

## ***Beautiful Lies***

***The liquid drops of tears you have shed,  
shall come again transformed to Orient Pearl  
The Odyssey—Homer***

### CHAPTER ONE

“Hey lady! Better watch out for sharks.”

In a different context, the warning might not have seemed so ominous to Liana Robeson. Spoken by a mother lecturing her adolescent surfer or a retiring CEO handing over the reins to his young and eager replacement, it might have seemed like good advice. But in the middle of a San Francisco sidewalk, when she was fast approaching the epicenter of the worst panic attack she’d experienced in months, the warning screeched alarm up and down Liana’s rigid spine.

She was surrounded by sharks, and she could feel them circling.

“You won’t forget now, will you?”

Liana batted at the hand puppet the homeless man continued to wiggle in front of her face. “No . . . No, I won’t forget.”

The puppet, a grinning dolphin, fell away. The man, dark-skinned and lean moved a little closer. He spoke over the clanging of a cable car across the busy street. “You all right, honey? You looking pale.”

“I’m. . .” The words wouldn’t form. She wasn’t all right. She was a thirty-eight year old business woman who could not walk down a sidewalk by herself. She was afraid of open spaces, afraid of the unfamiliar, terrified of all the forces in her life that she couldn’t see or control. She was a mother who just hours before had committed her son to a 737 and the great unknown. At 8:16 that morning she had watched her only child board the

plane that would deliver him into his father's arms. Now, she was paying the price.

Concern filled the man's eyes, but he waited for the cable car to depart. "Didn't mean to scare you. Flipper here, he won't hurt you."

Liana squeezed her eyelids so hard that the tentative sunrays piercing the afternoon gloom disappeared. For a moment she was in her own little world, fog sliding along overheated skin that would quickly turn icy cold if she didn't pull herself out of this. Skin icy cold, heartbeat faster than a firing squad drumroll, a million fiery needles stabbing at her extremities.

Oh, she'd been here before. She knew what she could expect.

"Honey, you had anything to eat today?"

Liana opened her eyes. The man was still there. She was dressed in Thai silk and Irish linen; his T-shirt had been old five years ago. Under his arm he held a stack of newspapers published by a coalition of the homeless. She always had her driver buy a copy, but she'd never actually read one.

"I'm fine, thanks." In an effort to take charge, she pointed to the papers. "I'll take one."

"Well, that's just fine. Flipper says thank you." He and Flipper began to shuffle through the papers, looking for the best of the stack.

Belatedly Liana wondered if she had any money. She was a vice president of one of the Bay Area's largest development companies. In the hours since she had accompanied Matthew to the airport, she had represented Pacific International Growth and Development at two meetings and picked over a seafood salad at Tarantino's with real estate magnates from four continents. As always she had been driven from one location to another with no thought of carfare or parking fees.

Then she had made the mistake of abandoning the limo to walk the final three blocks to the Robeson building. She had forced herself to take

this journey down California Street on foot, forced herself because her world was growing narrower, and she had to fight.

Or one day she would wake up and find herself unable to leave her bedroom.

She wrenched open her purse, but a search turned up nothing except a crumpled dollar bill. Officially it was more than enough, but she didn't often encounter kindness.

"Look, take this." She shoved the dollar bill at him as a bicycle whizzed by. She was not surprised to find her hand was trembling. "And this." She reached down to the lapel of her black blazer, which was embellished by a brooch from the days when she was young and foolish enough to believe she should follow her heart. The pearls were small but pristine, six of them tucked in a spray of lily of the valley forged from fourteen carat gold. The only man she'd ever loved had created the pearls. She had created the brooch.

The clasp gave way, and she took a second to lock it before she held it out. His eyes widened. "I can't take--"

"Sure you can." She reached for his hand and curled his dusty fingers over the brooch. "Take it to a good jeweler."

He was staring at the brooch in fascination when she turned away. The look on his face carried her to the door of her building and across the black and white marble floor to the brass filagree elevator screen. Inside the empty car she pulled the emergency lever and closed her eyes.

