



Spring Break with a Billionaire

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Description: Cameron Shaw has spent his life running full throttle, but now he's ready to hit the brakes and soak in the simple joys of life. A few weeks at the beach with his daughter and her new husband, who happens to be his best friend, seems like the perfect escape. What he doesn't expect is Cricket Adams—a lively, whip-smart teacher on spring break who steals his heart from the moment they meet.

Cricket's idea of romance is rooted in reality: it's fleeting, especially when it involves a beach fling with a devastatingly handsome older man who couldn't possibly want anything long-term. With her return ticket home already in hand, she's determined to guard her heart.

Cameron's not about to let the woman of his dreams slip away. As their week together unfolds, Cameron works to convince Cricket that what they've found isn't a Spring Break fling—it's forever.

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One

Chapter One

Cameron

The breeze rolling off the ocean whispers against my skin, and I take a deep breath, inhaling the salty air. As I climb from the driver's seat of my black Range Rover, my shoulders immediately drop, the tension draining from my body. Everything here feels quieter, simpler—exactly the opposite of my world back home.

I glance around, taking in the scene that unfolds in front of Luke and Natalie's sprawling beach house. The sand stretches beyond the walkway, pale gold fading into a vibrant blue horizon. Even in March, Love Beach looks like paradise. And right now, paradise is exactly what I need.

"You finally made it!" Natalie calls from the front porch, waving enthusiastically. She's barefoot, wrapped up in a thick sweater over shorts, and her blonde curls blow gently around her smiling face. The warmth in her welcome melts the last fragments of tension in my chest. She rushes down the steps to hug me, her arms tight around my shoulders.

"Hey, sweetheart." I squeeze her close for a moment, enjoying how quickly the comfort of family seeps into my bones. "Thanks for inviting me."

"You know you're always welcome here." She steps back, grinning. "Luke's inside, pretending he knows how to grill snapper." Natalie lowers her voice, "Spoiler alert:

he doesn't."

"That's slander," Luke's deep voice rumbles from the doorway. He emerges, looking every bit the laid-back beach bum even though he's a tech billionaire. His grin stretches wider than usual. "Good to see you, Cameron."

"You too." I clap him on the shoulder, feeling instantly at home in their presence. There's something undeniably grounding about being with family.

"How's the drive?" Luke asks, already taking my bag despite my protest. He's always been that guy—hospitable, generous, easygoing. I'm so glad that we got past all the drama that I made when he and Natalie got together.

"Quiet, thankfully." I rub the back of my neck, releasing the lingering stiffness. "Exactly what I needed."

Natalie nudges my arm gently as we head inside. "You look tired, Dad. Have you taken a break since Christmas?"

I chuckle softly, though there's truth in her teasing. "Not really. You know how I get."

"We do," Luke agrees, his voice serious despite the playful jab. "That's why we insisted you come. You deserve to slow down and breathe a little."

He's right, of course. It's the curse of success: the harder I work, the less I know how to stop. Every project, every investment, every decision demands constant vigilance. Years of late nights and endless flights between coasts have left me craving something simpler.

Luke shows me to the guest suite, and I pause at the threshold, absorbing the view.

Sliding doors open onto a balcony overlooking the beach, where the Atlantic stretches endlessly beneath a clear sky. The soothing roar of waves breaking gently onto the shore is already pulling at me, reminding me exactly why I'm here.

"Think you can survive a few weeks of peace and quiet?" Luke leans against the doorframe, his arms crossed casually.

"I'll try," I smirk, glancing around the perfectly decorated guest room. Natalie's thoughtful touches—fresh flowers, soft linens, a few of my favorite books placed casually on the nightstand—tell me how much they want me to feel comfortable.

Luke chuckles, clearly reading my mind. "Nat spent hours fussing over everything. She worries about you."

I sigh, feeling a pang of guilt. "She shouldn't have to. I've managed fine on my own."

"Have you?" Luke's gaze is knowing. "It's okay to admit you need a break. Life doesn't have to be one big sprint."

I laugh quietly, knowing he's right, but old habits die hard. "I don't know if I even remember how to relax."

He pushes away from the doorframe with a grin. "Lucky for you, you've got experts around. Natalie will make sure you relearn fast. We'll start tonight—seafood and drinks out on the deck at sunset. No business talk allowed."

"I'll try to restrain myself," I joke, feeling lighter already.

He leaves me then, closing the door softly behind him. Alone, I move to the balcony, stepping outside to lean against the railing. The vastness of the ocean captivates me, pulling my attention into its rhythm. It feels like a heartbeat, a steady pulse that

grounds me, calming the chaos that constantly hums in my veins.

I take another deep breath, savoring the silence broken only by waves and the occasional cry of a gull. The knot between my shoulders loosens slightly, my mind starting to unwind from months of constant pressure.

What would it feel like, I wonder, to truly embrace the simplicity of this place? To walk along the shore without an itinerary, to enjoy long afternoons without checking emails or conference calls? It sounds foreign, almost impossible. Yet it's exactly why I came here.

Maybe this break will give me a glimpse of the life I've quietly longed for: uncomplicated, genuine, and slow. As I watch the gentle rhythm of the ocean, I make myself a silent promise. For the next few weeks, no business. No stress. Just sunshine, sand, and family.

I'm going to find peace, whether I'm ready for it or not.

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* * *

Cricket

The tiny cottage sits nestled among palm trees, weathered pale-blue paint peeling charmingly from the siding. The whole scene is picture-perfect, like something from a postcard. I pause next to Abby, my best friend since forever, breathing in the salty breeze that stirs my hair. Already, I feel the relaxation creeping into my bones, a welcome release from months of teaching second-graders how to sit still and listen.

“Wow.” Abby lets out a happy sigh, shielding her eyes from the afternoon sun. “This is exactly what we needed.”

I smile and nod, unable to argue. “It’s adorable.”

Abby bumps my shoulder playfully. “Just think—a whole week of no alarm clocks, no grading papers, and no kids asking why the sky is blue.”

We laugh, and I adjust my sunglasses, feeling genuinely excited. “Sounds like heaven.”

“It is.” Abby leads the way up the sandy walkway, unlocking the front door with an exaggerated flourish. “Welcome to our temporary escape from reality.”

I step inside and instantly fall in love. The cottage is cozy and bright, with whitewashed walls, pastel accents, and oversized windows that frame perfect beach views. A breeze blows gently through sheer curtains, carrying the scent of salt and

ocean with it.

“This is perfect.” I spin slowly, absorbing every charming detail—the weathered furniture, nautical décor, the bookshelves stocked with worn paperbacks. Someone put thought into making guests feel at home.

Abby drops onto the overstuffed couch, her legs draping comfortably over the armrest. “Okay, rules for this trip. Number one: no worrying about work. Number two: we eat whatever we want, no counting calories. And number three—”

“No falling for charming vacationers,” I interrupt, finishing the sentence for her with a firm nod. This isn’t the first time she’s gone over the rules. “Got it.”

Abby grins, giving me a pointed look. “Exactly. We’re here for us, not to end up with spring break heartbreak.”

I laugh softly, moving to peer out the window toward the beach, where the waves crash rhythmically onto the shore. A group of surfers floats idly, waiting patiently for the next swell. It’s easy to imagine spending the entire week lounging in the sun, ignoring anything remotely complicated.

“I’m serious, Cricket,” Abby adds gently. “You’re not allowed to fall in love with anyone here. It’s a fling-free zone.”

I glance back at her, amused by the worry in her eyes. She means well, and it’s not like I haven’t done exactly what she’s saying before. Our senior trip to Cozumel is not something I want to repeat. “Trust me, Abby, love is the last thing on my mind. I’m here to read books, relax, and forget about anything resembling romance except for what I find between the pages.”

Abby raises her eyebrows skeptically. “Famous last words.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “It’s only one week. How much trouble could I possibly get into?”

She laughs outright. “Oh, you want a list?”

“Fine.” I hold up my hands in surrender, laughing softly. “No falling in love, no charming strangers, no trouble.”

She gives a satisfied nod. “Perfect.”

We spend the next half-hour unpacking quickly, filling the cottage with our familiar clutter—bikinis, sunscreen, stacks of novels we’ve been meaning to read all year. The more we settle in, the more relaxed I feel. Abby cranks open the windows wider, letting the breeze flow freely through every room. Soon, the whole cottage smells like salt, sun, and freedom.

“Should we explore a little?” Abby suggests, adjusting her floppy beach hat in the mirror. “Find a cute café or something?”

I nod eagerly. “Definitely.”

Outside, we walk barefoot down the sandy path toward town, the warmth of the sun seeping into my skin. Everything feels soft here, slower than Star Mountain. My life back home is full of teaching, planning, and other responsibilities.

