouldn't have expected given his profession. Nick was even taller and slimmer than Frank with a narrow face and receding hairline, but with the same nice eyes as his dad. Gwen, with short, blonde hair looked similar to Becky only more petite. Bryce thought she and Nick made a funny couple due to the difference in their heights.

She'd had a wonderful evening with them. They'd all been so nice to her - asking her so many questions about her life and her work - making her feel like she was the most interesting person in the world. And just when she was leaving, Maryanne invited her to come to their beach house up at Cambria.

Their house had been unbelievable – like a mansion. She expected that the Cambria one would be beautiful too. It was great getting a break from Scripps and from the solitude of her condo to go spend a whole weekend with Becky’s nice family - playing on the beach and eating delicious food. She loved being with them, it felt homey like back when she was young with her own mom and dad.

Reaching up, she ran her fingers through her hair just as a favorite song by The Eagles came on the radio. She cranked it up and started singing, feeling the happiest she’d felt in a long time...

*On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair*

*Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air...*

#

The floor to ceiling windows of the Meyers’ beach house provided a spectacular view of the ocean. Jim stood near them, gazing out, having arrived a few minutes before.

Behind him, farther back past the entryway where bookshelves and high-backed chairs created a library of sorts, sat Frank and Nick, locked in a quiet battle of chess. Closer to him, curled up on the floral sofa, lay Gwen turning the pages of an apparently very interesting book. The normally talkative group seemed subdued, like they were waiting for an earthquake or something. It was curious.

Off to his right the enormous windows ran in front of the dinner table, in its place near a doorway to the kitchen. From there he could hear Maryanne cooking one of his favorites: glazed pork tenderloin and potatoes au gratin.

He felt glad for being invited, but couldn't help thinking that it was the first time he'd been back since losing Sarah. He blinked, pushing the thought from his mind, and glanced at his watch again. He'd been wondering where Becky was. After scanning the beach once more, he pulled away from the windows and started across to the kitchen.

Maryanne nearly jumped out of her skin when he walked in, jerking her hands away from a stack of dinner plates on the island. Again, he sensed something going on with his friends, but damned if he knew what it was.

"Where's Becky?"

"She couldn't come," Maryanne said, sounding a little short of breath. "She called me this morning – she's sick."

"Oh?"

"Just a bad cold," she said, rubbing her hands against her apron, "but... such a shame."

"Yes, that is too bad."

A rust-colored apron covered Maryanne's tan shorts and white blouse. Hairspray held her dark, thick hair in a neat style and expertly applied make-up enhanced her features. The reddish-brown color of her lipstick matched the color on her nails. Diamond earrings shined at the sides of her face.

Several pans steamed on the burners and an assortment of food and cooking utensils lay scattered over the island, including a bundle of fresh asparagus. She walked across the tile floor and took a small mixing bowl out from a low cupboard.

"Since when do Frank and Nick play chess?" Jim asked.

“Oh... they hmmm... they’ve played before – I think,” she said, opening another cabinet. He’d never known them to. He stepped out of her way as she came back over and set the bowl on the island. She paused beside him, placed a finger on her chin, and turned to gaze about the room. Jim pressed his brows together. He knew Maryanne to be a cooking monster, but she seemed less than sharp at the moment, a little off her game. He almost came right out and asked her what was going on, but shook his head instead. Maybe it was his imagination.

He watched her cluck around the kitchen for another minute, before turning around and picking up the stack of plates. “I’ll put these out for you.”

“Oh, no...” she said, quickly walking over to him. “That’s okay, Jim. It’s still early...yet...” He set the plates back down and chuckled at her funny behavior. He’d never seen her so jittery. Just then, Gwen appeared at the doorway.

“Cuse me,” she said, wearing a grin over her face. “I just wanted to get... hmmm...” without finishing, she shot a goofy look at Maryanne, and then at him, before grabbing a Diet Coke from the fridge. She walked back out, snickering, and mumbling that she could help too if they needed her.

Jim set a questioning gaze on Maryanne. Something was up. Absently, he touched his thumb to the plates and thumped it down the edges of them. At last, the light went on in his head. After making a quick count, he grinned and raised his eyebrows at his hostess. “Why do you have six plates out?”

“Oh...” she breathed ruefully.