Why should she be surprised that today of all days panic had burrowed straight through to her soul? This was June, and in June her beloved son belonged body and soul to his father, Cullen Llewellyn. Right now, if all had gone well with his flight, Matthew was already at LaGuardia, wrapped in Cullen's hearty embrace.

For weeks Matthew had thought of nothing but being with his father. They were going on a camping trip to the White Mountains, then to the coast of Maine where Cullen had rented a boat and a primitive fisherman's cottage. Cullen, raised in the Australian outback on kangaroo milk and water buffalo meat, Cullen, who was part Mad Max, part Crocodile Dundee, was going to teach their son to be a man.

At fourteen Matthew was already tall enough for the role, but he still had a child's sensitivity. He was broad-shouldered and big-hearted, this man-child who was the very center of her existence. He had never by word or deed communicated that he preferred his father to her, but each June, despite an ironclad custody agreement, as she watched Matthew board his flight into Cullen's arms, she was never convinced he would return.

And why should she be convinced of anything where Cullen Llewellyn was concerned? A century ago an ancestor of Cullen's had nearly destroyed the Robeson family. Ten years ago Cullen had nearly destroyed her.

Liana sagged against the wood paneling and covered her eyes with her palms. She told herself she was sheltered securely in the building that was her second home. Matthew was gone, but of course, he would come back.

She was safe.

Eventually the comfort of the familiar began to work its magic. Her mind continued to race, but mixed with adrenaline-laced forecasts of doom was the beginning of logic. By the time she restarted the elevator and waited for it to reach the offices on the top floor, she was in control again. When the doors opened and she stepped out of the car, her eyes were wide open and her spine was as straight as the path she cut through the crowded hallway.

"Good afternoon, Miss Robeson."

She nodded to personnel as she skirted walls of opalescent white hung with calming pastel seascapes. The decor was soothing, but the atmosphere

was not. The most expensive interior design firm in the city hadn't found a way to veil the tension that permanently infused the air. The world of real estate development was always cutthroat, but nowhere more so than in this building.

"Liana?"

Frank Fong, director of marketing, stepped into her path, forcing Liana to slow her pace and swerve. Frank, oblivious to Liana's stony gaze, fell into place beside her. "Your ex called. Twice."

Liana didn't slow. She nodded to her stepbrother, Graham Wesley, Pacific International's CEO, who was having a conversation with another employee in the hallway outside his office. He returned her nod, but unlike Frank, he heeded Liana's somber expression and didn't approach her. At the desk nearest her office, her secretary Carol, a quiet young woman who was easily wounded, didn't even meet her eyes.

Liana waited until she was inside her office with the door shut before she faced Frank. "He sounded upset," Frank said. "Carol put him through to me. She was shaking in her Gucci's."

"Frank, this is a game divorced people play. Cullen calls to tell me Matthew's arrived, then he launches into a list of complaints. He doesn't like the clothes I sent along, or my arrangements for Matthew's flight home. . ."

"This sounded like more than picking a fight about blue jeans or Dockers."

Liana clipped each word. "Cullen is incapable of repressing his feelings. When we were married that made him great in bed and a complete washout the rest of the day."

Frank affected a lisp. "Well, dahling, I wouldn't have been so quick to divorce him. On the timeclock of life that puts him at least an hour ahead of the men I'm acquainted with."

Liana leaned against the edge of her desk. Frank was smiling, and reluctantly, she did, too. She and Frank, who was her assistant, were distantly related, but any resemblance was subtle. Frank, one hundred fifty pounds of honed muscle, had a ready smile that was as appealing as the streets of Chinatown, where he had grown up. Serious, tightly-wired Liana had a thin, angular body that barely topped five foot. But the shape and set of her dark eyes and the parchment tint of her skin hinted that like Frank, some of the roots of her family tree were buried in the fertile soil of the far East.

Liana glanced at her watch, a Cartier that was much less her style than the brooch she had given away. "Did Cullen say if Matthew got in on time? I heard there were storms expected over the Rockies. And he was changing planes in Denver."

"No, he insisted he'd only speak to you."

Liana didn't show her annoyance. "Well, he's not going to have the chance. Graham and I are leaving in ten minutes for an interview."

Frank turned away. "I told him you had an appointment and might not be available."