It’s exactly what I need, a simple, uncomplicated week with zero expectations. I’m not searching for love or even romance. I’ve learned the hard way that vacation romance rarely survives beyond the trip, and I refuse to set myself up for disappointment. My heart needs rest as much as my body and mind.

Abby stops at the corner, scanning a signpost marked with hand-painted arrows.

“Hmm. Coffee or ice cream first?”

I grin, considering our choices seriously. “Both?”

She nods, matching my enthusiasm. “Both.”

As we stroll through Love Beach’s charming downtown, I let myself truly relax, my heart rate slowing to match the gentle rhythm of this seaside escape. The entire vibe is charming and unpretentious—colorful storefronts, quirky beach-themed décor, and smiling locals waving from open windows. It feels like stepping into a movie, a magical place where nothing bad ever happens.

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This is exactly how I plan to spend my week—calm, content, and utterly carefree.

Yet as Abby and I wander hand in hand through the streets, laughing at the silly signs and soaking up the warmth, I can't help feeling an inexplicable tug of anticipation.

This week, I remind myself firmly that, is just for relaxation, but even as I say it to myself again, a tiny, rebellious voice whispers a challenge in the back of my mind: We'll see about that.

Two

Chapter Two

Cricket

The fading afternoon sunlight bathes everything in a golden haze, casting long shadows across the sand. Soft music drifts through the air, mingling with laughter and the gentle murmur of conversation as Abby and I approach the beach gathering our new friend, Natalie, invited us to after we met while getting iced coffee. Warm tiki torches line the perimeter, flickering in rhythm with the ocean breeze, lending the scene a cozy intimacy.

“You think we're underdressed?” Abby whispers, glancing down at our casual sundresses.

“Absolutely not.” I nudge her shoulder, smiling reassuringly. “Natalie said it was casual, and she didn't seem the type to exaggerate.”

“True.” Abby grins, her confidence restored. “Besides, we look cute.”

“Damn right we do.” We both laugh, nerves fading as Natalie waves us over, her welcoming smile radiant even from a distance.

“I’m so glad you two came!” Natalie hugs me warmly, her embrace sincere. In the short time since we’d met earlier, it already feels like we’ve known her for ages.

“You’ve got a perfect night for this,” I say, glancing around at the relaxed group spread across the sand. Some guests cluster around the fire pit, roasting marshmallows, while others lounge on blankets near a long, rustic table piled high with appetizers and cold drinks. Everything feels easy, laid-back, just like Natalie herself.

“Let me introduce you around,” Natalie says cheerfully. “Luke’s down by the fire—he’ll be thrilled you made it.”

Abby nudges me softly, whispering under her breath, “This is exactly the kind of thing we swore we’d avoid.”

I roll my eyes playfully. “It’s just a casual beach party. No romance involved.”

“Uh-huh,” she teases gently. “There are those famous last words again.”

We trail Natalie down toward the fire pit, the sand warm beneath my bare feet. Natalie calls out to her husband, Luke, and he waves back. Beside him, a tall, silver-haired man stands sipping casually from a bottle of beer, eyes scanning the horizon thoughtfully. When his gaze finally lands on us, it holds for a beat longer than necessary, sending an unexpected ripple of warmth through me.

“Luke, this is Cricket and Abby,” Natalie introduces warmly, smiling up at her

husband with obvious affection. “Our new friends are renting the cottage down the beach.”

“Great to meet you both,” Luke says, shaking our hands firmly. “Welcome to Love Beach.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Abby grins broadly, clearly charmed by his relaxed confidence.

Luke gestures to the older man beside him. “And this is Cameron Shaw—Natalie’s dad.”

My surprise must show on my face, because Cameron chuckles softly, extending his hand to me with a wry smile. “I hope that’s a good shock, not a bad one.”

“Good,” I assure him, feeling oddly flustered by his presence. He’s tall, solidly built, his handsome face framed by neatly trimmed silver hair. He has the kind of distinguished look that speaks volumes about experience and authority, yet there’s a relaxed ease about him that makes me instantly comfortable.

I shake his hand gently, startled by the spark of electricity at the simple contact. My gaze locks onto his, noticing how clear and deep his eyes are, a striking shade of ocean blue.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Cameron,” I manage, suddenly aware of how dry my throat has become. “Natalie didn’t mention her dad was visiting.”

Cameron laughs warmly, the sound rich and inviting. “Probably because she didn’t want to scare off her new friends.”

Natalie playfully elbows him. “Be nice, Dad. Or no marshmallows for you.”

He holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Forgive me.”

“Only if you roast my marshmallow perfectly.” She points dramatically at the fire.

“Golden brown, no black bits.”

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He grins, eyes twinkling with obvious affection. “Your wish is my command.”

“I’ll do it, Cam. I know just how my wife likes it,” Luke says as he walks off with a smile.

Cameron rolls his eyes, chuckling as Natalie drags Abby off toward the drinks, leaving me standing awkwardly next to Cameron, suddenly very aware of how alone we are among the friendly chaos.

“So, Cricket—” Cameron’s voice breaks the brief silence, calm and confident. “Natalie mentioned you’re a teacher?”

I nod, relieved to have an easy topic. “Second grade. I’m from a small town with only one elementary school.”

“Where is that?”

“I’m from Star Mountain and I love it,” I say with a true smile. I really do love my hometown.

“Star Mountain?” His eyebrows rise with surprise. “Beautiful place.”

“You’ve been?” I ask, genuinely curious now. Most people I meet outside our little town have barely heard of it.

“I visit on occasion.” His eyes seem distant for a moment before snapping back, focused warmly on mine. “Teaching is admirable work. Those kids must adore you.”

I shrug modestly, though his compliment sends another wave of heat through my chest. “I love it. Exhausting, but rewarding.”

He studies me thoughtfully, lips curling into a gentle smile. “Exhausting, yes. I can relate. My career wasn’t exactly relaxing either.”

“Retired now?” I guess, noting the relaxed way he holds himself, the casual clothes, the tan that suggests plenty of time outdoors.

“Mostly,” he admits. “Learning to enjoy life a little slower these days.”

“Love Beach seems like a good place to learn that,” I murmur, glancing out at the endless stretch of beach, the peaceful crash of waves in the background. “It feels easy here.”

“That it does.” His voice drops slightly, more intimate now. “It’s nice to finally breathe. I’m not sure I ever knew how until recently.”

I turn slightly, facing him fully, intrigued by the quiet vulnerability beneath his composed exterior. “That sounds familiar.”

He chuckles softly, his gaze thoughtful. “Something tells me you’re the type who finds it hard to slow down, too.”

“Guilty,” I admit sheepishly. “Even on vacation, I feel like I should be productive somehow.”

His laughter rings out, sincere and warm. “Ah, a fellow workaholic. Then maybe we should help each other relax. Hold each other accountable.”

I raise an eyebrow teasingly, heart rate picking up despite myself. “Accountable

how?”

He shrugs casually, eyes dancing with amusement. “I’ll remind you it’s okay to lounge around doing nothing. You can tell me when I start slipping back into business mode.”

“I think I can handle that,” I reply lightly, grateful he’s taking our flirtation in stride without making it feel awkward. His ease puts me at ease, too. It’s dangerously comfortable standing this close, our shoulders nearly brushing.

“Good,” he says decisively, eyes still locked onto mine. “Then it’s settled.”

A silence falls again, but it’s comfortable rather than awkward. I find myself struggling against an inexplicable pull toward him, curiosity mingling with a fluttering attraction that feels too strong, too sudden.

“You know,” he finally says quietly, breaking the silence gently, “it’s been a long time since I had a conversation this enjoyable.”

My cheeks warm slightly, his honesty catching me off guard. “Likewise. It’s rare to find someone who listens.”

“Oh, I’m listening.” His voice is soft, sincere. “You’re quite captivating.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, feeling shy now, unused to such genuine attention from a man who feels so... substantial.

I remind myself sharply: this is exactly what Abby and I swore we’d avoid. The last thing I need is to complicate my carefree week with a charming older man who makes my heart race with just a glance. Especially someone so closely tied to the new friendships we’re making here.

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“So, Cameron,” I say, clearing my throat slightly, trying to steer us back onto safer ground. “Do you plan to spend the entire vacation perfecting marshmallow-roasting techniques, or do you have other big plans?”

He chuckles, clearly amused by my deliberate shift to casual conversation. “Mostly marshmallows. But I’d like to explore a bit, too. See if this place can teach me how to truly relax.”

“I hope it does,” I say sincerely, smiling gently. “You deserve it.”

His eyes soften, holding mine again for a long, meaningful moment. “Thank you, Cricket.”

