

endless harbor (book 8)

always,

just

us

fiona grace

ALWAYS, JUST US

(Endless harbor—BOOK 8)

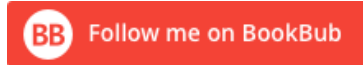
FIONA GRACE

Fiona Grace

Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY series, comprising seven books; of the DUBIOUS WITCH COZY MYSTERY series, comprising three books; of the BEACHFRONT BAKERY COZY MYSTERY series, comprising six books; of the CATS AND DOGS COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books; of the ELIZA MONTAGU COZY MYSTERY series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the ENDLESS HARBOR ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the INN AT DUNE ISLAND ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting); of the INN BY THE SEA ROMANTIC COMEDY series, comprising five books (and counting); and of the MAID AND THE MANSION COZY MYSTERY series, comprising five books (and counting).

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

Twinkling fairy lights draped along the walls and ceilings and created a glowing, magical atmosphere as New Year's Eve descended at the Leaside Bed and Breakfast. In the dining room at the attached Seaside Café, lively music from a local band had everyone tapping their feet, and the joyful laughter of friends and family filled the air.

Ariel Hawthorne—now Ariel Clemens—stood beside her new husband, Miles, who looked dashing in a dark suit that complemented his eyes. Their recent wedding was still a fresh and cherished memory (despite a little prewedding drama), and the occasional guest offered congratulations as they drifted past the newlyweds. Ariel's daughter, Katie, mingled among the crowd, excited to be included in such a grown-up affair as an official New Year's Eve party.

Darcy, the kind-hearted general manager of Leaside, was engaged in a spirited conversation with Oliver, Ariel's globetrotting brother. They discussed the delicious appetizers that Ariel had prepared, and Ariel surveyed the spread with a bit of a blush rising to her cheeks—she'd gone overboard on the food for the party. But no one was complaining.

Ariel's gaze drifted past the appetizer table to where her best friend, Jill, stood, and Ariel didn't miss that it was the exact spot that Darcy's gaze kept wandering. She sidled over to the tattooed sous chef and manager, and teased playfully, “The way you're staring makes me think Jill is more than just

a wedding date.” She gave him a knowing wink. He blushed, and it was incongruous with his rock-star style.

Nearby, Charlie, Ariel’s sister, chatted with a few of Leaside’s guests. She looked over and smiled at Ariel, and Ariel smiled back. Her heart swelled with love and appreciation for the extraordinary people who had become such an integral part of her life in Endless Harbor. She caught Miles’s eye, and he came to stand beside her, their hands intertwining.

“Looks like our little family is growing,” Miles murmured, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Indeed, it is,” Ariel agreed, her gaze lingering on Katie as she laughed with a group of friends from school. “I couldn’t be happier.”

Ariel felt the butterflies fluttering in her stomach as she glanced around the room, absorbing the sheer joy and laughter that filled the air. Though Christmas was passed, the chilly Maine winter was still at their doors—but the warmth of the gathered party pushed away any thought of the blustery Miane cold outside.

“Everyone!” Ariel called out, raising her champagne glass and capturing their attention. “I just wanted to say thank you for being here tonight, celebrating not only the new year but also our recent wedding. Your presence means the world to us.”

She paused, taking a moment to let the emotion settle before continuing. “As most of you know, we’re about to embark on our honeymoon adventure to Saint Celadon Island.

We're so excited! I think my resolution for this new year is to have a smooth start and a wonderful honeymoon with my amazing husband."

"Here's to love and adventures!" Charlie chimed in, raising her glass in agreement.

"Love and adventures!" the others echoed, clinking their glasses together.

The atmosphere in the room grew more electric as midnight approached. The anticipation bubbled like the champagne, and everyone gathered around the television, ready to join the countdown.

"Are you all set for the big moment?" Oliver asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he handed Ariel and Miles each a party horn.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Ariel replied, smiling as she took the horn from him.

"Ten, nine, eight..." the countdown began, and everyone joined in, their voices united in a chorus of excitement.

"Three, two, one... Happy New Year!" they shouted, and the room exploded into cheers and laughter. Party horns sounded, confetti filled the air, and everyone broke into spontaneous embraces, wishing one another happiness and prosperity in the year ahead. The clock struck midnight, signaling the start of the new year.

"Happy New Year, my love," whispered Miles, his voice soft and tender against her ear. His eyes held a depth of

emotion that made Ariel's heart swell, a soulful connection she hadn't imagined possible just a few years ago.

"Happy New Year, my darling," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck. They shared a lingering kiss, their lips brushing before pressing together in a sweet moment of pure bliss. It was as if the rest of the world had faded away, leaving only the two of them to share this intimate expression of their love.

"Here's to a year filled with all our dreams coming true," Miles murmured against her lips, his breath warm and tinged with the taste of champagne.

Ariel smiled, her heart overflowing with the love and excitement that swirled around them. "I can't imagine spending it with anyone else," she confessed, her fingers brushing through his tousled hair. "You've made me happier than I ever thought possible."

"Likewise, Ariel," he responded, his eyes shining with affection. "Every day since we met has been a gift, and I'm grateful for each and every one of them."

As they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms amidst the celebrations, Ariel felt a sense of completeness she hadn't known was missing from her life. With Miles by her side, the promise of a bright future lay ahead of them, and she couldn't wait to see what the new year would bring.

Gradually, the festive atmosphere began to wind down. The music softened, and the twinkling fairy lights cast a gentle glow over the emptying room.

“We’re so happy for you, dear,” Mildred, the quilt shop owner said as she and her husband, Clyde, gave farewell hugs.

“Happy New Year!” Ariel called over Mildred’s shoulder to the Greens, the winery owners from the next county over.

“We’ll see you in a few weeks!” Mrs. Green shouted back, smiling.

As the last of the guests filtered out into the crisp night air, Ariel and Miles stood together in the now-quiet restaurant. The echoes of laughter and well-wishes still seemed to hang in the air.

“Tonight was perfect,” Ariel murmured, her hand finding its way into Miles’s as they gazed at the remnants of their New Year’s celebration.

“It truly was,” he agreed, his eyes reflecting the happiness that filled her heart. She felt Miles’s hand envelop hers, warm and reassuring, as they lingered together.

“Can you believe we’re leaving for our honeymoon tomorrow?” Ariel asked, her eyes shining with excitement. “It feels so surreal.”

Miles smiled, his gaze never leaving her face. “It’s going to be amazing, just like tonight was.”

Behind them, just in the hallway between the main house and the Seaside Café, Ariel heard low laughter.

“I think some of our partygoers are still going,” Miles said, smiling.

“Katie, Darcy, Oliver,” she called out, catching their attention as she turned to call down the hallway. “Can I talk to all of you for a moment?”

The three emerged from the hall, Katie especially looking sheepish—but still pleased to be included, Ariel could tell by her smile. They gathered around, their faces open and eager.

“First of all, thank you all for your help tonight,” Ariel began, her voice filled with gratitude. “You’ve truly made this night one to remember.”

“Aw, it was nothing,” Katie said, waving off the praise with a bashful smile.

“Really, though,” Ariel continued, her heart swelling with affection. “And I want you to know how much we trust you to take care of Leaside while we’re away.”

Darcy nodded solemnly. “Don’t worry, Ariel. We’ve got everything under control.”

“Exactly,” Oliver chimed in. “We’ll make sure everything runs smoothly, and we’ll keep you updated if anything comes up. Your only job is to have a great honeymoon.”

“Thank you,” Ariel said again, misting up at their assurances. “We wouldn’t be able to enjoy our time away without knowing that you’re here, handling things.”

“Go and have the time of your lives, Mom,” Katie urged, her eyes sparkling with sincerity. “We’ll be here when you get back, ready to hear all about it. And ready for all the souvenir gifts you’ll be bringing.”

Ariel laughed and pulled her daughter in for a long hug. When they broke apart, the group began to gather the leftover party decorations, working side by side in comfortable silence. As they did so, Ariel's thoughts turned to the upcoming trip and the plans they had made to ensure Leaside B&B would be well taken care of in their absence. She had arranged and rearranged two tables' worth of chairs before she realized that she was letting her nerves about the trip overwhelm her excitement about it.

Once the dining room was set to rights again, Oliver, Darcy, and Katie slipped away for the night. Darcy reached behind the bar and switched on the music system right before he faded down the hallway. As a slow, romantic tune fill the room, Ariel glanced over at Miles with a playful smile.

“Care for one last dance before we call it a night?”

“Nothing would please me more,” he replied, taking her hand and leading her through the empty tables to an open spot near the window.

The music slowed, and they wrapped their arms around each other, swaying gently to the rhythm. The warmth of his embrace sent a thrill through her, and she couldn't help but think of all the dances they would share in the years to come. They moved as if they were the only two people in the world, everything else fading into a distant murmur.

“Are you ready for our big adventure?” Miles whispered, his breath tickling her ear.

“More than ready,” Ariel murmured, her heart swelling with anticipation. “I can't wait to see the island.”

“Neither can I,” he agreed, pulling her closer as they danced, the melody enveloping them like a cocoon.

Ariel closed her eyes, letting the music guide her movements, her thoughts drifting to their upcoming honeymoon. She imagined the sun-drenched beaches they would stroll along, the laughter-filled evenings they would spend exploring new cities, and the quiet moments they would share, just the two of them, wrapped in each other’s love.

“Promise me one thing,” Miles said softly, interrupting her reverie.

“Anything,” she replied without hesitation.

“Promise me that we’ll always make time for moments like these,” he said, his voice filled with emotion. “No matter how busy life gets or where it takes us, let’s never forget to slow down and appreciate the love we share.”

Ariel gazed into his eyes, seeing the depths of his commitment, and felt her own strength. They had faced so many hardships on their way to happily-ever-after; his, hers, and theirs. It felt good to be here, finally.

“I promise, my love,” she whispered. “Our love is worth every moment we can steal away, and I wouldn’t want to share them with anyone else.””

As the final notes of the song faded and the dance came to an end, Ariel and Miles held each other close, their hearts beating as one. For now, all that mattered was the connection between them.

“Neither would I,” he replied, pressing a gentle kiss to her hair. “Wherever we go, whatever we do, we’ll always have each other.”

And as they stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms and lost in the promise of the new year, Ariel and Miles knew that they were ready to embark on their honeymoon adventure, hand in hand, hearts aflame with hope and love.

There was just that one remaining problem that Ariel kept trying to push from her mind—their flight left in the morning, and she was deathly afraid to fly.

CHAPTER TWO

The Endless Harbor Pharmacy, situated in the heart of the small coastal town, was a hive of activity despite it being New Year's Day. Locals bustled through the narrow aisles, exchanging warm greetings and well-wishes for the year ahead as they stocked up on essentials to recover from the previous night's festivities. The scent of peppermint and cinnamon filled the air, remnants that clung to the wooden shelves and antique glass counters. It was one of the only shops open today in town, and Ariel was grateful.

She hesitated at the entrance, taking a deep breath as she braced herself for the task ahead. Today wasn't about friendly conversation or reminiscing on holiday memories; it was about finding the one thing that might save her from herself. The mere thought of flying made Ariel's heart pound erratically in her chest, her palms grow clammy, and her breathing quicken. Despite her many years of traveling the world and working in top kitchens, the fear of being suspended thousands of feet above the ground was a constant, unrelenting phobia.

"Come on, Ariel," she whispered under her breath, trying to steady her nerves. "You can do this. It's just one flight."

But it wasn't just any flight. It was the first leg of her honeymoon with Miles, who had stolen her heart and shown her that love could be found even in the quietest corners of the earth. Overcoming her fear was more than just a personal

battle; it would prove her commitment to Miles and their future together.

As she stepped into the crowded pharmacy, Ariel's mind raced with thoughts of turbulence, crashing planes, and worst-case scenarios that seemed too gruesome to imagine. Her stomach churned with anxiety, threatening to spill its contents onto the worn floorboards beneath her feet.

"Focus, Ariel," she scolded herself, forcing her attention onto the shelves of brightly colored bottles and boxes. "Find the sedative, take control."

As she looked around, she spotted familiar faces of the locals, chatting animatedly about their New Year's Eve celebrations and upcoming resolutions. The sight brought an odd mix of comfort and unease—she was home, yet her heart felt heavy with the fear of flying that plagued her thoughts.

"Hello, Ariel!" called the friendly pharmacist from behind the counter, her eyes crinkling in recognition. "It's been a while since I've seen you around here. How can I help you today?"

"Hi, Sharon," Ariel replied, trying to sound cheerful despite the tightness gripping her chest. "I, uh, need something to help me relax for an upcoming flight."

Memories of her last disastrous flight played like a horror movie in her mind, making her palms sweat and her stomach churn. It had been years ago, in her corporate-hustle days, but one bad storm and emergency landing later, and she had gained a fear of flying. She knew that if she didn't find something effective, this trip would be unbearable – not just

for her, but for Miles as well. She felt awful, having kept it from him. But she'd *thought* it wouldn't be a big deal...

“Of course,” Sharon said warmly, nodding her understanding. “Traveling can be quite stressful, even for the most seasoned adventurers.” She glanced at Ariel knowingly, as if acknowledging the duality of her prestigious career and personal fears.

“Let's see what we have that might work for you.” Sharon led Ariel to a section of the store dedicated to sleep aids and anxiety relief, her gentle voice providing a soothing complement to the symphony of rustling bags and low conversation around them.

Ariel's fingers trembled slightly as she scanned the shelves, her mind racing with the weight of her impending journey. “What about this one?” Ariel asked Sharon, holding up a green box with a serene beach scene on its front. “It says it's ‘non-habit forming,’ but I'm worried about taking something for the first time right before such an important trip.”

Sharon peered at the box through her reading glasses, nodding thoughtfully. “It's a popular choice for many people, but every person's body is different,” she said gently. “It might work wonders for you, or it might not be quite enough. It's difficult to say without trying.”

Ariel hesitated, biting her lip as she weighed the risks and benefits of each option. She felt as though she teetered on the edge of a precipice, any decision potentially leading to either relief or further distress. There was the added pressure of how

close their flight time was—she had to get back to Leaside, and fast. Her thoughts swirled.

“Maybe I should try something more natural,” she suggested, reaching for a bottle of herbal supplements. “I’ve heard good things about valerian root and chamomile.”

“Those can be helpful for some people,” Sharon agreed, her voice patient and soothing. “Just keep in mind that they might not be as potent as some of the other options here.”

Ariel’s fingers traced over the embossed leaves on the herbal supplement’s label, uncertain. She longed for a clear answer, a perfect solution that would carry her through the flight without fear. But she knew that life rarely offered such guarantees.

“Sharon, I just don’t know what to do,” Ariel admitted, her voice cracking with emotion. “I want to not be a total hot mess on my flight, but every option here feels like a gamble. What if I make the wrong choice?”

“Darling,” Sharon said softly, gripping Ariel’s hand with a firm yet tender touch, “you’re overthinking it. I think anything that helps you feel you have your fear more in hand would help.”

Ariel took a deep, steady breath, feeling the weight of Sharon’s words sink in. Ariel’s fingertips grazed the edge of a small, unassuming box on the bottom shelf. It held a sedative that claimed to be powerful enough to ease her anxiety but gentle enough to cause minimal side effects. She hesitated for a moment

“Sharon,” Ariel said, her voice steady and determined, “I think I’ve found the one I want to try.”

The pharmacist looked at the box in Ariel’s hand and nodded approvingly. “Ah, yes, that’s a good choice. It’s strong enough to help you relax but mild enough not to interfere too much with your experience. Just remember to follow the instructions closely.”

“Thank you,” Ariel replied earnestly, her eyes glistening with gratitude. She approached the counter, placing the box gently beside the register.

As Sharon rang up the purchase, Ariel felt a glimmer of optimism. “You’re a lifesaver, Sharon.”

“Anything for one of our own,” the pharmacist replied warmly, handing Ariel the small paper bag containing her purchase “Safe travels, Ariel. And congratulations on your wedding.”

“Thanks,” Ariel said softly, clutching the bag tightly.

As she left the pharmacy and stepped back into the crisp Maine air, Ariel took a deep breath, willing herself to embrace the challenge ahead. The quaint coastal town of Endless Harbor was blanketed in a thin layer of snow, giving it an ethereal charm. Winter in Maine was starkly beautiful—the skeletal trees adorned with glittering icicles, the ocean waves capped with white foam, crashing against the shore with an icy ferocity.

The flight wouldn’t be easy, but she knew that every mile traveled would bring her closer to a tropical island and time

alone with the man she loved. Ariel could feel her grip on the paper bag relax slightly. The streets of her hometown, covered with a mix of salt and sand, crunched beneath her feet. The air smelled of pine, saltwater, and a hint of wood smoke emanating from chimneys dotting the picturesque landscape.

Endless Harbor was a town of stories, where old sea captains' houses stood tall and proud with their weathered sidings, telling tales of the harsh Maine winters they'd endured. Seafood restaurants and small boutique shops lined the harbor, most of them closed for the season, their windows frost-kissed. The occasional boat could still be seen in the harbor, rocking gently in the waves, their masts bare and waiting for spring.

Ariel allowed her surroundings to ground her further. The rustle of leaves beneath her feet, the distant chime of the church bell downtown, even the chatter of two elderly women catching up outside the bakery—all of these reminded her of where she came from, of the strong woman she had become despite her fears.

As she turned the corner onto the street where she'd parked, a soft gust of wind carried the scent of freshly baked bread and saltwater taffy from a local candy shop. Ariel spotted a group of neighborhood children playing outside, their cheeks rosy from the cold. They were making snow angels and throwing snowballs in a front yard, their breaths visible in the chilly air.

“Hey, Mrs. Hawthorne!” called out one of the children, waving excitedly at her.

“Hello there, Tommy!” Ariel replied, her voice warm and genuine. “How’s your day been?”

“Great! Where are you going?”

“Oh, I’m headed home to leave for my honeymoon, sweetie,” Ariel said, touched by the boy’s enthusiasm. “I’m pretty excited.”

“Will you be flying on an airplane for your honeymoon?” another child chimed in.

“Indeed, we will,” Ariel answered.

“Wow, that’s so cool! I’ve never been on a plane before,” Tommy exclaimed, his eyes wide with wonder.

“Maybe one day you will,” Ariel said with a smile, before continuing her walk.

Every few steps, Ariel passed historic houses still adorned with wreaths of holly and evergreen from Christmas. Their porches were lit by lanterns that flickered against the gray light. As she approached her car, she paused for a moment, looking out at the vast ocean. Its vastness seemed even more profound against the backdrop of a winter sky. Ariel imagined returning from her tropical honeymoon with Miles, filled with new memories and deeper connections, ready to begin the next chapter of her life here in this beautiful coastal town.

“All right, Ariel,” she murmured, taking a deep breath and opening the driver’s side door, “you’re going to have the most incredible trip.” With that manifestation out in the universe, Ariel climbed in and closed the car door beside her, ready to face the big, scary sky.

CHAPTER THREE

“Katie, Darcy, Oliver, can you come here for a moment?” Ariel called out, her voice steady but her hands betraying her anxiety as they continued to work the dough in front of her.

The kitchen of Leaside was a masterpiece of restoration, a perfect blend of Victorian-era elegance and modern functionality. High ceilings crowned with intricate moldings gave the room an airy feel, while the deep mahogany floorboards, worn smooth by years of foot traffic, added a touch of historical warmth. On one wall, a tall window framed in ornate woodwork let in streams of light, casting delicate patterns on the marble countertops below. Stained glass panels, reminiscent of the era, added splashes of vibrant colors when caught in the sun’s rays.

Ariel stood at the center of this bustling space, surrounded by gleaming copper pots and pans that hung from an overhead rack, reflecting the ambient light like jewels. The substantial wooden island in the middle of the room was scarred from years of culinary adventures, bearing witness to countless meals prepared and secrets shared.

An original brick hearth, now housing a modern range, provided the perfect fusion of old-world charm and contemporary convenience. Above it, an ornate wooden mantelpiece displayed an array of ceramic pots filled with a variety of herbs, their fragrant aroma mingling with the scents of the kitchen.

Her senses were alive with the aroma of freshly baked pastries and the sound of sizzling pans. The warmth from the oven, a modern appliance set within a Victorian-style alcove, brushed against her cheeks as she expertly kneaded dough for bread that wasn't even on the menu, a result of her nervous energy about leaving the B&B soon. They had only about three hours until their flight.

Tucked into a corner stood a vintage icebox, its polished silver handles and hinges gleaming, now retrofitted to serve as a modern refrigerator. Period-appropriate light fixtures dangled from the ceiling, casting a soft glow over the room, while the walls, painted in a muted sage green, were adorned with framed recipes and photos from the past, evoking memories of a bygone era.

As the heart of Leaside, the kitchen bore silent testimony to the love and care Ariel and her team—her family—poured into their work, ensuring that every guest left with memories of delicious meals and a warm, inviting ambiance. One by one, her family filed into the kitchen, each face bearing an expression of curiosity.

“All right, team,” Ariel began, wiping her flour-covered hands on her apron. “As you all know, Miles and I are going to be away for our honeymoon, and I need to make sure everyone is prepared to handle things here.”

She paused, taking a deep breath and glancing around the kitchen. This was her sanctuary, the place where she had poured her heart and soul into creating culinary masterpieces.

Leaving it in someone else's hands, even if for a short time, was difficult.

“Katie, reservations are the lifeblood of this place. We need to ensure that every guest feels welcomed and taken care of. Double-check the bookings for the next few weeks and make sure everything runs smoothly.”

“Of course, Mom. We've been through this several times. Don't worry, we've got this,” Katie reassured her, her eyes shining with amusement.

Ariel turned her attention to Darcy. “Darcy, you know how important it is to maintain the quality of our meals. I trust you to keep the high standards we've set, all right?”

“Absolutely, Chef,” Darcy responded with a confident nod, his hand running through his shaggy hair, the tattoos that adorned his forearm on full display. “You know that we don't...need any bread, right?” He pointed to her dough, which she had set aside to rise.

“Oliver,” Ariel continued, ignoring Darcy's smirk, “I'm counting on you to handle any maintenance issues that might come up and keep an eye on the overall operations. I know you're more than capable.”

“Will do, Ariel. *Enjoy* your honeymoon,” her brother said, a warm smile spreading across his face.

Ariel's heart swelled with gratitude for her team. She knew they were capable, but the thought of leaving her beloved B&B, even temporarily, was enough to make her stomach

churn with anxiety. Still, she had to trust them, just as she trusted herself and Miles to build a future together.

“Remember,” she added, a note of urgency creeping into her voice, “our guests expect the best. We don’t just serve food and offer rooms here; we create memories that last a lifetime.”

A flicker of a smile crossed Darcy’s face as he absorbed her words. “We’ll make you proud.”

“Thank you, Darcy,” Ariel replied, the knot of anxiety in her chest loosening ever so slightly. She took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scents of the kitchen and savoring the warmth that enveloped her like a comforting embrace. It was time to let go and trust the people she’d trained and nurtured, and in doing so, allow herself the chance to find happiness outside these walls. Ariel squared her shoulders and prepared to walk out of the kitchen. Her suitcase was upstairs, where Miles had been packing a few last-minute items.

Just as she was about to take her first step, a guest burst into the kitchen, his face flushed with frustration.

“Excuse me!” he exclaimed, his voice tinged with annoyance. “I hate to interrupt, but there’s no towels in our room. Who do I need to speak to?”

Ariel’s heart clenched at the unexpected intrusion, her worry returning anew. The delicate balance she had been trying to maintain between her responsibilities as a hostess, chef, and soon-to-be honeymooner seemed to be tipping.

“Please accept my apologies,” she said with a strained smile. “I’ll make sure to have fresh towels sent up to your

room right away.”

“Thank you,” the guest muttered, still clearly disgruntled, but mollified by her quick response.

“Katie, would you mind handling that?” Ariel asked, her eyes pleading for her daughter to take charge of the situation.

“Of course, Mom,” Katie replied, springing into action despite her own visible nerves about managing the B&B during her mother’s absence.

“All right, I appreciate it,” the guest conceded, his demeanor visibly relaxing. As he left the kitchen, Ariel felt her own shoulders sag with relief.

The door swung open once more, admitting a gust of cool Maine air and revealing Miles, his hands tucked casually into the pockets of his worn jeans. A gentle smile tugged at the corners of his lips, his eyes radiating reassurance.

“Ready to go?” he asked, stepping closer and lightly brushing his fingers against her elbow. His touch was like a balm; it soothed her nerves and reminded her of the reason they had planned this honeymoon in the first place.

“Almost,” Ariel murmured, her heartbeat quickening at the thought of their impending flight. She glanced around the bustling kitchen one last time, taking in the sound of the fridge humming and the sight of Darcy expertly plating a beautiful dish. This was her dream come to life, and leaving it behind, even for a short time, was proving more difficult than she had anticipated.

“Hey,” Miles said gently, drawing her attention back to him. “We do need to leave soon if we want to catch our flight.”

Ariel nodded, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat. “I know.” She took one last look at her beloved kitchen, etching its warmth and familiarity into her memory before turning to face Miles.

“Let’s go.”

He grinned at her. “Keeping the apron for the flight?”

Ariel looked down, and then smiled sheepishly. She untied her apron, handed it to Darcy, and took Miles’s outstretched hand.

“I have the bags loaded in the truck,” he said.

After she grabbed her coat and purse, they stepped out into the crisp air together, leaving behind the safety of Leaside in pursuit of new memories, new adventures. As soon as Ariel slid into the passenger seat of Miles’s truck, her mind began racing with thoughts of the potential problems that might arise in their absence. She imagined overflowing sinks, disgruntled guests, and reservation mix-ups, each scenario more stressful than the last. Her fingers drummed restlessly against her thighs, her gaze fixed on the passing scenery as the car picked up speed.

“Remember,” Miles said, reaching over to give her hand a reassuring squeeze, “they can handle it. Trust them.”

Ariel nodded, trying to quell the rising tide of anxiety within her. She knew he was right; she had a strong, capable

team. But the thought of leaving her dream in the hands of others, even those she trusted deeply, was difficult to bear.

“Still,” she murmured, unable to keep the worry from creeping into her voice, “so much could go wrong...”

“Focus on us,” Miles suggested gently, his thumb tracing soothing circles over her knuckles. “This honeymoon is a chance for us to celebrate our love, and they want that for us as much as we do. Honey, you used to manage a multi-million-dollar company with lower stress levels than you’re putting on yourself right now. And you have people who love you watching the place. Leaside will be fine.”

Ariel looked into his kind eyes, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. She knew he was right; they had both worked so hard, and their love story was nothing short of a small-town fairy tale. They deserved to celebrate their union and create memories together, far from the daily responsibilities that occupied their minds. As Ariel listened to the wisdom in his words, she realized that she owed it not only to herself and Miles but also to Oliver, Darcy, and Katie to trust their abilities and let go of her concerns. They were a family, and they would weather whatever challenges came their way.

“I’m sorry, Miles. I’ll try not to worry about everything back home.”

“Believe me, I understand,” he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “But trust in Katie, Darcy, and Oliver.”

“All right,” she whispered, allowing herself to lean back against the seat, feeling the weight of her worries begin to lift

as the car carried them toward the airport and the adventure that awaited them.

The sun cast warm hues of orange and pink across the sky, reflecting on the calm waters of Endless Harbor. Ariel sat in the passenger seat, her gaze momentarily captured by the beauty outside the window. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and focused on the excitement of the trip ahead. Images of romantic walks on the beach, candlelit dinners beneath the stars, and lazy mornings spent in each other's arms danced through her mind. She could almost feel the soft, tropical sand, so different from the beach here, between her toes and taste the salt in the air as she imagined exploring new destinations with Miles by her side.

The car continued down the winding coastal road, the sun setting behind them as they left their beloved town behind, if only for a little while. Ariel leaned her head against Miles's shoulder, feeling content and ready to embrace the joys of their honeymoon.

“Almost there,” he murmured, breaking the comfortable silence that had enveloped them during the latter part of the drive.

Ariel glanced at the passing scenery, the bare trees and picturesque houses giving way to the sprawling expanse of the airport. Her heart fluttered nervously as she watched families and couples rushing in and out of the terminal, luggage in tow.

“Feeling better?” Miles asked, his eyes flicking to her for a moment before returning to the road.

“Somewhat,” she admitted, her fingers twisting in her lap. Now, her worries shifted—to the flight ahead.

“Well,” Miles added with a smile, “think of all the fun we’ll have exploring new places together, trying out local cuisine, and simply enjoying each other’s company. Now, let’s get checked in and start this adventure of ours.”

As the truck came to a stop outside the bustling terminal, Ariel took one last deep breath, steeling herself for the whirlwind of excitement that awaited them—and mentally inventorying where she’d put the sedatives in her purse. The parking attendant took Miles’s keys and unloaded their bags, and soon they were standing on the curb. The screeching of wheels on the pavement and slamming trunks echoed in Ariel’s ears as she clutched her bags, taking in the frenzy of the airport before her, visible through the big glass doors. Her heart pounded with a mix of trepidation and anticipation, the weight of her fear of flying now pressing down on her.

“Are you ready?” Miles asked, his voice steady amidst the chaos. He took their luggage, arranging it neatly on a trolley with practiced ease.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Ariel murmured, her eyes scanning the crowd of travelers. She marveled at the ease with which he navigated the bustling terminal, his calm presence soothing her frayed nerves.

“First order of business: checking in our bags.” Miles led her towards the check-in counter, his hand resting reassuringly on the small of her back. The warmth from his touch anchored her, reminding her that they were in this together.

“Passports and boarding passes, please,” requested the airline attendant, her smile tight but professional.

“Of course,” Miles replied, rummaging through his carry-on bag to produce the necessary documents. As he handed them over, Ariel found herself admiring his composure and control – traits she had come to rely on and cherish.

“Thanks for navigating all of this,” Ariel whispered as they waited for their bags to be tagged and processed. “Airports always make me feel so...lost.”

And terrified, she thought.

Miles smiled at her, his thumb brushing against her knuckles as he held her hand. “It’s my pleasure, Ariel. We’re a team, remember?”

With the check-in process complete, Miles guided Ariel through the security line, offering words of encouragement when her nerves threatened to overwhelm her once more. She felt grateful for the stability he provided, a solid foundation amidst the whirlwind of emotions churning within her.

“Deep breaths, love,” he reminded her as they collected their belongings and made their way to the gate. “In a few hours, we’ll be in paradise.”

Ariel nodded, allowing herself to envision the sun-soaked beaches and turquoise waters that awaited them. As the boarding call echoed through the terminal, Ariel squeezed Miles’ hand, grateful for the love and strength that bound them together.

Now she just had to believe that it was stronger than the churning, rising fear in the pit of her stomach.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’ve been looking forward to this since the moment I proposed to you, Ariel.”

If only Ariel felt the same. Oh, it wasn’t that she didn’t want to travel with Miles—but getting in that tour bus in the sky was never on her list of fun things to do.

The cacophony of the airport swirled around Ariel and Miles as they walked hand in hand, their suitcases on wheels trailing behind them like loyal pets. Excitement tinged with nervous energy hummed through the air as travelers rushed past them, a blur of faces and voices that seemed to echo Ariel’s own racing heartbeat. Miles squeezed her hand reassuringly, his steady presence grounding her amidst the chaos.

Despite his excitement, the thought of boarding the plane sent an icy shiver down Ariel’s spine. She had always considered herself adventurous, having left Endless Harbor as a young woman to train as a chef in Paris, but flying was the one thing she could never truly conquer. Her fear of being trapped in a metal tube thousands of feet above the ground made her stomach churn, and she felt a cold sweat break out over her skin.

“Are you all right, darling?” Miles asked, concern etched on his handsome face as he noticed Ariel’s sudden pallor.

Ariel forced a smile, trying to keep the tremors in her voice at bay. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just... you know how I am about flying.”

“What about flying?” Miles replied gently, his thumb tracing soothing circles on her hand.

Ariel swallowed, hard, and admitted in a rush, “I’m terrified to fly. I’m so sorry I haven’t told you. I thought you would think it silly. I mean, maybe it is—but, Miles, I’m *petrified*.”

He frowned slightly. “I—Ariel, I would never laugh at your fears! But remember, it’s only a few hours, and then we’ll be on the beautiful coast of a tropical island, basking in the sun and enjoying each other’s company. And I’ll be right beside you.”

As much as Ariel longed to believe him, the persistent knot of anxiety in her chest refused to loosen. She glanced around the bustling airport, searching for any distraction from her fear and upcoming flight.

“Maybe I should take a sedative,” Ariel murmured to herself, her gaze fixated on the departure board as if seeking solace in the ever-changing list of flights.

“You have some?” Miles asked, his brows rising.

“I picked one up at the pharmacy this morning. Something totally over the counter. Safe, I swear.”

“Okay. If you need to, go for it. I’ll be sure you’re okay.” He put an arm around her.

Ariel allowed herself to melt into his arms, drawing strength from the familiar scent of him washing over her. She tried her best to imagine their destination, far away from the relentless roar of the engines and the suffocating grip of her fear. When they reached their gate, they took seats, and Ariel rummaged in her purse for the sedative. She shook loose a single pill out and stared at it in her trembling hand, wondering if this tiny sedative was truly capable of subduing her mounting anxiety. The airport's cacophony of sounds and motion seemed to amplify her fear, drowning her senses with a wave of panic that threatened to consume her completely.