“There’s only five of us - if Becky’s not coming.” He rested back against the island, crossing his arms over his chest, waiting for her to speak. The game was up.

Maryanne blinked her eyes, reached over, and switched off one of the burners. Then, with trembling hands, she began picking at her apron pockets.

“There’s another person coming, I take it.” He’d figured it out – that he’d been set up.

“Yes...” Maryanne said, looking up at him. “I’m sorry, Jim. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Who is she?”

“Oh... umm... she’s a friend of Rebecca’s.”

Jim widened his eyes.

“Well, she’s older...”

“How much older?”

“A few years. She’s a graduate student at Scripps and... we’ve all met her and she’s really very...” she paused, sucking in a breath. “I mean – we really think you might like her.”

Just then Frank appeared.

“Did you know about this?”

A big grin spread over his friend’s face. “Oh, no, sir. Not me. I had nothing to do with -” He opened the fridge and took out a beer. “- anything. Definitely a cute girl though,” he added, walking back out.

“I hope you don’t mind, Jim...”

He didn’t feel comfortable with it. A blind date for a whole weekend seemed like a bit much, but he nevertheless let her off the hook. “No, it’s okay. What else can you tell me about her?”

“Well, she’s had an unusual life. She grew up in Africa – somewhere like Nambia I think. Her parents were researchers – pretty renowned at the time. They made documentaries and they would go up in a small plane – an Ultralite I think she called it - ?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. Vague memories blinked on and off in his head as she talked.

“- and film the wildlife from up there. But when she was only seventeen her parents went up in that plane and crashed and were both killed. Such a shame.”

“Yes. Sorry to hear that.”

“Then she came here and started going to school at UCSD. They must’ve left her a sizeable inheritance or a big amount of life insurance is all we can figure. We don’t think she has any other family.”

“Sounds pretty tough.”

“Yes.” She walked back over to a high cabinet and started taking the glasses down.

“What’s her last name?”

“Langtree.”

It really was a small world. He’d known the girl’s father. But he didn’t say anything. He’d confirm it first by asking her what her parents’ names were. But he was pretty certain of it. Jonathan Langtree. He’d been a zoology professor at the University of Chicago during his freshman year. He’d been well liked by the students and they’d all been disappointed when he’d left the next year to go to Africa. He and his wife had wanted to do field research full-time.

After thinking it over another minute, he shook his head, wondering at Maryanne’s judgment. If she was their daughter then the girl had to be considerably younger than himself.

At last, Bryce reached the town and, following the directions, eventually located the address.

She snatched up her fanny pack, grabbed her duffel bag from the back seat, and walked around to the side of the building. The trip took less time than she'd expected. It was only four-thirty. Hope this is the right door, she thought, ringing the bell.

Frank opened the door. "Hi," she smiled.

"Hi, Bryce. Come on in."

"Oh, wow," she said, stepping in. The place was unbelievable – so spacious with beautiful furniture everywhere and gigantic windows all across the front looking out to the ocean.

"Hi, Bryce," Nick said, coming down the hall. "Here, let me take that. I'll put it in your room."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Mom! Bryce is here!" Nick called out.

Bryce walked through the entryway toward the sitting area, her awestruck gaze drifting across the giant windows for a moment before dropping to go around the room. First, she spotted Gwen sitting on the couch and then - on the loveseat – her eyes fell onto *the most handsome man she'd ever seen in her life.*

*Jesus, wonder who he is.*

Maryanne appeared from the kitchen. "Hi, Bryce."

“Hi, Maryanne,” Bryce said, looking away from the Adonis. “Thanks again for inviting me.” She dropped her fanny pack down near a side table. “This is so beautiful,” she said, gesturing to the windows, thinking Becky was probably out there on the beach.

“Thank you, Bryce. We’re so glad you could come. Here, let me just finish the introductions...” Maryanne took her hand and pulled her up alongside the dining room table. They stopped and turned toward the sitting area and Bryce felt her heart flutter at the sight of the man – whoever he was. “You know Gwen, of course.”

“Yes, hi,” she murmured to her. But only ten percent of her mind was on Gwen, while the other ninety percent was fixed on the giant, gorgeous man who’d gotten up from his seat and was now walking toward her.

