



The Quality
of **BLUE** ☾

Nat Burns

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by

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Other Bella Books by Nat Burns

House of Cards

Two Weeks in August

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my editor, Katherine V. Forrest, who said, very gently: “You have eighty pages in which nothing happens.” I also wish to thank my Bella family for looking after me as I diligently make things happen in my books. And thank you, readers, for giving me a reason to make things happen.

*I'd like to dedicate this book to all those who still truly believe
love and passion do exist.*

About The Author

Nat Burns grew up just outside Washington DC, in a Gaelic household, where she studied writing under the tutelage of the faerie-folk.

CHAPTER ONE

Beads. It had always been about the beads.

Ever since she was a little girl, River Tyler had been fascinated by any item that was small and round, but beads were a special pleasure. She had loved peering through the drilled center holes then rolling their glassy coolness endlessly between her tiny palms. Her bedroom had been dotted with bins of colorful beads and she would spend hours stringing and unstringing them, changing patterns and colors into never-ending variety.

Her mother, an extraordinary hippie philosopher, opined that loving the beads and continually restringing them was a useful exercise in humility. The perfect pattern always eluded River and no matter how many times she would line up a rank of beads, marbles or creek pebbles, they would roll at the first stirring, thereby proving how little real control the child had over them.

“I never should have taken you to Mardi Gras when you were little,” her mother would remind her cheerfully. “By the time we returned home, you were covered with the strands of beads thrown during the parade. Made you into a little necklace junkie.”

River knew differently; her fascination with beads had begun with Grandma Alice’s pearl necklace.

Summers spent with Grandma had been a magical time, filled with fruit ices and the sweet scent of Mary’s starched apron as River clung to her. Grandma’s New England home was very different from River’s rural Virginia home, with large, clean rooms that smelled of beeswax and grown-ups who always asked if she needed anything. There were also loud waves and sea spray, a pony named Pierre and a yard of manicured green grass that stretched off toward the ocean.

While there, the Tyler children’s special visits with Grandma occurred three times each day. There were meals at the long, cloth-draped dining table, which were delicious, but the after-meal playtimes in the parlor with Grandma had been River’s particular favorite. Perched on overstuffed sofas, River and her siblings would laugh together over silly books and make up grand stories of faraway places. Grandma Alice had quickly noted young River’s interest in the long strand of plump, ivory pearls she wore each day and it became a habit for her to press the strand into River’s hands during story time. She would tell River that she must take special care of them, and River would, lovingly caressing them until it was time for the children to go back into the care of Mary.

River had brought the memory of that enchanted, bead-comforted time with Grandma home with her each year and it had undeniably shaped her life.

Now, as her plane dipped west, River spied the line of islands extending well below mainland Florida and felt a surge of affection, remembering those pearls. She noted how much the ocean-framed keys resembled a haphazardly flung strand of beads. She tapped one finger against her chin as she professionally assessed the commercial appeal of such a necklace. It wouldn’t do, she decided. Though a lovely panorama from her high vantage point, a necklace made from the too random tones of white sand,

ice-blue water and the dull ebon of thick island greenery would never make it in the competitive jewelry market.

Leaning back, she closed her eyes and gripped the armrests with both hands as the huge aircraft veered into its final approach toward Miami International Airport. River truly hated flying. Each takeoff and landing was a small death to her nervously poised body, each disembarking a grateful ritual. She knew she needed to toughen up and get used to it but still found herself quietly humming Simon & Garfunkel songs for comfort as the landing gear lowered and the plane returned to earth.

The unfamiliar heat of southern Florida surrounded her as she stepped from the coolness of the red and white airliner onto the uninsulated jet bridge. Intense, sudden moisture sprouted on her forehead and above her lips. She blew a strand of damp, curling hair from her forehead as she strode into the huge airport terminal. It was positively frigid there by comparison and, stepping to one side, she paused to enjoy a blast of cool air from an interior vent. Stopping just then turned out to be a mistake as a large, rapidly moving body struck her from behind.

“Oh, gee, I’m sorry,” said a tall, dark figure as she held River tightly to keep her from falling. “I was blinded by the sun coming through those blasted windows and didn’t see you. Are you all right?”

Her voice was deep and mellow and an unexpected thrill raced through River upon hearing it. Surprised, she glanced up into a set of brilliant green eyes, the darkly tanned skin around them creased with worry as the woman studied her.

Regrouping herself, River straightened and adjusted the position of her carry-on bag, a self-conscious smile on her lips. “Yes, yes, I’m fine! Please...it’s okay. I didn’t even fall.”

The woman relaxed her grip on River’s arm and rose from a worried crouch, taking in a deep sigh of obvious relief. Her large white smile dazzled in the brightness of the airport. “Well, good. I’ll continue on then. You have a pleasant day.”

“You too,” River called to the retreating form. She noted how the monotone dark blue suit and an almost military bearing stretched the woman’s form into a lofty, striking figure. She carried a large brown valise with graceful ease.

“Powerful,” River muttered to herself, as she touched the arm where the woman had grasped it.

She moved in the direction of the baggage carousel and spent a frustrating twenty minutes collecting one bag. The rest of her possessions were being shipped via a moving company to her new, as yet unseen, apartment on Petronia Street. The apartment, and Petronia Street, were still a good three hours’ drive away, situated in the last of the chain of coral islands that made up the southernmost tip of Florida: Key West.