“Have you seen these things help?” she asked Miles, her voice barely audible over the din of chattering passengers and rolling luggage.

Miles nodded reassuringly, his gentle eyes filled with understanding. He took Ariel's hand and placed the pill in her palm. “I had a cousin who swore by them for flying. It'll take the edge off your nerves, sweetheart,” he said softly. “And once we're in the air, everything will be fine.”

Ariel glanced around one more time, as if trying to find an alternative solution to her predicament. But with no other options in sight, she swallowed the sedative and washed it down with a sip of water from her reusable water bottle.

“Okay,” she whispered, feeling strangely vulnerable and exposed. “I trust you.”

“Good,” Miles replied, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulders and pulling her close to his side. “Just focus on breathing.”

As Ariel listened to his soothing words, she could already feel the sedative beginning to work its magic. The rushing of her panicked thoughts began to slow to a trickle, replaced by a haze of calmness. She leaned against Miles, allowing herself to be enveloped in the safety of his embrace.

“See?” he murmured into her hair. “Everything’s going to be just fine. We’ll get through this flight together, and then you’ll wake up in a beautiful little town by the sea. A new one.”

A faint smile found its way onto Ariel’s lips as the calm continued to spread through her body. For the first time since arriving at the airport, she felt a glimmer of hope that she might actually be able to endure this flight and finally reach their honeymoon destination.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice thick with gratitude. “I love you.”

Miles pressed a tender kiss to her forehead, his love for her shining in his eyes. “I love you too, my beautiful bride. And I promise, everything will be worth it once we’re in the air and on our way to our dream vacation.”

Just as Ariel was beginning to feel a sense of peace, the airport intercom crackled to life. “Attention all passengers: We regret to announce that Flight 1827 to Saint Celadon has been delayed due to unforeseen circumstances. Please relocate to Gate C and await further instructions. We apologize for any inconvenience and will update you with further information shortly.”

A heavy sigh escaped from Ariel's lips, her frustration bubbling up once more. The sedative had begun to take effect, but this new development threatened to undo everything it and Miles had worked so hard to help her overcome. "I can't believe this," she muttered, leaning against him for support.

"Hey, it's okay," Miles reassured her gently, his arm wrapping around her waist as they stood. "We'll get there eventually."

Ariel nodded. The sedative continued its course through her system, and her movements grew slower and more deliberate, her thoughts hazy and foggy. She placed a hand on her forehead, trying to clear her head, but the effort was futile. Her grip loosened on her suitcase.

"Is everything okay?" Miles asked, concern lacing his voice as he noticed the change in her demeanor.

"Y-yeah," Ariel stammered, forcing a weak smile. "Just feeling a bit... fuzzy."

Miles tightened his grip on her waist, steadying her as they stood among the now restless crowd of travelers moving to the new gate. "Remember what I said earlier?" he asked softly. "Everything will be worth it once we're in the air."

"Right," Ariel murmured, trying to focus on his words despite the sedative clouding her mind. "Our dream vacation..." Her voice trailed off, her eyes half-closed as she swayed slightly in place.

"Stay with me, Ariel," Miles urged, his hands cupping her face as he tried to keep her grounded. "Just breathe, and try to

focus on walking.”

“Saint Celadon...” Ariel echoed dreamily, her thoughts drifting as the sedative continued its relentless march through her body.

“Look at me,” Miles instructed, his voice soft but firm. “Stay present, Ariel. You can do this.”

Ariel summoned what little strength she had left to focus on his gaze, finding solace in its warmth. “I’m trying,” she whispered, her words slurred and slow.

“Good,” he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Because if you pass out, I’ll have to carry you through this airport singing that one song that the prince sings in that princess movie...you know the one?”

“Okay,” she agreed, her voice barely audible. “My prince...” And as the chaos of the airport whirled around them, Ariel clung to Miles, determined to keep her head above the foggy haze that threatened to pull her under.

Ariel’s legs felt like lead as she shuffled alongside Miles, her body swaying with each step. Her eyelids drooped, and a thin film of sweat coated her forehead as the sedative continued to work its way through her system. She clung to Miles’s arm, using him as her anchor in the bustling sea of travelers that swirled around them.

“Almost there,” Miles murmured, his voice a soothing balm against the cacophony of the airport.

“Can’t... stay awake...” Ariel mumbled, her words barely coherent as they stumbled toward their gate. She could feel

herself slipping in and out of consciousness, her surroundings blurring into an indistinct haze of colors and sounds.

As they arrived at the gate, the chaos seemed to intensify. Frustrated passengers clustered around the counter, their voices raised in agitation as airline representatives scrambled to provide answers. The stress and disorientation threatened to overwhelm Ariel, who already struggled to maintain even the most tenuous grasp on reality.

“Stay close to me,” Miles instructed, his grip on her tightening as they navigated the confusion.

“Wha’s going on?” Ariel slurred, blinking blearily at the scene before her. Her head lolled against Miles’s shoulder as he guided her through the fray.

“Flight’s been canceled,” he explained, his brow furrowed in concern. “Seems they’re redirecting us to another flight.”

“More... waiting?” Ariel groaned, the thought of enduring any more delays nearly unbearable in her foggy state.

“Seems like it,” Miles sighed, pulling her closer. “But we’ll get there eventually, I promise.”

“Promise?” Ariel echoed, her eyes fluttering closed as she fought to stay present.

“Promise,” Miles confirmed, pressing a tender kiss to her temple. “And once we’re there, you can sleep as long as you need to.”

“Sleep...” Ariel sighed dreamily, the word a siren’s call that beckoned her toward oblivion. “Mm... nice...”

“Very nice,” Miles agreed, his voice tinged with humor and affection. “But for now, let’s just focus on getting to the new *new* gate.”

“Okay,” Ariel whispered, summoning the last of her strength. Ariel’s eyelids felt as heavy as lead, each blink slower and more laborious than the last. The dulled roar of the bustling airport around her seemed to fade in and out, like waves crashing against a distant shore. Her drowsy mind drifted along, anchored only by the steady warmth of Miles’ hand wrapped firmly around her own.

“Come on,” Miles urged gently, his words punctuated by the rhythmic thud of their footsteps on the polished airport floor. “We’re almost at the new gate.”

“Trying... so hard,” she mumbled, her voice barely audible above the cacophony of voices and announcements surrounding them. She forced her eyes open again, struggling to focus on Miles’ strong, reassuring profile as they navigated through the throngs of people.

“Only a little bit further,” he encouraged, casting a worried glance at her pale, drawn face. Ariel clenched her teeth, attempting to will herself awake. But the fog clouding her thoughts was relentless, making it nearly impossible to hold onto any semblance of alertness.

“Gate F-2, right here,” Miles announced, leading her to a row of seats near the boarding area. He lowered her into one, his fingers lingering on her arm as if reluctant to release her even for a moment.

“Thank you,” she whispered, offering him a weary smile. As soon as she settled into the seat, her body seemed to surrender completely to the sedative’s grasp. Her head lolled to one side, her breathing becoming slow and even.

“Rest now, love,” Miles murmured, tenderly brushing a strand of hair from her face. “I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

Ariel nodded weakly, unable to form any more words as the darkness finally claimed her. Her body relaxed into the cushioned seat, her fingers still entwined with Miles’s. The chaos around them continued unabated, but for Ariel, all that mattered was the deep, healing sleep that enveloped her and the unwavering presence of the man she loved.

Despite the cacophony of noise that filled the terminal, Ariel’s sleep was deep and undisturbed. Her chest rose and fell gently, her face a picture of serenity amidst the chaos. The raucous laughter of children, the grating sound of announcements over the intercom, and the steady hum of conversation did little to penetrate the peaceful cocoon she had slipped into. For once, her ever-active mind was still, allowing her body to rest and recover.

“Attention all passengers,” a disembodied voice crackled through the speakers, jarring those who were lost in their own thoughts. But Ariel remained undisturbed, her breathing steady and even as Miles kept a protective arm around her.

“Looks like we’ve got another hour or so before boarding,” he said quietly, more to himself than anyone else.

His gaze never left Ariel's sleeping form, his fingers absently tracing circles on the back of her hand.

Ariel's subconscious registered the familiar touch, and a faint smile played at the corners of her lips. Her dreams were pleasant, filled with sun-dappled cabanas and gentle ocean breezes, far removed from the sterile confines of the airport.

"Rest," Miles murmured once more, his voice a soothing balm in the cacophony. "I'll wake you when it's time to board."

CHAPTER FIVE

Ariel's eyes fluttered open as she emerged from a dream in which she was back in her childhood home, the smell of freshly baked bread wafting through the air. Her senses were suddenly assaulted by the hum of engines and the muffled sounds of passengers settling into their seats. For a moment, she felt disoriented, struggling to remember where she was and why she was on a plane.

“Your seatbelt should be fastened low and tight across your lap,” came the flight attendant's voice over the intercom. “In the event of sudden turbulence, it is important to keep your seatbelt fastened at all times while seated.”

Ariel blinked, taking in the sterile interior of the aircraft, so different from the cozy warmth of her remembered kitchen. The haze of sleep slowly dissipating as she took in her surroundings. The soft, warm light filtered through the airplane window, casting a golden glow over the plush seats. Her senses gradually came to life, picking up on the hum of the engines and the muffled sounds of passengers settling into their seats. She attempted to piece together her memories, her thoughts feeling sluggish like molasses. A familiar hand gently squeezed her own, grounding her with its reassuring touch.

“Hello, Ariel,” Miles whispered with a gentle smile, his hand softly resting on hers, offering comfort.

“Hi,” she replied groggily, trying to shake off the remnants of her dreams.

The interior of the plane felt cozy and inviting, a stark contrast to the bustling airport they had left behind. Richly upholstered seats, with their adjustable headrests, nestled the passengers in a cocoon of comfort. Soft murmurs of conversations mingled with the distant sound of pages turning, creating an atmosphere of calm and serenity.

“Did you sleep well?” Miles asked, concern lacing his voice.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Ariel admitted, rubbing her eyes. “I didn’t think I’d be able to, given how nervous I’ve been about this trip.”

“Saint Celadon will be good for both of us,” he assured her, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll finally have the chance to slow down. Everything all right?”

“Uh, yes,” she replied, still trying to shake off the lingering haze of sleep. “Just... forgot where I was for a moment.”

“Understandable,” he said, his voice filled with warmth and understanding. “It’s been a long few hours.”

Ariel nodded, her thoughts finally clearing as she remembered the whirlwind of events that had led them here – to this plane.

“Remember to put on your oxygen mask first before helping others,” the flight attendant continued, demonstrating how to secure the mask over one’s face. As Ariel listened to the safety instructions, the plane’s engines began to roar, and

the aircraft started to move, sending a shiver down her spine. And the thought of having to seal a plastic mask over her face, and then over someone else's—like a child! A scared child—added to her anxiety.

The sensation of motion was subtle at first, but it soon grew more pronounced as they taxied down the runway. Ariel's heart raced in tandem with the increasing speed, her pulse pounding in her ears. She glanced out the window, watching the world blur past them, while her thoughts tangled into knots of excitement, terror, and anticipation.

“First time leaving Endless Harbor in a long time, isn't it?” Miles asked, trying to distract her from the plane's movement.

“Since we moved back,” Ariel admitted, her voice wavering slightly.

Ariel's heart raced faster as the plane accelerated down the runway, a symphony of whirring engines and rattling metal surrounding her.

“Are you okay?” Miles asked, concern etched on his face. He tightened his grip on her hand, offering her a reassuring smile.

“I'm just... nervous,” Ariel admitted, her fingers digging into the armrests as her pulse quickened further.

“Hey, look at me,” Miles urged gently. As she turned her gaze towards him, he continued, “Nothing is safer than flying.”

Is that true, or is he just trying to calm you?

Her focus returned to the window, the world outside a blur of motion as the plane sped forward. The sudden lurch of liftoff made her stomach drop, and she instinctively gripped the armrests tighter, her knuckles turning white. The sensation of leaving the ground left her disoriented, the familiar pull of gravity giving way to an alien weightlessness.

“Easy there,” Miles said softly, placing a hand over hers to steady her trembling fingers. “Just breathe. We’ll be up in the air soon, and then it’ll be smooth sailing.”

“Smooth sailing” – the phrase brought a small smile to Ariel’s lips. As the plane ascended higher, the vibrations lessened, and Ariel’s heart rate gradually returned to normal. The ascent was accompanied by a symphony of sounds: the hum of the engines, the slight creaking of the aircraft’s frame, and the distant murmur of passengers conversing. As Ariel listened to this cacophony, she felt as if each noise was echoing through her very soul. The vibrations from the plane were like a pulsating heartbeat in her chest, making it difficult for her to distinguish between the aircraft’s movements and the pounding of her own heart.

Then, the plane began to shudder unexpectedly. Her stomach lurched as they hit a patch of turbulence, causing the aircraft to dip and sway. Gasps and muttered prayers filled the cabin as passengers clutched their armrests and exchanged nervous glances.

“Is this normal?” Ariel whispered, her eyes wide with alarm.

“Sometimes there’s a bit of turbulence during the climb,” Miles explained, his tone steady despite the unsettling motions of the plane. “Once we reach cruising altitude, it should smooth out.”

Ariel nodded, trying to take comfort in his knowledge and calm demeanor. She closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing as her internal thoughts raced. This journey was not only about the physical distance they were covering in the air, but also the emotional distance she’d traveled since first meeting Miles. But the turbulence continued to rattle the plane.

A high-pitched wail pierced through the cabin, rivaling the roar of the engines. The sound belonged to a small child, their cries echoing with distress as the plane continued to bump and dip in the turbulent air. Passengers exchanged uneasy glances, attempting to distract themselves from the unsettling atmosphere by adjusting their seats or engaging in hushed conversations.

“Sweetie, do you want your coloring book?” the mother tried desperately to console her upset child, but to no avail – the tears persisted, adding to the cacophony around them.

Ariel clenched her jaw, trying to focus on anything other than the increasing chaos. Every bump and jolt threatened to unravel the fragile thread of composure she had managed to cling to.

“Would you like some water?” Miles offered gently. Ariel shook her head, unable to find her voice as her thoughts spiraled further into a jumble of fear.

“Can’t they make it stop?” she whispered, her eyes darting between the distressed mother and her inconsolable child. “Everyone seems so... on edge.”

“Sometimes these things just take time,” Miles replied softly, his hand giving hers a reassuring squeeze. “It’ll pass eventually, and we’ll all be able to breathe a little easier.”

Ariel inhaled deeply, struggling to keep her emotions in check as the plane continued its tumultuous dance in the sky. Her mind pushed a fear that the turbulence might never truly end, that perhaps the universe was trying to tell her something.

The plane bucked and swayed. Then, the plane seemed to exhale as it hit a smoother patch of air, the sudden shift in momentum leaving Ariel momentarily weightless. Her heart continued to race within her chest, but the tight coil of fear in her stomach began to unwind with each steady breath she took.

“See?” Miles said gently, his hand still resting on hers. “It’s calming down now. We’re going to be just fine.”

Ariel managed a weak smile, grateful for the respite from her anxiety. She glanced around the cabin, watching the other passengers relax into their seats, their collective tension dissipating like fog under the morning sun. The screaming child had been soothed by their parent, their cries replaced by gentle coos of reassurance, and the flight attendants moved through the aisles with renewed ease, their smiles brightening the dimly lit space.

“Thank you,” Ariel whispered, her grip on the armrests finally loosening. “I don’t know if I could have made it

through that without you.”

Miles squeezed her hand, his touch warm and comforting. “You’re stronger than you think, Ariel. But I’ll always be here to help when you need me.”

She turned to him, her eyes filled with gratitude. But just as the *words* of gratitude were about to spill from her lips, an ominous chime echoed throughout the cabin. The seatbelt sign lit up once more, and the captain’s voice cut through the quiet, his tone more strained than before. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are anticipating another patch of severe turbulence ahead. Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts.”

A murmur of unease spread through the cabin, and Ariel felt that familiar knot of fear return, squeezing her heart tight. Miles’s grip on her hand tightened as they both braced themselves, left wondering what lay ahead and whether the journey would remain as smooth as they hoped.

CHAPTER SIX

“Finally, we’re here,” Miles said, squeezing Ariel’s hand reassuringly. “I can already tell that this is going to be an unforgettable honeymoon.”

The warm tropical breeze caressed Ariel’s clammy face as she and Miles stepped off the small plane onto Saint Celadon Island. The distant sound of crashing waves beyond the two-strip airport greeted them, eliciting a shared smile between the newlyweds. As Ariel took in her surroundings, she felt a sense of excitement mingling with her lingering nerves from the flight.

Ariel looked at him and smiled a thin, watery smile. “Yes, I’m sure it will be,” she agreed before turning her attention back to the lush landscape spreading out before them. Vibrant green palm trees swayed gently in the wind, their leafy fronds casting dappled shadows on the path they walked down. A riot of colorful flowers bloomed along the edges of the path out front of the airport, their sweet fragrance filling the air as if welcoming the couple to the island paradise.

Despite the enchanting beauty all around, Ariel’s heart still raced, echoing the turbulence from earlier. The familiar weight of air travel unease weighed heavily on her shoulders, causing her to grip Miles’ hand a little tighter.

Miles, sensing her tension, pulled her into a gentle embrace, his lips brushing her forehead. “It’s all behind us

now,” he whispered soothingly. “Just let the island work its magic.”

A melody caught Ariel’s ears, a soft tune played on a steel drum from somewhere nearby. It had an infectious rhythm that promised relaxation and joy. She watched as a group of local children ran past, laughing and kicking a woven ball. Their carefree nature was infectious, and she felt a small part of her tension melt away.

“Look,” Miles pointed towards a wooden sign, hand-painted with vibrant colors that read: “Welcome to Saint Celadon - Where Dreams Begin.” Below it, a smaller sign dangled, swaying in the wind, “Home of the Mysterious Blue Lagoon Ruins.”

Ariel’s curiosity piqued, she momentarily forgot her fears. “Mysterious Blue Lagoon Ruins? That sounds intriguing.”

Miles chuckled, “Our first adventure. I’m glad we booked the tour in advance.”

“Yes, the website for the ruins said there was a month-long wait. I’m so glad we planned ahead. Look at those red hibiscus flowers, Miles,” Ariel said, pointing at a particularly striking cluster of blooms. “They look like something out of a painting.”

“Everything here does,” he replied, his gaze sweeping over the verdant foliage surrounding them. “It’s hard to believe we’re really here. It feels like a dream.”

As they continued down the path, Ariel’s mind began to wander. She thought of her daughter, Katie, and hoped that

everything was going well back home in Endless Harbor.

“Are you okay?” Miles asked, interrupting her thoughts. “You seemed lost there for a moment.”

Ariel smiled, squeezing his hand. “I’m more than okay,” she reassured him. “I was just thinking about everyone back home and how much I’ll miss them. But I’m also so grateful for this time with you.”

“Me too,” he replied tenderly, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Now, let’s go explore our home away from home, shall we?”

A vintage, brightly painted taxi awaited them just outside the airport’s rustic terminal. The cab was adorned with vibrant painted flowers and palm trees, mirroring the island’s natural beauty. The driver, a tall man with sun-kissed skin and a wide grin, waved them over.

“Welcome to Saint Celadon! My name is Theo,” he greeted, extending a hand.

Ariel smiled in return. “Hi, Theo. I’m Ariel, and this is Miles.”

Theo helped them load their luggage into the trunk before they climbed into the car’s cool leather interior. The inside of the taxi was decorated with colorful beaded seat covers and dangling trinkets that clinked softly as the car moved.

“Where to?” Theo asked, adjusting his rearview mirror.

“Paradise Gold Resort,” Miles answered, handing him a small slip with their reservation details.

“Ah, you sure?” Theo said, frowning.

“Yes, do you know where it is?”

Theo grimaced. “I do. As long as you’re sure.”

The taxi began its journey, weaving through narrow lanes lined with quaint cottages and bustling local markets. Ariel pressed her face to the window, captivated by the beauty of the island. Every so often, the dense foliage would give way to reveal breathtaking vistas of the cerulean sea.

“Can you see the Blue Lagoon Ruins from here?”

“No, but you can take a bus there,” Theo replied. “The island is full of mysteries and tales,” he added, glancing back at them through the mirror. “Especially about the Blue Lagoon Ruins. Many say they are haunted.”

Ariel’s eyes widened, and she exchanged a look with Miles. “Really?” she inquired.

“Oh yes,” Theo chuckled, “but you’ll have to find out for yourself.”

As they continued driving, the landscape transformed, becoming even more exotic. Soon, the silhouette of the majestic Paradise Gold came into view. Ariel’s eyebrows furrowed as she looked at the inn. Her lips formed a slight frown, her initial excitement dampened by disbelief. “Is this really the place we booked?” she muttered under her breath.

Miles glanced at her, concern etching his features. “You don’t like it?”

“No, it’s not that,” Ariel replied, shaking her head. She tried to focus on the inn’s charm, but her mind kept returning to the glossy brochure photos that had enticed them to book their stay here. Somehow, the reality seemed less appealing than the fantasy had been. “It just looks... different than I expected.”

As they approached the inn, Ariel’s gaze lingered on the weathered exterior. There was something intriguing about the juxtaposition of history and tropical paradise, but she couldn’t shake the nagging doubt that had settled in her stomach. She couldn’t help but compare her mental image of the charming, intimate inn she had been dreaming about with the reality before her. The faded paint on the exterior walls seemed to beg for a fresh coat, and the sagging roof looked like it had seen better days. The overall worn appearance of the place was a far cry from the cozy hideaway she had envisioned for their honeymoon.

“Come on,” Miles said gently, giving her hand an encouraging squeeze. “Let’s see what it’s like inside.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun sank low over the horizon, casting shadows that did no favors to the Paradise Gold. The building seemed to lean slightly to one side, as if weighed down by the years gone by. The roof sagged ominously, its once vibrant shingles now cracked and peeling away. Faded paint clung stubbornly to the wooden exterior, a testament to the structure's former glory. Time had not been kind to this place, leaving it a shell of what it once must have been.

Ariel and Miles approached the inn hand in hand, their faces a mixture of disappointment and disbelief. They stood there for a moment, taking in the sad state of the building that was supposed to be part of their romantic getaway. Ariel thought of her own cozy bed and breakfast and seaside cafe. This was a far cry from that dream.

"Is this really the place?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

"Apparently," Miles replied, his eyes scanning the exterior for any signs of life. "It looked better online."

"Everything looks better online," Ariel sighed, trying to find some humor in their situation.

Miles gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Well, we're here now," he said, attempting to sound optimistic. "Let's make the best of it."

“Right,” Ariel agreed, swallowing the lump in her throat. She took a deep breath and forced a smile, determined not to let the dilapidated inn ruin their time together.

As they stepped inside, the creaking floorboards echoed through the dimly lit lobby. The air was heavy with the scent of stale cigarette smoke and mildew, making Ariel’s stomach churn with unease. But as she looked into Miles’ eyes, she saw the same determination reflected back at her. They were in this together, for better or worse.

“Let’s just hope the room is better than the exterior,” Ariel whispered, trying to convince herself as much as Miles.

Behind the dusty, fingerprint-smudged counter stood a man who looked as if he had been a part of the inn’s furniture for decades. His dull eyes were filled with disdain as they flickered over Ariel and Miles, taking in their obvious discomfort with an air of smug satisfaction. The nametag on his worn, once-white shirt read “Clyde” in faded letters.

“Welcome to Paradise Gold,” Clyde drawled, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “How can I make your day?”

Ariel glanced at Miles, silently communicating her unease. She tried to maintain her composure as she stepped forward, forcing a smile. “We have a reservation under Clemens.”

“Ah, yes,” Clyde said, his eyes narrowing as he pretended to search through a stack of papers. “The honeymooners. Room six.” He tossed a worn brass key onto the counter with a clatter. “Enjoy your stay,” he added, not even trying to hide his boredom.

“Thank you,” Ariel replied, her voice barely audible. She picked up the key, its cold weight heavy in her hand, and turned to share a concerned look with Miles.

“Is there anything we should know about the town or any good restaurants nearby?” Miles ventured, hoping to glean some useful information from the unhelpful clerk.

“Good luck finding anything worthwhile around here,” Clyde snorted, allowing himself a small, malicious grin. “Everything shuts down early, and there isn’t much to do except stare at the ocean and hope it swallows you whole.”

“Charming,” Ariel muttered under her breath as she turned away from the counter, gripping the key tightly in her hand. Miles followed suit, offering Clyde a tight-lipped smile before joining his wife.

As they made their way up the creaking staircase, guided by the faint glow of a flickering hallway light, Ariel felt a sense of foreboding. The inn’s atmosphere seemed to seep into her very bones, chilling her to the core.

“Maybe this is all just an act,” she whispered to Miles, trying to lighten the mood. “Like one of those haunted house attractions.”

“Let’s hope so,” Miles replied, his face taut with worry. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not spend our honeymoon feeling like we’re trapped in a horror movie.”

Ariel nodded, forcing herself to focus on the warmth of Miles’ hand in hers. They dragged their luggage up a rickety staircase to the appropriate door. Exchanging a glance, they

unlocked the heavy, wooden slab separating them from the big reveal.

The door to their room creaked open, revealing a dimly lit room that appeared to have once been grand but was now a shadow of its former self. Faded wallpaper clung to the walls, and cobwebs hung in the corners like ominous reminders of neglect. Ariel wrinkled her nose at the musty scent that pervaded the air, while Miles flicked on the light switch, casting a harsh light over the scene.

“Wow,” Ariel said, unable to hide the disbelief in her voice. “This is... something else.”

Miles stepped inside, surveying their temporary abode with a critical eye. “It’s definitely seen better days,” he agreed, attempting to maintain a semblance of optimism. But even he couldn’t deny the sinking feeling that must have settled in his chest, just as it was in Ariel’s, as he took in the sorry state of the room.

“At least there’s no ghosts in sight?” Ariel suggested hesitantly, trying to will herself into a more positive mindset. She set down their luggage and began to explore, hoping to find some redeeming qualities hidden amongst the decay.

As she made her way across the worn carpet, her foot accidentally caught on something, causing her to stumble slightly. Glancing down, her eyes widened in horror as she realized what she’d almost tripped over: a mousetrap, armed and ready to snap shut on any unsuspecting rodents – or toes.

“Ugh!” she exclaimed, recoiling in disgust. “A mousetrap? Really?”

Miles quickly crossed the room to examine the unwelcome discovery. “Looks like they’ve got a bit of a pest problem,” he said grimly, carefully removing the trap from the floor and depositing it in the corner.

“Maybe this isn’t such a great idea,” Ariel admitted, feeling the weight of disappointment settle heavily upon her shoulders. “I mean, we knew this place was old, but I didn’t think it would be this bad. I was thinking more vintage, less junkyard.”

“Hey,” Miles said softly, wrapping his arms around her. “We came here to spend time together, right? So let’s not let a lousy room ruin our honeymoon.”

Ariel nodded, trying to find comfort in his embrace. “You’re right. We’re here for each other, not the accommodations.”

“Exactly,” Miles agreed, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Now, how about we go take a walk on the beach? It’s getting late, but I bet the ocean is still beautiful.”

“Sounds perfect,” Ariel replied, allowing herself to be led away from their dreadful lodgings and toward the promise of something far more enchanting.

Together, they stepped out into the cool evening air and made their way down to the shoreline, where the waves lapped gently at the sand. As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting an array of warm colors across the sky, Ariel felt a sense of peace wash over her.

She was ready for the first romantic moment of the rest of her honeymoon.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The picturesque beach stretched out before them, a canvas of soft white sand merging with the crystal-clear turquoise water. Gentle waves lapped against the shore, creating a soothing rhythm that filled the air with a sense of serenity.

Ariel glanced over at Miles, his sun-kissed skin and tousled hair giving him an effortlessly handsome appearance. She couldn't help but smile as he squeezed her hand gently, their fingers intertwining as they walked along the shoreline. Each step they took left a fleeting imprint on the sand.

"Saint Celadon truly lives up to its slogan, doesn't it?" Miles remarked, his eyes taking in the beauty of their surroundings.

"Absolutely," Ariel agreed. "I've always found the beach magical, especially at this time of day when everything feels so calm and peaceful."

As they continued their leisurely stroll, the romantic atmosphere seemed to deepen, wrapping around them like a comforting blanket. The salty sea air mingled with the faint scent of wildflowers carried by the breeze, adding to the enchantment of the moment.

The sun cast its golden light across the beach, warming Ariel and Miles as they continued their leisurely walk. The gentle breeze caressed their faces, lifting strands of hair to dance in the wind. Ariel felt her skin tingle under the sun's

warm embrace, and she couldn't help but revel in the sensation of being so close to nature, and more importantly, to Miles.

“Isn't it amazing how something as simple as a walk on the beach can feel so surreal?” Ariel mused, her voice barely audible over the sound of the waves.

Miles smiled warmly, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “It is. I think it has something to do with the person you're sharing it with,” he replied, giving Ariel's hand a gentle squeeze.

Ariel glanced up at him, her cheeks flushed with a delicate pink hue, and her heart swelled with affection for the man beside her. They exchanged tender smiles, their eyes speaking volumes about the love and excitement bubbling within them.

“Remember when we first met?” Ariel asked, her thoughts drifting back to those initial moments that had sparked their connection. “I was so nervous, yet there was something about you that made me feel at ease.”

Miles chuckled, recalling the memory fondly. “Well, I have to admit, I was pretty smitten from the moment I laid eyes on you. I just tried my best not to show it.”

“Is that so?” Ariel teased, playfully bumping her shoulder against his. “I had no idea.”

“Good, because I've become quite skilled at hiding my emotions over the years, especially from beautiful women who are interested in me,” he admitted, his tone turning thoughtful. “But with you, it's different. I don't want to hide anything.”

He grinned and winked at her.

Ariel laughed, but then her heart fluttered at his confession, the sincerity in his voice touching her deeply. She found herself growing more and more enamored with him, cherishing every shared glance and tender smile.

As they walked, their laughter mingling with the sound of the waves crashing against the shore, the warmth of the sun seemed to mirror the warmth blossoming between them. The sun cast a golden hue across the beach as Miles and Ariel walked together. They exchanged shy glances, their smiles growing wider with each moment spent in each other's company. The anticipation of their first romantic gesture hung in the air like a melody waiting to be played.

“Can I tell you something?” Miles asked softly, his gaze never leaving Ariel's.

“Of course,” she replied, her heart skipping a beat at the intensity in his eyes. “You can tell me anything.”

“I've never felt this way about anyone before,” he confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. “You've changed my life in ways I never thought possible.”

Ariel's eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she absorbed his heartfelt words. She gently squeezed his hand, feeling the depth of their connection grow stronger with each passing second. “I feel the same way.”

They continued walking, their feet sinking into the soft, warm sand as they approached the water's edge. The waves lapped gently at the shore, beckoning them closer, inviting them to share in the beauty of the ocean's embrace.

“Shall we?” Miles asked, nodding towards the water with a playful grin.

“Let’s,” Ariel agreed, her excitement bubbling up within her as they stepped forward, hand in hand.

As their feet met the cool, crystalline water, they both gasped at the sudden change in temperature. The sensation sent a shiver up their spines, but neither could deny the exhilaration it brought. It felt as if the ocean itself was welcoming them, wrapping them in its cool, refreshing embrace.

“Wow, that’s colder than I expected!” Ariel laughed, the sound ringing out like music against the backdrop of the waves.

“Maybe it’s a good thing we didn’t dive right in,” Miles replied with a grin, his eyes sparkling as he gazed at her.

As Ariel and Miles moved further into the water, the gentle waves lapping at their ankles, they could feel the last remnants of tension leaving their bodies. It was as if the ocean was sharing its vast serenity with them, inviting them to let go of their worries and simply be present in this beautiful moment together.

Suddenly, Miles yelped in pain, clutching his foot.

“Ow! Something stung me!” he cried out, his face contorting in distress.

Ariel’s eyes widened with concern, and she rushed to his side without hesitation. “Miles, are you okay? What happened?”

“Something in the water... I don’t know, but it hurts like hell,” he grimaced, struggling to maintain his balance as the waves continued to wash around them.

“Here, lean on me,” Ariel said urgently, wrapping her arm around his waist to support him. Her mind raced with worry for him, but she knew she needed to remain calm and focused. “Let’s get you back to shore so we can take a look.”

As they made their way slowly back to solid ground, Ariel felt a pang of guilt for having led Miles into the water. What if he had a severe reaction to the sting? What if they needed medical help?

“Almost there,” she murmured softly to Miles as they reached the shoreline, his pain etched clearly on his features. “Just a little further.”

He limped beside her, groaning.

“First me and the sedative, and now you? What a trip so far,” she teased gently, trying to lighten the mood despite her concern. “Now let’s see what we’re dealing with, okay?”

As they settled down on the sand, Miles’s face contorted in pain as he tried to stifle another groan, beads of sweat forming on his brow. Ariel could see the distress in his eyes, and it pained her heart to witness him in such agony.

“Jellyfish,” he gasped. “I think it was a jellyfish.”