As I glance away, cheeks warming again, I know deep down I’m already breaking Abby’s rule. I’m drawn to Cameron Shaw. His quiet confidence, thoughtful manner, and undeniable charm are all so attractive. But the voice of reason inside me speaks louder, reminding me firmly that Cameron isn’t the kind of guy to have a carefree vacation fling. He’s complicated, mature, and undeniably attractive.

I’m here for relaxation, not romance. Right?

So, despite my undeniable pull toward him, I resolve silently to keep things friendly and uncomplicated. Anything else is asking for trouble.

* * *

Cameron

I lie in bed, wide awake, sheets tangled around my legs, body hot and restless. It's been hours since I said goodnight to her, but I'm still hard, still aching. The kind of ache that doesn't go away with time. If anything, it's gotten worse.

Cricket.

Her name is a drumbeat in my head, and every time it hits, it triggers a new image. Her in that tank top, soft curves barely contained, the line of her bra just visible beneath the thin fabric. The way her breasts moved when she laughed, the deep V of her neckline drawing my eyes, whether I wanted to look or not. And those shorts—damn. Her legs went on forever, toned and smooth and impossible to ignore. She had them crossed so casually, so confidently, like she didn't even realize how tempting she looked.

I shift, rolling onto my back with a groan, my body tight with need. I can still feel the heat of her beside me. I didn't touch her. Barely even stood close, but it didn't matter. The way she smiled at me, the gleam in her hazel eyes—playful, curious, interested—it lit me up like nothing has in years.

She was funny, sharp, and real. No pretenses. No bullshit. Just this bright, beautiful woman who made me feel important while she talked to me. She's younger, probably too young, but I just don't care. I feel a pull to her I haven't felt for anyone since Natalie's mom died. Fifteen years is a long time to be alone.

I rub my hands over my face, then press them to my chest, trying to calm my racing pulse. It doesn't work. Every thought circles back to her—the flush in her cheeks when she teased me, the way her lips wrapped around her straw, the soft shape of her mouth. I want that mouth on me. I want her legs around me. I want the weight of her on my chest, my lap, anywhere she'll fit.

I want to see her again. Not just because she's sexy—though she is, in the most

distracting, heart-thudding way—but because I liked being around her. I liked how easy it felt. She made me forget everything else for a little while.

I exhale sharply and turn my head toward the dark window. The ocean is out there, quiet and endless, but my mind's still full of her.

I need to see her again. Make her laugh again. Get her talking, watch her light up, and maybe, if I'm lucky, touch her. Taste her. Feel those long, gorgeous thighs wrapped around me instead of just imagining it.

Tomorrow, I decide firmly, I'll find a way to see her again. Not because it's rational, or even wise. But because I have to.

Three

Chapter Three

Cameron

I wake early, sunlight already filtering through sheer curtains, bathing the room in a warm glow. For a moment, I lie quietly, just breathing in the ocean air drifting through the open balcony doors. The night had been restless, thoughts filled with a charming woman I barely know but can't stop thinking about. Cricket.

She's the reason I couldn't sleep. My mind replayed every subtle glance and engaging smile she gave me last night. I'd sworn I wouldn't let anyone distract me from finding peace this vacation, yet here I am, completely captivated by a woman whose laughter echoes gently through my memory.

With a resigned sigh, I rise from bed and pull on a loose pair of khaki shorts and a soft white linen shirt. It's early enough that Luke and Natalie are still sleeping, so I

quietly slip outside, closing the door softly behind me. The beach is peaceful, deserted except for a few early risers jogging or strolling near the water's edge. The morning breeze is cool against my skin, carrying the fresh scent of salt and sand.

I decide to walk into town, my footsteps sinking comfortably into the soft sand as I move along the shore. The rhythm of the ocean is soothing, its constant, steady pulse a reminder of why I came here: to slow down, to breathe, and perhaps to find a simpler version of happiness than the hectic world I left behind.

Soon, the town comes into view, the colorful storefronts cheerful in the bright morning sun. I spot a charming café nestled right on the sand, its pastel walls faded by time, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee drifts invitingly toward me. It seems like the perfect spot to start my morning—a cup of coffee, a view of the sea, and nothing but my thoughts for company.

Inside, the café is small and cozy, painted in hues of soft blue and creamy white. Vintage wooden tables dot the space, each holding tiny jars filled with wildflowers. A few other patrons sit scattered about, sipping from mugs and enjoying pastries that look homemade and delicious.

I step up to the counter, scanning the handwritten menu board. A friendly older woman smiles warmly, her eyes crinkling with genuine kindness. “Good morning. What can I get you?”

“I’ll take a coffee, black, and maybe one of those blueberry muffins.” I gesture toward the glass case filled with tempting pastries.

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“Good choice,” she says, handing me a ceramic mug filled to the brim with rich-smelling coffee and a warm muffin wrapped carefully in wax paper. “Enjoy.”

I thank her and move outside to sit on the small patio that overlooks the ocean. It’s beautiful, the perfect setting for reflection, and maybe to clear my head of thoughts about Cricket.

Just as I take my first sip, savoring the bold taste, the café door opens behind me, and I hear a familiar, melodic laugh that makes my heart speed up inexplicably. I turn, almost certain my ears are deceiving me, but there she is, stepping onto the patio with Abby at her side. My pulse kicks up even more.

She spots me instantly, her face lighting up with surprise and pleasure. “Cameron! Hi!”

I set down my coffee, smiling broadly, undeniably happy to see her. “Morning, Cricket. Abby. Fancy meeting you here.”

Abby grins, giving Cricket a pointed glance that’s filled with silent teasing. “Small beach.”

Cricket blushes slightly, and something about her shy reaction makes her even more endearing. “We were just grabbing coffee before hitting the beach. Mind if we join you?”

“Please do.” I gesture to the chairs across from me, silently grateful Abby chooses the seat slightly further away, leaving Cricket to sit directly opposite me.

She sinks into the chair gracefully, looking relaxed and beautiful even in simple shorts and a loose, pastel-colored blouse. Her hair falls around her shoulders in loose waves, catching the sunlight perfectly.

“I’m glad we ran into you,” Cricket says softly, her voice warm and genuine. “Last night was fun. Please tell Natalie that we enjoyed ourselves.”

“It was,” I agree, unable to tear my gaze away from hers. “I’ll give Natalie your message. I have to admit, I was hoping to see you again.”

She arches an eyebrow playfully, her eyes sparkling. “Oh really?”

I chuckle, feeling a warmth spread through my chest. “Really.”

Abby coughs lightly, hiding a laugh behind her coffee mug. “Well, I think I’m gonna walk down and check out that bookstore we passed earlier. Cricket, I’ll catch up with you later?”

Cricket gives her friend a knowing glare but nods, smiling. “Sure. I’ll find you in a bit.”

Abby stands, throwing me an exaggerated wink as she walks away. “Have fun, you two.”

We sit quietly for a moment, both laughing softly at Abby’s not-so-subtle exit. I break the silence first, leaning forward slightly. “You know, I feel like I should thank her.”

“For what?” Cricket asks, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“For giving us this opportunity to talk alone,” I admit honestly. “I enjoy your

company.”

Her smile softens, cheeks faintly pink. “I enjoy yours too.”

There’s a gentle pause before she continues. “So, Cameron, what brought you to Love Beach, besides spending time with Natalie and Luke?”

“I needed a change,” I admit, stirring my coffee thoughtfully. “My life has always been busy. Chaotic. Constant travel and business obligations. I realized I hadn’t taken time to slow down, enjoy simple things, like a cup of coffee by the ocean, without constantly checking my phone or emails.”

She nods slowly, understanding dawning in her eyes. “I know exactly how that feels. Even on spring break, I’ve struggled to just relax.”

“Maybe we’re more alike than we thought,” I tease gently, enjoying how easily the conversation flows.

She laughs softly, leaning in a bit closer. “Maybe we are.”

Our conversation deepens naturally, moving from simple talk about work and stress to subjects like favorite books and places we’ve traveled. Cricket listens intently, her eyes bright with genuine curiosity, her laughter warm and easy. We discover shared interests effortlessly—classic films, long walks, quiet evenings with a good book, and an appreciation for the quiet beauty of nature.

Every minute that passes, my attraction to her grows, fueled not just by her obvious beauty but by her intelligence, kindness, and genuine warmth. She’s refreshing, captivating in a way that feels entirely new and thrilling.

After a while, she sighs contentedly, glancing out at the endless blue sea stretching

before us. “You know, I didn’t come here planning on meeting someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” I echo curiously, feeling a small flutter around my heart.

She blushes softly, glancing down at her coffee cup. “Someone intriguing. Genuine. Different from what I expected.”