He was as tall as Nick, but bulkier. He appeared to have been carved from a block of granite - every inch of him solid muscle - she could tell it even through the fabric of his jeans. Tucked into them he wore a forest green shirt with the cuffs rolled up to his forearms. The angular features of his handsome face were the same as those of the models in the western magazines she’d mused over as a girl. His gleaming blue eyes had little creases at the outside corners of them and his dark hair was brushed back casually, with some in the front a bit out of place. At his temples were specks of gray that only added to the beautiful sight of him.

He came across, stopping close in front of her. She stared up at him feeling dazed. He raised his large muscled arm and reached his hand out to her.

“And this is Jim, a good friend of ours.”

“Hi,” Bryce said, lifting her hand to his, feeling sure she would faint as his large, warm hand closed around hers.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Bryce,” he said. The sound of his deep voice tingled in her chest.

“Yes...” was all she managed in reply.

Beside her, Maryanne mumbled something about her cooking and headed back to the kitchen.

The man let go of her hand and Bryce turned away – he was just too much to take.

With a little cough, she brushed back her hair with her fingers and walked around the corner of the table, touching the back of a chair to steady herself, before going into the kitchen.

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Jim rubbed his forehead and blinked a couple times.

Frank wasn’t kidding, but she was way more than cute. The girl’s shiny green eyes and sumptuous, glossy, pink lips brightened the room. And she had a hellava head of hair; golden-brown and falling in a luscious mass of soft waves down her back past her shoulder blades.

*And then her body...*

He stared after her as she walked away, admiring how her khaki shorts enhanced the nice roundness of her butt and the light tan of her legs. But what had really caught his eye was the white halter-top she wore tied up behind her neck; its soft fabric and low cut made an eye-burning display of her ample breasts. He couldn’t help noticing how her appealing mounds rode high and firm on her chest, despite her not wearing a bra.

She disappeared into the kitchen, but he stood unmoving for a moment, captivated by her. Blinking his eyes again, he turned around and found the others all staring at him. A smile spread across Frank’s face and Jim grinned back at him, shaking his head.

“You guys ever gonna finish that game?”

“Yeah,” Frank said, looking down at the chessboard. “Nick, get over here. I think it’s your turn, isn’t it?”

### Chapter 3

Bryce looked around determined to forget about Jim The Gorgeous. She really needed to get out more. It was ridiculous for her to be so affected just from being introduced to one of their friends.

The kitchen was as impressive as the rest of the place; all stainless steel appliances with the fridge down the wall to her left and the sink and stove across from it. In the center was a large island with pots and other cookery hanging from a rack over it. Maryanne hustled around it, finishing her dinner. “Need any help?”

“No. There’s not much left to do. Would you like a drink – a beer or something?”

“No, thank you.” To Bryce’s right, near a window, sat a morning table adorned with an arrangement of fresh flowers. She went behind it and looked out. “Is Becky outside?”

“Oh, Bryce, she couldn’t come.”

“Oh?”

“She called me this morning. She’s sick with a bad cold. She told me to tell you she’s sorry she couldn’t make it.”

Bryce frowned at the disappointing news. “Sorry to hear that. Hope she feels better soon.” She sat down, pulled a Gourmet magazine from a basket, and began flipping through it, wondering how the weekend would go without Becky there.

“So, what do you think of him?” Maryanne said in a low voice.

Bryce looked up, scrunching her brows.

“You know...,” she said, motioning back to the living room with her head.

“You mean that guy, Jim?”

Maryanne nodded.

“Oh...” Bryce wasn’t sure what to say and just shrugged her shoulders as she looked back down at her magazine. *I dunno – what is he, a NFL quarterback? Where’s the rest of the team?* She turned a page, smiling at her private joke. But she could feel Maryanne still looking at her. She had to say something. “Who’s he here with? I didn’t see her yet.”

“No, he’s here just... by himself.”

“No wife? No girlfriend?” Bryce couldn’t believe that a man that handsome wouldn’t have a girlfriend at least.

“No, he’s... not with anyone... right now.”

“Oh.”

“So what do you think of him?”

“I’m sorry,” Bryce said, looking up and shaking her head. “I don’t... understand what you mean.”

“Well, Bryce, it’s just that we invited you and we invited him. And... well... we’re hoping the two of you might hit it off, so to speak,” Maryanne finished, wiping her hands with a towel.