She knew that sting well. She’d been stung a time or two. The sting felt like a searing sensation, as if someone had pressed a burning iron against tender flesh. As they sat together in the dappled shade, Ariel’s mind raced with

thoughts of how to ease Miles's suffering. Her years as a chef had taught her the importance of quick thinking and resourcefulness, and she knew that now was the time to put those skills to use.

Ariel knelt beside Miles, her fingers gently brushing the sand away from his injured foot. Her eyes roamed over his skin, searching for any signs of a severe reaction or allergic response to the jellyfish sting. She knew that while most stings were painful but harmless, some could be dangerous if not treated properly.

"Can you wiggle your toes for me?" Ariel asked, concern lacing her voice as she continued to examine Miles's foot. He complied, wincing slightly as he moved his digits.

"Does it feel numb or tingly at all?" she inquired gently, watching for any changes in his expression.

"No, just... sore," Miles replied, his breath hitching as he tried to find the right words to describe the sensation.

Ariel sighed with relief, grateful that the situation didn't seem more severe. But she still needed to find a way to alleviate Miles's pain.

"All right, just hang in there. I'll figure something out," she reassured him, pressing a tender kiss to his forehead before rising to her feet.

As she turned to survey the beach, her gaze fell upon a local beachgoer approaching them with a concerned expression. An older woman with sun-weathered skin and salt-

tousled hair, she seemed to possess the wisdom of the sea itself.

“Excuse me, dear,” the woman called out, her voice as soothing and rhythmic as the waves crashing on the shore. “I couldn’t help but notice your friend here is in some distress. Jellyfish sting, was it?”

“Yes,” Ariel confirmed, her brows furrowing with worry. “Do you know how to treat it?”

“Of course, dear,” the woman replied kindly, reaching into her beach bag and pulling out a small bottle of vinegar. “This should help take the sting out. Just pour a bit onto the affected area.”

“Thank you so much,” Ariel breathed, her gratitude evident as she accepted the bottle from the stranger. As she carefully poured the vinegar onto Miles’s foot, his face relaxed ever so slightly, the pain seemingly lessening with each drop.

“Better?” she asked, looking into his eyes for confirmation.

“Much better,” Miles confirmed, managing a small smile despite the lingering discomfort. “Thank you, Ariel.”

“Anytime, love,” she replied, returning his smile before turning to the kind beachgoer once more. “And thank you again for your help. We’re both truly grateful.”

“Think nothing of it, dear,” the woman said, waving off their thanks with a warm smile. “Just make sure he rests that foot for a bit, and he should be back on his feet in no time.”

With that, the woman continued on her way down the beach. As the last drops of vinegar soaked into Miles's skin, Ariel felt a swell of relief wash over her. The furrowed lines on his forehead had eased, and his once-tense grip on her hand had relaxed. "Thank goodness it's working," she said softly, more to herself than to anyone else.

"Thank goodness for kind strangers," Miles replied, his voice still tinged with pain but noticeably lighter.

Ariel helped Miles to his feet, making sure he could bear weight on his injured foot before they resumed their leisurely stroll. She kept one arm wrapped around his waist, providing support as they walked slowly, their steps now more cautious. The warmth of his body against hers was comforting, and she marveled at how easily they had come together to face this unexpected challenge.

"Are you all right?" she asked him, her concern evident in her voice.

"Thanks to you," he replied, flashing her a grateful smile. "You have a knack for taking care of me."

Ariel blushed slightly, touched by his words. "Well, I suppose it's what people who love each other do," she said softly, feeling a surge of emotion as he squeezed her hand in response.

"Indeed it is," he agreed, his eyes locked on hers.

As they continued their walk, the sun cast warm hues across the sky, painting the horizon with shades of pink and orange. The sounds of laughter and the distant crash of waves

filled the air, a soothing lullaby that accompanied their journey. The world around them felt alive with possibility, and though they moved gingerly, their hearts swelled with love and resilience.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Ariel asked, concern lacing her words as she glanced at Miles’s foot, now marked by the telltale red welt.

Miles smiled warmly at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling with the gesture. “I’m fine, Ariel,” he assured her, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “You really took great care of me.”

Ariel couldn’t help but smile back at him, touched by the genuine appreciation in his voice. “Well, it’s a good thing we had some help,” she admitted, thinking back to the kind stranger who had offered them vinegar to alleviate the pain.

“Let’s head back to the room and get cleaned up. We’re both tired from travel,” Miles suggested.

Ariel shivered, thinking of the hotel room. “After everything we’ve gone through today, I was really hoping for something... better than what that turned out to be.” She looked out over the ocean, trying to find solace in the view. But even that was marred by construction noises from a nearby site.

She sighed deeply, her heart heavy. “I just hope this isn’t a sign of how the rest of our honeymoon is going to go.”

Ariel’s mind raced with worries about the coming days. If their room was this disappointing, what else might go wrong?

She leaned into Miles, seeking comfort.

“Let’s just take it one day at a time,” Miles whispered, wrapping an arm around her. “Tomorrow is a new day.”

But as Ariel looked out into the approaching night, her thoughts clouded with uncertainty. What other surprises might be in store on this honeymoon?

CHAPTER NINE

Ariel and Miles stepped through the heavy, wooden front doors of the inn, their faces etched with exhaustion and disappointment. The gloomy lobby seemed to be an extension of the murky exterior, a far cry from the honeymoon paradise they had hoped for. Nevertheless, Ariel clung to the hope that their stay would still be enjoyable, imagining the cozy evenings she and Miles could spend by the fire, walking on the beach, and dining out.

“You again?” The voice came from the disinterested and grumpy clerk behind the reception desk. His eyes were glued to his newspaper, barely acknowledging the couple in front of him.

“Um, yes,” Ariel replied hesitantly, trying to maintain her composure. “We’re about to clean up and go to dinner. We’ve just gone down to the beach—”

“Beach?” His interruption was incredulous. “Firstly, it’s jellyfish mating season, so swimming in the ocean in this cove isn’t recommended. Secondly, our restaurant is currently closed due to health code violations.”

“Health code violations?” Ariel echoed, her eyes wide with disbelief. As a chef herself, she couldn’t fathom how an establishment could let its standards slip so egregiously.

“Indeed,” the clerk continued nonchalantly, as if the matter was of little importance. “Nothing too serious, but enough to

warrant closing until we can sort it out.”

Miles attempted to lighten the mood, his voice tinged with forced humor. “Well, at least the jellyfish are having fun, right?”

“Ha, yes,” the clerk replied dryly, but Ariel was not amused.

“Let’s go,” she whispered to Miles.

As Ariel and Miles turned to make their way to their room, a mix of frustration and sadness filled Ariel’s chest. She had been so excited to share this experience with Miles, but now it seemed as though fate itself was conspiring against them. She glanced over at her husband, wondering if he was feeling the same disappointment that weighed heavily on her heart.

Ariel’s thoughts churned like the turbulent waves outside their window, her hopes for a romantic honeymoon with Miles gradually sinking beneath the surface. She knew that any island was essentially a small town with its quirks, but she hadn’t expected their getaway to be marred by such unfortunate circumstances.

“Maybe we should stay in tonight,” Ariel suggested, forcing a smile as she tried to mask her disappointment. “We could order takeout from that little seafood place we passed on the way into town.”

“Sure,” Miles agreed, his own frustration evident despite his attempts at maintaining an upbeat tone. “I’ll go order some up, and we can have a cozy night in our room.”

“Thank you,” Ariel murmured, grateful.

Miles remained in the hallway to call for delivery for their dinner, and Ariel decided to take a shower in an attempt to wash away the day's frustrations. Perhaps a hot, steaming cascade of water would help rejuvenate her spirits.

Inside the room, she had to hold back her emotions once again. The space that was anything but what Ariel had envisioned for their honeymoon suite. The first thing that caught her eye was the bed – a lumpy, sunken mattress topped with thin, mismatched sheets and a threadbare quilt. She bit her lip, trying to suppress her disappointment as she imagined spending her nights on such an uncomfortable surface.

Her gaze drifted from the bed to the walls, where peeling wallpaper revealed patches of moldy plaster beneath. The floral pattern, once vibrant and cheery, had faded to a dull, sickly hue. A thick layer of dust coated every surface, and cobwebs dangled from the corners of the ceiling like forgotten party decorations. Ariel's eyes were drawn to the small mousetrap that Miles had relocated to the corner, its metal bar poised menacingly over a tiny lump of cheese. Her heart sank even further at the sight.

“Is this really where we'll be spending our honeymoon?” Ariel thought, feeling a pang of sadness in her chest. It wasn't that she needed luxury or extravagance – after all, she had grown up in a small town and understood the charm of simplicity. But this room, with its musty air and crumbling walls, felt more like a neglected storage unit than a romantic retreat.

Ariel peeled off her clothes, folding them neatly before placing them on a wooden chair in the bathroom. As she turned the knob of the shower, she imagined the warm water cleansing her of the day's disappointments, allowing her to start anew. Ariel's heart sank further when she realized that the water pressure was abysmal, barely more than a trickle. She bit her lip, trying to hold back her frustration. "Come on," she muttered under her breath, hoping that the pressure would improve once the water warmed up. But no such luck came, and she reluctantly stepped into the meager stream of lukewarm water.

"Focus on the positives," she whispered to herself, stepping under the spray. "You're here in this beautiful town with the man you love. Don't let these minor setbacks ruin your happiness."

Closing her eyes, Ariel let the water wash over her, trying to focus on the present moment and not dwell on what had gone wrong. Instead, she thought of the many wonderful memories she and Miles would create during their honeymoon and their life together, the love that they shared, and how fortunate they were to have found each other.

Suddenly, a scuffling sound brought Ariel out of her reverie. Opening her eyes, she spotted a mouse darting across the chipped tiles of the bathroom floor. Her heart leaped into her throat, and she let out an involuntary yelp of surprise.

"Is everything okay in there?" Miles called from the bedroom, concern evident in his voice.

“Fine, just... fine,” Ariel replied, trying to sound nonchalant despite the whirlwind of emotions brewing inside her. Then, another mouse skittered across the floor to join its friend, and Ariel had had enough. She wrenched off the tap to the shower and stormed out of the room.

Ariel’s heart pounded in her chest as she flung open the bathroom door, a dingy, damp towel wrapped hastily around her body. Their room seemed to close in on her, trapping her within the confines of the inn that had become the bane of her honeymoon.

“Can you believe this place?” Ariel cried out, her voice shaking with frustration and disbelief. “First the jellyfish, then the closed restaurant, and now a mouse in our bathroom! I can’t take it anymore!”

Miles appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide as he took in his wife’s dripping form. He reached for her, instinctively wanting to provide comfort. “Hey, hey,” he murmured softly, drawing her close. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“Isn’t it?” Ariel snapped, pulling away from him as if his touch was scalding. Her eyes blazed with anger and disappointment. “This was supposed to be perfect, Miles! Our honeymoon – the one time we could escape everything and just be together without any worries. And instead, we’re stuck in this... this disaster of an inn!”

Ariel’s breath came in short, ragged bursts as she paced the length of the room, her wet footprints leaving a damp trail behind her. The wallpaper seemed to close in on her, the faded floral pattern mocking her dreams of a perfect honeymoon. As

Miles approached, she rounded on him, her frustration evident in the tight line of her jaw and the fire in her eyes.

“Can you believe this place, Miles? I mean, really? A mouse? A mouse in the bathroom! Two! And don’t even get me started on the water pressure. This is our honeymoon, for heaven’s sake!” Her voice trembled, the weight of her disappointment threatening to crush her spirit entirely.

Miles stepped forward, his strong arms encircling Ariel as he tried to offer comfort. “I know it’s not what we expected, but maybe it’s not so bad?” he suggested tentatively, searching her eyes for a glimmer of hope. “We’re together, right? That’s what matters most.”

Ariel leaned into his embrace, feeling the warmth of his body seep into her chilled skin. But still, her thoughts churned with discontent, the reality of their situation gnawing at the edges of her resolve. “It’s just... I wanted everything to be perfect, you know? For us to start this new chapter of our lives in the best way possible. And instead, we’re stuck in this... this dump!”

“Sometimes things don’t go according to plan,” Miles said softly, his fingers tracing comforting circles on her back. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t make the best of it. We’re here together, and that’s what counts.”

With a sigh, Ariel allowed herself to be reassured. The bedside lamp cast a soft glow over the rumpled bedspread and worn furniture. It wasn’t the luxurious suite she’d imagined, but perhaps it could still be a sanctuary for them - a place to

escape the world and focus on the love that had brought them together in the first place.

“All right,” Ariel conceded, her voice laced with resignation. “So it’s not the honeymoon we planned. But we’ll make it work, right? We always do.”

Miles pressed a gentle kiss to her temple, the tenderness of the gesture soothing some of the raw edges of her disappointment. “That’s my girl,” he murmured, his breath warm against her skin. “We’ll make our own memories here, I promise. And in the morning, we’ll ask to switch rooms. Ok?”

“Ok,” she agreed.

As Ariel looked around the room, her heart heavy with the weight of all that had gone wrong, she couldn’t help but think that this was just the first of many disasters awaiting them. It was difficult not to feel cheated by the whole situation. Together, they stood in the dismal inn, united in their determination to create the perfect memory out of an imperfect situation—but the reality of their less-than-ideal honeymoon settled over her like a storm cloud.

CHAPTER TEN

Ariel sighed as she zipped her suitcase closed, her fingers brushing against the soft fabric of her honeymoon wardrobe. She glanced at Miles, who was carefully packing his belongings in a duffle bag, the quiet determination on his face making her heart swell with love.

“Ready?” he asked, looking up at her with a warm smile.

“Ready,” she replied, trying to mask her disappointment in their current accommodations. They deserved better than this for their honeymoon, but everything else on the island was booked up—both of them had called for over an hour this morning, and then resigned themselves to asking for a new room here.

Together, they carried their luggage down the narrow hallway of the inn, stopping at the door of their new room, the move only reluctantly granted by the crabby clerk. Miles turned the key and pushed the door open, revealing a slightly larger space than their previous one. The walls were painted a dull beige, and a small window let in just enough sunlight to illuminate the dust particles floating through the air.

“Let’s hope this is an improvement,” Ariel murmured, stepping into the room and setting her suitcase down on the creaky floorboards.

The first thing that caught her attention was the worn-out furniture scattered around the room. An old armchair with

frayed upholstery sat in the corner, its wooden frame groaning in protest as she tested its stability with her hand. The bed, though larger than the one in their previous room, sagged in the middle, hinting at countless sleepless nights ahead. A musty smell hung in the air, reminiscent of damp towels left out to dry for too long.

“Seems like they’ve had some trouble updating the place,” Miles observed, running his hand along the peeling wallpaper. “But we’ll make it work, right?”

“Of course,” Ariel agreed, forcing a smile. Inwardly, she couldn’t help but compare this dreary room to the cozy, inviting atmosphere of Leaside B&B, the place she had poured her heart and soul into. The inn they were staying at paled in comparison, and she wished there was a better option nearby.

But she pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the present. She and Miles had each other, and that was what truly mattered. They would find a way to enjoy their honeymoon, even if it meant enduring a few less-than-ideal accommodations along the way.

Ariel stared out the window, her gaze fixed on the gray skies above. She let out a deep sigh, her breath fogging up the glass momentarily before dissipating. This was less than tropical, and she’d seen nothing about a cool down or a storm—which looked incoming—on her weather app. And the room, though different in layout, still felt like a disappointment – a glaring reminder of how far from perfect their honeymoon had become. Her fingers traced the chipped

paint on the windowsill, and her heart ached for a bit of warmth and comfort.

“Okay,” Miles said, jolting her from her thoughts. “Let’s focus on something simple, like finding a decent meal.”

Ariel nodded against his chest, taking solace in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. “You’re right. Food always makes things better, doesn’t it?” And it was nearly lunch.

“Absolutely,” he agreed, leading her toward the door. “Let’s see if there’s a nice restaurant or cafe nearby.”

They ventured out into the oddly chilly island air, their hands intertwined as they walked along the quaint streets of Saint Celadon. Ariel couldn’t help but appreciate the beauty of the small town, even as her thoughts lingered on the less-than-ideal accommodations they had left behind.

“Look, there’s a little cafe just down the street,” Miles pointed out, his optimism not wavering despite the day’s disappointments. “And it seems like Main Street has quite a few options,” Miles observed, as they passed by various storefronts, each with their own unique character.

“True, but I want something special,” Ariel replied, her eyes scanning the inviting façades. “Something that feels... like us.”

Miles squeezed her hand gently, his gaze warm and supportive. “We’ll find it, sweetheart.”

Their search led them past quaint bakeries displaying mouthwatering pastries, cozy coffee shops emanating rich

aromas, and fragrant pizzerias teeming with lively chatter. Yet, none seemed to encapsulate the essence of what Ariel sought.

“Wait, look at that one,” Ariel exclaimed suddenly, pointing to a small restaurant tucked away on a side street. Its exterior was adorned with twinkling fairy lights and cascading ivy, creating an enchanting atmosphere that piqued her curiosity.

“Le Coeur Gourmand,” Miles read aloud, his brow furrowing slightly as he pronounced the French name. “Seems like a charming place. Shall we?”

“Definitely,” Ariel agreed, her heart swelling with hope as they approached the entrance.

Inside, the dimly lit dining room was intimate and inviting, with rustic wooden tables draped in white linen and delicate flowers accentuating the romantic ambiance. A soft melody played in the background, enhancing the warmth that enveloped them as they were guided to their table.

“Bonsoir, madame et monsieur,” the waiter greeted them with a genuine smile, handing them each a menu. “Can I start you off with something to drink?”

“Two glasses of your finest red wine, please,” Miles requested, his eyes meeting Ariel’s in silent acknowledgement of the significance this meal held for them.

“Very well,” the waiter replied, disappearing to fulfill their order.

Ariel scanned the menu, her eyes dancing over the exquisite dishes that showcased the best of French cuisine.

The descriptions alone transported her back to her days in Paris, awakening memories of laughter and passion that she hoped would be rekindled during their honeymoon.

“Have you decided on what to order?” Miles asked, his voice gentle and reassuring.

“I think so,” Ariel answered, her fingers tracing the name of a dish that seemed to embody both comfort and indulgence. “The Coq au Vin sounds divine.”

“Ah, a classic choice,” Miles agreed, nodding to the waiter as he returned with their wine. “I’ll have the Bouillabaisse.”

“Excellent choices,” the waiter affirmed, taking their menus and leaving them to savor the velvety richness of their chosen beverage.

As they clinked their glasses together, Ariel felt a sense of serenity wash over her.

“Here’s to us, and to finding joy in the unexpected,” Ariel whispered, allowing herself to believe that even amidst the imperfections, true love could make any moment shine.

“Cheers,” Miles agreed, his eyes never straying from hers as they sipped their wine.

Ariel felt a nagging sensation in the back of her mind. It was like a persistent itch that begged to be scratched, and she knew that she wouldn’t be able to fully enjoy her meal until she addressed it.

“Excuse me for a moment, love,” Ariel murmured, rising from her seat and pulling out her phone. “I just need to call Darcy and check up on things at Leaside.”

Miles nodded understandingly, his gaze warm with affection. “Of course, take your time.”

Ariel stepped away from the table and dialed Darcy’s number, her heart thrumming with a mix of anticipation and concern. As the phone rang, she found herself pacing along the worn cobblestones outside the restaurant, the cool air wrapping around her.

“Hey, Ariel,” Darcy greeted, his voice warm yet slightly flustered. “How’s the honeymoon going?”

“Hi, Darcy,” Ariel replied, trying to keep her tone light despite her concerns. “It’s been... interesting, to say the least. How are things holding up at Leaside?”

“Um, everything’s fine,” Darcy assured her, though there was a noticeable hesitance in his words. “We’ve got everything under control here.”

Ariel furrowed her brow, sensing that there was more to the story than Darcy was letting on. “Is something wrong, Darcy? You can be honest with me.”

“Really, Ariel, it’s nothing you need to worry about,” he insisted, attempting to sound casual. “Just some minor kitchen issues, but I’ve got it handled.”

Ariel bit her lip, torn between wanting to trust Darcy and the nagging feeling that there was more going on than he was admitting. She knew that Darcy meant well and didn’t want to burden her during her honeymoon, but she couldn’t shake the worry that weighed on her heart.

“Are you sure, Darcy? I don’t want you to feel like you have to handle everything on your own,” she said softly, her concern evident in her voice.

“Really, Ariel, it’s all good,” Darcy reassured her again, his tone more confident this time. “Now go enjoy your honeymoon. You deserve it.”

“All right,” Ariel conceded with a sigh, knowing that pushing further would likely only add stress to an already delicate situation. “But if you need anything or if things change, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Will do, boss,” Darcy promised, his voice laced with gratitude. “Have a great evening!”

“Thank you, Darcy,” Ariel replied before ending the call, her heart still heavy with lingering unease.

As she returned to their table, Miles looked up at her with concern etched on his handsome features. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything is... fine, supposedly,” Ariel admitted, trying to forge a smile as she settled back into her seat. “Darcy assured me that they’ve got everything under control.”

Ariel allowed herself to be drawn back into the romantic ambiance of the restaurant and the comforting presence of her husband. But despite Darcy’s reassurances, Ariel couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that something wasn’t quite right back at Leaside. She knew she should trust her assistant, but the worry still gnawed at the edges of her thoughts as they made their way back to the inn.

“Are you sure everything is okay?” Miles asked gently, sensing her unease.

Ariel forced a smile and nodded. “Yes, I’m just being overly cautious, I suppose. Darcy promised he’d call if anything changed.”

The subtle scent of fresh flowers wafted over her as Ariel looked out the window, hoping the view of the beach would bring her solace. But instead of calm, her anxiety continued to build. Wanting to feel connected to home and reassured by someone familiar, she decided to text Katie.

Pulling out her phone, she typed: “Hey Katie. How’s everything back home? Anything I should know about?”

She pressed send and waited, staring intently at the screen. But instead of the message going through, a dreaded “Failed to Send” notification appeared. Ariel frowned, trying again, but the message still wouldn’t go through.

She glanced at the signal bars - only one bar flickered, teasing her with its instability.

“Miles,” Ariel murmured, her voice tinged with worry, “I can’t seem to get a message out to Katie. The reception here is terrible.”

Miles took out his own phone, trying to send a message himself, but his phone too failed. “Seems like we’re in a dead spot,” he commented.

The weight of isolation pressed on Ariel. Not only were they miles away on their honeymoon, but now it seemed they were cut off from the world. The room felt smaller, more

confining, and Ariel's thoughts spiraled into what-ifs. What if there was an emergency? What if Katie needed her? What if the troubles at Leaside were more significant than Darcy let on?

“Honey,” Miles said, reaching across for her hand. “How about we make some calls in the morning and see if we can get a room at a different resort? I know they just switched our rooms, but, let's face it, the place is awful.”

“It's worth a try,” she said, smiling, hoping the gesture would make her feel happier.

Ariel gazed out into the sea, but it offered little comfort. The paradise she imagined had started showing its cracks, and Ariel was left wondering what other surprises awaited them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning, sunlight streamed through the window of their room at the Paradise Gold—and at least the name rang true as golden rays of light danced across the walls and floor. It was a lively scene outside, with birds chirping happily in the trees, their melodies weaving together in a cheerful symphony. The world seemed to be embracing the promise of a new day, a stark contrast to Ariel’s lingering frustration from the previous day’s disappointments.

Miles woke up first, and Ariel heard him whisper as her own eyes fluttered open to the sunlit room. “Hey,” he said gently, his hand reaching out to brush her dark hair away from her face, “it’s a new day, Ariel.” His voice was soft, like a soothing balm for her weary soul. “We have a fresh start, and I know things will get better.”

Ariel’s heart swelled with gratitude for this man who had become her rock, her safe harbor amidst the storms of life. The world around her gradually came into focus. The sunlight that had seemed so warm and inviting just moments ago now felt like an unwelcome intruder, forcing her to confront the reality of another day filled with uncertainty. She sighed, turning her gaze back to Miles, who looked at her with a gentle smile.

“Let’s try to start this day off on a lighter note, shall we?” He suggested playfully, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Why did the tomato turn red?”

Ariel raised an eyebrow, still feeling grumpy but curious about Miles's attempt at humor. "I don't know, why?"

"Because it saw the salad dressing!" Miles burst out laughing at his own joke, hoping to see Ariel's beautiful smile light up her face once more. To his delight, she couldn't help but chuckle as she shook her head at his silliness.

"Okay, okay," she conceded, her laughter easing some of the tension from the previous day. "You're right, we can make today better. Together."

They began discussing their plan to find a new hotel, eager to salvage the remainder of their honeymoon experience. While Ariel pulled out her phone to search for nearby accommodations, Miles started gathering their belongings, carefully folding clothes and placing toiletries into their suitcases.

"Look at this one," Ariel said, her voice tinged with excitement as she showed Miles pictures of a quaint inn nestled along the coastline. "The reviews are great, and it's not too far from here."

"Perfect," Miles agreed, pausing in his packing to wrap his arms around her waist from behind. "A fresh start, just like we talked about. And it'll be another adventure for us, right?"

"Right," Ariel replied, leaning back into his embrace and allowing herself to hope once more. As they continued to prepare for their departure, each action and shared word between them served as a reminder of the love that bound them together, and the promise of better days ahead.

But, to her disappointment, the quaint inn had no vacancies.

Ariel scrolled through the listings on her phone, feeling a glimmer of hope as she stumbled upon a nearby resort called Shore Skippers. She clicked on it, revealing stunning pictures of oceanfront views and beautifully manicured grounds.

“Hey, Miles, come take a look at this,” she called out, eager to share the discovery. Miles peered over her shoulder, nodding in approval as they perused the glowing reviews left by satisfied guests.

“Seems like a great choice, Ariel,” he agreed, his voice warm and optimistic. “What do you think?”

“Definitely looks promising,” she replied, her heart swelling with anticipation. “Let’s give it a shot.”

As sheer luck would have it, there was one room available—and Ariel snapped it up. With their new destination decided, they resumed packing their belongings, working together in easy harmony. Ariel folded the rest of the clothes while Miles tucked away shoes, each movement precise and efficient. As they zipped up their suitcases, Ariel felt nervous, hoping that this change would bring about the honeymoon they’d been dreaming of.

“Ready to go?” Miles asked, his eyes meeting hers as he reached for the last bag.

“Almost,” Ariel said, scanning the room one final time to ensure they hadn’t left anything behind. Her gaze landed on a

stray hairbrush near the nightstand, and she quickly scooped it up before securing it in her luggage. “Okay, now I’m ready.”

“Great,” Miles said, flashing her a reassuring smile. “Let’s get going, then.”

As they stepped out of the old inn and into the vibrant sunlight, Ariel took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air outside the stale room and the promise of a new beginning. Hand in hand, they strode toward the lobby of the Paradise, ready to leave past disappointments behind and embrace the possibilities that awaited them at Shore Skippers.

Ariel and Miles made their way to the old inn’s lobby, the wooden floorboards creaking beneath their feet as they carried their suitcases. The grumpy clerk glanced up from his worn paperback as they approached, his bushy eyebrows knitting together in a permanent frown.

“Checking out?” he muttered, not bothering to hide his disinterest.

“Yep,” Ariel replied brightly, determined not to let the man’s sour demeanor dampen her spirits. “We’re heading off to Shore Skippers.”

“Good luck with that,” the clerk grumbled as he processed their departure, handing back their credit card without so much as a farewell.

“Thanks,” Miles said with a pleasant smile, unfazed by the man’s indifference. “Take care.”

With that, they exited the musty old inn, their steps quickening as they crossed the threshold, back into the sunlit

morning air. Together, they loaded their luggage into the car, the crisp sound of zippers and the thud of heavy suitcases signaling the finality of their decision. As Miles closed the trunk, Ariel felt a surge of hope seep into her chest, warming her from within.

As they drove to Shore Skippers, the landscape transformed around them, trading the quaint charm of the touristy main island drag for the wild beauty of the coastline. Lush greenery lined the winding road, trees swaying gently in the breeze as if waving farewell to the couple. To their right, the sparkling ocean stretched out towards the horizon, an endless expanse of blue that seemed to embody the boundless possibilities of their new adventure.

“Remember this song?” Miles asked, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel in time with the melody that filled the car. It was one of their early favorites, a tune they’d danced to countless times in the warm embrace of each other’s arms. It had played at their wedding.

“Of course,” Ariel replied, her heart swelling with affection as she watched Miles’ eyes light up with joy. “How could I forget?”

They sang along together, their voices harmonizing effortlessly in a testament to their deep connection. The music created a light and joyful atmosphere within the car, the notes weaving together to form a tapestry of shared memories and love. Through it all, Ariel felt the frustrations of the previous day slowly fade away, replaced by a profound sense of gratitude for the man beside her.

“Look at that view,” Miles said, nodding towards the ocean as they rounded a bend in the road. “It’s hard not to feel hopeful when you’re surrounded by so much beauty.”

“True,” Ariel agreed, her gaze lingering on the shimmering waves as they crashed against the shore. “But it’s even easier to feel hopeful when I’m with you.”

Miles reached over to give her hand a gentle squeeze, his touch warm and reassuring. Together, they continued down the coastal road, quickly approaching Shore Skippers.

The car rolled to a gentle stop in front of the resort, its whitewashed exterior adorned with vibrant flowers and lush foliage that seemed to reach out in welcome. Miles turned off the engine, and for a moment, they simply sat there, taking in the inviting scene before them.

“Here we are,” Ariel said softly, her heart fluttering with a mix of anticipation and hope as she gazed at the impeccably maintained grounds. “Do you think this place will be better than the last one?” She couldn’t help the slight tremor of doubt that tinged her voice, the memories of the previous hotel still fresh in her mind.

“Let’s find out together,” Miles replied, his voice steady and reassuring. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before they stepped out of the car, their footsteps crunching on the gravel pathway leading to the entrance.

As they approached the resort’s doors, a friendly staff member greeted them with a warm smile, instantly putting Ariel at ease. “Welcome to Shore Skippers,” the young woman

said, her eyes sparkling with genuine enthusiasm. “I’m Jenna, and I’ll be helping you with your check-in process today.”

“Thank you, Jenna,” Ariel replied, returning the smile. “We’re really looking forward to our stay here.”

Jenna led them through the airy lobby, where sunlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting a warm glow on the polished wooden floors and cozy seating areas. Ariel’s spirits lifted as she took in the tasteful décor, sensing that they had indeed made the right choice in coming to Shore Skippers.

“All right,” Jenna said, efficiently handling their paperwork at the reception desk, “you’re all set. Here’s a map of the resort, and I’d be happy to answer any questions you might have.”

Miles glanced over the map, his fingers tracing the various pathways that meandered throughout the property. “It looks like there’s plenty to do here,” he remarked, his eyes lighting up at the prospect of shared adventures with Ariel.

“Definitely,” Jenna confirmed, her smile never wavering. “If you need any recommendations or assistance during your stay, please don’t hesitate to ask any of our staff members.”

“Thank you,” Ariel said, her excitement bubbling over as she turned to Miles. “I think we’re going to have an amazing time here, don’t you?”

“Absolutely,” Miles agreed, his own anticipation mirroring hers. “And after everything we’ve been through, I’d say we deserve it.”

With a final exchange of smiles and words of gratitude, they made their way towards their room, the promise of a better experience at Shore Skippers already lifting their spirits and drawing them closer together.

Ariel and Miles walked hand in hand down the hallway, the soft echo of their footsteps creating a rhythm that matched the beating of their hearts. As they approached the door to their room, Ariel felt a mixture of hope and trepidation, silently praying that this new place would help wash away the disappointments of the previous day.

Miles unlocked the door and pushed it open, revealing a spacious and sunlit room that took Ariel's breath away. An ocean view stretched out beyond the large windows, the waves crashing against the shore like a soothing lullaby. The room itself was tastefully decorated in hues of blues and sandy beiges, drawing inspiration from the natural beauty just outside their window.

"Wow," Ariel breathed, her eyes wide with appreciation as she stepped inside. "This is more like it."

"Isn't it?" Miles agreed, his own relief evident in his voice. "I knew we'd find something better."

As they moved further into the room, Ariel noticed a welcome basket on the coffee table, brimming with a colorful assortment of tropical fruits. Beside it, a handwritten note from the resort's management added a personal touch that warmed her heart. She picked up the note and read aloud, "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Clemens, Welcome to Shore Skippers Resort. We are delighted you have chosen to spend your honeymoon with us

and hope your stay will be filled with unforgettable memories. Warmest regards, The Shore Skippers Team.”

“See?” Miles said, wrapping his arms around Ariel’s waist from behind. “They already know how to make us feel special.”

Ariel leaned back into his embrace, her lingering frustrations melting away as a sense of relief washed over her. “You’re right. I’m so glad we found this place.”

“Me too,” Miles murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple.

Ariel stood in the middle of the room, her eyes taking in the ample storage space provided by the large wardrobe and dresser. She felt a surge of gratitude that they would be able to unpack properly and settle in. As Miles began to unzip their suitcases, Ariel joined him, folding their clothes and placing them in the available drawers.