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I lean in slightly, holding her gaze firmly. “I didn’t expect this either. But sometimes the best things are those you don’t see coming.”

Her eyes meet mine, vulnerable and open. “You might be right.”

Our conversation continues comfortably, flowing naturally as we share more stories, laugh openly, and slowly open ourselves up. By the time our cups are empty, I feel as though I’ve known Cricket much longer than a single day. Our chemistry is undeniable, the pull between us magnetic and genuine.

Reluctantly, she glances at her phone, sighing softly. “I need to go find Abby.”

“Of course,” I say gently, trying to hide the disappointment in my voice. “Would you maybe want to have dinner sometime this week? Just you and me?”

Her eyes brighten, and a shy smile curves her lips. “I’d really like that.”

“Perfect,” I reply softly, feeling warmth bloom in my chest. “Then it’s a date.”

She nods, her gaze lingering warmly on mine. “It’s a date.”

As she stands to go, our eyes hold, a silent acknowledgment of the undeniable connection we both feel. We quickly exchange numbers, and she turns to leave. Watching her walk away, I know without question I’m falling for this woman. And despite any logic or caution, it feels right.

* * *

Cricket

I can't wipe the smile off my face as I walk along the sandy path to find Abby at the bookstore. My heart still races from my unexpected morning encounter with Cameron. The conversation had been effortless, flowing naturally in a way that surprised me. I'd felt comfortable with him, more relaxed than I'd been in months.

But there's something more—something deeper. Cameron is undeniably attractive; that much had been obvious from the moment we met. He exudes a quiet confidence, his presence calming and exciting all at once. But this morning I'd seen something else beneath his poised exterior—warmth, sincerity, and genuine kindness.

“Well, well.” Abby's teasing voice interrupts my thoughts as I find her browsing shelves of worn paperbacks. “You look suspiciously happy.”

I roll my eyes playfully, unable to hide the blush spreading across my cheeks. “I'm allowed to be happy, Abby.”

She closes her book dramatically, smirking. “It wouldn't have anything to do with Natalie's charming dad, would it?”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “Maybe a little.”

She leans closer, her voice conspiratorial. “I knew it.”

“Okay, fine,” I admit, grinning sheepishly. “We talked and it was nice. Really nice. He asked me to dinner.”

Her eyes widen in mock surprise. “Oh, you are in trouble.”

I sigh, smiling despite myself. “I think I might be. He's just...”

“Perfect?” she suggests teasingly.

“No one’s perfect,” I remind her gently. “But he’s kind, smart, genuine, and really attractive.”

“Extremely attractive,” she adds, grinning wickedly.

“Extremely attractive,” I concede, laughing. “But I promised you no romance this trip.”

She nudges me gently, eyes sparkling with encouragement. “Cricket, you deserve to have fun. I was mostly teasing you when I said that. I just don’t want a repeat of your graduation trip. But you’re older and wiser now, you know we’re only here for a week, and whatever happens between the two of you has an expiration date. Why not enjoy yourself?”

I hesitate, weighing her words carefully. Abby’s right. I came here to relax, to have fun, and Cameron has made me happier and more relaxed in just a few conversations than I’ve been in months.

“I guess there’s no harm in just having a casual fling,” I finally admit, feeling a thrill of excitement. “It’s only a week.”

“Exactly,” Abby agrees, looping her arm through mine. “Enjoy it. You never know where it might lead.”

We leave the bookstore together, strolling lazily along the shoreline. My thoughts return to Cameron, the warmth in his gaze, the way he listened so intently to every word I said. I can’t deny my attraction any longer, not only to his appearance, but to his character, his quiet charm, and undeniable kindness.

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“Maybe you’re right,” I murmur thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s okay to let myself feel something, even if it’s just for this week.”

Abby squeezes my arm gently, smiling. “You deserve it, Cricket.”

And suddenly, I feel lighter, happier. I resolve to embrace whatever happens between Cameron and me—to enjoy this connection, this spark, for exactly what it is: a chance to find joy, relaxation, and maybe a little romance, even if only temporarily.

Because, after all, isn’t that exactly what spring break is for?

Four

Chapter Four

Cricket

My phone vibrates softly, startling me awake from a deep sleep. Sunlight filters warmly through the sheer curtains of the cottage, casting lazy patterns on the pastel walls. Yawning, I squint at the screen, my heart skipping a beat when I see Cameron’s name glowing on the display.

Cameron: Good morning, Cricket. Any plans for today?

I smile, rolling onto my side, heart fluttering gently as I type a reply.

Me: None yet. Did you have something in mind?

His answer arrives almost immediately.

Cameron:I was hoping you'd like to explore Love Beach with me. Shops, sights, maybe some ice cream?

A thrill runs through me, and I find myself smiling broadly at the screen.

Me:Sounds perfect. When should we meet?

Cameron:I'll pick you up in thirty minutes.

Me:I'll be ready.

I jump out of bed, energy flooding my body as I hurry into the bathroom. I quickly shower, towel-dry my hair, and dress in a comfortable sundress and sandals. By the time I hear Cameron's knock at the cottage door, excitement has chased away any lingering nerves.

I open the door, my breath hitching softly at the sight of him standing there, handsome and relaxed in casual linen shorts and a white button-up shirt, sunglasses pushed casually up into his thick, silver-flecked hair. His smile is warm and inviting.

"You look lovely," he says sincerely, his eyes lighting up as they sweep over me.

"Thank you," I murmur, blushing. "You're not too bad yourself."

He chuckles, offering me his arm gallantly. "Shall we?"

I link my arm through his, feeling oddly comfortable despite how little time we've known each other. "Let's."

We walk leisurely toward the small downtown area, conversation flowing effortlessly between us. I'm amazed by how easily we connect, how natural it feels to be with him. Cameron listens intently, his genuine interest evident in every thoughtful question, every attentive glance.

The town's main street is alive with charming activity. Brightly colored awnings shade the quaint shops, their windows displaying everything from beachwear to artisanal crafts. The scent of freshly baked goods drifts lazily from a nearby bakery, mingling deliciously with salty ocean air.

"Have you spent much time here before?" I ask, peering curiously into the shop windows as we stroll.

"A bit," Cameron admits, squeezing my hand gently. "But this is different. Exploring with you feels new."

"I feel the same," I confess softly, cheeks warming as our eyes briefly lock.

Our first stop is a quirky boutique filled with whimsical treasures, beach-themed decor, handcrafted jewelry, and vintage postcards. Cameron laughs warmly as I try on a pair of oversized sunglasses, striking an exaggerated pose. The sound of his laughter sends warmth rushing through me, and I realize suddenly how rarely I've felt this carefree with a man.

"Very stylish," he teases, eyes sparkling playfully.

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“Thank you,” I grin, setting the glasses back down. “You should get a pair, too.”

He raises an eyebrow skeptically but indulges me, slipping on a pair of heart-shaped, neon-pink frames. The sight sends me into a fit of giggles, and he laughs along, completely unselfconscious. I snap a quick picture with my phone to show Natalie later.

“Absolutely perfect,” I declare, still giggling. “You must get those.”

He shakes his head, eyes twinkling. “Only if you wear yours.”

“Deal,” I agree, and we both burst out laughing again.

We wander slowly through each store, enjoying easy conversation and playful teasing. Cameron patiently follows as I browse, occasionally selecting small items—souvenirs and gifts for Abby and family back home. Each discovery becomes a shared memory between us, strengthening the invisible thread linking our growing connection.

Later, we stop at a cheerful ice cream parlor. Cameron orders mint chocolate chip, and I choose strawberry cheesecake. We take our cones outside, settling comfortably on a bench overlooking the ocean. The evening air warms our skin, a gentle breeze rustling through my hair.

“This is exactly what I needed,” I say softly, savoring a sweet bite.

He smiles gently, gazing out at the water. “Me too. Life doesn’t always give you

moments like this—peaceful, genuine.”

“It’s hard for you to slow down, isn’t it?” I guess gently, observing the subtle tension that occasionally flickers across his features.

He nods slowly, expression thoughtful. “It has been, for years. Success came at a price, and relaxation felt like luxury. I was raising my daughter alone and had to make sure she had everything she needed. I forgot how to just be.”

“I understand,” I say quietly, my voice softening. “Sometimes I worry I spend so much energy taking care of others—my students, friends, family—that I don’t remember how to take care of myself.”

He studies me quietly, genuine understanding softening his gaze. “You’re naturally nurturing. It’s clear in how you speak, in the way you listen.”

Warmth blooms in my chest. “Thank you.”

“It’s true.” He reaches over, gently brushing away a loose strand of hair from my cheek, sending tingles dancing down my spine. “But remember to nurture yourself too.”