Liana looked up again. "And he said?"

"Fuck the bloody appointment." Frank managed a credible Australian accent. At the door he faced her again. "Do you think a war with your ex is a good idea? What if he really does have something he needs to discuss?"

Liana thought of all the discussions she and Cullen had engaged in during the years of their marriage and the ten years since. There had been a century to discuss in which the Robeson and Llewellyn families had murdered and betrayed each other. She and Cullen were star-crossed lovers, but there had been a time when they believed they could forge a future, despite the intrigues of the past.

They had been wrong.

Frank grew impatient. "Liana?"

"If I'm still here the next time Cullen calls, tell Carol to put him through. Otherwise he can call me at home tonight. In the meantime, see if Carol can talk to Matthew. Maybe she can find out how the flight went."

As the door clicked shut, Liana's shoulders sagged, but before she could take a deep breath someone rapped on the door again. It swung open and Graham walked in.

"I saw Frank leaving. I'm not interrupting, am I?"

She told him part of the truth. "I'm just preparing myself to make PIG look like the best thing to happen to San Francisco since sourdough bread."

She watched him wince at her nickname for the company he ran so effectively. "We could do without the acronym."

"Sure. Let's be even more direct and call ourselves Pacific International Land Swindlers."

"Maybe you ought to stay here and let me handle the interview."

Liana motioned him inside. She and her stepbrother were not friends-her father Thomas had seen to that. But Liana and Graham understood each other. Together they had lived through Thomas's abuse, his tantrums, his plots and intrigues. In the end they had survived being pitted against each other to develop a grudging mutual respect. Blond-haired Graham, who at forty was still battling baby fat, did not resemble Liana, but underneath a thousand differences they shared one similarity, a helpless connection to the despicable man who had raised them both.

Graham closed the door and stood with his back against it. "Jonas called a little while ago."

Jonas Grant was a reporter for the business section of the San Francisco Chronicle. Liana shrugged. "I sent him complete portfolios of everything we're involved in right now, at least everything we want him to know about. Does he need something more?"

“He wants you to bring the pearl.”

For a moment Liana just stared. There was only one pearl Graham could be referring to. The Pearl of Great Price. The pearl that had been shifted back and forth between her ancestors and Cullen’s since it had been plucked from the Indian Ocean floor. The pearl that was featured prominently on PIG’s glorious logo.

“You’re kidding,” she said at last.

“No. He claims the pearl will make a nice lead for his article and a good visual reference. They want a photo.”

Liana fell silent, mulling over Jonas Grant’s request. The panic, which had subsided to a distant nagging buzz, threatened to rise inside her again. She circled her desk to gaze at the city stretching toward the bay.

“I don’t like handling it, Graham.” She didn’t add the postscript. The Pearl of Great Price had a tumultuous history. For all it’s rare, flawless beauty, it had never brought good luck to anyone. She didn’t like the idea of handling the pearl today, not after Matthew had just left for the East coast. She turned. “It’s not like I can throw it in my purse with my tissues and lipstick.”

Graham nodded in sympathy. “Then don’t bring it.”

Despite his casual tone, Liana knew Graham was hoping she would take his suggestion. Then he would have one more story about her reluctance to give her all for the corporation.

She faced him. “We’ll need security, of course. Will you ask Frank to see to it?”

“If you really don’t want to handle it, I can do it for you. It’s only a pearl.”

She didn’t pretend to consider his offer. “I just want to be sure we make the appropriate arrangements to protect it.”

The door closed behind Graham, and after several seconds, she crossed the room and locked it. Then she leaned back against it and stared at the Georgia O'Keefe print hanging on the wall to the right of her desk.

For the first time since her return the room was silent except for the dull grumble of traffic beneath her window. But even with the door bolted Liana knew she was never quite alone here. This office had belonged to her father, and the ministrations of an interior designer hadn't erased Thomas Robeson's ghost. Worse yet, inside the wall lay tangible proof that some things endured forever.

She echoed Graham's words, but her tone was bitter. "It's only a pearl."

Before she had time to consider what she was about to do, she strode to the O'Keefe print, and carefully removed it, placing it face-up on the credenza before she turned back to the paneled wall.