“Finally, we can put our things away and feel more at home,” she said, smiling as she carefully arranged her chef’s aprons next to her casual attire. Miles chuckled, his eyes crinkling with warmth.

“Here’s to making this place our little sanctuary for the next few days,” he agreed, placing a folded shirt into a drawer before turning to face Ariel.

With their belongings organized, they changed into comfortable clothes, keen to explore the resort and make the most of their time there. Ariel opted for a light, flowing

sundress, while Miles donned a pair of shorts and a breathable linen shirt.

“Ready, Mrs. Clemens?” Miles asked playfully, holding out his hand for Ariel to take.

“Absolutely, Mr. Clemens,” she replied, her heart swelling with love as she took his hand.

Together, they ventured out of their room, strolling hand in hand along the well-manicured pathways that wound through the resort. The sun was shining, casting a warm glow over everything, and the scent of blooming flowers filled the air.

“Look at that pool!” Ariel exclaimed as they passed by a large, sparkling swimming pool surrounded by palm trees and comfortable loungers. “I think I might actually go for a swim later.”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Miles agreed, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “And there’s a spa just over there, too. We should book some treatments while we’re here.”

“Maybe a couples’ massage,” Ariel suggested, already feeling more relaxed at the thought.

As they continued their stroll, they discovered various recreational facilities such as a tennis court, a fitness center, and a cozy library room filled with books, games, and puzzles. The resort seemed to have everything they might need or want during their stay, and the excitement for their honeymoon was rekindled within them.

“Can you believe we’re actually here?” Ariel mused aloud, her eyes shining with happiness. “I’m so grateful we didn’t let

our previous experience ruin our honeymoon.”

“Me too,” Miles echoed, his voice full of warmth and affection. “This place is beautiful, but it’s not just the location that makes our honeymoon special – it’s sharing it with you.”

“Likewise, my love,” Ariel whispered, tucking herself into his side as they continued to explore the resort, hand in hand, looking forward to the adventures ahead.

The sun cast a warm glow on the resort’s lush gardens as Ariel and Miles continued their exploration, hand in hand. The scent of blooming flowers mingled with the salty ocean air, creating an intoxicating perfume that seemed to embody the essence of their honeymoon.

“Look at those happy couples,” Ariel observed, nodding toward a group of guests lounging by a nearby fountain. Their laughter filled the air, and they exuded an air of contentment that was impossible to ignore. “It’s nice to be surrounded by people who are just as excited to be here as we are.”

“Definitely,” Miles agreed, his eyes crinkling with amusement as he waved to a cheerful family passing by.

As they walked along the winding path, the sound of waves crashing against the shore grew louder, beckoning them closer. They soon found themselves standing at the edge of a secluded beach, where a weathered wooden bench offered a front-row seat to the captivating sight before them.

“Shall we?” Miles asked, gesturing toward the bench with a playful grin.

“Absolutely,” Ariel replied, her heart swelling with love for the man at her side. Together, they settled onto the bench, their fingers intertwined, and turned their attention to the mesmerizing dance of the waves.

A gentle breeze stirred the air, carrying the salty tang of the ocean and the distant cries of seagulls. As they watched the sunlight sparkle on the water’s surface, Ariel felt an overwhelming sense of peace wash over her, washing away the lingering frustration from their previous misadventures.

“Isn’t this just perfect?” she sighed, leaning her head against Miles’s shoulder. “I can’t remember the last time I felt so at ease.”

“Me neither,” Miles admitted, his voice barely audible above the sound of the waves. “This is exactly what we needed – a chance to escape from reality and just be together.”

Ariel closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in the salty air and allowing herself to be fully present in the moment. She could feel the warmth of Miles’s body next to hers, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, and the gentle pressure of his hand around hers. It was as if they had entered their own private world, where nothing mattered but the love they shared and the memories they were creating together.

As they sat there on that secluded bench, watching the waves crash against the shore and reveling in the serenity that surrounded them, Ariel and Miles knew they had found something truly magical. This was the honeymoon they had always dreamed of.

Ariel glanced at Miles. She squeezed his hand gently, a subtle invitation to make plans for their day together.

“Let’s take a leisurely walk along the beach,” Ariel suggested, her voice soft as the waves lapping against the shore. “We could explore the shoreline and see what treasures we might find. But no jellyfish.”

“Sounds perfect,” Miles agreed, his eyes crinkling with warmth. “And after our walk, we can indulge ourselves in one of the resort’s restaurants. I saw they have some excellent seafood dishes.”

The thought of sharing a delicious meal with her husband brought a smile to Ariel’s face. As a chef, she appreciated good food, and the prospect of savoring fresh seafood was enticing.

“Let’s do that,” Ariel said, filled with excitement. “I can’t wait to try some local flavors and learn more about this beautiful place.”

As they stood up from the bench, still holding hands, Ariel felt a sense of anticipation and hope welling up within her. Together, they walked along the sandy path leading away from their secluded spot, their footsteps leaving temporary imprints on the pristine beach. The sun continued its ascent into the sky, casting golden rays upon the turquoise waters and painting the world around them in vibrant hues.

There was nothing more that she could want out of her trip than was spread before her—and nothing could take away the joys he felt at this moment.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ariel and Miles finished their walk and took their time returning to the main resort. The exterior of Shore Skippers was simply breathtaking. Lush tropical gardens surrounded the resort, creating an oasis of vibrant colors and intoxicating scents that beckoned guests to explore its winding pathways. As they walked through the gardens, Ariel marveled at the delicate beauty of the hibiscus flowers, their petals a vivid shade of coral that contrasted beautifully against the deep green foliage.

“Isn’t this place amazing?” Ariel asked, her voice filled with awe as she looked up at Miles.

He nodded in agreement, his eyes taking in the picturesque view before them. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The gardens gave way to a pristine stretch of sand, the turquoise waves of the ocean gently ebbing and flowing against the shore. It felt as if they had stumbled upon a hidden paradise, untouched by the world beyond. Ariel could sense the stress and tension of their daily lives melting away, replaced by a profound sense of peace and contentment.

“Can you believe we’re actually here?” Miles murmured, slipping his hand into hers as they continued towards the resort.

Ariel squeezed his hand affectionately, feeling a surge of gratitude for the man beside her. They had weathered so many

storms together, and she was determined to make the most of this precious moment they had been given.

“Let’s make a promise,” Ariel said suddenly, her eyes shining with emotion as she looked into Miles’ steady gaze. “No matter what happens in the future, let’s always remember this moment and how it feels to be standing here, hand in hand, surrounded by such beauty.”

Miles smiled gently, his thumb tracing soothing circles on the back of her hand. “I promise,” he whispered, sealing their vow with a tender kiss. ‘Now, let’s go ask how we book that couples’ massage.’”

Moments later, they stepped into the lobby of Shore Skippers, struck again by the warm and inviting atmosphere that enveloped them. The walls were adorned with vibrant local artwork depicting scenes of island life, while an eclectic mix of colorful fabrics draped over comfortable couches and chairs.

“Wow, this place is amazing,” Ariel murmured appreciatively, taking in the cozy surroundings that seemed to welcome her with open arms. She could feel the weight of her worries slipping away as the soothing scent of the ocean breeze wafted through the open windows.

Miles squeezed her hand, his eyes twinkling with excitement. “I knew you’d love it here,” he said softly, watching as she absorbed every detail of the room.

They stood near the reception desk, waiting for the friendly staff member to return from attending to another

guest. As they waited, they couldn't help but overhear a couple who were complaining about their stay at the resort.

"I can't believe the nerve of that waiter!" the woman said indignantly, her voice shrill and tense. "And don't even get me started on the noise from those renovations."

"Tell me about it," her husband grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. "We came here to relax, not to be kept up all night by construction workers."

Ariel glanced at Miles, concern flickering across her features. But he simply shook his head, dismissing the negative comments with a reassuring smile. "Every place has its quirks," he murmured, leaning in to press a soft kiss to her temple. "Let's not let a couple of unhappy guests spoil our experience. I'm sure we'll have a wonderful time here."

Ariel nodded, allowing herself to be guided by Miles. After all, they had come to Saint Celadon Island to escape the pressures of their everyday lives. She refused to let any negativity seep into this sacred space they had carved out for themselves—even if the complaints of the couple checking out echoed some of the troubles she'd had back at Leaside.

"Hello again," the receptionist greeted them with a friendly smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Can I help you?"

Ariel exchanged a hopeful look with Miles.

"Do you have a menu of spa services?" he asked.

"Right away," she replied, ducking under the counter.

As they waited, her fingers brushed against Miles's in silent reassurance. She knew that he could feel her excitement

as much as she could sense his own anticipation.

“Here you are,” the receptionist handed them a cream-colored menu, the letters printed in gilded ink. “The spa books twenty-four hours in advance. We hope you enjoy your stay with us, and please don’t hesitate to let us know if there’s anything we can do to make your experience more comfortable.”

“Thank you,” Ariel replied, grateful for the warmth and hospitality that seemed to permeate every corner of the resort.

As they made their way down the softly lit corridor, Ariel couldn’t help but admire the delicate seashell decorations that adorned the walls, each one meticulously arranged to create a soothing, coastal ambiance. The subtle scent of sea salt lingered in the air, mingling with the faint whispers of laughter and conversation drifting from behind closed doors.

“Can you believe this place?” Ariel murmured, unable to contain her delight as they approached their room. “It’s like stepping into another world.”

Miles nodded, his expression softening as he took in the picturesque surroundings. “It’s perfect,” he agreed, his voice barely audible above the gentle hum of the resort. “Just like you.”

Ariel flushed, touched by the sincerity in his words.

“Time for some rest,” Miles announced as he unlocked the door to their room, his face bathed in the warm glow of the corridor’s soft lighting. “In our home away from home for the next couple of days.”

Ariel stepped through the threshold, her heart swelling again at the sight of the cozy haven that awaited them. A symphony of soft blues and creams greeted Ariel and Miles as they stepped into the room. The focal point was a plush king-sized bed adorned with crisp white linens and a smattering of decorative pillows. It seemed to beckon them toward its comforting embrace. She was reminded of how little she had slept on the lumpy, awful bed at the Paradise.

“Look at that view,” Miles said, his gaze drawn to the balcony’s sliding glass doors. He crossed the room and pulled back the delicate curtains, revealing the turquoise expanse of the ocean beyond.

Ariel joined him by the railing, her heart swelling as she took in the sight of the waves gently kissing the shoreline. The sun cast golden beams on the water’s surface, making it sparkle like a sea of diamonds. She sighed contentedly, feeling as if she’d somehow managed to capture a piece of heaven on earth.

“Doesn’t get much better than this, does it?” Miles asked, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“Not at all,” she agreed, leaning into his embrace. “I could stay here forever.”

As she savored the moment, Ariel’s hand absently drifted to her arm, her fingertips brushing against a small raised bump. She frowned, pulling her arm closer to examine the area. A tiny red mark glared back at her, unmistakably the result of a bug bite.

“Hey, what’s this?” she asked, showing Miles her arm. “I didn’t even feel it happen.”

He inspected the bite, his brow furrowing slightly. “Looks like a bug got to you. We’ll keep an eye on it, but I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Right,” Ariel nodded, pushing her concern aside. She wasn’t going to let a pesky bite ruin their time together. “Now, where were we?”

“Admiring the view,” Miles said with a grin, pulling her closer once more.

Ariel smiled, allowing the beauty of their surroundings and the warmth of Miles’ embrace to melt away her lingering unease. Ariel gazed out at the turquoise waters from their balcony, a sense of contentment washing over her. She turned back to Miles, who was already reaching for her hand. “Shall we explore the beach?”

“Absolutely,” he said, his eyes shining with excitement. “But remember, no jellyfish!”

Hand in hand, they found a path lined with palm trees, the sound of waves crashing against the shore drawing them closer to the water’s edge. The lush greenery swayed gently around them, creating dappled patterns of sunlight on the ground, and as they walked further along the path, they felt like they were stepping into a secluded paradise.

“Listen to those waves,” Ariel whispered, her heart swelling with joy. “It’s like nature is singing a love song just for us.”

Miles squeezed her hand, smiling warmly. “There’s no one else I’d rather share this moment with.”

As they stepped onto the soft white sand, a warm breeze caressed their skin, filling their senses with the salty tang of the ocean. The sun cast a brilliant reflection on the sparkling water, and Ariel felt her pulse quicken at the breathtaking view that stretched before them.

“Can you believe this?” she asked, her voice filled with awe. “It’s like something straight out of a dream.”

“Or a postcard,” Miles added, chuckling softly. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

They stood there for a moment, taking in the vast expanse of azure blue that seemed to merge seamlessly with the sky above. The gentle waves lapped at their feet, a cool contrast to the sun-warmed sand that stretched out before them. As they walked, they marveled at the vibrant colors of seashells scattered along the shore and the distant laughter of children playing in the surf.

A sudden itch on her arm caused Ariel to glance down, noticing a small red bug bite. She absentmindedly scratched at it, hoping it would be nothing more than a minor nuisance.

“Are you all right?” Miles questioned, concern etched on his face as he noticed her discomfort.

“It’s just another bug bite,” Ariel assured him with a smile.

Ariel and Miles continued their leisurely stroll along the shore, their footprints momentarily etched into the soft sand before being washed away by the waves. The salty sea breeze

intertwined with the scent of blooming tropical flowers, evoking a sense of serenity that enveloped them both. As they ventured further down the coastline, the distant laughter and chatter from other beachgoers gradually faded, replaced by the soothing sound of the ocean.

“Look at that,” Ariel murmured, gesturing towards a secluded spot nestled between towering palm trees and vibrant foliage. A makeshift driftwood bench rested on the white sand, inviting them to enjoy the postcard-perfect view.

“Seems like the perfect place to take a break,” Miles agreed, guiding her towards the bench with a gentle squeeze of her hand. They sank into the sun-warmed wood, the tranquility of the scene washing over them as they listened to the chorus of seagulls overhead.

“Remember our first date?” she asked, her voice a tender murmur, carried along by the salty breeze.

“Of course,” Miles replied, chuckling softly. “How could I forget? You invited me to Leaside for dinner. You had flour on your cheek and didn’t even realize it until I pointed it out. You were so embarrassed, but I thought it was adorable.”

Ariel smiled at the memory, recalling how vulnerable she had felt in that moment, yet how safe and accepted she felt with him. She tilted her head up to meet his gaze, her eyes reflecting the vibrant colors of the sky.

“Back then, I never imagined we’d be here now, together like this,” she confessed, her heart swelling with gratitude. “I had been hurt before.”

“Neither did I,” admitted Miles, his thumb gently tracing circles on her hand. “And so had I—But I wouldn’t trade us for anything. Not us, not the joy of being part of a family with you and Katie, rebuilding my business, being part of Leaside. It’s all beyond my dreams.”

They sat in silence for a moment, soaking in the picturesque surroundings. Suddenly, Ariel felt a sharp sting on her ankle. She looked down to find a small, red insect crawling on her skin. Brushing it off hastily, she noticed another, and then another. “Miles!” she exclaimed, “We’re not alone here!”

Miles glanced down and spotted several of the same bugs clustering around his feet. “Oh no,” he groaned, swiping at them. “Looks like we’ve become quite the feast!”

Without needing another word, the two scrambled up from the driftwood bench, brushing off the pesky insects as they hurried away from their once-idyllic spot. Their steps quickened as they tried to outpace the swarm, the sound of their laughter echoing amidst the rustling palm leaves.

“Of all the things to interrupt our moment,” Ariel panted, her tone half amused and half exasperated.

“I think the universe is telling us we’ve had enough relaxation for one day,” Miles joked, offering Ariel a playful wink. The romantic scene they had experienced was now replaced with a comedic retreat from nature’s uninvited guests.

Once they felt safely distant from the swarm’s territory, they paused, catching their breath and sharing a chuckle at their unexpected adventure. Ariel examined her bites, which had already started to swell and redden.

“I guess no place is truly perfect,” Miles remarked, examining his own bites.

Ariel sighed, “True, but it’ll make for a memorable story, won’t it?”

Miles nodded, pulling her close, “Every moment with you is memorable, bugs and all.” They chuckled together, deciding to head back to their accommodations, hoping for a bug-free evening.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The sun dipped low in the sky as they approached Shore Skippers, and the crystal clear waves lapped gently at the shoreline, leaving traces of white foam on the pristine, soft sand. A gentle breeze rustled through the dunes, carrying with it the faint scent of salt and seaweed. The tranquil atmosphere was a balm to the soul, soothing away the cares of the world.

Ariel strolled along the water's edge, her bare feet sinking into the wet sand as the surf playfully lapped at her ankles. The water soothed the bug bites on her legs. Her hair danced around her face, and she breathed deeply, savoring the briny air.

“Look, Miles!” Ariel exclaimed, pointing towards a cluster of seashells nestled in the sand. She bent down to collect a few, holding them up proudly for him to see. “These will make a lovely addition to the big jar in the lobby at Leaside.”

“Be careful not to go too far into the water,” he called out to her gently, emphasizing his concern for her safety. “I don't want you to get hurt.”

Ariel shot him a reassuring smile and playfully splashed some water toward him, her laughter infectious as Miles' lips curved into an amused grin.

However, the tranquil atmosphere was soon marred by a sudden sharp sensation on Ariel's arm. She winced, swatting

away the culprit – a mosquito that had dared to interrupt their peaceful time on the beach.

“Ouch,” she muttered, rubbing the spot where the tiny pest had bitten her. “Another bug?”

“Are you okay?” Miles asked, his brow furrowing with worry as he inspected the irritated area.

“Ah, it’s another mosquito bite,” she replied, brushing off the minor annoyance.

But even though she tried to dismiss it, there was no denying as several more pesky mosquitoes began to intrude. As they continued walking, the buzzing sound grew more insistent, and it seemed as though the insects were determined to make their presence known.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones enjoying this beautiful day,” Miles quipped, attempting to maintain a lighthearted tone despite the growing nuisance. ‘First our friends at the driftwood, and now...’

“Unfortunately,” Ariel agreed, swatting yet another mosquito from her skin. Her once carefree expression now held a hint of frustration, her previous euphoria dampened by the uninvited guests.

“Maybe we should go more quickly,” Miles suggested, his concern for Ariel’s wellbeing overriding any desire to prolong their beachside stroll.

“Ouch!” Ariel yelped again, slapping her arm where another mosquito had just made its meal. The discomfort intensified as more of the pesky insects seemed to follow their

every step, their bites leaving a trail of welts on Ariel's sun-kissed skin.

"Are they multiplying or what?" Miles exclaimed, swiping at the air in an attempt to ward off the relentless swarm. His own body was beginning to show the signs of the unwelcome feast, and he felt responsible for bringing Ariel into such an annoying predicament.

Ariel winced as she scratched another itchy bump on her leg. "I think we've stumbled upon their favorite dining spot," she said with a strained chuckle, trying to make light of the situation despite the mounting agitation.

The buzzing grew louder, as if the mosquitos were taunting them with their persistent presence. It filled the air around them like an invisible cloud, drowning out the soothing sound of the waves crashing against the shore. The once tranquil atmosphere had transformed into a war zone, and Ariel and Miles were losing the battle.

"Enough is enough," Miles declared, reaching for Ariel's hand with determination. "We're getting out of here."

"Thank goodness," Ariel agreed, her relief evident in her voice. She could feel the stinging sensation on her skin, each bite adding to her desire to escape the torment of the tiny bloodsuckers.

As they hurried away from the beach, the whine of the mosquitoes seemed to follow them, a constant reminder of the irritation they felt. Every step took them further from the serenity they had once shared, replaced now by a sense of urgency to find refuge from the winged menaces.

“Let’s hope our room is mosquito-free,” Ariel thought aloud, rubbing her swelling bites as they finally reached their destination. The promise of respite from the onslaught of insects brought a glimmer of hope to their eyes, despite the disappointment that lingered from their disrupted beach day.

The buzzing around Ariel’s ears grew louder, more insistent. Her heart raced as she swatted at the relentless mosquitos, each of their bites sending a fresh wave of irritation through her body. Miles, on the other hand, had gone pale, his eyes wide with concern as he scanned their surroundings for an escape route.

“Maybe we can make a run for it,” Miles suggested, his voice shaky with apprehension. “If we’re fast enough, we might be able to outrun them.”

“Let’s do it,” Ariel agreed, her chest tightening with panic as she imagined the swarm of insects growing larger by the second. They couldn’t remain in this mosquito-infested battlefield any longer.

With adrenaline pumping through their veins, Ariel and Miles sprinted away from the beach, their feet pounding against the soft sand as they struggled to put distance between themselves and the merciless insects. Their desperate breaths mingled with the sound of the crashing waves, forming a chaotic symphony that underscored their frantic flight.

“Keep going!” Miles encouraged, his voice strained as he fought to maintain their pace. Ariel could feel his grip on her hand tighten, a silent promise to not let go.

As they ran, Ariel's thoughts were consumed by a singular focus: escape. She didn't have the luxury of pondering the ruined day, or even spare a thought for her swelling bites. There would be time for that later, she promised herself, once they were safely away from the bloodthirsty mosquitos.

"Almost there," Miles gasped, his eyes locked on their escape route as he urged them forward. "Just a little further."

Finally, with their lungs burning and their legs protesting every step, Ariel and Miles reached the safety of their destination. Ariel and Miles stumbled through the doorway of their room, shaking off the remnants of the mosquito swarm as they slammed the door shut behind them. The sudden silence was deafening, a stark contrast to the relentless buzzing that had haunted them moments ago.

"Are they all gone?" Ariel whispered, her voice wavering with anxiety. She scanned the room for any lingering insects, her swollen bites throbbing in protest.

Miles brushed his hands through his hair, dislodging a rogue mosquito before turning to her with a small, relieved smile. "I think we're safe now."

Ariel sighed, allowing her shoulders to relax as she leaned against the door. The adrenaline that had fueled their escape began to ebb away, replaced by the weight of disappointment. "I can't believe our day ended like this," she murmured, her gaze drifting towards the window, where the beach lay hidden beyond their view.

"Neither can I," Miles admitted, his eyes clouded with concern as he took in the assortment of angry red welts dotting

Ariel's skin. "How are you feeling?"

"Like an all-you-can-eat buffet," she replied with a weak chuckle, attempting to brush off the pain. "But it's not just the bites that hurt. We were having such a lovely time out there, and then... this happened."

Miles nodded, the corners of his mouth pulling downward in a sympathetic frown. "I know, sweetheart. I feel the same way." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "I'm sorry I didn't notice the mosquitos sooner. I should've been more vigilant after the jellyfish incident."

"Hey," Ariel said gently, reaching for his hand and squeezing it reassuringly. "This wasn't your fault. Sometimes things just happen, no matter how careful we are."

He offered her a grateful smile, but the shadows of guilt still lingered in his eyes. "I just wanted this day to be perfect for us, you know?"

"Me too," Ariel agreed, her heart aching with the knowledge that their tranquil beach day had been ruined by such an unexpected turn of events.

Ariel sat in their cozy, dimly lit room, the soft sounds of waves crashing against the shore outside acting as a balm for her frazzled nerves. The soothing cream she had applied to her numerous mosquito bites brought some relief. They were safe now, away from the relentless buzzing and biting.

Miles popped out of the en suite bathroom, fresh from the shower, rubbing cream onto his own spots. He came to where she sat on the bed and leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead.

“Our tour is in the morning—remember the Blue Lagoon Ruins?”

“Ah, the tour,” Ariel mused, her mood momentarily lifted by the thought of exploring. “It’s the must-see on the island.” Despite her attempt at optimism, uncertainty lingered in her tone.

“Exactly,” Miles encouraged, his smile infectious. “It’s a chance to see the sights, learn some history, and just enjoy each other’s company. No mosquitos, no worries. Just you and me, discovering new things together.” His enthusiasm was palpable, as if he could already envision them strolling hand in hand through picturesque lagoons and finding hidden gems.

The Ruins tour just had to go well. If not, she might just take it as an omen that their honeymoon was well and truly cursed. But with Miles by her side, she knew there was still *hope* for their vacation, and that was enough to keep her going.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

That night, Ariel and Miles sat on the edge of their resort room bed, swatting at the persistent mosquitoes that seemed to be everywhere. The once inviting and romantic space now felt like an uncomfortable battleground against the relentless insects.

“Ugh, these mosquitoes are driving me crazy,” Ariel muttered, scratching at a fresh bite on her arm. The whole room now smelled of bug spray, and still the little pests persisted. “The front desk said this is normal?”

“They offered mosquito netting for the bed—but not until morning,” Miles said, irritated.

Ariel picked up her phone from beside her and checked again for texts. “I hope Darcy and Oliver and Katie are handling things okay at Leaside. I can’t stop thinking about all the drama we left behind.”

Miles sighed and rubbed his forearm where another mosquito had just feasted. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it too.” He looked over at Ariel, noticing the worry creasing her brow. “I don’t mind if you check in with them.”

Ariel hesitated, remembering the poor reception in their room. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get through. But I suppose it’s worth a try. I just need to know everything is running smoothly.”

Her fingers tapped nervously on her thigh as she contemplated the situation. She knew the issues at the B&B couldn't be resolved from a distance, but the maternal instinct within her urged her to reach out and offer support. It was more than just a business to her; it was a dream that had finally come to life, and she wanted to make sure it continued to flourish.

"Let's give it a shot," Miles said, trying to sound optimistic despite their shared frustration with the mosquito situation. "Who knows? Maybe they've got everything under control."

Ariel managed a small smile at the thought, hoping that their romantic getaway could still be salvaged. Ariel pressed the phone to her ear, pacing back and forth across the resort room's limited floor space. The static-filled silence gnawed at her, broken only by the occasional faint beep as the call tried to connect. Her frustration mounted with each passing second, mirrored in the way she absently swatted at the persistent mosquitoes buzzing around them.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath, willing the signal to improve. Miles watched from the edge of the bed, his fingers drumming a restless beat on his knee, the lines around his eyes deepening as he shared her concern.

"Any luck?" he asked, keeping his voice low as if not to startle the elusive reception.

"Nothing," Ariel sighed, pausing in her pacing to glare at the phone. "It's like we're in some sort of communication black hole."

Miles arched an eyebrow, his gaze flicking toward the window. “Well, I heard the reception is better outside... but that means braving the mosquito army.”

Ariel blinked at him, then at the window, weighing the pros and cons. On one hand, she could potentially reach out to her family and staff, gain some peace of mind. On the other hand, stepping outside meant exposing herself to the relentless swarm of bloodthirsty bugs that had already tormented them since their arrival.

“Fine,” she said finally, steeling herself for the battle ahead. “I’ll give it a try. But if I come back looking like I’ve contracted some rare tropical disease, I’m blaming you.”

Miles chuckled, the sound edged with his own anxiety. “Deal.”

Ariel stared at the window, her fingers tightening around her phone. It was a simple choice - step outside and face the onslaught of mosquitoes to make the call, or stay inside and continue to worry about the B&B. She sighed heavily, the weight of her concern pressing down on her chest and making it difficult to breathe.

“Maybe I should just go out there,” she muttered, her voice wavering with hesitation. “I can’t stand not knowing what’s happening.”

Miles looked up from where he sat on the bed, his eyes softening as they met hers. He could see the torment written across her face, the internal battle she fought between her desire for information and her reluctance to face the bugs again.

“Tell you what,” he said, standing up and moving toward her. “Why don’t I come with you? We can brave the mosquito army together.”

Ariel glanced at him, surprise flickering in her eyes. “Are you sure?” she asked hesitantly, searching his face for any sign of doubt.

“Absolutely,” he replied, determination shining in his eyes. “We’re in this together, remember?”

She nodded, touched by his offer, and allowed herself a small smile. Together, they would face the enemy outside their resort room door. Ariel steeled herself and took a deep breath, her grip on the phone tighter than ever, while Miles reached for the doorknob.

“All right,” she murmured, her voice resolute. “Let’s do this.”

The moment Ariel and Miles stepped outside, a swarm of mosquitos greeted them like an unwelcome committee. The high-pitched whine of their wings filled the air, and the couple reflexively swatted at the tiny pests buzzing around them.

“Ugh, these things are relentless,” grumbled Miles, his annoyance evident as he waved his arms in a futile attempt to ward off the bloodthirsty insects. “Why was this not on any of the reviews?”

Ariel nodded in agreement, her eyes squinting as she tried to focus on finding a spot with enough reception for her call. She could feel the itch of mosquito bites already forming on

her skin, but she pushed the discomfort aside, determined to get through to Leaside.

“Let’s try over there, by that tree,” she suggested, pointing towards a slightly more secluded area just a few steps away from their current position.

As they approached the tree, Ariel glanced down at her phone, her heart sinking when she saw that the signal strength remained weak. She could feel the frustration building within her, fueled further by the constant onslaught of the mosquitos. Despite this, she refused to let the situation get the best of her.

“Come on, come on,” she muttered under her breath, willing her phone to pick up a stronger signal.

“Maybe if we move closer to the water?” Miles offered, trying to be helpful despite his own growing irritation.

“All right, let’s give it a shot,” Ariel agreed, her voice laced with determination.

They trudged through the sandy beach, their feet sinking into the cool sand, the mosquitos continuing their relentless pursuit. As much as she wanted to curse and scream at the unfairness of it all, Ariel knew that doing so would only make the situation worse. Instead, she poured every ounce of her willpower into remaining focused on the task at hand.

Finally, as they neared the water’s edge, the signal bars on Ariel’s phone crept upwards, giving her hope. With a triumphant smile, she looked at Miles and said, “I think this might work.”

“Great! Make the call, I’ll keep these little monsters off you as best as I can,” he replied, positioning himself between her and the majority of the buzzing horde.

Ariel took a deep breath, steeled herself for the conversation ahead, and dialed the number. The phone rang in her ear. Ariel’s heart sank as the call dropped unexpectedly, the shrill sound of the disconnection echoing in her ear. She stared at her phone in disbelief, the frustration building within her like a tidal wave, threatening to consume her.

“Darn it!” she exclaimed, her voice cracking with emotion. “I was just about to get through.”

Miles put his arm around her, offering what little comfort he could amidst the swarm of mosquitos. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “Maybe we can try again later when there’s a better signal.”

Ariel sighed, knowing he was right but still feeling the weight of the situation on her shoulders. “It’s just so frustrating,” she muttered, swatting away another mosquito that had ventured too close to her face. “I just want to know what’s going on back home, and I can’t even make a simple phone call.”

“Hey,” Miles said gently, tilting her chin upwards so their eyes met. “Why don’t we go out and grab some food? Get our minds off things for a while?”

Ariel hesitated, torn between her desire to keep trying and the need for a reprieve from the stress. The gnawing hunger in her stomach made the decision for her. “All right,” she agreed, managing a small, strained smile. “Maybe some food will help

clear our heads. And hopefully we'll have better luck with the phone tomorrow."

"Let's hope so," Miles agreed, his voice tinged with determination. "We'll figure it out, Ariel. One way or another."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A soft ocean breeze greeted Ariel and Miles as they stepped into the restaurant, with its nautical-themed decor, large bay windows overlooking the water, and a hint of salt in the air. It transported them to a serene maritime world.

They were led to a table by the window, the gentle crash of waves just outside providing a calming soundtrack to their day. As they settled into their seats, Ariel couldn't help but notice the way the sunlight reflected off the water, casting a shimmering glow on Miles's face. He looked so at ease, his eyes alight with curiosity and anticipation.

"Here are your menus," the cheerful hostess said, placing the leather-bound booklets before them. "Take your time, and just let me know if you have any questions."

"Thank you," Ariel replied, opening the menu and scanning the seafood options with a discerning eye. Her many years as a professionally-trained chef had given her an uncanny ability to judge the quality of a dish based on its description alone.

Miles leaned closer, his voice low and teasing. "So, what do you think? Are we in for culinary delight or a disaster?"

"Let's see..." Ariel trailed off, her attention focused on the menu. Oysters on the half shell, pan-seared scallops, and cedar plank salmon – the offerings were certainly enticing. But she

knew all too well that even the most tempting dishes could disappoint if not prepared with care and skill.

“Hard to say,” she admitted finally, looking up at Miles with a playful smile. “But I’m willing to take the risk if you are.”

Ariel hesitated, her fingers tracing the edge of the menu. While she trusted her own culinary instincts, the uncertainty of an unfamiliar kitchen weighed on her mind. “You know what?” she said, making a decision. “I think I’ll play it safe and order a salad instead.” Her choice was far from her usual adventurous palate, but with their special day at stake, she couldn’t risk disappointment.

“Suit yourself,” Miles replied, his eyes still scanning the options before him. “But I might be tempted to try something more... exotic.”

Just then, a waiter approached their table, his crisp white shirt and black trousers perfectly complementing the refined atmosphere of the restaurant. His smile was warm and genuine, his eyes twinkling as he greeted them. “Good evening, folks. My name is Ben, and I’ll be taking care of you today. Can I interest you in any appetizers or drinks?”

“Actually,” Ariel interjected, folding her menu and handing it to him, “I’ve already decided on the mixed greens salad with goat cheese, cranberries, and candied pecans.” She caught Miles’s faintly amused glance and added, “I’m feeling a bit conservative today.”

“An excellent choice, ma’am,” Ben assured her, jotting down her order. Then, turning his attention to Miles, he asked,

“And for you, sir?”