“Easier said than done,” I admit with a wry smile.

He chuckles softly. “Believe me, I know.”

We share a comfortable silence, watching the waves roll gently onto the shore. After a moment, Cameron’s voice breaks through the quiet, filled with genuine curiosity. “If you could do anything, no limitations, no expectations, what would it be?”

I glance thoughtfully at the sea, considering his question carefully. “Honestly? I’d

travel more. See places that exist beyond my comfort zone. Experience life instead of always just thinking about it.”

He nods, his eyes lighting with quiet excitement. “I’ve thought about traveling more, too. Experiencing cultures firsthand, living without a schedule or itinerary. Life isn’t meant to be spent entirely behind a desk.”

I smile gently, inspired by the passion in his voice. “Maybe we should both start. Stop waiting for the right time.”

His gaze softens, a meaningful silence settling between us before he finally speaks quietly, “Maybe we should.”

The conversation shifts naturally to lighter topics—books we’ve loved, favorite movies, childhood memories. I find myself opening up, sharing things I’ve rarely spoken about. Cameron listens intently, occasionally sharing his own stories. Each moment deepens our connection, building trust and intimacy in ways I hadn’t anticipated.

The night passes swiftly, filled with laughter and conversation. Eventually, we make our way slowly back toward the cottage, neither of us eager to end the day.

“I had an amazing time,” I admit softly as we reach the doorstep. “Thank you.”

“The pleasure was entirely mine,” he says sincerely, his eyes warm and lingering. “You’ve reminded me how wonderful slowing down can be.”

“I feel the same,” I whisper, heart fluttering as he gently takes my hand, pressing a soft, lingering kiss against my knuckles.

“Goodnight, Cricket,” he murmurs, eyes intense, filled with longing.

“Goodnight, Cameron,” I reply breathlessly, watching him walk away.

My heart beats rapidly, emotions swirling within me. Tonight didn’t feel like the beginning of a fling, and I don’t think I care.

* * *

Cameron

Returning home from my date with Cricket, I find the house quiet, Luke and Natalie out for dinner. Alone with my thoughts, I head out onto the balcony, needing fresh air and space to process everything stirring within me.

Today was extraordinary. The hours I spent with Cricket were filled with laughter and ease, effortless conversations flowing as naturally as breathing. I hadn't expected to connect with anyone so deeply, not on this trip, not at this stage of my life. Yet, something about her feels special—her warmth, her sincerity, her intelligent curiosity. Each interaction with her leaves me wanting more.

I lean against the railing, gazing thoughtfully at the darkening ocean. The waves roll gently, rhythmic and calming, yet my heart remains restless, racing at the mere memory of her touch, her laughter, the genuine spark in her eyes.

I know what started as curiosity has rapidly grown into something deeper, more profound. What I'd initially seen as an intriguing vacation romance now feels infinitely more complicated. Cricket isn't someone I can just walk away from at the end of this trip, of that, I'm increasingly certain.

She stirs emotions in me I thought were long dormant. She makes me laugh freely, reminds me of joys I'd neglected while chasing success. With her, I feel seen, genuinely understood, in ways I'd long believed impossible.

The truth settles over me clearly, undeniably: I care for Cricket even though we've known each other for a few days. I can no longer pretend our connection is merely casual. She's sparked feelings that demand acknowledgment, emotions too powerful to dismiss.

I recall the vulnerable honesty in her eyes today, the sincerity behind her words. She's guarded, careful, yet somehow, she trusts me. That knowledge fills me with a sense of responsibility and deep tenderness. Cricket deserves someone who appreciates her complexities, who truly values the beautiful, thoughtful soul beneath her cheerful exterior.

I want to be that someone. I want the chance to cherish her, to explore what this incredible connection between us might become.

Yet, I'm cautious, aware of the barriers between us: age difference, distance, the realities of our separate lives. But those obstacles pale against the feelings growing stronger each day. I refuse to let fear dictate my choices. Life is too short, too precious, to deny what my heart unmistakably desires.

As night settles fully over Love Beach, stars glitter softly above the dark ocean. I realize suddenly how long it's been since I've felt truly happy, content. Cricket brought laughter back into my life, awakened dreams I'd forgotten I had.

The choice feels suddenly clear. Whatever complexities lie ahead, whatever uncertainties remain, I know I want Cricket in my life. Not just this week, not merely this vacation, but beyond.

A surge of determination fills me, replacing doubt and hesitation. Tomorrow, I'll share these feelings with her—honestly, openly. I'll ask her if she's willing to explore this connection further, together.

And whatever happens next, I refuse to regret taking this chance, embracing the unexpected, beautiful connection forming between us. Life is unpredictable, fleeting. But love—real, genuine, heartfelt—must never be squandered or ignored.

Five

Chapter Five

Cameron

“Are you sure this isn’t too much?” I ask Natalie, glancing around the deck as she lights a few candles on the long outdoor table. The sunset bathes everything in shades of gold and pink, the ocean calm and shimmering beyond the dunes.

Natalie laughs gently, brushing her curls out of her eyes. “Dad, it’s perfect. Romantic, but not overly formal. Cricket will love it.”

“Romantic?” I raise a brow, teasing. “Who said anything about romantic?”

She fixes me with an amused look. “Please. You haven’t stopped smiling since you met her. If this isn’t romance, I don’t know what is.”

“I like her,” I admit quietly, watching the flame flicker as she finishes with the candles. “She’s special.”

Natalie squeezes my arm softly. “I’ve never seen you look this happy. Just relax and enjoy tonight. Luke and I will stay out late and be quiet if she’s still here when we get home.”

“I appreciate it,” I murmur gratefully, feeling a strange, fluttering anticipation in my chest.

When Natalie and Luke finally head out, I busy myself finishing dinner preparations. The scent of grilled fish and roasted vegetables fills the air, the meal simple, perfect for an evening under the stars. My heart beats faster when I hear the soft knock at the front door.

Opening it, I feel my breath catch softly in my throat. Cricket stands on the doorstep, smiling shyly in a flowing, pale-blue sundress.

“Hey,” she whispers, eyes sparkling warmly.

“You look incredible,” I tell her sincerely, stepping aside to let her in.

She blushes softly. “Thank you.”

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I lead her out onto the deck, watching her expression brighten in delight as she sees the candlelit table. “Oh, Cameron, this is beautiful!”

“I wanted it to be special,” I say quietly, guiding her gently to a chair. “You deserve it.”

Her cheeks flush deeper, eyes full of quiet emotion as she sits. “You’re spoiling me.”

“You deserve it,” I repeat softly, pouring her a glass of crisp white wine. She takes a sip, sighing contentedly, visibly relaxing.

Dinner flows easily between us, filled with comfortable conversation and shared laughter. Cricket’s laughter is infectious, her eyes brightening beautifully with every story she tells. I’m drawn in deeper by every detail of her life she reveals—her passion for teaching, her close-knit family, her love for travel and adventure.

As the sky deepens into a rich indigo, stars twinkling gently overhead, our conversation drifts toward more intimate subjects.

“Have you always wanted to teach?” I ask gently, genuinely curious about the passion that lights her eyes every time she talks about her students.

She nods, thoughtful. “I always felt a pull toward education, even as a child. Something is amazing about guiding young minds, seeing them discover and grow.”

“It’s clear how much you care,” I say quietly, feeling warmth bloom in my chest. “Your students are lucky.”

“I hope so,” she whispers, smiling shyly. “What about you? Did you always know what you wanted to do?”

“Honestly? No,” I admit softly, swirling the wine thoughtfully. “Business came naturally, and I had a young child to support. I wasn’t a success overnight. It happened gradually, until I found myself at the top.”

“Did you enjoy it?” she asks gently, sensing the complexity in my words.

“At times,” I admit honestly. “But there were sacrifices—relationships, happiness, peace of mind. It’s easy to lose yourself chasing success. I’m only now realizing what I gave up in pursuit of it. I hate that I might have missed things with Natalie. I always thought I was a good dad, but now I’m not so sure.”

“From what I’ve seen, Natalie adores you. You deserve happiness,” she murmurs, eyes sincere, full of quiet understanding.

“I’m starting to believe that,” I whisper, holding her gaze gently. “And I think you’re helping me realize it.”

She blushes again, shy but pleased, the candlelight dancing softly in her eyes. Our conversation continues naturally, deepening the intimacy growing steadily between us.

When dinner ends, I rise and extend my hand across the candlelit table. “Would you like to dance?”

“I’d love that,” she says, her voice warm and low, slipping her hand into mine like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Our fingers lace together easily, her touch soft but electric, sparking a familiar heat low in my gut.