Four tiny screws held this narrow section of paneling in place, and she removed them with the help of a screwdriver from her desk. When the paneling was lying neatly on the floor, she stared at the brass-adorned wall safe with the imposing lock.

Graham and Frank knew the pearl was here, of course, and so did the rest of the management staff. The paneling fooled no one, although it might deter a random burglar. But the safe itself was as secure as any device of its kind. Her father had demanded the best and gotten it.

"You were a son of a bitch, Thomas Robeson."

Her hands were clammy as she reached for the dial. Some days she could almost forget that the pearl was embedded deep in the heart of the room, its moonbeam glow extinguished in velvet darkness. When she remembered its presence, she told herself that hidden behind cast iron and steel, shielded by sheets of redwood and the endearing O'Keefe poppies, the pearl had no power to harm her.

But there were days when she felt the pearl watching her, speculating, laughing . . .

"Tell it to a psychiatrist, Liana." She grimaced and thrust out her hand. The dial was cool to the touch, and her hand, sweating now, slid right over it. She wiped her palm on her skirt, then reached for it again. She imagined it grew warmer as she began the long series of numbers that would open the safe. Only three people in the world had ever known the combination. Her father, herself, and the man who had calibrated the dial.

She stepped back before she set the final number, preparing herself to remove the pearl.

Her intercom buzzed and Carol's high voice came over the speaker. "Miss Robeson, Mr. Llewellyn's on line one."

She flinched, and her heart sped faster. She was suspended between the pit and the pendulum, the pearl and the man who had even more power to hurt her.

"Miss Robeson? Are you there?"

She heard Carol coughing softly. She turned the dial to the final number, then she threw open the door and abandoned the safe, marching to her desk. She punched the intercom and cleared her throat. "Has he told you how Matthew is?"

"No. I'm sorry, but he sounds furious."

Liana sagged against the desk. Clearly she had no choice but to take the call. "Thanks."

She lifted the receiver and her finger hovered over the blinking button before she punched it savagely. "Cullen, don't start with me. Just tell me how Matthew's flight went."

A silence ensued. Somewhere at LaGuardia there was an announcement over a loudspeaker. The line crackled. She'd had no patience to lose. "Damn it, Cullen. Don't play games."

A familiar voice with a broad Australian accent rumbled across the lines. "What do you mean how his flight went? What flight? Do you take me for a bloody idiot?"

There was a soft rapping at her door and Graham's voice sounded from the other side. "Liana, it's time to leave."

Liana put her free hand over her ear. "You're not making sense," she said into the receiver. "It was a simple question. Did he get there on time? Did he have rough weather. Look, if Matthew's there, just put him on the line. I'm in a hurry. You and I can talk another day."

"Get here? He bloody well didn't get here, Liana. You know he didn't because you didn't put him on the fucking plane!"

For a moment her heart seemed to stop beating. "What are you talking about?"

"Matthew wasn't on the plane! He was never on the plane! Where's my son? Either you tell me what's going on, or I'm taking the next flight to San Francisco to shake it out of you!"

Graham grew louder. "Liana, we're going to be late."

Liana pressed her palm against her ear. "You met the wrong flight, Cullen. Damn it, he's there at the airport somewhere waiting for you. I sent all the information. You told Matthew you had it."

"I met the flight. He wasn't on it. In the past hour I've met every flight coming in from Denver and two directly from San Francisco. He wasn't on any of them!"

"I took him to the airport myself. I saw him board. I saw the plane take off!"

There was silence again. The line didn't even crackle. Finally Cullen spoke. "Then somewhere between San Francisco and New York, our son went missing, Liana."

The receiver slid through her hands, and she felt the blood draining from her face. She could hear Cullen's voice from the desk, smaller, so much smaller than the man. Graham rapped on the door again and called to her.

She turned slowly and stared at the open safe, as if the Pearl Of Great Price, the flawless, hideous pearl that for a century had determined the destiny of her family and Cullen's had rolled from its velvet pedestal and kidnapped her son.

As she stared, she realized how foolish that was. Because the safe was empty.

Like the child who meant more to her than anything in the world, the Pearl of Great Price had vanished.