Miles hesitated, his finger tapping against the menu. “I’m considering the seafood options, but I’m not quite sure yet...”

“Ah,” Ben exclaimed, nodding knowingly. “Allow me to make a recommendation. Our chef prides himself on sourcing only the freshest seafood from local fishermen. The pan-seared Trout with garlic and shallot-citrus sauce is particularly popular – and for good reason. The flavors are bright and bold, and the fish is cooked to perfection.”

Ariel watched as Miles’s eyes lit up, his initial hesitation replaced by curiosity. She felt a twinge of envy; it had been too long since she’d allowed herself the luxury of culinary exploration. But the menu had mentioned nothing about the seafood being local, and she was wary. Still, she reminded herself, love was about compromise and trust – even when it came to something as seemingly trivial as dinner choices.

“All right,” Miles said slowly, his voice filled with anticipation. “I’ll give it a try. Thank you for the recommendation, Ben.”

“Of course, sir. I’m confident you won’t be disappointed.” With a final nod, Ben collected their menus and disappeared into the bustling kitchen, leaving Ariel and Miles alone once more.

As they waited for their meals, Ariel found her thoughts drifting back to her own restaurant, the tantalizing scent of seared seafood wafting through the air.

The sea breeze drifted through the open windows of the restaurant, carrying with it the soothing sounds of waves crashing against the shore. Ariel closed her eyes, allowing the melody of the ocean to envelop her senses.

The clinking of silverware against plates and the murmur of conversation filled the air as their food arrived, the aroma of Miles's seafood dish wafting through the air. Ariel's trained chef's eye couldn't help but assess the presentation, noting the vibrant colors and artful arrangement. The seared fish was nestled atop a bed of greens, drizzled with a bright lemon beurre blanc that glistened enticingly. Beside it, a small mound of rice pilaf boasted flecks of fresh herbs.

"Wow, this looks incredible," Miles commented, his eyes wide with appreciation. "I'm glad I took a chance on it."

"Me too," Ariel agreed, unable to hide her curiosity. She had always been cautious when it came to seafood, especially after having worked in some of the finest kitchens in Paris. She knew what quality looked like, and she couldn't deny that Miles's dish seemed to meet those standards. However, she decided to play it safe and stick to her salad, which was nothing to scoff at either.

She speared a cherry tomato with her fork, watching as it burst, releasing its sweet juices over the crisp lettuce and tangy goat cheese crumbles. A light vinaigrette coated the leaves, bringing together the flavors in a harmonious dance on her palate. Fresh cucumber slices added a cool crunch, while toasted almonds provided a satisfying contrast in texture.

“Your salad looks delicious,” Miles said, his eyes lingering on her plate for a moment before meeting her gaze again.

“How is it?”

“Fresh,” Ariel replied, savoring another bite. “The ingredients all complement each other beautifully.” As she spoke, she felt grateful for this simple yet elegant meal they were sharing. It was a reminder that sometimes, it was the simpler things in life that brought the most joy.

“Would you like to try some of mine?” Miles offered, his voice filled with enthusiasm. “It’s really quite good.”

“Maybe next time,” Ariel responded gently, her eyes sparkling with warmth. She appreciated the gesture, but she was content with her salad and the company it came with.

“All right,” he agreed, nodding as he continued to enjoy his seafood dish. They continued their meal in companionable silence, the sound of the ocean waves just outside the window a soothing backdrop to their evening.

As Miles took his last bite of the seafood dish, savoring the delicate flavors that danced on his tongue, Ariel felt a sense of satisfaction. The meal had been better than she’d dared to hope for, and she knew this experience would be etched in both their memories for years to come.

“Did it live up to your expectations?” Ariel asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity as she dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a crisp white napkin.

“Absolutely,” Miles replied, giving her a warm smile that set her heart aflutter. “And yours?”

“Surprisingly so,” she admitted, taking a final, appreciative bite of her salad. “I’m glad we took the risk.”

Outside, the sky was awash with vibrant hues of pink and orange as the sun burned bright in the sky. Ariel felt a longing for the soothing sound of the waves and the gentle caress of the sea breeze on her skin.

“Would you like to take a stroll along the beach?” she suggested softly, her eyes meeting Miles’s in quiet invitation. “The mosquitos should have died down by now.”

Miles’s face lit up at the idea, and he nodded eagerly. “I’d love that.”

They rose from their chairs, leaving behind the remnants of their satisfying meal, and ventured hand in hand toward the shoreline. The soft sand greeted their feet. As they walked along the beach, the sound of the waves lapping at the shore filled the air around them, creating a symphony of serenity that only served to deepen their connection. Every step they took together felt like another chapter written in the story of their love, and Ariel knew that this was just the beginning of a lifetime’s worth of memories they would create side by side.

Moonlight danced on the water’s surface, casting a soft glow that illuminated the waves as they kissed the shoreline. Ariel and Miles strolled hand in hand along the beach, their bare feet sinking into the damp sand with each step. The salty breeze played with strands of Ariel’s hair, the cool air a refreshing contrast to the warmth of Miles’ hand enveloping hers.

“Did I ever tell you about my first-ever cooking disaster?” Ariel asked with a giggle, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she glanced up at him.

Miles chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t think you have. Do tell.”

“Okay, well, I was probably around ten years old,” she began, her voice taking on a playful tone. “My sister, Charlene, and I were trying to make cookies for our dad as a surprise. We managed to sneak a recipe from one of our mom’s cookbooks, and we thought we had everything under control.”

“Clearly, you didn’t,” Miles teased, raising an eyebrow in anticipation.

Ariel laughed, nodding in agreement. “Oh, we were so off. We somehow managed to swap the measurements for sugar and salt. Those cookies were... let’s just say, a memorable experience.”

“Memorable in the worst way, I assume?” Miles grinned, imagining young Ariel’s dismay at her culinary catastrophe.

“Absolutely,” she affirmed, her laughter mingling with the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. “But it taught me the importance of double-checking everything in the kitchen, especially when baking.”

“Ah, a valuable lesson indeed,” he replied, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “It must have been quite the adventure growing up with Charlie in Endless Harbor.”

Ariel's gaze drifted towards the horizon, her thoughts filled with cherished memories of her childhood. "It was. I sometimes miss those simpler times before life got so complicated."

"Life has a way of doing that," Miles agreed, his voice soft and understanding. As Ariel and Miles strolled along, their laughter gently subsided into companionable silence, leaving only the sound of the waves to accompany their thoughts.

"Tell me something you've never told anyone before," Ariel whispered, her words carried away by the sea breeze. It was a game they often played—and she knew they would always be discovering something new about one another, year after year.

Miles hesitated, his gaze lingering on the horizon before he finally spoke. "I used to dream of sailing around the world, just my boat and the open sea. But after everything that happened, I guess I lost sight of that dream."

Ariel's heart ached for him, sensing the pain behind his words. She squeezed his hand in a silent gesture of support, and he offered her a grateful smile.

"Maybe one day," she said softly, "we can sail together, exploring new horizons as a team."

"Nothing would make me happier," he replied, his voice thick with emotion.

As they shared this intimate moment, Miles's eyes locked onto Ariel's, and time seemed to slow down. The space between them gradually disappeared, their faces drawing

closer, drawn together by an irresistible force. The scent of the ocean mingled with the faintest hint of Ariel's perfume, and the anticipation of their kiss sent shivers down their spines.

"We'll take that journey, no matter what life throws at us," Ariel murmured, her breath warm against Miles's lips.

"I promise," he whispered back, closing the remaining distance between them.

But just as their lips were about to meet, a sudden wave of discomfort washed over Miles, causing him to pull away abruptly. His face contorted with unease, and his free hand instinctively clutched his stomach.

"Are you okay?" Ariel asked, concern filling her eyes as she searched his face for any sign of relief.

"Uh, I think so," he replied, trying to downplay the situation. "I just felt a bit queasy all of a sudden."

"Maybe it was that fish," Ariel suggested, her brows furrowing in worry. "The waiter was very convincing, but perhaps we should have been more cautious."

"Maybe," Miles admitted, his earlier confidence replaced by uncertainty.

For a moment, they stood there in silence, the magic of their near-kiss dissipating like mist over the ocean. The beach, once a scene of burgeoning romance, was now cast in a shadow of concern as Ariel felt Miles's grip tighten around her hand. His breaths came out shallow and labored, his stoic demeanor crumbling as the pain in his stomach intensified.

“Come on, let’s get you back to our room,” Ariel said with a gentle urgency, her eyes reflecting the worry that had settled in her heart. Miles nodded, not trusting his voice as they abandoned their romantic stroll and began to hurry toward the resort.

As they walked briskly along the shoreline, the sound of their footsteps echoed through the quiet afternoon, punctuating the stillness that surrounded them. The waves crashing against the shore seemed distant, almost like a fading memory, as their focus narrowed solely on reaching the safety of their room in time.

“Damn seafood,” Miles muttered between clenched teeth, attempting to make light of the situation despite the discomfort gnawing at him. Ariel managed a small, worried smile, appreciating his effort but wishing there was something more she could do to ease his pain.

“Maybe we should have stuck with the salad like you did,” he added, glancing over at her with a pained grimace.

“Next time, trust the chef, okay?” Ariel teased gently, trying to lift their spirits as they hurried on. Internally, however, she berated herself for not being more insistent about avoiding the seafood. As a trained chef, she should have known better, and now the man she loved was paying the price.

“Definitely,” Miles agreed, his voice strained. “No more doubting your culinary instincts.”

“Deal,” Ariel said, her free hand reaching up to brush a strand of hair from his damp forehead. She looked into his

eyes, filled with equal parts gratitude and determination, and felt an overwhelming surge of love for this resilient man who had become her rock amidst life's storms.

“Almost there, Miles,” she whispered, more for her own reassurance than his. “We’ll get through this.”

As their room came into sight, the adrenaline driving them forward began to wane, replaced by a sense of urgency that propelled them onward. Ariel’s heart hammered against her ribcage as they stumbled through the door, the warmth of their room washing over them like a reassuring embrace. The dimly lit space seemed to pulse with energy, every detail magnified by the urgency of their situation. Her eyes darted from the rumpled sheets of their bed to the half-empty wine glasses resting on the nightstand, each object a testament to the tender moments they’d shared before Miles’s sudden illness had torn them from their idyllic reverie.

“Are you okay?” Ariel asked, her voice taut with concern. She watched as Miles clutched his abdomen, his face contorted in pain.

“Go,” he managed to choke out, nodding toward the bathroom door. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Ariel hesitated for only a moment before rushing into the bathroom, the cold tile beneath her feet grounding her as she prepared to face whatever lay ahead. As much as she wished she could protect Miles from this unexpected turn of events, she knew that the best she could do was offer her unwavering support and love.

Miles staggered into the bathroom behind her, his breathing labored as he leaned against the sink for support. He glanced at Ariel, his eyes clouded with pain. With a grimace, Miles nodded before collapsing onto the cold floor, his body finally succumbing to the weight of his discomfort. As he retched into the toilet, Ariel rubbed soothing circles on his back, her mind racing with thoughts of what might have caused his sudden sickness.

Was it the seafood after all? She wondered, a wave of guilt washing over her. If only she had trusted her instincts and steered him clear of the questionable dish. But now was not the time for recriminations; it was a time for comfort and healing.

“Try to breathe slowly,” Ariel advised gently, her heart aching at the sight of Miles in such distress. “It’s going to be okay.”

Miles nodded weakly, his breathing ragged as he tried to follow her guidance. The violence of his sickness seemed to ebb and flow, like the tide washing over the shore outside their window. And as the night wore on, they clung to each other like driftwood caught in the current.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ariel stood with her back pressed against the cool pastel tiles of the bathroom wall, waiting for Miles's retching to subside. The smell of disinfectant hung in the air, mingling with the salty scent of the ocean breeze that filtered through the slightly ajar window. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Sorry," Miles whispered, his voice barely audible over the gurgling of the toilet as it flushed away the last remnants of their unfortunate dinner. Ariel opened her eyes and saw the look of pain, embarrassment, and regret etched into every line of his face.

"Let me get you cleaned up," she said softly, moving to the sink and running a cloth under the cold water. She wrung it out carefully, ensuring that only the slightest hint of moisture remained before returning to his side.

"Here," she murmured, pressing the damp cloth gently against his clammy forehead. She traced her fingers along the curve of his brow and down the slope of his nose, wiping away the beads of perspiration that clung to his skin.

"Thank you," Miles breathed, leaning into her touch and closing his eyes. His chest rose and fell in shallow, strained breaths, each exhale ragged and pained.

"I'm sorry, Ariel," he said, his voice breaking with emotion. "I never wanted our honeymoon to be like this. I feel

like I've ruined everything."

Ariel's knew how much he had looked forward to exploring the quaint seaside town where they had decided to spend their honeymoon. She could see the frustration in his eyes, the desperate longing for things to have been different.

Ariel's heart ached as she looked into Miles's eyes, seeing the frustration and disappointment that mirrored her own. She gently squeezed his hand, her thumb tracing comforting circles on the back of his palm. "Miles, it's not your fault. We can't control everything," she reassured him, her voice soft and soothing.

"Maybe not," he admitted, his gaze downcast. "But I wanted our honeymoon to be perfect."

A tender smile curved Ariel's lips. "We'll make the best of the rest of our trip," she promised, leaning closer to press a soft kiss to his cheek. The warmth of their connection seemed to chase away the shadows in Miles's eyes, if only for a moment.

"Let's try to get some sleep," she suggested, her voice laced with fatigue. "We could both use some rest."

"All right," Miles agreed, his voice heavy with exhaustion. He leaned back against the pillows, closing his eyes as Ariel pulled the thin blanket over them.

As they lay there, side by side, Ariel's thoughts wandered to their sunlit wedding day, when they'd exchanged heartfelt vows on the beach. The love they shared was strong, and she knew that even this unfortunate turn of events couldn't break

them apart. Despite the trials they faced, their love would flourish like the flowers in her mother's garden, nurtured by the warm rays of the sun.

"Goodnight, my love," Ariel whispered, her breath ghosting across Miles's cheek. His lips curved into a small smile, his features relaxing as he drifted off to sleep.

"Goodnight, Ariel," he murmured, his voice a gentle rumble that sent a comforting shiver down her spine. She closed her eyes, allowing the rhythm of his steady breathing to lull her into a fitful slumber.

With Miles lying down on the uncomfortable bed, Ariel sat beside him, her palm moving in slow circles across his back. The rhythm of her touch was a soothing balm, easing the tension that still clung to his weakened frame. His breaths came as shallow sighs, each exhale releasing another layer of pain.

As she continued to rub his back, her thoughts drifted beyond the walls of their resort room. Their honeymoon had been one misfortune after another: the questionable seafood, the mosquitos that seemed to have taken an unhealthy interest in them, and now this blasted bed that felt more like a medieval torture device than a place of rest.

Ariel's frustration simmered beneath her skin like water on the brink of boiling. It wasn't fair that their dreams of a perfect honeymoon had been dashed by circumstances beyond their control. She wanted to rage against the universe, to demand answers as to why they couldn't simply enjoy this time together.

“Are you okay?” Miles asked, his eyes searching hers. He must have sensed her growing irritation.

“Of course,” she lied, forcing a smile. “Just worried about you, that’s all.”

Miles reached up, his fingers brushing her cheek as if he could wipe away her concerns. “We’ll get through this,” he promised, his words a soothing balm to her frayed emotions. “

“Right,” Ariel agreed, swallowing the bitter taste of disappointment and anger. “We’ll make the most of it, just like we always do.”

“Exactly,” Miles replied, his voice growing fainter as sleep began to claim him. “Our love will prevail.”

As she sat there, her hand still moving across his back, Ariel tried to focus on the beauty of their surroundings—the lapping waves and the salty breeze that carried the scent of the ocean. She clung to the knowledge that their love was a force to be reckoned with, even in the face of adversity.

But as she stared out the window at the moonlit sea, her heart heavy with unspoken frustration, she couldn’t help but wonder if they’d ever find their happily ever after amidst the chaos that seemed determined to mar their honeymoon.

Ariel sighed, her eyes lingering on the moonlit waves crashing against the shore just outside their resort window. The calmness of the water seemed to mock her own turbulent emotions. She turned her gaze to Miles, who was now lying on the bed, his face pale and contorted with residual pain. His

breathing had grown steadier, but she could still hear the faintest rasping sound with each exhale.

“Can I get you anything?” Ariel asked softly, not wanting to disturb him too much.

Miles shook his head, his voice barely audible. “Just stay close.”

“Of course,” she replied, trying to keep the frustration from seeping into her tone. She knew it wasn’t his fault, but everything that could go wrong on this honeymoon seemed determined to do so. From the uncomfortable bed that left them both tossing and turning each night to the questionable seafood that had sent Miles reeling, it felt as if they were being tested at every turn.

As she sat beside him, her fingers gently rubbing circles on his back, Ariel couldn’t help but wonder if they would ever find a moment of peace and romance during their time away. This trip was supposed to be a celebration of their love, a chance for them to forget about the stresses of life back home in Endless Harbor, and yet it felt like those very stresses had followed them here, determined to sabotage their happiness. How many lasting marriages started off with such ominous honeymoons?

“Sleep, my love,” she whispered, pressing a tender kiss to his temple. “I’ll be right here when you wake up.” Just as he had done, for her, on the flight.

“Thank you, Ariel...” Miles murmured, his eyelids fluttering closed as sleep finally claimed him.

Ariel continued to watch him, her heart aching with a mixture of love, concern, and disappointment. She longed to see him smiling again, to see the man she'd fallen in love with restored to his full strength. But instead, she was left with the image of him hunched over in pain, and the knowledge that their honeymoon was slipping through their fingers like sand.

“Is this really all we get?” she thought, her frustration mounting. “After everything we've been through, is this what fate has in store for us?”

Ariel knew that life was full of challenges, both big and small, but it seemed unfair that their honeymoon—a time meant for joy and connection—should be marred by such a relentless string of obstacles. She knew that their love could weather any storm, but that didn't make it any easier to watch her husband suffer.

As Miles slept, his breathing now slow and even, Ariel remained awake, her mind a whirlwind of bitter thoughts and unspoken worries. She stared out at the moonlit ocean once more, silently praying for a reprieve from the turmoil that had followed them to this supposed paradise.

“Please,” she pleaded into the night, “let us find some peace and happiness here, if only for a little while.”

The oppressive heaviness of the room seemed to close in on Ariel as she lay beside her slumbering husband. Unable to bear the stifling atmosphere any longer, she carefully slipped out from beneath the covers and tiptoed towards the balcony door, wincing at the slight creak of the wooden floorboards beneath her feet.

With a gentle push, she opened the door and stepped out onto the small balcony, the cool night air a welcome relief against her flushed skin. She leaned against the railing, taking in the rhythmic sound of the waves crashing against the shore below. The moon hung low in the sky, casting a silver glow over the ocean's surface that seemed to dance in time with the swaying palm trees.

As Ariel breathed in the salty air, she felt a slight prickling sensation on her arm. Glancing down, she saw a few mosquitoes feasting on her exposed skin. With a soft sigh of resignation, she swatted them away, knowing that a few bites were a small price to pay for this moment of peace.

She gazed out at the vast expanse of water before her, feeling a sense of calm wash over her as she drank in the beauty of their surroundings. The ocean had always held a special place in her heart; it was where she found solace in times of turmoil, and where she felt closest to her late mother.

“Mom,” she whispered into the night, “I could really use some guidance right now.”

Ariel closed her eyes, allowing herself to be carried away by the soothing sounds of the sea. In her mind's eye, she saw her mother standing on the shores of Endless Harbor, her laughter carried on the wind as she danced along the water's edge.

“Find the joy in the small moments, my love,” her mother's voice seemed to say, a gentle reminder that sometimes, happiness was a choice.

“Thank you,” Ariel murmured, her heart filling with gratitude and determination. She knew that their honeymoon had not gone as planned, but she was resolved to make the most of the time they had left.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Ariel turned back towards the room, her eyes lingering on Miles’s peaceful form for a moment before she quietly slipped back into the bed beside him.

Ariel stood on the balcony, her bare feet tingling from the cool touch of the wooden floor beneath her. The moon cast a silver path on the surface of the ocean, creating an ethereal beauty that stole her breath away. She inhaled deeply, the salty air filling her lungs and giving her a renewed sense of strength.

“Life is about more than just the big moments,” she whispered to herself, as if saying it out loud would make her resolution stronger. “It’s about all the small ones, too.”

She thought of all the memories she and Miles had created together back in Endless Harbor – spontaneous picnics on the beach, quiet evenings spent fixing up his sailboat, and laughter shared over simple meals at the marina. Those were the moments that had brought them closer together, building a foundation of love and trust that no misfortune could shake.

“All right, universe,” Ariel murmured, her gaze fixed on the gentle ebb and flow of the waves. “I won’t let you steal my joy anymore. I will find happiness in whatever you throw at us.”

As if in response to her declaration, a distant star twinkled brightly in the night sky. Ariel smiled, feeling a warmth spread through her chest, as if her mother's spirit had wrapped its arms around her in a comforting embrace.

"Let's make some beautiful memories, Miles," she whispered, though he couldn't hear her from his deep slumber inside the room. "That's what life is all about."

Resolved, Ariel tiptoed back into the bedroom, taking care not to disturb her husband. She watched him sleep for a moment, the rise and fall of his chest a testament to the fact that they'd weathered this storm together.

"Tomorrow," Ariel thought, gently running her fingers through Miles's tousled hair, "we'll start anew. We'll find joy in the smallest moments and cherish every second we have together, no matter what life throws at us."

With that silent promise, she slid back into bed and curled up beside her husband, the warmth of his body against hers a soothing balm to her weary soul. As sleep finally claimed her, Ariel knew that their love was strong enough to overcome any obstacle, and that together, they would make the most of the remaining days of their honeymoon – one small, precious moment at a time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The morning had crept in like an unwelcome guest, the sun's rays slicing through the gap between the curtains and casting a bright beam across Ariel and Miles' entwined bodies. As the room began to fill with light, so too did it fill with the low murmur of hotel guests preparing for their day, the distant rumble of engines, and the incessant chirping of birds just outside their window.

Ariel stirred, her eyelids heavy and her mind foggy from the restless night. Beside her, Miles groaned and shielded his eyes from the intrusive sunlight, his body tense and weary. They had both tossed and turned throughout the night, their minds racing with thoughts and worries that seemed determined to keep them from the restful slumber they desperately needed.

"Ugh, why is it so bright?" Miles mumbled, rubbing his temples as he tried to shake off the lingering remnants of sleep. His voice was rough and irritable, betraying his fatigue and mounting frustration.

"Can't we just close the curtains more?" Ariel suggested, her own voice tinged with annoyance. She knew that neither of them were at their best when they were tired, but it still felt like a cruel joke that their exhaustion seemed to have amplified their irritability toward one another.

“Is it really that hard to do it yourself?” Miles snapped, pushing himself up into a sitting position and glaring at her. It was a petty retort, and he regretted it almost instantly, but the words had slipped out before he could stop them.

“Fine,” Ariel huffed, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and marching over to the window. She yanked the curtains shut with more force than necessary, plunging the room back into merciful dimness.

“Happy now?” she asked icily, crossing her arms over her chest as she turned to face him. Miles sighed, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

“Look, I’m sorry,” he said quietly, the anger in his voice giving way to weariness. “I’m just so tired, Ariel. And it feels like everything is getting on my nerves.”

“Believe me, I understand,” she replied, her own voice softening. “But we can’t keep taking it out on each other, Miles. That’s not going to make either of us feel better.”

He nodded, reaching out to take her hand, which she hesitated for only a moment before allowing him to hold it. The warmth of his touch was familiar and comforting, but it wasn’t enough to wash away the tension that had settled between them.

“Let’s try to find some common ground today,” Ariel suggested, forcing a small smile onto her lips. “We don’t have to be perfectly in sync, but maybe we can at least salvage some enjoyment from this trip. For both our sakes.”

“Agreed,” Miles murmured, his eyes meeting hers with a glimmer of determination. “Let’s do our best, even if we’re both running on empty.”

And with that tentative truce declared, they began their day, each trying to put aside their exhaustion and irritation in favor of finding a shared happiness amidst the beautiful setting that surrounded them.

The sun had barely begun its ascent, casting a faint glow into the hotel room as Ariel glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It read 5:30 am, and although their bodies screamed for more sleep, they had no choice but to rise. The tour of the ancient ruins was scheduled to begin in less than an hour, something both Ariel and Miles had been looking forward to during their honeymoon.

“Ugh, why can’t we just sleep in today?” Ariel groaned, rubbing her tired eyes as she reluctantly sat up.

“Because we’ve been waiting for this tour,” Miles responded, his voice equally fatigued. “We don’t want to miss it.”

“Fine, but I’m not promising to be in the best of moods,” Ariel warned, forcing herself out of bed. Their exhaustion weighed heavily on them, like invisible anchors threatening to drag them back down.

As they shuffled through their morning routine, the anticipation for the excursion couldn’t quite overpower the weariness that clung to their bones. Even so, they managed to get dressed and out the door, trudging towards the bus where the other tourists eagerly awaited.

When they reached the idling vehicle, the contrast between Ariel's disgruntled mood and the excited chatter of the other passengers was stark. Animated conversations filled the air as people recounted the highlights of their trips thus far and shared their eagerness to explore the ruins.

"Can you believe we actually hiked to the top of that mountain yesterday?" one woman exclaimed, her face flushed with the thrill of accomplishment. "The view was absolutely breathtaking!"

"Really?" another tourist chimed in, his eyes wide with awe. "I can't wait to see what today has in store for us!"

Despite the infectious enthusiasm surrounding them, Ariel found it difficult to muster even a hint of excitement. She slumped onto the bus, sinking into the seat with a heavy sigh. Miles, understanding her struggle, offered her hand a gentle squeeze, a silent promise to make the best of their day despite their fatigue.

"Let's just hope these ruins are worth it," Ariel muttered under her breath, trying to find some semblance of optimism within herself. Little did she know that the ancient site would hold more surprises and challenges than either of them could have anticipated.

The bus rumbled to life, its engine vibrating through the seats as it pulled away from the curb. Ariel leaned her head against the window, watching the landscape gradually change as they traveled toward the ruins. They passed quaint little houses, their white picket fences standing like sentries guarding the secrets of the families within. Fields stretched out

on either side of the road, their green expanse dotted with the occasional wildflower—a burst of color amidst the verdant sea.

Miles sat beside her, his gaze fixed on some far-off point outside the window. Though they were physically close, a palpable tension seemed to have erected an invisible barrier between them. Their hands occasionally brushed together, but neither made an effort to hold the other's. The weight of their fatigue and irritability hung heavy in the air, stifling any attempt at conversation.

“Are you excited for the tour?” Miles finally asked, his voice barely rising above the hum of the bus's engine.

Ariel glanced at him, her eyes scanning his face for any signs of genuine enthusiasm. “I'm trying to be,” she admitted. “I just wish we'd gotten more sleep last night.”

“Same here,” he sighed, squeezing her hand briefly before letting go. “But let's try to make the most of it, yeah?”

“Of course,” she agreed, forcing a smile onto her lips. But deep down, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that their honeymoon was slipping through their fingers like grains of sand in an hourglass.

As the bus continued its journey, the landscape shifted once more. Gone were the picturesque little houses and neatly-trimmed hedges. In their place stood towering trees draped in a cloak of ivy, their branches reaching out as though beckoning the travelers to venture deeper into their wild embrace. An air of mystery descended upon the scene, hinting at the ancient secrets that lay hidden within the heart of the forest.

The bus finally came to a halt, its passengers roused from their contemplative silence by the sudden cessation of movement. As they disembarked, the full majesty of the ruins revealed itself. Crumbling stone walls stood in testament to the passage of time, their once-bold edifices now softened by the relentless caress of nature. Vines snaked their way through crevices and cracks as though attempting to hold together the remnants of a long-forgotten civilization.

“Welcome to the ruins,” their tour guide announced, his voice filled with reverence for the sacred site. “These ancient structures have borne witness to centuries of history, stories of love and loss etched into every stone.”

Ariel couldn't help but be moved by the undeniable beauty of the place. She reached out to touch one of the moss-covered stones, her fingertips tracing the grooves worn by countless hands that had come before her. In that moment, she felt a connection not only to the past, but also to the countless other souls who had sought solace in these timeless relics.

“Maybe this won't be so bad after all,” she whispered, her spirits buoyed by the awe-inspiring surroundings.

Miles, sensing her change in mood, flashed her a small smile. Together, they set off to explore the ruins, hand in hand, determined to salvage what remained of their honeymoon and find the emotional connection they'd momentarily lost.

A warm breeze rustled the leaves of the ancient trees, their branches casting dappled shadows over the time-worn stones. Ariel watched as other tourists wandered among the ruins, their laughter and excited chattering filling the air. She

couldn't help but notice how effortlessly they seemed to enjoy themselves, snapping photos and posing for selfies against the backdrop of the crumbling walls.

“Look at that,” Miles said, pointing to an elaborate carving on a nearby stone column. “Isn't it incredible?” He was putting on a brave face, but that same face was also still pallid and a little sickly looking.

Ariel forced a smile, doing her best to share his enthusiasm. “It is,” she agreed, even as disappointment gnawed at her heart. Their honeymoon was supposed to be a magical escape, a chance to reconnect after months of stress and planning. Instead, they found themselves sleep-deprived and irritable, struggling to find joy in the experiences that should have been exhilarating.

Occasionally, Miles had to stop and duck behind the foliage to hide a heaving spell. Add to that the fact that one of the bug bites on Ariel's leg was huge, swelling, and getting a little concerning—and she could barely muster anything like enthusiasm. As they trailed behind the rest of the group, Ariel tried to shake off her negative thoughts. She focused on the intricate details of the ruins, the way the sunlight played across the mossy stones, and the gentle caress of the wind on her skin. But despite her efforts, a sense of detachment persisted, leaving her feeling adrift and disconnected from the beauty around her.

“Are you okay?” Miles asked quietly, concern furrowing his brow.

“Of course,” Ariel lied, unwilling to burden him with her emotions. “Just really tired.”

Miles nodded, his hand finding hers as they continued to wander through the ruins. They paused to admire a stunning mosaic, its vibrant colors still bold despite the passage of time. For a fleeting moment, Ariel felt a spark of wonder ignite within her, only to fizzle out as quickly as it had appeared.

“Look at them,” she murmured, nodding toward a couple who stood arm in arm, their faces alight with joy as they took in the sights. “Why can’t we be like that?”

“Maybe we just need to find our own way of enjoying this,” Miles suggested, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “We don’t have to be like everyone else.”

With renewed determination, they set out to discover the hidden corners of the ancient site, seeking solace in quiet nooks and secluded alcoves. But each time they stumbled upon a new treasure – a secret garden, a crumbling archway, a forgotten shrine – the magic was tainted by their exhaustion and frustration.

Ariel knew she should be grateful for the opportunity to explore such a magnificent place, to share in the wonder of its history with the man she loved. But as they trudged back toward the entrance, their steps heavy with disappointment, she felt as though they had failed – not only themselves, but also the love that had brought them together in the first place.

A sudden burst of laughter from a nearby group of tourists caught Ariel’s attention, and she turned to see their animated tour guide gesturing exuberantly toward an ancient inscription.

Clad in khaki shorts and a brightly colored shirt adorned with the tour company's logo, he seemed to be the epitome of enthusiasm, his expressive face conveying a deep passion for the ruins that surrounded them.

“Come on,” Miles suggested softly, giving her hand a gentle tug. “Maybe we can join that group for a while. The guide seems to know his stuff.”

Ariel hesitated, her fatigue and frustration threatening to overshadow her curiosity, but she nodded her agreement, unwilling to let her disappointment ruin the experience for Miles. They made their way over to the group, and the tour guide – whose name tag identified him as Marco – greeted them with a warm smile.

“Ah, welcome!” he exclaimed, ushering them into the circle of tourists. “We were just discussing the fascinating history of this particular temple. Did you know that it was dedicated to the goddess of love and fertility?”

As Marco launched into a detailed account of the temple's significance, complete with dramatic anecdotes and colorful descriptions, Ariel found herself struggling to focus on his words. Despite her best efforts, her mind kept drifting back to the earlier part of the day, when she and Miles had tried – and failed – to find connection in the beauty of the ruins.

Her internal struggle persisted throughout the tour, each new revelation about the ancient site serving as a reminder of what they had missed out on. She couldn't help but compare their own lackluster experience to the obvious enjoyment of

the other tourists, who hung on Marco's every word, their eyes wide with wonder and delight.

"Isn't this incredible?" Miles whispered in her ear, his voice tinged with excitement. "I had no idea there was so much to learn about these ruins."

"Indeed," Ariel replied, forcing a smile onto her face. "It's truly amazing."

As the tour continued, Ariel found herself growing more and more resentful of Marco's boundless energy, his ability to engage the group so effortlessly. Why couldn't she and Miles have had that kind of experience from the start? What was it about them that made it so difficult for them to connect with the magic of this place?

"Are you enjoying the tour?" Marco asked, turning his attention to Ariel and Miles as they paused in front of a stunning mosaic.