I lead her across the deck, the wood warm beneath our bare feet, the ocean stretching dark and endless just beyond the rail. The soft glow of string lights bathes us in a golden shimmer, and the hum of music playing low from inside drifts into the night air. I pull her gently into my arms, her body fitting against mine like we've done this a hundred times before.

We begin to sway, slowly, her head resting lightly against my chest. I press a kiss to the top of her hair, breathing her in—coconut, salt, and something distinctly her. She looks up after a moment, her eyes shining in the soft light, and the way she gazes at me makes the air between us crackle.

I brush her hair back, fingers lingering along her jaw, and cup her cheek. "I'm glad you're here," I whisper, meaning every word.

She presses her palm to my chest, right over my heart. "Me too," she breathes.

I dip my head, capturing her mouth in a slow, lingering kiss that deepens as she rises onto her toes. Her lips are soft, eager, and addictive. Her arms wind around my neck, pulling me closer, and I respond instinctively, pressing her against me, one hand splayed at her lower back, the other tangling in her hair. The world narrows to nothing but the feel of her mouth on mine, the way her body moves with mine as we sway, kissing like we're the only two people left in the world.

She gasps softly when I break away just enough to trail kisses down her jaw, then back to her mouth, unable to stay away for long. I kiss her again, deeper this time, tasting her desire. She moans quietly against my lips, and it nearly undoes me.

"I've wanted to do that since the first night we met," I murmur, my voice low and rough as my forehead rests against hers.

"Me too," she whispers, her smile dazed and beautiful, her fingers tracing circles on

the back of my neck.

We keep dancing, bodies pressed close, mouths meeting again and again—slow, lingering kisses that turn hungry in waves. There's no rush. Just us. The warm deck beneath our feet, the stars above, and this slow, perfect unraveling of restraint between us.

* * *

Cricket

My heart still races gently as Cameron walks me home, our fingers entwined tightly. The memory of our kiss burns warmly on my lips, his tenderness and passion leaving me shaken in the best possible way.

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Standing on the doorstep, I meet his gaze shyly, my cheeks warm under his intense, gentle eyes.

“Tonight was perfect,” I whisper, meaning it deeply.

He smiles gently, cupping my face tenderly again, pressing one last, soft kiss to my lips. “Sleep well, Cricket.”

“You too,” I murmur, watching until he disappears into the night, leaving me breathless, dizzy with emotion.

Inside, I find Abby curled up on the sofa, flipping through a magazine. She glances up, eyes widening immediately at my flushed, dreamy expression.

“Well, someone had a good night!” she teases, setting the magazine aside with a knowing smirk.

I sink beside her, sighing softly. “Abby, I’m in trouble.”

“Trouble?” She laughs gently, amused.

“It was amazing,” I confess quietly, cheeks warming further. “Cameron is incredible. Thoughtful, kind, genuine.”

Her smile softens, sensing the seriousness beneath my joy. “You’re falling for him, aren’t you?”

I hesitate, heart fluttering nervously. “Maybe. It’s complicated. This was supposed to be casual—just fun during spring break.”

Abby squeezes my hand softly, eyes full of gentle understanding. “Cricket, you deserve happiness, even if it’s unexpected.”

“But it’s temporary,” I whisper, sadness flickering softly in my chest. “In a week, we’ll both return to our separate lives. I can’t get attached.”

“Who says?” she asks gently. “Life isn’t always predictable. Maybe this connection with Cameron means something more. You won’t know unless you let yourself feel it.”

I sigh softly, considering her words carefully. She’s right—this connection is undeniably special, powerful. Cameron isn’t just a casual fling; he’s someone who genuinely touches my heart.

“You’re right,” I finally whisper, smiling gently. “I shouldn’t overthink this. I’ll enjoy whatever we share, while we can.”

“Good,” she says warmly, squeezing my hand encouragingly. “You deserve this happiness, Cricket.”

Lying in bed later, staring quietly at the ceiling, I replay the evening over again in my mind, the warmth in Cameron’s gaze, the tenderness of our kiss, his gentle sincerity. I’m falling deeper every moment we spend together, but despite my fears, I’m going to choose to embrace this happiness, this genuine connection.

Whatever happens next, I refuse to regret these moments. Cameron is special, our connection rare and beautiful, even if fleeting. I’ll treasure every second of it, no matter how brief. Because, despite my worries, falling for Cameron Shaw feels

entirely right.

Six

Chapter Six

Cricket

Sunlight spills through the sheer curtains, gently coaxing me awake from dreams filled with Cameron—his laughter, the tender warmth in his eyes, and the lingering softness of his lips against mine. For a long moment, I lay still, staring up at the ceiling, my heart fluttering at the memory. The intensity of my feelings both thrills and terrifies me.

Sitting up slowly, I swing my legs out of bed, stretching my arms overhead and glancing toward the window. Outside, the beach looks peaceful and inviting, the ocean a serene sheet of blue beneath a clear sky. My thoughts immediately drift back to Cameron. A slow smile curls my lips, impossible to resist.

“You look like you’re plotting something,” Abby teases lightly, appearing in the doorway with a steaming mug of coffee in her hand. She leans casually against the doorframe, studying me with amused curiosity.

I laugh softly, grateful for the distraction from my complicated emotions. “Just thinking.”

“About Cameron, I assume?” She raises an eyebrow knowingly, a teasing grin playing on her lips.

I sigh dramatically, falling backward onto the bed and staring up at the ceiling again. “Who else?”

“You’ve got it bad,” she says gently, pushing away from the doorway and stepping into the room. She sits down beside me, handing over the coffee with a knowing look. “You want to talk about it?”

Wrapping my fingers around the warm ceramic mug, I sigh softly again. “It’s complicated, Abby. This was supposed to be a fun, carefree vacation fling—no expectations, no strings attached.”

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“Yet you’ve clearly developed feelings,” she says gently, not judging, just observing.

“Yeah.” I stare into the coffee, watching the steam rise in delicate tendrils. “Cameron isn’t like anyone I’ve met before. And when he kissed me...”

Abby chuckles softly, nudging me playfully. “Sounds pretty perfect to me. So, what’s the problem?”

I glance at her helplessly. “The problem is, this isn’t supposed to be serious. It’s temporary. A week from now, I’ll be back home, back to my life—work, responsibilities, reality. And he’ll be gone too, back to his world. I don’t want to get hurt. I think this could be worse than the Cozumel trip.”

She studies me quietly, eyes gentle with understanding. “Cricket, do you remember last summer when I went to Italy?”

“Of course,” I reply softly, smiling faintly at the memory. Abby had returned from her month abroad glowing with happiness, a new confidence evident in her eyes.

“I met Lorenzo, remember? It was short-lived—just a summer romance, something neither of us expected to last beyond the trip. But do you know what?”

“What?” I whisper, curious.

She smiles warmly, squeezing my hand gently. “That summer romance was exactly what I needed. It reminded me that life isn’t always about what comes next. Sometimes it’s about living fully in the moment, enjoying every second we’re given.

I don't regret a single moment of it."

I exhale slowly, absorbing her words carefully. "So, you think I should just...embrace this? Even if it's temporary?"

"Exactly," she says warmly. "Stop worrying about how long it might last. Just enjoy it while it's happening. Allow yourself to feel deeply, to be happy without overthinking it."

"I'm just afraid," I admit quietly, voice barely audible. "Afraid of getting hurt."

She squeezes my hand reassuringly. "I understand. But Cricket, isn't happiness, even temporary happiness, worth risking a little heartbreak?"

My heart thuds gently in my chest, recognizing the truth in her words. Cameron is worth the risk. The joy, connection, and genuine intimacy we share far outweigh any potential pain of saying goodbye later.

"You're right," I finally whisper, determination blooming slowly within me. "I shouldn't let fear keep me from enjoying what we have now."

Abby smiles gently, nodding in encouragement. "Exactly. So, go out there, be happy, and stop overthinking everything. Life's too short to deny yourself moments like these."

"Thank you," I whisper, grateful for her unwavering friendship and wisdom.

"Always." She squeezes my shoulder warmly. "Now, go get ready. I have a feeling Cameron will be eager to see you again today."

Laughing softly, I rise from the bed, feeling lighter, more determined. Abby's

right—I won't let fear keep me from embracing happiness with Cameron. Whatever the future holds, I'll treasure every moment we have now.

Dressed casually in shorts and a loose tank top, I step outside onto the small porch of our cottage. The sea breeze greets me softly, stirring gently through my hair. In the distance, I spot Cameron strolling down the shoreline, hands tucked comfortably in his pockets, lost in thought.

Abby was right—life's too short to deny myself joy, even if fleeting.