Bryce’s mouth dropped open. She’d been turning another page, but her fingers froze, holding it in the air, right in mid-turn.

If an earthquake had struck at that moment leveling everything for miles, she wouldn’t have been more shocked.

She turned her eyes back to the magazine, but couldn't see the words due to the rush of adrenalin flooding her brain. Her stomach turned queasy. She started shaking and laid her hand down on the table.

*Jesus, she couldn't handle a date with the pizza boy, let alone a heart-stopping hunk like that man...*

"Are you okay?" Maryanne asked.

"Oh, uh... it's just that..." A nervous swallow interrupted Bryce's words.

"Yes? What?"

"It's just... Maryanne..." Bryce felt her heart hammering away. It was all she could do to get the words out. "I really don't think that a big... gorgeous... man like that is... going to have any... interest in me."

A big smile spread over Maryanne's face. "Oh, it can't hurt to get to know each other and see if there's any chemistry." With that, she walked away, back to the fridge, getting out a dish covered with plastic wrap.

*Oh, there'd be chemistry all right. Soon as her nerves overcame her and she started barfing all over the man. Oh, yeah, great chemistry.*

Bryce closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

"What... does... he do?" She was just waiting for her to say that he was a heart surgeon like her husband.

"He's a heart surgeon also."

*Oh, of course.*

"He and Frank work together at the medical center."

Dear, God, they were trying to fix her up with a tall, dark, and handsome heart surgeon. Unbelievable. She was so far out of her element she didn't know what the hell...

*How could they have thought she was a candidate for this!*

"Does... he... uh..." With a cough, Bryce cleared her throat. "Does... uh... he know about this?"

"Hhmm... Yes. He does."

Bryce rose from her seat thinking maybe she would have that beer after all, but her legs felt like jelly. She sucked in a breath and started willing herself to move toward the fridge just as Maryanne walked past her, still smiling, as she left the room.

Bryce didn't drink often, but a beer sounded like just what she needed at the moment. She opened the fridge and bent down into it, looking over the different kinds they had. After a minute, she reached in with a trembling hand and picked up a glass bottle that said NEWCASTLE on it. Then she rose back out and felt her butt bump up against a warm body. "Ah!" she cried, whipping around.

"Sorry," Jim The Gorgeous Giant said, smiling down at her.

"No, no, 'cuse me," she stammered. She stepped out of his way and went behind him, feeling like she'd just had her heart defibrillated; unnerved as hell at how he'd snuck up on her and how she'd touched him with her butt.

Grasping the bottle, she tried to twist the top off, but it was really hard. She tried a couple more times, hurting her hand in the process.

Dream Man closed the fridge and she turned back around.

"It doesn't... twist off."

“No,” he said, shaking his head and twinkling his blue eyes at her.

He took a step forward and she took a step back. But he kept coming closer making her take several more steps back until she felt herself hit up against the counter. It was as far as she could go, but still he came closer until he was right up in front of her, towering over her. A whiff of his cologne tickled up her nose and she closed her eyes, almost moaning from the heavenly scent of it. Then she felt him lean against her and reach his arm around her. *Oh, Jesus...*

*Whatever he was going to do, she just wouldn't even stop him...*

“Here it is.”

She opened her eyes and saw a bottle opener lying in the palm of his hand. “Oh,” she said, not even looking up at him. She took it, turned around, and set her bottle on the counter, her mind completely clouded by his presence. He was standing so close to her... She tried to open the bottle, but her hands were shaking too much. She couldn't do it and she knew he was watching.

Then in one fluid move, his hands appeared and opened it for her. “Thank you,” she murmured, feeling her face turning red.

She put the bottle to her mouth and poured in a big drink-full of it, anxious to get an affect from the alcohol, hoping it would help. But the ice cold beverage packed a hell of a kick and her eyes started watering.

“Are you okay?”

“No,” she croaked, shaking and touching a finger to her eye. *She was a moron*, she groaned in her mind.

He leaned against the counter.

A quiet moment passed with him standing there next to her drinking his beer and her shaking like a leaf.

“I hear you’re studying at Scripps?”

“Yes...” she mumbled, but she couldn’t take it anymore. “Hhmm... excuse me. I just...” As steadily as she could, Bryce went across the floor and left the room.