"Very much so," Ariel lied, though she hoped her voice sounded sincere. "You're quite the storyteller."

"Thank you," Marco beamed, obviously pleased by her compliment. "It's always a pleasure to share my passion with others."

Ariel glanced over at Miles, who was studying the mosaic with rapt fascination, his earlier fatigue momentarily forgotten. In that moment, she made a conscious decision to set aside her own disappointment, to focus on supporting him in his quest for connection and understanding.

“Tell us more,” she urged Marco, forcing herself to meet his gaze with genuine interest. “We want to learn everything we can.”

A gentle breeze rustled the leaves overhead as Ariel and Miles wandered away from the bustling group of tourists, seeking solace in the quiet corners of the ancient site. The sun cast a warm glow over the sprawling ruins, illuminating the intricate stonework with a golden hue. The distant laughter and excited chatter of their fellow travelers seemed to fade into the background as they found themselves in a secluded alcove, surrounded by crumbling walls adorned with faded frescoes.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Miles whispered, his voice soft and full of reverence. He reached out to trace his fingertips along the delicate patterns etched into the stone, a small smile playing on his lips.

“It really is,” Ariel agreed, allowing herself a moment to truly appreciate the scene before her. But the serenity of the moment was quickly overshadowed by the weight of her earlier frustrations. She knew she couldn’t keep them bottled up any longer. “Miles, can we talk about what’s been going on between us?”

He looked at her, concern etching lines into his forehead. “Of course, Ariel. I know this hasn’t been the honeymoon we envisioned.”

She sighed, suddenly feeling vulnerable under the scrutinizing gaze of the ancient gods that watched from the faded frescoes. “I don’t understand why we can’t seem to get

on the same page here. It's like there's this... disconnect, and no matter how hard we try, we just can't bridge it."

"Maybe we're both just exhausted," Miles suggested gently, reaching out to take her hand. "We've had a lot going on lately, and maybe we're not giving ourselves enough credit for how well we're actually holding up, all things considered."

Ariel gave a weak chuckle, her eyes welling up with unshed tears. "You might be right. I just hate feeling like I'm letting you down. This was supposed to be our dream honeymoon, and I can't help but feel like I'm ruining it for you."

"Hey," he said softly, cupping her face in his hands and forcing her to meet his gaze. "You're not ruining anything. We're in this together, remember? It's not about having the perfect honeymoon; it's about experiencing it together, for better or worse."

Ariel couldn't help but smile through her tears at his words. "You always know just what to say, don't you?"

"Only when it comes to you," he replied, grinning. "I mean it, though. Let's make a pact right here, right now. We won't let our frustrations define the rest of our honeymoon. Instead, we'll focus on making the most of our time together, no matter what challenges come our way. Okay?"

"Okay," Ariel agreed, feeling a renewed sense of hope well up within her. She knew their journey wouldn't be without its obstacles, but as long as they faced them together, she was certain they could overcome anything.

“Let’s head back to the group,” Miles suggested, his arm wrapping around her waist as they began to walk away from the secluded alcove. “We may not be able to change the past, but we can make the most of the present—and that starts with rediscovering the magic of this place, hand in hand.”

Ariel took a deep breath, feeling the rays of sunlight warm her face as they left their sanctuary and rejoined the group. The air was thick with the scent of moss and ancient stone, making her feel both grounded and connected to something much larger than herself. She glanced at Miles, feeling reassured by his presence, and squeezed his hand gently in silent gratitude.

“Look,” said a fellow tourist, pointing excitedly towards an impressive carving on a wall. “Isn’t that incredible? Imagine the stories these walls could tell.”

Miles leaned in closer to Ariel and whispered, “Maybe we can find our own story here, too.”

She smiled, touched by his sentiment. With renewed determination, she tried to focus on the unique beauty surrounding them, allowing herself to be drawn into the intricate designs carved into the stones. Inwardly, she willed herself to set aside her fatigue and frustration, instead channeling her energy into appreciating every moment with the man she loved.

“Over here,” called the tour guide, motioning for the group to gather around him. “This particular area was believed to be a sacred space where rituals were performed. You’ll notice the

intricate patterns and symbols etched into the stone—each one carries a specific meaning and purpose.”

As Ariel listened, she couldn't help but be captivated by the history unfolding before her. There was a certain magic to the idea that countless generations had stood in this very spot, each leaving behind a piece of themselves in the process.

“Imagine all the love stories that played out here,” Miles mused, his voice soft and full of wonder. “All the connections made, the hearts broken, and the promises kept... It makes you appreciate what we have, doesn't it?”

Ariel nodded, her heart swelling with affection for her husband. Despite their rocky start, she knew that they were building a love story that would withstand the test of time, just like the ruins surrounding them. It was a humbling thought, and it made her more determined than ever to make their honeymoon as memorable as possible.

“Let's make our own history here,” she suggested, pulling Miles closer for a tender kiss. “No matter what happens, we'll always have this moment, right here, surrounded by so much beauty and history.”

“Absolutely,” Miles agreed, his eyes shining with love and determination. “This is just the beginning for us, Ariel. We'll find our way through this together.”

“Load up!” the guide said. “Next stop is ruins number two. The main temples.”

As they rejoined the group, Ariel felt a newfound sense of purpose. They might not have had the picture-perfect

honeymoon they had envisioned, but that didn't mean they couldn't create their own beautiful memories along the way. And if there was one thing she knew for certain, it was that as long as she and Miles stood side by side, they could weather any storm life threw their way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The hot sun beat down on Ariel and Miles as they stepped off the tour bus at the next stop, kicking up a cloud of dust in the desolate gravel lot. Before them loomed the first stop of their honeymoon adventure: a second, larger set of ancient ruins that promised to reveal a hidden piece of island history. The crumbling bricks, overgrown with ivy and wildflowers, stood like a testament to the passage of time, beckoning them forward.

“Wow,” Ariel whispered, her eyes wide with wonder.

Miles took her hand, his grip strong and reassuring, as he gently pulled her closer. “I told you this trip would be worth it,” he said, his voice barely audible over the distant chatter of the other tourists. “And we’re just getting started.”

As they joined the group, Ariel felt a surge of excitement course through her. It was a welcome reprieve from the stress that had consumed her life back home. She glanced at Miles, whose eyes sparkled with anticipation. He looked younger, more relaxed than she’d seen him in months. They both needed this time away together, she realized, to reconnect and rediscover the love that had brought them to this point.

“All right, everyone,” the tour guide called out, his booming voice capturing their attention. “Let’s make our way towards the ruins. They’re about a mile down this path. Keep

close and be sure to watch your step – some areas can be a bit tricky.”

As they began walking, Ariel couldn't help but sneak glances at her new husband. His broad shoulders were squared against the backdrop of the vibrant green foliage, and the gentle breeze tousled his salt-and-pepper hair. She marveled at how effortlessly he navigated the uneven terrain despite being far removed from the familiar waters of Endless Harbor.

“Watch out for that root,” Miles warned, pulling Ariel slightly to the side as they maneuvered around a gnarled tree root protruding from the narrow path.

“Thanks,” Ariel murmured, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “I'm usually more observant than this.”

Miles chuckled, squeezing her hand reassuringly. “Don't worry about it. I've got your back.”

Ariel smiled at him, grateful for his unwavering support. She knew she was prone to getting lost in her thoughts, particularly when it came to her family and the responsibilities that weighed heavily on her shoulders. But here, surrounded by nature and the steady presence of Miles, she felt lighter, more present than she had in a long time.

As they continued down the path, the ruins gradually came into focus, their ancient beauty taking Ariel's breath away. As the group moved closer, she could sense the history embedded in the crumbling walls, the stories waiting to be uncovered. This was what she had been craving – the opportunity to escape the confines of her own life and experience something new with the man she loved.

“Can you imagine what this place must have been like centuries ago?” Ariel asked, her voice barely above a whisper as they approached the entrance to the ruins.

Miles nodded, his eyes reflecting the same awe she felt. “It must have been incredible. And now we get to explore it together.”

A warm breeze rustled through the leaves above, casting dappled shadows on the path as Ariel and Miles walked with their tour group. The air was filled with the scent of wildflowers and the distant sound of birdsong, creating an idyllic atmosphere that seemed a world away from their daily lives.

“Can you believe how beautiful it is here?” Ariel asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

Miles smiled, squeezing her hand gently. “It’s incredible. I’m so glad we decided to do this.”

They continued down the path, reveling in the beauty of the moment and the connection they shared. As they walked, Ariel felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She hesitated, not wanting to be pulled out of the present, but curiosity got the better of her. Pulling it out, she saw a message from her sister, Charlene.

“Everything okay?” Miles asked, noticing the shift in her demeanor.

“I don’t know,” Ariel admitted, scanning the text quickly. “Charlene says there’s some issue with Dad’s property, and she needs me to call her right away.”

“Maybe it can wait?” Miles suggested, trying to keep the worry from his voice.

Ariel shook her head. “I should at least try to call her. It could be important.” She attempted to make the call, but her phone showed no service. Frustration bubbled up inside her as she stared at the screen. “There’s no reception here.”

“Let’s see if we can find a spot with better signal,” Miles said, guiding her off the path slightly. They moved carefully through the underbrush, searching for that elusive connection to the outside world.

Ariel held her phone up, scanning for any sign of a signal. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she managed to get enough bars to send a text. “I just need to let her know I got her message and that I’ll call as soon as I can.”

“Good idea,” Miles agreed, his eyes scanning their surroundings. The dense foliage seemed to close in around them, a stark contrast to the openness of the path they’d left behind. But as long as Ariel was by his side, he knew they would find their way back.

With a deep breath, Ariel sent the text and slipped her phone back into her pocket. She turned to face Miles, her eyes filled with gratitude. “Thank you for understanding,” she said softly. “I know we came here to get away from it all, but sometimes, it’s just not possible.”

Miles wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. “I get it,” he assured her. “Family comes first. And when we get through this, we’ll have even more adventures waiting for us.”

Ariel and Miles walked briskly, trying to catch up with their group. The lush green foliage around them seemed to encompass their every step, preventing them from seeing any familiar landmarks. Their once-clear path had given way to a dense thicket, leaving them disoriented and unsure of their direction.

“Where did everyone go?” Ariel asked, her voice betraying a hint of anxiety as she scanned the surrounding area for any sign of their fellow travelers.

“I don’t know,” Miles admitted, his brow furrowed in concentration. “We must have wandered further than we thought.”

“Ugh, this is all my fault,” Ariel muttered, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. “If I hadn’t insisted on finding reception for that stupid text...”

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Miles said soothingly, though his own frustration was beginning to show. “We just need to retrace our steps and find our way back to the path. We’ll catch up with them eventually.”

“Can you believe this?” Ariel huffed, shaking her head. “Our honeymoon, and we’re lost in the middle of nowhere because I can’t let go of things back home for even a moment.”

“Let’s not turn this into a blame game,” Miles replied, trying to remain calm. “Besides, who could have predicted that wandering off for a few minutes would result in us getting lost?”

“True,” Ariel conceded, though her mind still churned with guilt. She couldn’t help but think about how her need for control had led them to this predicament. Why couldn’t she just relax and enjoy their time together?

“Come on,” Miles encouraged, reaching out to take her hand. “Let’s keep moving. We’re bound to find something or someone eventually.”

As they walked, their bickering continued, each one trying to assert their opinion on which direction to take. The tension between them mounted, only adding to the frustration of their lost state.

“Maybe we should try going back the way we came,” Ariel suggested, her voice tight with irritation.

“Or maybe we should just keep moving forward,” Miles countered. “There’s a chance we’ll stumble upon something familiar.”

“Fine,” Ariel snapped, though she couldn’t help but think how ridiculous it was for them to be arguing like this. Weren’t they supposed to be enjoying their honeymoon?

Inwardly, she cursed herself for allowing her need for control to invade every aspect of her life, even now when she was supposed to be celebrating her love for Miles. She had the sinking feeling that if they didn’t find their way soon, the damage to their relationship might be irreparable.

“Look,” Miles said suddenly, his voice softening. “I know we’re both frustrated, and I know you feel responsible for us

getting lost. But let's not let this ruin our honeymoon, okay? We'll find our way back, and then we can laugh about it later."

Ariel looked into his eyes and saw the sincerity there. Despite her guilt, she felt a surge of love for this man who was always ready to support her, even when she was being difficult. With a nod, she squeezed his hand and said, "You're right. Let's keep going."

Together, they continued their search for the group, hoping that their combined efforts would lead them back to the people and the adventure they had set out to enjoy.

Ariel squinted at the screen of her phone, holding it high above her head as she tried in vain to catch a single bar of signal. Her frustration grew with each passing second, and she couldn't help but let out an exasperated sigh. The sun was dipping lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the unfamiliar landscape and only adding to their growing sense of desperation.

"Any luck?" Miles asked, concern etching lines into his handsome face.

"Nothing," Ariel admitted, lowering her arm. "I don't understand; I was able to send that text earlier." She chewed on her bottom lip, her thoughts racing. If they couldn't find their group or make contact with anyone, what were they going to do?

"Let's keep walking," Miles suggested, reaching for her hand. His touch, warm and reassuring, brought a small measure of comfort to Ariel. "Maybe we'll stumble upon something familiar."

As they continued down the path, the sounds of rustling leaves and the distant call of birds filled the air around them. It was a beautiful afternoon, but the beauty did little to alleviate their distress. Ariel's mind kept returning to the ruins they'd set out to see, wondering how they could have strayed so far off course.

"Hey, look at this," Miles said, stopping suddenly. He pointed to a small stone marker, half-hidden by overgrown grass. Ariel leaned closer, brushing aside the foliage to reveal faded etchings on its surface.

"Could this be a sign for the ruins?" she asked, hope creeping into her voice.

"Maybe," he replied, though his expression remained doubtful. "At the very least, it could mean we're not too far from the path everyone else took."

They followed the direction indicated by the marker, their steps quickening as their confidence grew. But with each step, Ariel felt the weight of her need for control pressing down on her. It had led them here, lost and uncertain when they should have been enjoying their honeymoon.

"Promise me something," she said suddenly, stopping in her tracks. Miles looked at her quizzically, waiting for her to continue. "When we get back home, let's make a conscious effort to let go of control sometimes. Life is too short to try and manage every single detail."

He smiled softly, squeezing her hand. "I promise," he agreed, his sincerity shining in his eyes. "But for now, let's focus on finding our way back."

With renewed determination, Ariel and Miles pressed onward through the unknown terrain as they searched for any sign of their group or a familiar landmark that would lead them back to safety.

The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows that stretched across the ground like grasping fingers. Ariel's frustration continued to simmer beneath the surface as she and Miles trudged through the dense undergrowth, their once leisurely walk now a desperate search for the path they had strayed from.

"Maybe we should have followed that sign back there," Miles suggested, his voice tense.

"Which one?" Ariel snapped. "The one that was half-covered in moss and completely illegible? Or the one that pointed in two different directions?"

"Fine," he replied, his jaw clenched. "But standing here arguing isn't getting us anywhere. We need to pick a direction and stick to it."

"Isn't that what got us into this mess in the first place?" she retorted, her hands on her hips. Her eyes narrowed as she stared him down, thoughts of blame bouncing between them like a heated game of ping-pong.

"Look, I know you're worried about your family," Miles said, softening his tone. "But we'll find our way back."

"Except this time, it's my fault. I just had to make that call, didn't I? That's what you want to say." Ariel sighed, fatigue creeping into her voice.

“Hey, it’s okay. We’ll figure this out together.” He reached out to take her hand, but Ariel pulled away, her stubbornness flaring up.

“Let’s just keep going,” she muttered, continuing down the overgrown path before them.

As they pressed on, the terrain became increasingly difficult to navigate. Roots snaked across the ground, threatening to trip them with every step. The thick foliage above blocked out much of the sunlight, leaving them in a dim and eerie twilight. At one point, they came across a fork in the path, both options equally uninviting.

“Which way do you think?” Ariel asked, her voice laced with uncertainty.

“Let’s try left,” Miles suggested. “It seems slightly less overgrown.”

“Fine,” she agreed, though her expression remained skeptical.

As they ventured deeper into the woods, the path began to narrow and twist, leading them through a maze of tangled branches and thick underbrush. They battled their way forward, their frustration mounting with each obstacle they encountered.

“Maybe we should have gone right,” Ariel muttered, swiping at a low-hanging branch that threatened to catch in her hair.

“Or maybe we should have just stayed on the main path to begin with,” Miles shot back, his patience wearing thin.

“Right, because that worked so well for us before.” Ariel rolled her eyes, unable to suppress the bitterness in her tone.

“Look, I get it. We’re both scared, frustrated and lost. But taking it out on each other isn’t going to help,” Miles said, his voice more measured now.

Ariel took a deep breath, trying to quell the storm of emotions raging within her. She knew he was right – they needed to work together if they wanted to find their way back.

The sun began to dip below the horizon, casting long shadows across the forest floor as Ariel and Miles trudged onward. A sudden hush fell over the woods, the only sounds their ragged breaths and crunching footsteps on the carpet of fallen leaves. The air was thick with tension, but also with a newfound determination to find their way back.

“Wait,” Ariel whispered, her hand on Miles’ arm stopping him mid-stride. “Do you hear that?”

He listened intently, straining to make out any sound that might give them hope. For a moment, all he heard was the rustle of wind through the trees – but then, faintly in the distance, came the unmistakable murmur of voices.

“Over there,” she pointed, her eyes wide with relief. “Let’s head that way.”

As they moved cautiously toward the sound, Ariel felt a pang of guilt for the part she’d played in their predicament. Her need for control, her insistence on dealing with matters back home even during their honeymoon, had led them astray.

She bit her lip, the weight of her actions settling heavily on her heart.

They traversed the uneven terrain, pushing through patches of thorny brambles and stepping carefully over slick rocks.

“Look – I think I see a clearing up ahead,” Ariel said, her voice tinged with hope. “Maybe it’s the path?”

“Could be,” Miles replied, squinting into the fading light. “Let’s check it out.”

As they stepped into the clearing, they found themselves at a fork in the path. The voices had grown louder, but seemed to echo from both directions, leaving them uncertain which way to turn.

“Which way do you think?” Ariel asked, biting her lip as she glanced between the two options.

“Left seems more familiar,” Miles offered hesitantly. “But I can’t be sure.”

“Let’s try left, then,” Ariel decided, trusting his judgment. “Together.”

Hand in hand, they set off down the chosen path, hearts pounding in their chests as they prayed that this time, they would find their way back to the group. Ariel and Miles stumbled upon a dilapidated stone structure half-covered in ivy. A pang of hope surged through them both as they recognized it from their earlier trek.

“Remember this old thing?” Ariel asked, her voice strained with exhaustion but laced with optimism. “We must be close to the ruins, right?”

Miles nodded, rubbing his tired eyes. “Yeah, I think we passed it on our way there. Let’s just keep going; we can’t be far now.”

With renewed determination, they continued down the path, their hands interlocked for comfort and support. They navigated around fallen trees and patches of nettles, focusing intently on each step they took and straining their ears for any sound that might indicate their proximity to the group.

“Wait,” Miles said suddenly, pausing to study the surroundings more closely. “I think...we’ve been here before.” He pointed out an oddly shaped tree branch that jogged their memory, and their spirits sank as they realized they’d come full circle.

“Darn it,” Ariel muttered under her breath, fighting back tears of frustration. “How did we end up back here? We were so sure we were going the right way...”

“Let’s try going this way instead.” She gestured to another path that branched off from where they stood, hoping against hope that it would lead them back to their group.

“Sounds good,” Miles replied, his tone supportive. “Let’s give it a shot.”

As they trudged along the new path, their weariness weighed heavily on them. The landscape around them seemed to taunt them with its familiarity, offering tantalizing glimpses of landmarks they thought they recognized, only to lead them further astray.

“Look,” Ariel said, pointing out an old wooden signpost partially obscured by foliage. “That has to be a good sign, right?”

“Maybe,” Miles said cautiously, squinting at the weathered wood. “But I can’t make out what it says.”

The last vestiges of daylight faded as the sky turned a deep indigo, casting eerie shadows across the path. Ariel’s heart pounded in her chest, her exhaustion matched only by her growing desperation. She glanced over at Miles, who seemed to be faring no better. His brow furrowed with worry, and his face was drawn and weary.

“Maybe we should stop for a moment,” she suggested, her voice barely above a whisper. “We can’t keep going like this.”

“All right,” he conceded, looking just as drained as she felt.

They found a small clearing off the path, settling down on a patch of dew-dampened grass. As they sat in silence, the world around them seemed to close in, an unending expanse of wilderness stretching out before them, a reminder of how truly lost they were.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ariel's heart sank when, hours later, she and Miles stumbled upon the gravel lot. They had been searching for their bus, hoping to make it back to the resort before nightfall, but found nothing but emptiness where the vehicle should have been.

She couldn't believe this was happening on their honeymoon. Was this current predicament some kind of cruel joke played by fate?

"Let me see that map again," Miles said, his tone calm despite the frustration gnawing at the edges of his words. He took the map from Ariel and studied it closely, his brows furrowed in concentration. Ariel admired his composure, even in the face of adversity. It was one of the many reasons she had fallen in love with him.

As they stood there, feeling more lost by the minute, Ariel noticed that they were at the edge of a small local village. The quaint stone cottages seemed to grow straight out of the earth, their roofs covered in moss. A faint scent of woodsmoke hung in the air, the promise of warmth just out of reach.

"Maybe someone there can help us," Ariel suggested, her voice tinged with hope. Miles nodded, and together, they made their way towards the village. It felt like stepping back in time, each step bringing them closer to a world that seemed untouched by modernity.

The villagers, clad in simple clothing, eyed the couple curiously as they approached. Their faces were etched with wisdom and kindness, yet they seemed to struggle with communicating in English. Ariel hesitated, unsure of how to proceed, but Miles gently nudged her forward.

“Excuse me,” Ariel began, trying her best to articulate her words slowly and clearly. “We’re lost, and we need to find our bus. Can you help us?”

The villagers exchanged glances, their expressions a mix of concern and confusion. It was clear that the language barrier was proving to be an obstacle, but their determination to help the couple shone through.

“Bus... no here,” one of the villagers managed to say, gesturing vaguely towards the empty gravel lot they had just come from. His eyes were filled with sympathy as he tried to convey his understanding of their plight.

“Thank you,” Ariel replied, her voice wavering slightly. She glanced at Miles, her eyes seeking reassurance in his steady gaze. They were stranded, miles away from the resort, but somehow, she couldn’t shake the feeling that they would find a way out of this situation.

Ariel’s stomach grumbled loudly, reminding her that they hadn’t eaten since breakfast, and the long walk had left them both hungry and exhausted. The villagers seemed to notice their fatigue and, as if by silent agreement, began gathering around the couple while beckoning them towards a nearby communal table laden with freshly prepared food.

“Please,” an elderly woman said, her eyes crinkling with kindness as she pressed a steaming bowl into Ariel’s hands.

“Thank you,” Ariel whispered, touched by their generosity. Miles reached out to accept his own bowl, his eyes meeting hers in a moment of shared gratitude.

As they sat down to eat, the fragrant aroma of the local cuisine wafted through the air, awakening their senses and rekindling their appetites. They exchanged shy smiles with the villagers, who watched them intently, eager to see their reactions to the food. With each bite, Ariel couldn’t help but marvel at the rich flavors and textures, her culinary instincts kicking in as she mentally catalogued each ingredient.

“Delicious,” Miles agreed, his mouth full but his expression satisfied. A murmur of approval rippled through the crowd, and Ariel felt a surge of warmth towards these strangers who had welcomed them so openly.

Just then, a young man approached the table, his English tinged with a thick accent but understandable nonetheless. “Hello,” he said hesitantly. “I speak some English. I can help.”

Ariel looked up, relief flooding her features. “Oh, thank goodness. We’re trying to get back to our resort, but we seem to be... quite lost.”

The young man frowned thoughtfully. “Resort... hmm. It is far from here, and already late.” He glanced at the darkening sky, concern etching lines across his brow. “You will not make it back before nightfall.”

Ariel's heart sank, her mind racing with thoughts of what their unexpected detour might mean for the rest of their honeymoon. Miles squeezed her hand reassuringly, his touch grounding her amidst the whirlwind of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Thank you for letting us know,” he said calmly, his voice steady despite the uncertainty of their situation. “We appreciate your help.”

The young man nodded solemnly, seeming to understand the gravity of their predicament. As they finished their meal and weighed their options, Ariel couldn't deny that their adventure had taken an unexpected turn. Ariel glanced up at the sky, streaked with hues of pink and gold as twilight approached. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of earth and spices that lingered in the air after their meal. Despite the beauty around her, her thoughts were tinged with worry.

“Perhaps you could stay here tonight,” the young man suggested hesitantly, his eyes full of concern. “In our village, we have rooms for guests. Tomorrow, I can drive you to your resort. But my ox cart has no lights, so I can't take it at night.”

Miles looked over at Ariel, silently seeking her opinion. Her brows furrowed as she considered the proposition. The idea of spending the night in an unfamiliar place was disconcerting, especially since this detour had not been part of their carefully crafted honeymoon plans. But with nightfall fast approaching and no other viable options, it seemed they had little choice but to accept the young man's offer.

“Are you sure?” Ariel asked, biting her lip in a mix of gratitude and disbelief. “We don’t want to impose.”

The young man shook his head earnestly. “No, please. We would be honored to have you as our guests. You will be safe and comfortable here.”

“Thank you,” Miles said, gratitude shining in his eyes as he squeezed Ariel’s hand once more. “We appreciate your kindness.”

Ariel tried to smile, but her frustration bubbled just beneath the surface. A part of her longed for the luxurious honeymoon suite they had left behind at the resort – the plush linens, the sparkling wine, the gentle sound of waves lapping against the shore. But instead, they found themselves in this small village, far from the world they knew and the carefully laid plans that had begun to unravel.

“Can you believe this?” Ariel whispered to Miles, her voice tight with dismay. “Our honeymoon was supposed to be perfect, and now we’re stranded in this little village in the middle of nowhere.”

“Hey,” Miles murmured soothingly, his thumb tracing gentle circles on the back of her hand. “It’s not ideal, but we’ll make the best of it. We’re together, and that’s what matters.”

Ariel knew he was right, even as her heart ached for the honeymoon they had envisioned. But as she looked around at the villagers who had welcomed them with open arms, she felt a wave of gratitude wash over her. They may not have planned for this unexpected detour, but perhaps there was something to be gained from this extraordinary experience – a deeper

connection, a newfound appreciation for the world beyond their own, and a reminder that love could flourish even in the most unexpected of places.

Ariel nodded, her gaze flitting to the kind-faced English-speaking villager. “All right, we’ll stay. Thank you for your help.”

“Of course,” the villager replied with a warm smile. “You are our guests. We will make sure you are comfortable.”

Miles squeezed Ariel’s hand reassuringly as they followed their host through the village, winding down narrow dirt paths lined with modest homes and lush gardens. The scent of blooming flowers mingled with the earthy aroma of damp soil, creating an atmosphere that felt both familiar and foreign to the couple.

“Here,” the villager announced, gesturing to a small barn nestled among a tangle of flowering vines. “You can stay here for the night.”

Ariel frowned. “What? *Really?*”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ariel and Miles trudged toward the old barn, their weary bodies aching as they sought temporary refuge from the day's misadventures. The weight of the day seemed to cling to them like a stubborn shadow, casting a somber mood over their journey. Ariel glanced at Miles, wondering how he managed to remain so enigmatic even after spending hours together.

The barn loomed ahead, its walls weathered by time and countless storms. As they approached the entrance, the creaking of aged wood filled the air. Miles pushed open the large door, revealing the dimly lit interior. They stepped inside, their boots sinking into the soft hay that covered the floor. A musty smell permeated the space, evoking memories of forgotten times when the barn was likely teeming with life.

“Guess this will have to do for tonight,” Miles said, his voice barely audible above the groaning of the wooden beams overhead.

“Better than sleeping outside, I suppose,” Ariel replied, trying to find a silver lining in their current situation. They navigated their way around scattered tools and remnants of farm life, searching for a place to lay their heads for the night. The barn might not have been the ideal setting, but it was all they had, and they would make the best of it.

Ariel gazed at the barn's high ceiling, where cobwebs danced in the drafty air, and sighed. “It's been a long day,

Miles. Let's try to get some rest," she suggested, settling on a relatively clean pile of hay. As they lay down in the dimly lit barn, surrounded by the echoes of creaking wood and the musty scent of days gone by, Ariel wondered what the morning would bring. Would it offer a new beginning, or merely more obstacles for them to overcome? Only time will tell.

Ariel shivered as a sudden gust of wind rattled the barn door. It was then she noticed a peculiar movement in the shadows, accompanied by an unusual scent that seemed to hang in the air.

"Did you see that?" she whispered to Miles, her voice barely audible over the creaking wooden walls. He squinted into the darkness, trying to discern the cause of her unease.

"It's probably just a raccoon or something," he reassured her, but Ariel couldn't shake the feeling that they were not alone in the barn.

The sound of chattering teeth caught their attention, and from the shadows emerged a small, furry creature with bright, curious eyes. To their astonishment, it was a pet monkey, its wiry frame wrapped in a tattered blanket that did little to mask the pungent odor it emitted.

"Is that... a monkey?" Ariel asked incredulously, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten.

"Looks like it," Miles confirmed, equally baffled by the presence of such an exotic animal in a place like this.

Before they could ponder the monkey's origins, the skies outside roared to life, and the first heavy drops of rain began to pelt the roof above them. The storm intensified rapidly, drowning out all other sounds with its thunderous cacophony.

“Great,” Ariel muttered, pulling her coat tighter around her. “Just what we needed.”

The monkey seemed unfazed by the storm, hopping around the barn with a surprising agility, seemingly content in its makeshift home.

“Maybe he can keep us company,” Miles suggested, trying to bring some levity to the situation. “It’s not every day you get to sleep in a barn with a monkey.”

Ariel managed a weak smile, appreciating his attempt to lighten the mood. Through the chaos of the raging storm and the bizarre company, she found solace in the thought that, at the very least, they were in this together. As the rain continued its steady assault on the barn's roof, Ariel and Miles huddled close for warmth, the monkey chattering nearby. And though their situation was far from ideal, the presence of one another provided a small measure of comfort amid the tempestuous night.

As the storm outside raged on, the wind howled through the cracks in the barn's walls, and the thunderous downpour grew stronger. The old, wooden roof – weakened by time and neglect – creaked and groaned under the relentless onslaught of rain. Water dripped from the leaky roof, pooling on the floor in dark, spreading puddles that shimmered with each flash of lightning.

“Looks like this place isn’t as watertight as we hoped,” Ariel observed with a sigh as she watched the droplets fall, her voice barely audible over the din of the storm. She glanced at Miles, who stood near the entrance, his gaze fixed on the cascading water.

“Should’ve known better,” he replied, frustration evident in his tone. He ran a hand through his damp hair, pushing it back from his forehead. “I’ll see if I can find something to catch the water.”

A sudden burst of lightning illuminated the barn, casting eerie shadows across the haphazard assortment of hay bales and forgotten farming tools. For a brief moment, the entire space seemed to come alive – the pet monkey’s strong odor intensifying in the charged atmosphere, its silhouette stark against the flickering light. Ariel shivered, wrapping her arms around herself as she looked away from the unsettling scene.

“Here,” Miles said, returning with an old metal bucket. He set it beneath the most persistent leak, the hollow sound of dripping water echoing inside the container. “It’s not much, but it should help.”

“Thanks,” Ariel whispered, her thoughts a swirling mix of apprehension and gratitude. She couldn’t help but wonder how they had ended up here, seeking shelter in a musty barn alongside a peculiar-smelling monkey while a storm threatened to tear the roof off above them.

“Hey,” Miles began softly, noticing her unease. He stepped closer, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. “We’ll be okay, Ariel. This storm won’t last forever.”

Ariel looked into his eyes, seeing the sincerity and concern in them. She knew he was right – they would make it through this, just like they had faced every other challenge together. But the weight of their circumstances still hung heavily upon her.

“I know,” she murmured, forcing a small smile onto her lips. “It’s just hard to see past this moment, you know?”

The barn’s air grew thicker, charged with electricity as the storm raged outside. Ariel couldn’t shake off the feeling of claustrophobia that had settled in her chest, and Miles’ presence, once comforting, now only served to amplify her agitation.

“I mean, can you believe this?” she said, her voice taut with frustration. “We’re stuck in a leaky barn in the middle of nowhere!”

Miles ran a hand through his damp hair, his eyes reflecting the same weariness she felt. “Ariel, we didn’t have a choice. It was either this or risk getting lost out there.”

“Maybe if we hadn’t taken that detour in the first place, we wouldn’t be in this mess!” she snapped, her anger flaring.

“Look, I thought it would save us time, okay? I didn’t know this would happen.” Miles’ tone matched hers, laced with irritation.

“Great. Just great,” Ariel muttered, turning away from him and pacing restlessly across the barn floor. She knew it wasn’t entirely his fault, but the stress of the day had her emotions

running high, and she needed an outlet for her pent-up frustrations.