* * *

Cameron

The afternoon sun spills brightly across the deck, warm and golden, as Luke and I sit comfortably in Adirondack chairs, watching the waves roll gently onto the sand. Natalie has gone to town to pick up a few groceries, leaving just the two of us to talk privately. After everything that happened with Cricket, I find myself grateful for Luke's easygoing presence and thoughtful wisdom.

"So," Luke begins casually, sipping from a cold glass of lemonade, eyes sparkling knowingly behind his sunglasses, "you and Cricket seem to be spending a lot of time together."

I chuckle softly, shaking my head gently. "You could say that."

"You're falling for her, aren't you?" he asks gently, sincerity replacing playful teasing.

I pause thoughtfully. "Yeah, Luke. I think I am. I didn't expect this, not now, not here. But Cricket is special. Being with her feels right."

He smiles warmly, nodding in understanding. “Sometimes the best things in life are completely unexpected.”

“I haven’t felt this way in years,” I admit quietly, staring thoughtfully out at the ocean. “Cricket has a way of seeing beyond the surface. She genuinely listens, cares deeply about the people around her. Being with her reminds me of what matters—love, happiness, connection.”

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“You deserve happiness,” Luke says sincerely, studying me carefully. “After everything you’ve been through—losing Natalie’s mom, years of dedicating yourself fully to work and responsibilities—you’ve earned the right to love again, Cameron. You don’t have to be alone.”

My heart clenches gently at his words, knowing he’s right. The past has been heavy, filled with responsibilities and quiet grief. Cricket’s presence in my life feels like sunshine after years of darkness. She’s warm, life-giving, joyful. Denying my feelings would be a disservice to both of us.

“You’re right,” I say finally, determination clear in my voice. “I won’t let fear or doubts hold me back. Cricket deserves honesty, sincerity, openness.”

“And you deserve happiness,” Luke emphasizes gently. “Don’t forget that.”

“Thank you, Luke,” I murmur gratefully, sincerity evident in my voice. “You’ve always been a good friend.” I pause, “Even when you stole my daughter away from me.”

He smiles gently, clapping my shoulder warmly. “Always here for you, Cameron. Now, go find Cricket and let her know exactly how you feel. Don’t waste another second hesitating.”

“I won’t,” I promise quietly, heart determined and hopeful.

As evening falls softly over Love Beach, stars glitter gently overhead, the ocean peaceful and serene. My thoughts are filled with Cricket, anticipation warming my

chest as I picture the moment I'll finally tell her exactly how deeply she's captured my heart.

Because, no matter what the future holds, I refuse to deny myself happiness. Cricket Adams has reminded me what it truly means to feel alive again.

Seven

Chapter Seven

Cameron

The evening air is soft, wrapped in a warmth that feels almost tangible as Cricket and I stroll along the shoreline. Our footprints mark a winding path in the damp sand, the gentle waves erasing them moments after we pass, as if the ocean itself knows our story is only temporary. The sky fades from golden to a velvet indigo, stars beginning to blink softly overhead.

Cricket's hand rests comfortably in mine, our fingers intertwined with a familiarity that belies the short time we've known each other. She gazes quietly at the ocean, her expression peaceful yet thoughtful. I steal glances at her, marveling at how effortlessly beautiful she is, illuminated by the fading light, her loose curls catching softly in the breeze.

"It's so peaceful out here," she murmurs, squeezing my hand gently.

"I think this might be my favorite time of day," I agree, turning slightly toward her. "Everything feels possible at twilight—like the world is holding its breath, waiting."

Her eyes flick toward mine, warm with curiosity. "Waiting for what?"

I smile gently, shrugging one shoulder. “Anything. Everything. Like the future is open, ready to be shaped by whatever choices we make.”

She studies me quietly for a moment, a tender smile playing on her lips. “That’s a beautiful way to see it.”

We continue walking, our silence comfortable, filled with unspoken emotion. Eventually, I pause, turning fully toward her, reaching up to brush a loose strand of hair gently behind her ear.

“Cricket,” I begin softly, voice thick with genuine feeling. “I’ve been thinking about us, about this week, and about what comes after.”

She glances downward briefly, her smile flickering subtly, an almost imperceptible tension appearing in her shoulders. “What have you been thinking?”

I take a slow breath, stepping a little closer, allowing myself the vulnerability I rarely show. “I know this started as something casual, temporary. But I can’t help imagining more, beyond this week. I don’t think I’m ready to say goodbye to you, Cricket. I want to know what could happen if we let this continue, if we explore where it could lead.”

She takes a small breath, visibly conflicted, before meeting my gaze again. Her eyes hold warmth and affection, but also hesitation.

“Cameron, this week has been amazing—truly. Being with you feels... right,” she admits softly. “But we both have lives waiting for us, responsibilities and realities that might not align. I don’t want to set us both up for disappointment by making promises about something neither of us can control.”

“I understand,” I murmur, thumb stroking softly across her knuckles. “I’m not asking

for promises. I just want us both to remain open to possibilities.”

She nods gently, her gaze softening. “Maybe we can just enjoy what we have right now. No expectations, no pressure. Just us, in this moment.”

I squeeze her hand reassuringly, understanding her need to keep things uncomplicated, even as I quietly hope for more. “All right. Right now, just us. That’s enough.”

Cricket smiles gratefully, relief flickering gently through her expression. We resume our leisurely stroll along the beach, the conversation shifting naturally to lighter, easier topics. We share more stories, laughter, and quiet, tender moments, both of us carefully skirting around any further talk of the future.

As twilight gives way fully to night, we find ourselves back near her cottage, slowing to a stop by the porch steps. She turns toward me, her face illuminated by the soft glow of moonlight.

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“Thank you for tonight, Cameron,” she whispers sincerely, her voice barely louder than the waves. “Being with you always feels special.”

I cup her cheek gently, thumb brushing tenderly across her soft skin. “You’re special, Cricket.”

Her eyes soften with warmth, and she rises slightly onto her toes, pressing a gentle, lingering kiss to my lips. I savor the moment, hoping desperately for more.

“Goodnight,” she whispers against my lips, but this time, when she starts to pull away, her fingers don’t slip from mine. They linger—tight, warm, trembling slightly.

Her eyes search mine, flickering with something that makes my chest tighten.

“Come inside,” she says, voice hushed but steady, barely louder than the whisper of the ocean behind us. “Please.”

Everything in me stills for a moment. The longing in her voice, the way her eyes soften as she looks at me. It isn’t uncertain. It’s a quiet invitation, layered with nerves and want and something deeper.

I nod once, not trusting my voice, and follow her.

She leads me through the softly lit cottage, her hand still in mine. The space smells like lavender and salt air, and every step makes my heart beat harder in my chest. When we reach her room, she pauses, then turns to face me fully.

“I know this changes things,” she murmurs. “But I don’t want to overthink tonight. I just want you.”

I step closer, cupping her face gently. “You have me.”

She rises onto her toes, and this time our kiss isn’t tentative or polite. It’s a release—hungry, deep, filled with the tension that’s been building since the moment we met. Her lips part, and I kiss her like I’ve wanted to from the start—like I’ve been holding back and can’t anymore. Her fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt, pulling me closer, and I don’t hesitate. My hands find her waist, her hips, her lower back, pressing her body to mine as we stumble back toward the bed.

She’s all soft curves and warm skin, and when her dress strap slides down just enough to reveal the barest sliver of her nipple, I lose my breath. Her breasts are full and perfect beneath the thin fabric, and I swear I’ll never forget the way she looks right now—flushed, breathless, radiant. I help her pull her dress over her head, her toned legs brushing against me, and I groan at the sensation.

I lower her gently to the mattress, following her down without breaking contact. She wraps her legs around me, and the feel of her is almost too much. Her hands roam over my back, under my shirt, fingers dragging across skin with a hunger that matches my own.

We move together like we’ve done this before, like our bodies already know the rhythm. Kissing. Pausing. Laughing softly between gasps. Her smile in the dark is brighter than any star I’ve ever seen, and the sound of her moan when I kiss down her neck drives me wild.

There’s no hesitation anymore. Only touch. Only heat. Only us.

I stand and remove my clothing. Her eyes watch every movement of my hands. I

don't miss the widening of her eyes when she sees my cock. He's hard and angry-looking with pre-cum already dripping from the head.

I climb back onto the bed and remove her panties. The last barrier between our bodies. I run my finger through her slit, finding her soaking.

"You wet for me, angel?" I ask her.

"Yes, it's just for you," she responds.

"Good, because you're mine," I add before lowering my head between her thighs and getting my first taste of heaven. "Fuck, you taste so good."

A blush spreads across her body, but I can tell she likes the dirty talk as she pushes her pussy into my face.