As she moved away from the dim light cast by the flickering lantern, Ariel noticed her phone screen light up. Glancing down at the device, she saw that she had finally managed to get a single bar of reception - a small miracle amidst the chaos. Her heart raced with anticipation as she swiped open her messages, eager to reconnect with the world beyond the confines of the barn.

“Hey, um, Ariel?” Miles called out hesitantly, his voice softening. “I’m sorry about all this. I should’ve listened to you earlier.”

She glanced back at him, her expression softening for a moment before her eyes returned to her phone. Inwardly, she knew she owed him an apology as well. But that could wait until she saw what messages awaited her.

“Let me just check this,” she said, tapping the screen with trembling fingers. “I need to know if there’s any news from Katie or Charlene.”

Miles nodded, giving her the space she needed as he busied himself with adjusting the lantern and attending to the monkey who had become their unexpected companion.

Ariel’s heart pounded in her chest as she waited for the text messages to load, praying silently for good news or at least some indication of how her family was faring during the storm.

The rain intensified, hammering against the barn's roof like a thousand tiny drummers. As Ariel waited for her messages to load, the screen seemed to take an eternity to refresh. She glanced around the barn, taking in the rustic and uncomfortable surroundings - creaking wooden walls, the musty smell of damp hay, and the lingering odor of their new pet monkey.

“Ugh, I'd give anything for a hot shower right now,” Ariel muttered under her breath, her fingers still fiddling with her phone. “Just one moment of comfort would be nice.”

“Tell me about it,” Miles agreed, trying to coax the monkey away from the lantern with a piece of fruit he had found in his backpack. “But we'll have to make do with what we've got for now.”

Ariel sighed, feeling the weight of exhaustion settling in her bones. Her gaze flicked back to her phone, willing the text messages to appear so she could finally know if her family was safe and sound. The suspense gnawed at her, making her feel increasingly anxious with each passing second.

“Come on, reception,” she whispered desperately, her thumb swiping the screen again and again. “I don't have all night.”

Miles looked over at her, concern etched across his face. “Any luck?” he asked gently, his previous argument with Ariel temporarily forgotten.

“Nothing yet,” she admitted, frustration coloring her voice. “I just want to know that everyone is okay. Is that too much to ask?”

“Sometimes it feels like it, doesn’t it?” Miles responded, glancing out at the storm raging outside.

As the rain continued to pour down outside, thunder rumbling in the distance, Ariel kept her eyes glued to her phone, waiting for the moment when the screen would finally reveal the messages that held the answers to her questions. The suspense was nearly unbearable

With a wry smile, Ariel gazed up at the leaky roof, watching as water continued to drip down onto the floor. She shook her head, amused by the absurdity of their situation. As if on cue, a torrent of cold water suddenly splashed down from above, drenching Ariel from head to toe. She gasped, shivering from the shock of the icy deluge, while Miles stifled a laugh at the sight of her dripping form, earning himself a glare from Ariel. It was ironic, but certainly not the warm shower she had been craving.

“Very funny,” she retorted sharply, wringing out her soaked hair. “Now, can we please focus on fixing this mess?”

“Fine, fine,” Miles relented.

“Maybe if you hadn’t insisted on taking that shortcut, we wouldn’t be stuck here in the first place!” Ariel snapped, her patience wearing thin.

“Me? You’re the one who wanted to run off without even thinking about the consequences!” Miles shot back, his voice rising in anger.

Ariel’s face flushed with indignation as she clenched her fists at her sides. “Maybe we should just call it a night,” Ariel

finally suggested, her voice wavering slightly. “We’re not going to solve anything like this.”

“Agreed,” Miles conceded, raking a hand through his hair. “Let’s just try to get some rest and tackle this tomorrow.”

As they settled into their makeshift sleeping arrangements, the silence between them was heavy, filled with unresolved anger and lingering questions. Neither one could shake the feeling that there was still so much to be said, but for now, the weight of their exhaustion won out over the need for closure.

Ariel sighed heavily, her breath visible in the cold air as she shivered involuntarily. The barn, with its damp and musty scent, felt oppressive – a far cry from the comfort of her own bed. Beside her, Miles shifted on his makeshift pallet of straw, the weariness etched deep across his face.

“Can’t believe this is where we ended up,” Ariel muttered, rubbing her arms to generate warmth.

“Yeah, this isn’t exactly how I imagined our night going either,” Miles replied, his voice laced with fatigue.

The two exchanged a glance, the tension between them still lingering. Their argument had left them both drained and emotionally spent, yet neither seemed willing to broach the subject further.

Ariel’s phone buzzed weakly, signaling that she had finally received a message. Her heart raced in anticipation, but she hesitated to check it, knowing that whatever it contained might only add fuel to the fire.

“Are you going to read that?” Miles asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

“Maybe later,” Ariel said quietly, slipping the phone back into her pocket. “Right now, I just want to try and get some rest.”

She lay down on the uncomfortable straw, trying to find a position that didn't aggravate her aching muscles. As she closed her eyes, images of the heated exchange with Miles played on repeat in her mind, each word cutting deeper than the last. She was wet and freezing cold, and she doubted she would sleep tonight.

Miles, too, seemed unable to sleep. He tossed and turned, the creaking of the wooden floor beneath him mirroring the restless turmoil within. The unresolved tension hung heavily in the air, like the lingering storm clouds outside the barn.

As the darkness of the night deepened and the rain continued to fall, so too did the silence between them. With each passing moment, Ariel's curiosity about the delayed text message gnawed at her, while the uncertainty of their relationship's future weighed heavily on both their hearts.

But for now, sleep seemed an elusive escape from the turmoil surrounding them. And as they lay there, side by side yet worlds apart, the barn offered little solace in the face of their mounting doubts and unspoken fears.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Ariel woke to warmth—*surprising* warmth. Though not perfectly dry in every crease, her clothes had dried out nearly all the way overnight. She felt sore and still upset over the argument with Miles last night, but there was nothing to say. In fact, he was gone from their accommodations when she woke.

And her phone was dead.

Great.

With the offer of a ride back to the resort foremost in her mind, Ariel burst out of the barn, determined to find the young man who had spoken with them prior. And Miles, of course. The storm had finally passed, leaving a world washed clean and glistening in its wake. Shafts of sunlight streamed through the dissipating clouds, casting a golden glow over the village. The air held a fresh, invigorating scent, as if the rain had scrubbed away every last trace of grime and dust.

As she walked along the dirt path that led from the barn, her eyes were still adjusting to the sudden brightness. She took a deep breath, savoring the crisp post-storm atmosphere. Though she had traveled far and wide throughout her life, there was something undeniably special about the simple beauty of the town. She felt her crankiness begin to—very slightly—lift.

As she wandered further from the barn, drawn by the sound of laughter and conversation, Ariel spotted a group of locals gathered around a makeshift cooking area. Steam rose from a large pot set over an open flame, filling the air with a tantalizing aroma that made her stomach rumble in anticipation.

She felt a surge of excitement at the sight of the traditional dish being prepared. It reminded her of the countless hours she'd spent in the kitchens of Paris, honing her skills as a chef and learning the secrets of culinary artistry.

“Morning, Ariel!” called out the boy from yesterday, noticing her approach. “Come on over and join us!”

“Good morning,” Ariel replied with a warm smile. “What are you all making?”

“Clam chowder,” answered another woman, which Ariel understood as the boy translated, stirring the contents of the pot. “It’s a little something to warm us up after the storm.”

Ariel’s mouth watered at the thought of the creamy, savory concoction, and she eagerly accepted their invitation, feeling a sudden sense of camaraderie and connection with these people who shared her love of food and community.

Ariel’s eyes sparkled with curiosity and excitement as she approached the group of locals, drawn by the familiar scents that stirred memories of her childhood in Endless Harbor. The rich aroma of the clams was like home. As Ariel took the spoon offered to her, her heart swelled with gratitude for the opportunity to immerse herself in culinary traditions once again.

“Thank you,” she said softly, accepting the spoon and stirring the thick mixture with practiced ease. “It smells amazing already.”

As they continued to prepare the dish, Ariel felt a sense of camaraderie growing between her and the locals. Their shared passion for food, community, and the simple pleasures of life seemed to transcend any language or cultural barriers.

Ariel eagerly leaned in closer, observing the women as they expertly chopped the fresh clams and vegetables for the chowder. The rhythmic sound of the knives on the cutting board and the low murmur of conversation among the locals felt like music to her ears.

“Is there a secret ingredient you add to make it so delicious?” Ariel asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. She sensed that this clam chowder would be unlike any she had tasted before – each family seemed to have their own unique twist on the recipe. The boy translated quickly, and the women all laughed.

“Ah, well,” one woman replied, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “We do add a pinch of our special blend of spices. It’s been passed down through generations.”

The boy added, as he relayed their words, “And you may guess it, but we’ll never tell.” He winked after.

“Amazing,” Ariel murmured, taking a mental note of the different spices spread out on the makeshift table. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch them, to get a sense of the flavors that would soon meld together in the simmering pot.

As the women continued to work and the boy to translate, Ariel found herself entranced by the symphony of sounds around her. The sizzle of butter in the cast iron pan as the onions and celery were sautéed to a golden brown, the gentle bubbling of the rich, creamy broth, and the laughter of children playing nearby filled the air with a sense of warmth and joy.

“Would you mind if I added some thyme?” Ariel inquired, recalling how her mother used to incorporate the herb into her own clam chowder recipe. The women exchanged glances, then nodded in agreement.

“Go ahead, dear,” a grandmotherly figure encouraged, her hand resting gently on Ariel’s arm. “Let’s see what your touch brings to our chowder.”

Taking a deep breath, Ariel carefully sprinkled the fragrant thyme leaves into the simmering mixture. As the herb hit the hot liquid, its aroma wafted through the air, mingling with the scent of clams, vegetables, and spices. Ariel smiled, feeling a deep sense of connection with this simple dish.

“Ah, that smells wonderful,” one woman remarked approvingly, her eyes closed as she breathed in the tantalizing scent. The other women murmured their agreement, their faces equally full of anticipation.

As they neared the end of the cooking process, Ariel couldn’t help but marvel at the magic of this shared experience. Despite their differences, they were all brought together by their love for food and their desire to create something beautiful and nourishing from the earth’s bounty. It

was moments like these that Ariel cherished the most – moments of connection, of learning, and of pure joy.

The sun overhead cast a warm glow on the scene as Ariel observed the dance of the women around the cooking area. It was like watching an intricate ballet, each person knowing their role and moving in harmony with one another. The rhythmic sound of knives chopping and laughter filled the air.

“Can I show you a trick I learned?” Ariel asked, indicating the onion one woman was chopping. “It makes it much easier to get an even dice.”

“Of course,” the woman replied, her eyes widening with curiosity as she handed Ariel the knife.

Ariel demonstrated how to hold the onion and make precise cuts, guiding the woman’s hand as they worked together. The locals watched with rapt attention, exchanging impressed glances as Ariel showed them this simple yet effective technique.

“Wow! That’s so much faster!” the woman exclaimed, her face lighting up with delight.

As they continued their culinary collaboration, Ariel felt an overwhelming sense of unity. Despite the language barrier, their shared passion for food allowed them to communicate easily - a universal language that transcended words.

“Try this,” Ariel suggested, handing a spoonful of the chowder to a woman next to her. “See if it needs more salt.”

The woman tasted the sample, her eyes closed in concentration. She nodded appreciatively, and Ariel felt a

sense of pride at having brought something new to the table, both figuratively and literally.

“Perfect,” the woman said, smiling warmly at Ariel. “You have a gift.”

As the morning wore on, the space between them gradually diminished, replaced by a deep understanding that went far beyond spoken language. They laughed together, sharing stories and techniques, both parties eagerly learning from one another.

Ariel realized that despite the differences in their backgrounds, they were all bound together by their love of cooking. It was a powerful force that had the ability to bridge gaps and create lasting connections, even in the most unlikely of places. And as she stood there amongst her newfound friends, Ariel felt a sense of belonging, a feeling that had eluded her for so long.

“Thank you,” she whispered to the villagers, her voice choked with emotion. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“Thank you,” the women echoed, their faces warm and welcoming. “Your presence has enriched us all.”

The aroma of the freshly cooked dish permeated the air, a tantalizing blend of spices and herbs. The sun was casting a warm glow over the makeshift cooking area as the locals gathered around to taste the fruit of their collaboration. Ariel could sense the anticipation in the air, a palpable excitement that made her heart race with pride.

“Come, everyone!” one of the women called out, beckoning the others to join them. “Let’s see how our creation turned out.”

With eager hands and curious eyes, they scooped generous portions onto their plates, exchanging smiles and nods of approval as the flavors mingled on their tongues. The dish was a symphony of taste, each ingredient playing its part in harmony with the others. The local vegetables brought an earthy sweetness, balanced by the rich creaminess of the chowder base that Ariel had helped perfect. Every bite seemed to tell a story, one of love, passion, and unity forged through the art of cooking.

As more people joined the gathering, some expressed their surprise at seeing Ariel there, a stranger in their midst. But as they witnessed her genuine enthusiasm and skill, their initial wariness melted away into acceptance and appreciation. They shared knowing glances and murmured words of praise as they tasted the dish she had helped create, recognizing her expertise and the value she brought to their small community.

“Your touch has made this truly special,” an elderly man told Ariel, his eyes twinkling with admiration. “We are honored to have you here with us.”

“Thank you,” Ariel replied, touched by their kindness. She found herself sharing stories about her past culinary experiences, her love for cooking evident in every word. Her voice wove together with the locals’ laughter and chatter, creating a tapestry of sound that filled the air with warmth and camaraderie.

In that moment, surrounded by the faces of people who had once been strangers but now felt like family, Ariel couldn't help but think about the power of food. How it transcended barriers and brought individuals together, forging connections that went beyond mere words. How it created memories that would last a lifetime.

“Ah, this is simply marvelous,” one of the women exclaimed, her eyes widening with delight. She turned to Ariel, extending her hand for a high-five. Ariel hesitated for just a moment before reciprocating with a grin.

“Isn't it amazing how food can bring us all together?” another woman said, gesturing towards the diverse group gathered around the table. Nods of agreement rippled through the crowd, accompanied by light-hearted laughter.

“Indeed,” Ariel mused, her gaze drifting from face to face. She had never imagined that she would find herself in the company of such warm, welcoming people, let alone share in their culinary traditions. Yet here she was, forging connections that went beyond mere words, united by their shared passion for cooking.

“Hey, you're pretty good at this,” the young man who'd translated told Ariel, playfully elbowing her in the ribs. “You should come back and cook with us again sometime.”

“Really? I'd love that,” Ariel replied, her heart swelling with gratitude. She leaned in, conspiratorially whispering, “But only if you promise to teach me more about your local ingredients.”

“Deal,” the young man agreed, locking pinkies with Ariel as a symbol of their pact. The surrounding crowd cheered, clapping their hands and raising their glasses in celebration.

“Here’s to new friends, delicious meals, and the magic of cooking,” Ariel declared, raising her glass

A gentle breeze rustled the leaves above as Ariel stood among her newfound friends, their laughter and conversation filling the air with a warmth that spread through her very soul.

“Thank you all,” Ariel said, her voice brimming with genuine emotion. “I’ll never forget this.”

“Neither will we, Ariel,” a woman replied, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You’re always welcome here.”

As the group broke into smaller sets of people, chatting and eating, Ariel checked her watch and suddenly realized—it had been over an hour since she’d come out of the barn.

Where was Miles?

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Ariel started walking along the beach, the gritty sand between her toes grounding her as she searched for her husband. She had a bowl of chowder in hand and directions to the village pier looping in her mind, both provided by the cooking group.

“Miles?” she called out tentatively, scanning the area for any sign of him. The waves crashing against the shore seemed to swallow her voice, leaving her feeling small and vulnerable.

“Where are you?” she murmured softly, a mixture of hope and fear lacing her words. Ariel’s heart ached with the need to find him and make amends to share the depths of her remorse. They deserved the chance to repair the fragile bond that had been tested by the stress of their unconventional honeymoon.

As Ariel walked further down the beach, her determination fueled by love and a desire to set things right, she prayed that he would be willing to listen, to understand her heartache, and to forgive her for the hurtful words that had escaped her lips the night before.

As Ariel rounded a bend in the shoreline, she caught sight of a nearby harbor bustling with activity. Her eyes scanned the lively scene, pausing as they landed on Miles among the villagers. He was working on fixing a fishing boat, his strong hands expertly handling the tools and materials as he assisted

the locals. Relief washed over her, mingling with the lingering uncertainty that weighed heavily on her heart.

The harbor exuded an air of warmth and camaraderie, each villager contributing to the symphony of sounds that filled the air. The melodic clinking of tools echoed through the area, accompanied by the rhythmic lapping of waves against the docks.

Miles had always possessed an uncanny ability to connect with people, even those he'd only just met. As she watched him work, it was plain to see that he'd already become an integral part of the community here in Endless Harbor. It was a testament to his caring nature, his willingness to lend a hand to those in need, and his genuine love for the sea.

“All right, Ariel, you can do this,” she whispered to herself, her heart pounding in her chest as she took a shaky step forward. “He deserves to know how sorry you are.”

With each hesitant step towards Miles, Ariel felt the uncertainty that had plagued her since their honeymoon begin to dissipate, replaced by a burgeoning sense of hope and determination. There, amidst the vibrant thrum of life at the harbor, Ariel steeled herself for what would become a defining moment in both her own journey and the marriage between her and Miles.

Ariel's fingers curled around the wooden railing, her knuckles turning white as she held herself back from moving closer. Her eyes, wide with a mix of admiration and curiosity, were glued to Miles as he moved about the fishing boat with practiced ease.

“Pass me that wrench, will you?” he called out to another villager, his voice steady and authoritative.

“Sure thing, Captain,” came the jovial response, accompanied by the clang of metal against metal as the tool found its way into Miles’ calloused hands.

Ariel couldn’t help but marvel at the sight before her; Miles working hand in hand with the locals, the sun casting warm, golden rays on his tanned skin, highlighting the muscles that flexed beneath his rolled-up sleeves. And there was something undeniably attractive about the way his brow furrowed in concentration as he studied the boat’s intricate workings, his fingers deftly tightening bolts and adjusting ropes.

“Maybe I should just watch him for a bit longer,” Ariel mused internally, her heart fluttering at the thought of approaching him. “He seems so focused, and I don’t want to interrupt.”

She leaned against the railing, feeling the rough wood press into the small of her back as she continued to observe her fiancé. The scent of salt filled her nostrils, mingling with the heady aroma of freshly-caught fish, and she could hear the distant laughter of children playing along the shoreline.

“Or maybe I’m just stalling,” she admitted to herself, biting her lip as her heart thudded in her chest. “I need to be brave. This won’t get any easier.”

“Enough stalling,” Ariel murmured to herself, her heart pounding as she pushed off the railing and straightened her spine. Inhaling a deep breath, she took a tentative step towards

Miles, then another, her sandals sinking into the warm sand with each hesitant stride. The gentle lapping of the waves against the harbor's edge seemed to echo her own racing pulse, urging her forward.

“Hey, Miles?” she called out softly, feeling a mixture of relief and anxiety when he looked up from his work on the fishing boat. He paused, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, his eyes searching for the source of the voice.

“Ah, there you are,” he said, a warm smile spreading across his sun-kissed face. His gaze met hers, the corners of his eyes crinkling gently in genuine affection. “What brings you down here to the harbor? I was trying to let you sleep in.”

Ariel could feel the flush creeping up her cheeks as she approached him, but she forced herself to keep moving despite her nerves. “I just wanted to talk to you about... something,” she admitted, her voice barely audible above the cacophony of noise from the bustling harbor. She held out the bowl of chowder.

Miles set down his tools and stepped closer, concern etched in the lines around his eyes. “Is everything okay?” he asked, reaching out to touch her arm gently.

Ariel nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Yes, I just...” She hesitated, feeling a sudden rush of vulnerability wash over her like a wave crashing onto the shore. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior during our honeymoon. I haven't been the most present or understanding, and I'm truly sorry.”

His fingers brushed against her skin, sending a tingling warmth up her arm. “Ariel, you don’t have to apologize. We’ve both been through a lot lately, and it’s okay to feel overwhelmed at times. We’re in this together, remember?”

“Thank you, Miles,” she whispered, her eyes welling up with tears as the weight of her guilt began to lift. “I just want you to know that I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“Likewise, Ariel,” he replied, his warm smile never wavering. He took the bowl gently from her hands.

Ariel couldn’t help but return his smile, hope blossoming in her chest like a newly-budded flower. She glanced behind him, and it was clear a sense of camaraderie infused the atmosphere, and Ariel admired the way the locals worked together to unload the day’s catch, repair nets, and exchange stories of life at sea. It occurred to her that this was the sort of close-knit community she had always longed for - a place where people knew and cared for one another, bound by shared experiences and mutual support.

“Your cooking skills are truly impressive, Ariel,” Miles remarked, drawing her attention back to him. “I saw you working in the outdoor kitchen earlier, and I must say, your talent is undeniable. The people here may not be famous chefs or business tycoons, but they have an incredible wealth of knowledge and skill when it comes to living off the land and sea. There’s something humbling and inspiring about that.”

Ariel nodded thoughtfully, understanding the allure of such a lifestyle. “I think that’s why I’ve always been drawn to the idea of running my own B&B and café,” she admitted. “It’s

not just about serving delicious food, but also creating a space where people can come together, share stories, and forge connections.”

As they stood there, basking in the warmth of the sun and each other’s presence, Ariel felt a deep sense of gratitude for the unexpected experiences that had brought them closer together. Despite the challenges they had faced, she knew that their love was stronger for having overcome them, and she looked forward to continuing their journey as partners - in life, love, and all the adventures that lay ahead. Ariel realized that this unconventional honeymoon had become something far more significant than she could have ever imagined. Instead of strolling through quaint European streets or lounging on pristine beaches, they were here, in a remote island village, surrounded by locals who welcomed them into their community with open arms.

In this place, they were not just two people in love, but vital threads woven into the fabric of the town itself. They shared laughter and conversation over steaming bowls of chowder, felt the grit of sand beneath their feet as they helped mend fishing nets, and might even dance beneath the stars at impromptu gatherings on the beach. Ariel found herself grateful for every moment spent in this little corner of the world. She realized that by embracing the unexpected, they had forged a bond far stronger than any luxury retreat could have provided.

“Thank you,” she whispered again, leaning into Miles’s side. “For showing me that love isn’t just about grand gestures

and picture-perfect moments, but also about sharing our lives with others and learning from the world around us.”

“Always,” he murmured, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead.

Tomorrow, they would have to return.

So why did Ariek get the sudden urge....not to?

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

A warm breeze danced through the village square as Ariel and Miles prepared to say their goodbyes. The locals had gathered to send them off, their faces shining with warmth and a little sadness. Ariel's eyes brimmed with tears as she hugged each person, feeling an unexpected connection to these kind people who had made their honeymoon so unforgettable.

“Thank you for everything,” she said earnestly to an elderly woman whose skilled hands had taught her the art of the chowder. “I'll never forget the time we spent together.”

Miles stood beside her, his strong hand resting on the small of her back in support. He too expressed his gratitude, his deep voice resonating with sincerity. “You've shown us a side of life we didn't know existed, and we're grateful for that.”

As they exchanged heartfelt farewells, Ariel couldn't help but think of their families back in Endless Harbor. She wondered if her sister Charlene and her children, Hannah and Peter, would have enjoyed the simplicity and authenticity of the village just as much as they had. And what about her father, Lee? Had he found a similar sense of peace and belonging when he chose to disappear?

With their goodbyes said, the couple turned to leave, climbing into the wooden cart hitched to a pair of sturdy oxen. As they settled onto the rough-hewn bench, Ariel glanced

behind them one last time, memorizing the smiling faces and the vibrant colors of the village.

She felt Miles's hand on hers, his thumb gently stroking her palm as they began their journey away from the village. A complex mix of emotions surged within her – sadness at leaving this newfound haven, gratitude for the experiences they had shared, and a lingering sense of longing for the familiar comforts of home.

“Are you okay?” Miles asked softly, his eyes filled with concern as he searched her face.

Ariel nodded, blinking back tears. “Yes, I just... I didn't expect to feel so connected to this place and these people.”

Miles squeezed her hand reassuringly. “It's a special place. And we'll carry the memories of our time here in our hearts forever.”

As the cart rumbled along the path, Ariel leaned into Miles, resting her head on his shoulder. The simplicity and authenticity of the village seemed to hang in the air around them, a poignant reminder of the meaningful connections they had made during their unconventional honeymoon.

Despite the bittersweet departure, Ariel knew that she would always cherish this time spent with Miles – the love of her life, her rock, her partner in every adventure life threw their way. And as the resort loomed in the distance, she felt that this was only the beginning of their journey together, one that would be filled with even more laughter, love, and unforgettable moments.

As the cart carrying Ariel and Miles ambled closer to the resort, the pristine white sands and crystal clear waters seemed to shimmer seductively. However, the beauty of the scene felt oddly muted in contrast to the vibrant authenticity and warmth they had discovered in the village.

“Look at that,” Miles murmured, nodding towards the row of perfectly aligned beach chairs and identical palm trees dotting the resort’s grounds. “Feels like a different world, doesn’t it?”

Ariel sighed, her eyes scanning the carefully manicured landscape. “It does,” she agreed, her heart heavy with a sense of loss as she thought of the laughter and camaraderie they had shared with the villagers. “Everything here seems... too perfect. Almost artificial.”

The cart rolled to a stop at the entrance of the resort, and Ariel and Miles reluctantly dismounted. As they walked hand in hand through the lavish lobby, the opulence surrounding them felt jarring compared to the rustic charm of the village they had left behind.

“Welcome back, Mr. and Mrs. Clemens,” the receptionist greeted them with a polished smile, handing over their room key. “We trust you enjoyed your little excursion?”

“Thank you,” Ariel replied, forcing a smile. “It was quite an experience.” She couldn’t bring herself to elaborate, knowing that the true depth of their connection to the village could never be distilled into mere pleasantries.

Once inside their luxurious suite, Ariel wandered over to the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking in the panoramic view of

the ocean. It should have been breathtaking, but all she could think about were the genuine smiles and warm embraces of the people they'd met in the village.

Miles wrapped his arms around her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. "I miss them too," he whispered, as if reading her thoughts.

Ariel leaned back into his embrace, a bittersweet smile playing on her lips. "I know it's silly," she admitted, "but I can't help feeling disappointed. This place is beautiful, but it just doesn't compare to the connection we had with the locals."

"Sometimes," Miles murmured, pressing a tender kiss to her temple, "the most beautiful things in life are the simplest – the laughter of friends, the warmth of a loving touch, the knowledge that you truly belong. And those are the moments we'll treasure forever."

Ariel closed her eyes, allowing Miles' words to wash over her like a soothing balm. She knew he was right; their honeymoon might not have gone as planned, but the memories they had made together were more precious than any five-star resort could ever be.

"How about that couples' massage we saw earlier?" Ariel suggested, forcing a smile as she took Miles' hand and led him towards the spa. She hoped that maybe by participating in the resort's offerings, they could recapture some of the magic they had experienced in the village.

As they lay side by side on plush massage tables, Ariel tried to focus on the soothing scent of lavender oil and the

skilled hands working on her tense muscles. But her thoughts kept drifting back to the simple joys they had shared with the locals: the laughter around a shared meal, the heartfelt conversations, the sense of being seen for who they were, not just as guests at a luxury resort.

“Are you enjoying this?” Miles whispered, interrupting her reverie. His voice was soft, but she could hear the same longing she felt mirrored in his tone.

Ariel hesitated before answering, sensing that he too was struggling to embrace the superficiality of the experience. “It’s nice,” she admitted, “but it’s just not the same.”

Miles reached out and squeezed her hand gently, his touch speaking volumes without words. As their eyes met, they shared an unspoken understanding, and without needing to say anything more, they rose from the massage tables and left the spa hand in hand.

They found themselves wandering along the resort’s pristine beach, the waves lapping softly at their feet as they walked in companionable silence. The sand was smooth and white, a stark contrast to the rugged, untamed beauty they’d discovered in the village.

“I can’t help but think about how different this is from the village’s beach,” Ariel mused, her gaze sweeping over the perfectly arranged sun loungers and umbrellas that dotted the shore. “I miss the way the locals would gather around a fire in the evenings, sharing stories and laughter.”

“Me too,” Miles agreed, his eyes distant as he recalled the warmth and camaraderie they had experienced. “There was a

sense of genuine connection there that I haven't felt anywhere else.”

As the sun sank below the horizon, casting the sky in a riot of orange and pink hues, Ariel and Miles stood at the water's edge, their fingers intertwined and hearts yearning for the authenticity and simplicity they had discovered during their time in the village.

“Maybe we can find a way to bring some of that magic back with us to Maine,” Ariel suggested softly, her eyes shining with the hope of preserving the connections they had made.

Miles smiled, his love for her evident in the tender way he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. “We'll find a way,” he promised, and as they continued their walk along the beach, hand in hand, they vowed to hold onto the memories of their unconventional honeymoon and carry them home to the life they were building together.

Ariel glanced at the setting sun, its golden rays casting a warm glow on the pristine white sand beneath her feet, creating a mesmerizing contrast. She took a deep breath, inhaling the salty ocean breeze, and turned to Miles, who stood beside her, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

“Can I ask you something?” Ariel's voice was barely audible over the gentle lapping of the waves, but she knew he would hear her.

“Of course,” Miles replied, his eyes never leaving the sea.

“Would you... want to go back home early? To Maine?”
The words tumbled from her lips hesitantly, as if she were afraid of what his response might be.

Miles finally looked at her, his brow furrowed in thought.
“Why would you want to do that?”

Ariel bit her lip, trying to find the right words. “I don’t know... I can’t help but feel like we’re missing something here. This place is beautiful, no doubt about it, but...” Her voice trailed off, unable to articulate the emptiness she felt within her.

“Like it’s not real?” Miles suggested softly, understanding dawning in his eyes. “Like it’s the tourist side of the island, but not the heart, the village?”

“Exactly. I miss our little town, our family, our friends – everything that makes life worth living.” Ariel sighed, her shoulders slumping with the weight of her longing.

Miles reached for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “You’re right,” he said slowly, mulling over the idea. “Our time in the village showed us what truly matters – genuine connections and the simple joys of life. Maybe we should go back home and focus on that.”

Ariel’s eyes filled with gratitude and relief as she smiled at him. “You’d really be okay with ending our honeymoon early?”

Miles nodded, the corners of his eyes crinkling with affection. “As long as I’m with you, that’s all that matters. We

can make our own memories right there in the place we call home.”

“Thank you,” Ariel murmured, her heart swelling with love for this man who understood her so well. Together, they walked back to their resort room, hand in hand, their steps light and purposeful.

That night, they sat on the balcony of their suite, overlooking the moonlit ocean as they booked an earlier flight back to Maine. As they clicked “confirm” on the reservation, a sense of peace washed over them, knowing that they were choosing what truly mattered – their emotional well-being and the life they had built together.

“We’ll be back in our cozy little town soon,” Miles whispered, his arm wrapped around Ariel’s shoulders as they gazed at the stars above, dreaming of the future that awaited them in the familiarity and comfort of their beloved Maine.

The sun was sinking over the horizon, casting warm hues of pink and orange across the sky as Ariel and Miles made their way to the resort’s reception desk. The sound of laughter and clinking glasses filled the air, but their hearts yearned for the quiet intimacy they had discovered in the village.

“Excuse me,” Ariel said, her voice gentle as she addressed the smiling woman behind the desk. “We wanted to let you

know that we've decided to cut our honeymoon short and head back home tomorrow."

"Of course, Mrs. Clemens," the receptionist replied, her cheerful demeanor faltering slightly. "Is everything all right? Were you not satisfied with your stay?"

"No, no, it's not that at all," Miles interjected, his hand finding Ariel's and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "The resort has been lovely, truly. It's just that our time spent in the village made us realize how much we value the simplicity and authenticity of life back home in Maine."

"Ah, I see," the receptionist said, nodding understandingly. "Well, we appreciate your honesty and wish you both the best on your journey home."

"Thank you," Ariel replied, her smile soft and genuine as they turned to leave the reception area."

The drive to the airport was a quiet one, with Ariel and Miles exchanging glances filled with anticipation for their return to Maine. As they pulled up to the terminal, the crisp morning air greeted them with a hint of the biting cold they would soon face back home.

"Ready for this?" Miles asked, his hand resting on Ariel's knee as he gave her an affectionate squeeze.

"More than ever," she replied, her voice brimming with eagerness. "I can't wait to get back to our Leaside B&B and start applying all we've learned."

They made their way through the bustling airport, the cacophony of noise and movement a stark contrast to the

serene village they had just left behind. But among the chaos of travel, they found solace in each other's presence, their hands intertwined as they navigated their way to the boarding gate.

“Final call for flight 1821 to Portland, Maine,” crackled the intercom, snapping Ariel out of her thoughts. They hurried to the gate, the excitement bubbling within them as they handed over their tickets and boarded the plane.

“Looks like we're just in time,” Miles said, settling into the window seat next to Ariel. She leaned her head against his shoulder, feeling a wave of relief wash over her as they settled in for the journey ahead. She had taken her sedative—just the smallest amount—and was comforted with Miles at her side, despite her anxiety over the flight to come.

As the plane roared to life and began to taxi down the runway, Ariel couldn't help but look out the window, watching as the tropical paradise they had left behind slowly receded into the distance. Her thoughts drifted back to the simple joys they had experienced in the village—the laughter shared around a fire, the warmth of a home-cooked meal, the genuine connections forged with the locals.

“Hey, you all right?” Miles asked, sensing her introspection.

Ariel smiled softly, turning her gaze from the window to meet his eyes. “Yeah, just reflecting on everything we've been through on this trip. It's been a rollercoaster, hasn't it?”

“Sure has,” he agreed. “But I wouldn't change a thing. We've grown so much from these experiences and learned to

appreciate the simple things in life.”

“Like our love for each other,” she added, her heart swelling with affection. “And the importance of family and deep emotional connections.”

“Exactly,” Miles said, his voice warm and tender. “I’m grateful for every moment we’ve shared on this journey, even the challenging ones. They’ve made us stronger as individuals and as a couple.”

As the plane lifted off the ground and soared into the sky, Ariel felt a sense of closure, leaving behind the rollercoaster of their honeymoon and looking forward to a future filled with love, family, and the simple, meaningful moments that truly mattered—and, surprisingly, she wasn’t nearly as nervous as she had been on the trip here.

The plane’s engines hummed softly as they climbed higher, the landscape below dissolving into a patchwork of blues and greens. Ariel felt a gentle pressure on her hand, and she looked down to see Miles’ fingers intertwined with hers. She smiled and squeezed his hand in return, their shared warmth a comforting presence.

“Can’t wait to get back to Leaside B&B,” Miles said, his voice tinged with excitement. “I miss our little town and the people there.”

“Me too,” Ariel agreed, her thoughts drifting toward the cozy familiarity of their home. The thought of returning to the welcoming embrace of Endless Harbor filled her heart with anticipation, eager to apply the lessons learned from their honeymoon journey.

As they settled into their seats, Ariel glanced out the window once more, taking in the last glimpses of the tropical paradise they were leaving behind. She marveled at how the beauty of nature had given way to the artificiality that awaited them at the resort, and yet it was the genuine connections and experiences they had forged in the village that would remain etched in their memories forever.

“Neither can I,” Ariel murmured, her heart full as she turned to look at him. “I love you, Miles.”

“I love you too,” he replied, their eyes locking in a moment that seemed to suspend time itself.

As the plane continued its ascent, Ariel and Miles sat side by side, hands clasped tightly together. They were ready to embark on the final leg of their journey home, hearts brimming with gratitude for the experiences they had shared and the lessons they had learned. And as they soared through the sky, their thoughts turned toward the warmth of their small town, the embrace of their loved ones, and the life they were eager to continue building together at Leaside B&B

“Are you thinking about Leaside?” Miles asked, concern etched on his face as he studied Ariel’s thoughtful expression. “I know you’re worried about what’s going on there.”

Ariel shook her head, her eyes meeting his with quiet determination. “No, I trust them,” she said firmly. “I have to believe everything will be all right. We can’t control everything, Miles. We just have to trust and let things unfold as they will.”

He nodded, his gaze never leaving hers. “You’re right,” he conceded. “We can only do our best, and then we have to let go.”

Ariel felt a sense of peace settle over her. She knew that there would always be challenges and uncertainties in life, but she also knew that she had found a partner who would stand by her side through it all. And that, she realized, was worth more than any amount of control or predictability.

“Are you okay?” Miles asked, concern etched on his face as he gently squeezed her hand.

Ariel glanced at him, offering a small, reassuring smile. “I will be,” she whispered, leaning her head against his shoulder, seeking comfort in his steady presence. Their intertwined fingers spoke volumes about their unbreakable bond, forged through trials and tribulations, and strengthened by unwavering love.

An announcement crackled over the intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Due to unforeseen weather conditions along our original route, we’ve been advised to reroute our flight path for your safety. We’ll be making an emergency landing.”

A murmur of unease rippled through the cabin, the passengers exchanging nervous glances and murmuring in hushed tones. Ariel’s grip on Miles’ hand tightened, her fears of flying resurfacing like a dark cloud on the horizon.

“Hey,” Miles whispered softly, using his free hand to brush a stray lock of hair from her forehead. “We’ll be all right. You trust the captain, don’t you?”

Ariel nodded, swallowing hard. “Of course. It’s just...” She trailed off, her eyes meeting his, the unspoken fears dancing in their depths.

“Change is hard,” he murmured, understanding written in the lines of his face. “But it’s also a chance for new beginnings, for growth and adventure.”

She let out a slow breath as she considered his words, her heart gradually quieting its rapid beat. Together, they would face the unknown, hand in hand, their love an anchor in the stormy seas of life.

“Thank you, Miles,” Ariel whispered, her eyes shining with gratitude and love. As the plane soared into the sky, leaving the familiar behind, they turned toward each other, ready to embrace whatever lay ahead.

The plane jolted, causing a chorus of gasps to rise from the nervous passengers. Ariel squeezed her eyes shut and gripped the armrests tightly, her knuckles turning white as she tried to steady her pounding heart. It seemed as if the rough weather was intent on ensuring their trip was anything but smooth sailing.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Miles asked, his voice calm and steady despite the turbulence rattling the aircraft like a toy in the hands of an impatient child.

“Y-yes,” Ariel stammered, her eyes still closed as she fought to keep her fear at bay. She could feel her pulse racing, her thoughts consumed by the unsettling sensation of being tossed about like a leaf in the wind.

“Here,” Miles said tenderly, taking her trembling hand in his own. “Hold onto me. You’re not alone in this.”

Ariel felt a wave of comfort wash over her as she tightened her grip on him, their fingers intertwined like the roots of two trees standing strong together through the storm. She opened her eyes and met his warm gaze, thankful for the anchor he provided in this sea of uncertainty.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice barely audible above the din of the engines and the rustle of anxious passengers. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Just remember to breathe,” he advised gently, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “These moments are temporary, and we’ll be safe soon enough.”

As the plane continued to weave its way through the turbulent skies, Ariel focused on her breathing, her fears gradually subsiding under the weight of Miles’ unwavering support. Slowly, the violent shaking gave way to a more manageable rocking motion, as if the storm had finally decided to show them mercy.

“See?” Miles said with a smile, sensing the change in the atmosphere. “We made it through the worst of it together.”

Ariel returned his smile, her heart full of gratitude and love for the man who had stood by her side through thick and thin. Together, they would face the unknown, their love a beacon of light guiding them through the darkest of nights.

“Thank you,” she whispered once more, leaning her head against his shoulder as they continued their journey hand in

hand, their destination still uncertain but their love as sure as the sun that would eventually break through the storm clouds to warm their faces.

The aircraft swayed and shuddered, a reluctant dance with the storm outside. Ariel's heart raced as she clung tightly to Miles' hand, her knuckles white and her breath coming in shallow gasps. The flight attendants moved through the cabin, their voices strained but professional as they attempted to reassure the uneasy passengers.

"Please remain calm, everyone," one of them said, her voice barely audible above the howl of the wind and the groan of the plane's metal frame. "We're experiencing some turbulence due to the weather, but our pilots are doing everything they can to ensure a safe journey."

Ariel glanced out the window, staring into the dark, churning skies that threatened to swallow them whole. She closed her eyes, desperately trying to focus on the sound of Miles' steady breathing beside her, seeking solace in his presence.

"Sometimes things don't go as planned," she thought, recalling the events leading up to this moment. "But as long as we have each other, we can face anything."

The captain's voice crackled over the intercom, announcing their decision to make an emergency landing on a nearby Caribbean island. The news sent a wave of murmurings throughout the cabin, but Miles squeezed Ariel's hand reassuringly.

“Whatever happens, we’ll figure it out together, all right?” he whispered, his words laced with both determination and tenderness.

As the plane descended rapidly through the stormy weather, the world outside transformed into a blur of gray and green. Ariel felt a thrill of excitement mixed with fear, her stomach twisting into knots as they plummeted closer to the unknown island below. Her thoughts raced, wondering what this sudden change would mean for their already tumultuous journey.

“Maybe this is fate’s way of telling us to slow down,” she mused internally, her grip on Miles’ hand never wavering. “Perhaps we’re meant to find something here, some hidden piece of the puzzle that will help us heal and grow.”

The plane touched down with a jolt, its tires skidding against the rain-slicked runway as the pilots expertly brought them to a halt. For a moment, the cabin was silent, relief washing over each passenger like a warm embrace.

“Welcome,” the flight attendant announced, her voice still calm but tinged with relief. “We apologize for the inconvenience, but your safety is our top priority. We’ll be providing further information about accommodations and rescheduling as soon as possible.”

Ariel looked at Miles, her eyes wide with a mixture of exhaustion and curiosity. Together, they had weathered the storm – both literally and metaphorically – and now found themselves on an unfamiliar island, their plans cast aside in favor of this unexpected detour.

A collective sigh of relief filled the cabin as the plane touched down safely, the tires screeching against the runway. The tension that had been building up inside Ariel throughout the turbulent flight began to dissipate, leaving her feeling emotionally and physically spent.

“Come on, let’s grab our stuff,” Miles said gently, taking Ariel’s hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze. They unbuckled their seat belts and reached for their carry-on bags in the overhead compartment. The airplane’s cabin was abuzz with quiet chatter as fellow passengers discussed the unexpected turn of events and speculated about what awaited them on this unfamiliar island.

“Thank you for flying with us,” one of the flight attendants said, trying to maintain a professional demeanor despite the strain in her voice. “I hope you enjoy your stay here.”

“Thanks,” Ariel replied, managing a weary smile. As they exited the plane, she glanced back at the other passengers, all wearing similar expressions of exhaustion mixed with curiosity. This certainly wasn’t the trip they had planned, but there was something thrilling about the unknown that lay before them.

“Who would have thought we’d end up here, huh?” Miles asked, his words punctuated by a gust of warm, tropical air as they stepped onto the tarmac. The sun was beginning to set, casting a golden glow on the lush greenery surrounding the small airport.

“Definitely not me,” Ariel admitted, her eyes taking in the vibrant colors of the island. The air was thick with the scent of

blooming flowers, and she could hear the faint strains of steel drums playing in the distance. “But, I guess sometimes life throws you curveballs, right?”

“Right,” Miles agreed, his arm wrapping around her waist as they walked toward the terminal. “And if there’s one thing I’ve learned from our time together, it’s that facing those curveballs is a lot easier with you by my side.”

Ariel leaned into him, feeling a sense of comfort and security despite the unexpected circumstances they found themselves in. As they entered the terminal, she felt a spark of excitement for the adventure that awaited them on this uncharted island. Together, they would explore this new territory, hand in hand, embracing every experience life had to offer.

The airport on the new island was a stark contrast to the bustling one they’d left behind. With its smaller size and fewer crowds, there was an almost palpable sense of tranquility in the air. The low hum of conversation mingled with the distant chirping of birds, creating a soothing atmosphere that seemed to wrap around Ariel like a warm blanket.

“Feels like we’ve been transported to a whole different world, doesn’t it?” Miles mused, his voice soft as he took in their surroundings.

Ariel nodded, her eyes roaming over the small terminal building, its walls adorned with vibrant murals depicting scenes of island life. “It’s definitely not what we had planned, but somehow, it feels...right.”

Their sudden change of plans had initially thrown them off balance, disappointment tinging their excitement for the trip they'd so carefully planned. But as Ariel stood there, hand in hand with Miles, she felt her apprehension give way to something else – a sense of adventure, of openness to the unexpected experiences this new island would offer.

“Come on,” Miles said, a mischievous glint in his eyes as he led her toward the exit. “Let’s see what this place has in store for us.”

“Miles! We have to find out how we get home.”

“Just a peek?” he pleaded, making puppy eyes.

As they stepped outside, Ariel couldn't help but be struck by the beauty of the island. Lush green foliage stretched out before them, the vibrant colors seeming almost impossibly vivid against the backdrop of a cerulean sky. A gentle breeze carried the scent of salt and exotic flowers, tantalizing her senses and hinting at the wonders yet to be discovered.

“I know it’s not what we planned, but I think this could be a blessing in disguise,” Miles said, his words mirroring her own thoughts. “We can explore this place together, make our own memories. That’s what really matters, right?”

Ariel looked up at him, her heart swelling with love for this man who had become such an integral part of her life. She knew that, together, they could face any challenge and turn it into an opportunity for growth and happiness.

“Absolutely,” she replied, squeezing his hand.

The island stretched out before them like an enchanting postcard, the sun casting a warm, golden glow over everything it touched. Ariel and Miles shared a glance, excitement twinkling in their eyes as they took in the scene before them.

“Who would’ve thought we’d end up here?” Ariel mused aloud, her voice soft with wonder. “One moment we’re on our way home, and the next, we’re dropped off on this unexpected little gem.”

“Sometimes life has a funny way of leading us where we need to be,” Miles replied, his hand finding hers and giving it a reassuring squeeze. “The airline said they’d call us in an hour or so. Let’s take a walk.”

As they walked through the small town, past quaint shops and cafes that seemed to beckon them inside, Ariel couldn’t help but marvel at how quickly their plans had changed. Yet, amidst the uncertainty and initial disappointment, she felt a surge of gratitude for this serendipitous twist of fate. It was as if the universe had conspired to give them a chance to slow down, breathe, and truly savor each other’s company.

Then, Miles’s phone rang.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Ariel took a deep breath as she and Miles entered the small airport, their eyes adjusting to the dimmer lighting after the bright tropical sun. The high ceiling was adorned with hanging plants, giving the building a cozy, welcoming atmosphere. A gentle buzz of conversation filled the air as passengers milled about, some collecting luggage while others browsed the few available shops.

“Attention, passengers,” a cheerful voice rang out over the PA system. “We are currently experiencing an unexpected influx of travelers due to weather-related delays. We’re asking for volunteers to stay behind for a day or two while we arrange connecting flights. In exchange, we will provide complimentary accommodations at a nearby resort.”

Ariel and Miles exchanged glances, their eyebrows raised in surprise. They had already endured so many twists and turns on their honeymoon, but the prospect of extending their stay on this beautiful island seemed too good to pass up.

“Should we do it?” Ariel asked, her voice hesitant yet hopeful.

Miles considered the offer for a moment before replying, “Why not? It’s not like we have any pressing engagements back home.”

A sense of excitement bubbled within Ariel’s chest, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. She couldn’t deny the allure

of spending more time in this paradise with the man she loved. “All right,” she agreed, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Let’s do it.”

They approached the ticket counter, where a friendly staff member was handling the volunteer sign-ups. The small size of the airport had cultivated a warm, community-like atmosphere that felt worlds away from the bustling, impersonal hubs they were used to.

“Hi, we’d like to volunteer to stay behind,” Ariel told the staff member, clasping Miles’ hand in hers.

“Fantastic!” the woman replied enthusiastically. “Thank you so much for your flexibility. I’ll get you set up with a room at the resort right away.”

As Ariel and Miles filled out the necessary paperwork, their minds raced with thoughts of the unexpected adventure they were about to embark on. Little did they know, the best was yet to come.

Ariel gazed at the palm trees swaying in sync with the gentle breeze, their long fronds casting dappled shadows across the tarmac. The tropical surroundings were a far cry from the cramped, damp hotel room they had endured mere days before.

“Can you imagine?” Miles mused as he leaned against the airport’s glass wall, his eyes fixed on the azure waters that shimmered just beyond the runway. “A couple of extra days at a luxury resort? And it’s all for free?”

“Sounds too good to be true,” Ariel admitted, her heart fluttering in excitement. She glanced back at the bustling airport terminal, where staff had just made the announcement requesting volunteers to stay behind for a day or two. They were offered complimentary accommodations at a nearby resort while their connecting flights were rearranged for other passengers.

“Think about it, Ariel,” Miles said, turning to face her, his deep-set eyes filled with hope. “We could finally have the honeymoon we’ve always dreamt of. No more leaky faucets or lumpy mattresses.”

Ariel couldn’t help but smile at the thought, recalling the challenges they had faced during their previous honeymoon accommodations. As much as she loved every moment spent with Miles, even she had to admit that their lodgings had left something to be desired.

“Plus,” Miles continued, his voice softening, “we’ll get some extra time to enjoy each other’s company, without any distractions.”

The warmth in his gaze sent a shiver down Ariel’s spine, and she knew in that moment that she wanted nothing more than to stay on this island paradise with him. She took a deep breath, inhaling the salty scent of the ocean mingling with the sweet fragrance of the island’s lush flora.

“All right,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. “Let’s do it.”

Miles grinned, his relief evident in the way his shoulders relaxed and his eyes sparkled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Hand in hand, they made their way back to the ticket counter, their excitement growing with each step. As Ariel informed the staff of their decision to volunteer, she could feel a sense of eagerness rising within her – a desire to leave behind the challenges of their past and embrace this new opportunity for a truly unforgettable honeymoon.

“Thank you,” the staff member said warmly as she handed Ariel and Miles their new room information. “Enjoy your stay at our beautiful resort.”

“Thank you,” Ariel replied, her heart swelling with gratitude. She glanced over at Miles, whose smile mirrored her own, and knew without a doubt that they were about to embark on an adventure filled with love, laughter, and memories that would last a lifetime.

Ariel and Miles stepped onto the waiting shuttle, their hands clasped tightly together as they settled into their seats. Ariel gazed out the window, her anticipation building with each passing moment. The lush greenery of the island seemed to reach out for them, beckoning them in with its swaying palms and vibrant flowers. As the shuttle navigated the winding roads, Ariel found herself lost in thoughts of their honeymoon thus far. The challenges they had faced seemed so distant now, replaced by the promise of a beautiful new beginning at the resort. She could feel her heart swelling with happiness as she envisioned lazy days spent lounging by the

pool, romantic walks along the beach, and candlelit dinners beneath the stars.

The shuttle slowed to a stop, and Ariel's breath caught in her throat as they arrived at the entrance to the resort. A grand archway framed an elegantly manicured garden, bursting with tropical blooms that danced gracefully in the gentle breeze. Beyond the gardens, a breathtaking view of crystal-clear turquoise water sparkled under the golden sun.

"Wow," Miles whispered, echoing Ariel's awe-struck sentiments.

Hand in hand, they exited the shuttle and made their way toward the entrance, each step bringing them closer to the paradise that awaited them. As they passed through the archway, Ariel couldn't help but pause for a moment, allowing the beauty of the scene before her to wash over her senses. The scent of exotic flowers mingled with the salty tang of the ocean air, creating a symphony of scents that both invigorated and relaxed her.

"Are you ready for this?" Miles asked softly, his voice tinged with excitement and a hint of uncertainty.

Ariel looked into his eyes, seeing the love and anticipation reflected there. "More than anything," she replied, her voice filled with warmth and conviction.

Together, they continued into the resort, each step bringing them closer to their perfect honeymoon, and the memories that would last a lifetime.

Ariel and Miles strolled hand in hand toward the beach, the pristine white sand warm and soft beneath their feet. The gentle breeze rustled palm fronds overhead, casting dappled shadows on the ground as they walked. Ahead, swaying hammocks beckoned invitingly between the trees, while the sun cast a sparkling path across the surface of the inviting infinity pool.

“Everything is even more beautiful than I imagined,” Ariel murmured, her eyes wide with wonder as she took in the idyllic setting.

“Me too,” Miles agreed, his grip on her hand tightening ever so slightly. “I can’t believe we’re finally here, and we get to share this moment together.”

As they approached the main building of the resort, Ariel couldn’t help but marvel at the elegant architecture and thoughtful design that seemed to blend seamlessly with the natural beauty of the island. She felt a surge of gratitude for the unexpected turn of events that had led them to this magical place.

They entered the cool, welcoming lobby and made their way to the front desk, where a friendly staff member greeted them with a warm smile. “Welcome to our island paradise!” he said cheerfully. “May I have your names, please?”

“Ariel and Miles Clemens,” Ariel replied, her excitement bubbling up in her voice.

“Ah, yes,” the staff member said, his fingers tapping at the computer keyboard. “We’ve been expecting you.” He glanced up from the screen, his grin widening as he handed them each

a room key. “You’ll find your accommodations absolutely delightful, I assure you.”

“Thank you,” Miles said, exchanging a joyous look with Ariel as they accepted the keys.

“Please, don’t hesitate to reach out if there’s anything you need during your stay,” the staff member added. “Our goal is to make your time here as perfect as possible.”

“Thank you,” Ariel echoed, her heart swelling with happiness. “I think we’re off to a great start.”

As they left the front desk and walked toward their room, Ariel felt a deep sense of contentment settle over her. This enchanting resort offered them the opportunity to leave behind the challenges of their previous honeymoon accommodations and truly connect with one another in an unforgettable setting.

“Here’s to new beginnings,” she whispered, as Miles wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

“New beginnings indeed,” he agreed, planting a tender kiss on her forehead. They continued down the path, their dreams for the future stretching out before them like the sunlit waves lapping at the shore.

A gentle breeze tousled Ariel’s hair as she and Miles unlocked the door to their room, revealing a haven of luxury and serenity. The interior was bathed in warm sunlight that streamed through floor-to-ceiling glass doors leading to a private balcony. The king-sized bed, dressed in crisp white linens, beckoned them with its promise of comfort and relaxation.

“Wow,” Ariel breathed, her eyes drinking in the elegantly-appointed space. “This is incredible.”

“Wait until you see the view,” Miles said, his voice filled with anticipation. He led her by the hand to the balcony, which overlooked the azure ocean, its undulating waves creating a symphony of soothing sounds.

“Amazing,” she sighed, leaning against the railing. “I could get used to this.”

“Me too,” Miles agreed, wrapping his arms around her from behind. They stood like that for a while, simply watching the sea, before turning their attention to exploring the rest of the resort.

As they meandered through the lush gardens, Ariel marveled at the vibrant tropical flowers that perfumed the air. Their journey led them to the spa, where an attendant greeted them warmly.

“Good afternoon,” she said, her smile genuine. “Would you like to book a couples massage or any other treatments during your stay?”

“Sounds tempting,” Ariel mused, glancing at Miles. “What do you think?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “Let’s treat ourselves.”

“Great,” the attendant said, booking them in for the following day. “You’ll love our signature treatment – it’s pure bliss.”

“Can’t wait,” Ariel said, her excitement growing.

As they continued to explore, they discovered the beachside bar, where they ordered refreshments and relaxed in the shade of swaying palm trees. With each sip of their drinks, the stress of their previous honeymoon accommodations seemed to evaporate, replaced by a profound sense of peace.

“Cheers,” Ariel said, clinking her glass against Miles’. “To new memories.”

“New memories,” he echoed, his eyes sparkling with promise.

Evening approached, and they made their way to the gourmet restaurant, where a table for two awaited them. As they perused the menu, bursting with mouthwatering descriptions of local cuisine, Ariel felt grateful for this unexpected turn of events.

“Everything sounds delicious,” she said, her fingers tracing the embossed lettering on the menu.

“Indeed,” Miles agreed, reaching across the table to take her hand. “I can’t wait to sample it all with you.”

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the resort, Ariel felt an overwhelming sense of contentment. This place, with its breathtaking beauty and serene atmosphere, was the perfect setting for the next chapter in their journey together. And as she gazed into Miles’ eyes, filled with love and devotion, she knew that no matter what challenges life may throw their way, they would face them hand in hand, hearts entwined.

As Ariel and Miles finished their exquisite dinner at the gourmet restaurant, they decided to venture out onto the resort's private beach. The sun was beginning to set, casting warm hues of gold and pink across the sky. They strolled hand in hand, feeling the soft, warm sand between their toes, savoring the lingering taste of the local cuisine on their lips.

They paused by the shoreline, allowing the gentle waves to tickle their feet. Miles turned to Ariel, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Want to have a little competition? Whoever finds the most unique seashell gets to choose our next adventure."

"Deal," Ariel agreed with a smile, accepting the challenge.

As they combed the beach, their laughter filled the air, mingling with the soothing sounds of the ocean. Ariel picked up a beautiful, iridescent shell, examining its intricate patterns before tucking it carefully into her pocket. She glanced over at Miles, who held an equally stunning specimen. Their eyes met, sharing a moment of mutual appreciation for the simple pleasures life had to offer.

"Let's take a break and enjoy the sunset," Ariel suggested, leading them toward a pair of inviting hammocks strung between palm trees.

They settled into the swaying hammocks, sipping on tropical cocktails garnished with fragrant blossoms. The sweet, tangy taste of pineapple and coconut danced on their tongues, transporting them to a world where worries were forgotten and time stood still. As they gazed at the sky, bathed in vibrant shades of orange and purple, Ariel's mind drifted to their future together.

“Can you imagine what life will be like when we finally get home to Leaside back in Endless Harbor?” she mused, her voice soft with wonder.

Miles traced the rim of his glass thoughtfully, a gentle smile playing on his lips. “If it hasn’t burned down..”

She tossed a handful of sand at him.

Miles chuckled softly, his eyes reflecting the moonlight as he gazed down at her. “Well, I always knew that we were meant for something special, but I never imagined it would be this perfect.”

Ariel squeezed his hand, feeling a warmth flood her chest at his words. She couldn’t help but think back on the challenges they had faced during their previous honeymoon accommodations – the cramped quarters, lack of privacy, and an overwhelming sense of disappointment. Yet here they were, surrounded by tropical beauty and serenity, their love stronger than ever.

“Maybe everything does happen for a reason,” she mused, her thoughts drifting to the unexpected opportunity that had brought them to this paradise. “If we hadn’t volunteered to stay behind at the airport, we might never have discovered this place.”

“Sometimes life has a funny way of guiding us where we need to go,” Miles agreed, his gaze sweeping across the beach and the resort beyond. “What matters most is that we’re together, and we can take this experience back home with us. It’ll remind us that even when things seem difficult, there’s always a silver lining.”

Ariel looked at him, her eyes filled with love. “You always know just what to say,” she whispered, her voice breaking the serene quiet around them.

Miles leaned down, his face inching closer to hers. “It’s easy when I’m speaking from the heart,” he murmured, his breath warm against her cheek.

Time seemed to stand still as their lips met, the world fading away until there was only the two of them and the rhythm of the waves as their backdrop. It was a kiss full of promise—the perfect end to the perfect honeymoon.

EPILOGUE

Ariel and Miles pulled up to Leaside, their breaths fogging up the car windows as they exchanged relieved glances. The familiar path leading to the entrance seemed to welcome them back with open arms.

“Home at last,” Ariel sighed, her eyes twinkling with affection for the place she had grown to love so dearly.

“Indeed,” Miles agreed, his warm voice a soothing balm for the weariness of their journey.

As they stepped out of the car, the freezing Maine air nipped at their skin, causing them both to shudder involuntarily. Ice crystals had settled on the ground, giving the quaint B&B a magical appearance under the moonlit sky. Ariel wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck and hurried towards the front door, Miles following closely behind with their luggage in tow.

“Ready to feel the warmth?” Miles asked playfully, his breath visible in the frosty air as he fumbled with the keys.

“Absolutely,” Ariel replied with a grin, eagerly awaiting the comforting embrace of their home away from home.

The moment they stepped inside Leaside B&B, the cold was instantly forgotten. Warmth enveloped them like a hug from a loved one, chasing away any lingering chills. A gentle hum of lively conversation drifted from the dining room while the aroma of freshly baked bread wafted through the air. It felt

as though the B&B itself was welcoming them home, inviting them to leave their cares at the door and relax into its nurturing embrace.

“Ah, there’s nothing like coming home to this after being out in the cold,” Ariel mused, her cheeks flushed from the contrast between the frigid outdoors and the cozy warmth of the B&B.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Miles concurred, setting down their luggage with a contented sigh. “Shall we join our guests for a warm drink and catch up on what we’ve missed?”

“Sounds perfect,” Ariel said, her heart swelling with gratitude at the thought of their shared life in this special place. Arm in arm, they made their way to the dining room, ready to reconnect with friends and share stories of their eventful honeymoon.

As Ariel and Miles entered the bustling dining room, she couldn’t help but marvel at how immaculate and well-maintained everything looked. The polished wooden floors gleamed beneath their feet, and the tables were adorned with crisp white tablecloths and sparkling silverware. The rich aroma of coffee wafted through the air, mingling with the scent of cinnamon and freshly baked pastries.

“Wow,” Ariel whispered to Miles, her eyes wide with surprise and delight. “I can’t believe how amazing this place looks. Darcy, Oliver, and Katie must have worked really hard while we were away.”

Miles squeezed her hand gently, his own pride evident in the curve of his lips. “They truly did an incredible job,” he

agreed. “It’s clear they care about this place just as much as we do.”

Ariel’s heart swelled with gratitude as she scanned the room, her gaze coming to rest on Darcy, who was expertly flipping glasses behind the bar counter. He caught her eye and flashed a proud smile before turning his attention back to his liquid masterpiece.

Meanwhile, Katie and Oliver moved gracefully between the tables, taking orders and refilling cups with practiced efficiency. Their warm smiles and easy banter with the guests spoke volumes about the level of care and attention they had shown during Ariel and Miles’ absence.

“Leeside is in good hands,” Ariel mused, her thoughts echoing Miles’ earlier sentiment. She knew that entrusting the B&B to her daughter and their dedicated staff had been the right decision, and she couldn’t be more pleased with the results.

“Indeed it is,” Miles replied, his arm wrapping around her waist as they approached their regular table by the window. “And now that we’re back, we can continue building on this beautiful foundation together.”

The flickering flames in the fireplace cast a warm glow throughout the dining room of Leeside B&B, chasing away the last remnants of winter chill. Soft jazz music played in the background, its soothing melody weaving through the murmurs of conversation from the guests seated at their tables. A sense of coziness and contentment filled the air, as if the

very walls of the quaint B&B were embracing everyone within.

“Isn’t it wonderful to be back?” Ariel sighed, her gaze drifting around the familiar surroundings that had become her sanctuary over the past few years. Miles nodded in agreement, his eyes meeting hers with a spark of love and shared happiness.

“Absolutely,” he replied, reaching for her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. “I can’t imagine a better place to call home.”

As they continued to soak in the comforting atmosphere, Ariel’s phone buzzed softly in her pocket. She retrieved it, expecting perhaps a welcome-home message from a friend or family member. But instead, her eyes widened as she saw a notification for a booking request at Leaside for Valentine’s Day weekend.

“Look at this, Miles,” she said, showing him her screen. “We’ve already got a booking request for Valentine’s Day weekend. And we’ve only just returned!”

Miles leaned in closer, reading the details of the reservation request. “Seems like you’ve built quite a reputation for romance here at Leaside,” he teased, a smile playing on his lips. Ariel playfully swatted his arm, her heart swelling with pride at the thought of their B&B being the setting for such a special occasion.

“Let’s make sure we go above and beyond for this couple,” she suggested, excitement bubbling within her. “Valentine’s

Day is always a time for creating magical memories, and I want them to remember their stay here forever.”

“Of course,” Miles agreed, his eyes filled with pride. “We’ll make it a weekend they’ll never forget.”

Ariel’s curiosity piqued as she read the name of the guests requesting a booking for Valentine’s Day weekend. Her heart skipped a beat, recognizing the same last name as an old flame from her past. A flurry of memories swirled in her mind, filling her with a mix of nostalgia and disbelief.

“Hey, Miles,” Ariel said, her voice filled with uncertainty. “Does the name ‘Bennett’ ring any bells to you?”

Miles furrowed his brow, taking a moment to think before he replied, “I’m not sure. Should it?”

“Well, it’s just...” Ariel hesitated, unsure of how to express her thoughts. “It’s the same last name as someone I used to know – someone I was quite close to, actually.”

“Really?” Miles asked, his curiosity now ignited as well. He moved closer, trying to get a better look at the reservation request on Ariel’s phone. “Do you think it could be the same person?”

Ariel shook her head slowly, her eyes still fixed on the screen. “I don’t know. It’s been so long since we’ve spoken, and who knows what life has brought him since then? But the thought of him staying here... it’s just strange, you know?”

Miles wrapped a comforting arm around Ariel’s shoulders, pulling her close. “Well, whatever happens, we’ll make sure their stay is unforgettable. And if it does turn out to be

someone from your past, then that's just another interesting chapter in the story of Leaside.”

“Thank you, Miles,” Ariel whispered, leaning into his embrace. The warmth of his body contrasted sharply with the cold winter air outside, and she felt grateful for the love they shared. Unexpected emotions stirred at the name on her screen, and Ariel took a deep breath, her eyes still lingering. The past had a way of resurfacing when least expected, but she was determined not to let it affect her present.

With a decisive tap on her phone's screen, she accepted the booking. It was time to focus on creating a memorable event that would bring joy to her guests, no matter who they turned out to be.

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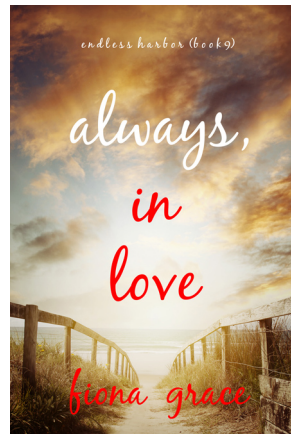
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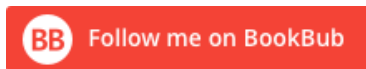
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