I take one finger and spread her lower lips apart. I begin to make love to her with my mouth, my tongue entering her tight hole and then licking my way up to her clit. That tight bundle of nerves standing at attention, begging to be sucked. I insert a finger into her pussy as I suck her clit between my lips.

Instantly, she screams my name, and I feel her come around my finger. I look up at her flushed face and unfocused eyes. It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

I sit back and pump my cock in my fist a couple of times. "Are you ready for me, angel?"

"Yes, please, Cameron, make love to me."

That's exactly what I do, I make love to her like I've waited years for this—slow and reverent, then urgent and raw. Her breath hitches when I whisper her name, and when

she comes undone beneath me again, her body clinging to mine, I swear I lose myself in her completely.

After, we lie tangled together in the quiet, sweat cooling on our skin, breaths still heavy and uneven.

She traces idle circles on my chest, her cheek resting just over my heart. “That was...”

“Yeah,” I murmur, brushing a kiss into her hair. “It was.”

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I don't say more. I don't need to. Everything I feel is in the way I hold her close, in the way she fits against me like she was made to.

Eight

Chapter Eight

Cricket

I wake to the sound of waves outside the window and the soft, steady rhythm of Cameron's breathing beside me.

For a moment, I don't move. I just lie there, cocooned in the quiet warmth of morning light, his arm wrapped around my waist, our legs tangled under the sheet. My body is sore in the best possible way—used and cherished. Every inch of me feels different somehow, like something shifted overnight. Like I shifted.

His chest rises and falls against my back, his skin warm against mine. I close my eyes again and let myself sink into the feeling of being held, truly held. Not out of obligation or instinct, but something deeper. Something real.

My hand finds his over my stomach, fingers threading through his, and I smile softly to myself. I wasn't sure what I would feel this morning. Fear, maybe. Regret. But none of that comes. Only contentment and a quiet, aching sort of joy.

Last night wasn't just sex. It was everything I hadn't let myself want. Connection. Comfort. Craving. And it was him. Cameron.

I turn slowly, careful not to wake him, and prop myself on one elbow so I can look at him. His face is relaxed in sleep, mouth slightly parted, lashes resting on sun-kissed skin. He looks younger like this. Softer. But still impossibly handsome, his dark hair mussed from sleep and my hands.

I trace the curve of his shoulder with my gaze, remembering the way he moved above me last night. The way he whispered my name like it was something holy. The way he kissed me like he never wanted to stop.

God, the way he made me feel.

I bite my lip, heat blooming across my cheeks, not from embarrassment, but from the memory of how completely I let go with him. How right it felt. Like every doubt I had faded with every touch, every breathless kiss, every whispered word in the dark.

He stirs beside me, eyes fluttering open, and the second they find mine, something tightens low in my belly.

“Morning,” he murmurs, voice low and rough with sleep.

“Morning,” I whisper, smiling.

He reaches up, brushing a piece of hair from my cheek. “You’re even more beautiful in the daylight, you know that?”

I roll my eyes, but my heart stumbles anyway. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m serious.” His hand finds my waist beneath the sheet, tugging me gently closer. “I haven’t slept like that in I don’t know how long.”

I rest my palm on his chest, right over the steady beat of his heart. “Me neither.”

For a while, we just lie there, wrapped around each other as the morning drifts in through the window. I don't want to think about what comes next. I don't want to think about reality or distance or time limits. I just want this.

"I know we said this week was supposed to be simple," I whisper eventually, my voice quiet, as if I say it too loudly, the moment might break. "But it doesn't feel simple anymore."

He nods, eyes searching mine. "No. It doesn't."

"I'm scared," I admit. "Of what happens when we leave this place. Of how easily this could fall apart."

"I know," he says. "But I'm not going anywhere. Not unless you ask me to. I meant what I said, Cricket—I want more than just this week."

I press my forehead against his chest, heart pounding, body aching with the weight of everything I feel for this man. It's overwhelming. Terrifying. It's also the first time in a long time I've felt brave.

I lift my head, meet his eyes, and kiss him again—slow and sure and full of everything I don't have words for yet.

"Okay," I whisper against his lips. "Then let's not waste a single second."

We get out of bed, dress covering up all the important bits in case Abby is awake, and head to the kitchen for coffee.

As I sit down with my coffee in Cameron's lap, there's a knock on the door, and I hear Natalie's voice as the door opens.

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I look at Cameron to see if he's freaking out because Natalie is about to catch us, but he just smiles and takes a sip of his coffee.

The front door closes, followed by the unmistakable sound of flip-flops smacking against hardwood.

"Cricket?" Natalie's voice rings through the cottage. "You up? I brought muffins from that place you love—wait, what the hell?"

Cameron's hands drop instantly, and we both turn toward the kitchen entrance just as Natalie freezes in place, paper bag in one hand, eyes wide as they land on him... then slowly drop to the shirt I'm wearing. Recognition flashes in her expression.

"Oh my God," she blurts, taking a step back. "Did you sleep with my dad?"

I go red instantly. "Natalie—"

"I mean, I knew you two were vibing, but I didn't expect to walk into it."

Cameron clears his throat. "We weren't doing anything—"

"You were kissing her neck," she snaps, holding up a hand. "Please. I'm begging you. Spare me the visual details."

I press my lips together to stop laughing. "Do you want a muffin or...?"

She narrows her eyes, then sighs, dropping the bag onto the counter. "Yes, I brought

blueberry and lemon poppy. But I'm gonna need a minute to mentally separate you from my dad, thanks."

Before anyone can respond, Abby walks into the kitchen.

"Morning!" she calls brightly, then stops short as she takes in the scene: me, wearing Cameron's T-shirt. Cameron, shirtless and flushed. Natalie dramatically face-palming against the counter.

"Oh hell yes," Abby grins, hands on her hips. "I knew it!"

"I hate this," Natalie mutters. "This is my villain origin story."

Cameron rubs a hand down his face. "Okay, maybe I should—"

"Stay right there," Abby says, pointing at him like she's directing a crime scene. "I want every detail. When did it happen? Was it last night? Did you light candles? Was there music?"

"You are literally asking about my dad's sex life," Natalie groans.

"You're the one who walked in early in the morning after you knew they had a date," Abby says with a shrug.

I let out a laugh, ducking my head. "Can we all take a breath and maybe drink some coffee before launching an interrogation?"

Natalie exhales and grabs a muffin. "Fine. But I'm going to pretend he's not here for the next fifteen minutes."

"I'm gonna go to another room," Cameron offers, already backing toward the living

room with his coffee.

“Please do,” she mutters.

Abby turns to me, her voice dropping into something just for us. “So? Was it everything I imagined?”

My face warms again, but I nod, unable to stop the grin that spreads across my lips. “Yeah. It really was.”

Abby squeezes my arm. “Good. You deserve that.”

And as Cameron settles onto the couch with a smirk and Natalie loudly pretends not to look at him, I can’t help but laugh. Because yeah, this is chaotic. Weird. A little awkward. But it’s also kind of... wonderful.

After a quick debrief about my night without too many details, quiet falls over the kitchen.

Natalie sips her coffee thoughtfully, glancing toward the window, her expression fondly distant. “I’ve missed days like this, being at the beach, surrounded by family. It reminds me so much of summers in Star Mountain, back when Dad used to—”

Her voice trails off as she sees the confusion flickering across my face. My heart skips a beat at her words, my mind snagging sharply on that name—Star Mountain. My hometown. A strange unease twists sharply through my chest, though I’m not sure why.

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“You know Star Mountain?” I ask carefully, voice barely audible, heart beginning to race.

Natalie nods casually, completely unaware of my sudden discomfort. “Oh yeah. My dad spent years there. It’s a beautiful place, isn’t it?”

I look at Cameron, who’s starting to get off the couch and head back into the kitchen. My throat tightens sharply, a wave of disbelief and confusion crashing over me. “Cameron lived in Star Mountain?”

“Sure did,” Natalie says cheerfully, completely oblivious to the turmoil within me. “We left years ago when his business took off, but he loved it there. He still owns a house just outside town. Says he might retire there someday.”

My head spins softly, a thousand questions racing frantically through my mind. Cameron mentioned knowing Star Mountain, but never said he lived there. How could he possibly keep something like that from me?

Natalie’s brow furrows gently, finally noticing my obvious discomfort. “Cricket? Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, heart aching softly as confusion overwhelms me. “Cameron never mentioned anything about Star Mountain to me. I—I don’t understand.”

Her eyes widen softly, guilt and surprise evident on her face. “Oh—I’m so sorry, Cricket.” She looks to her dad, who’s walking into the room. “I had no idea you

didn't know. He must have assumed you did."

"I don't think he did," I whisper numbly, feeling utterly lost. I look up at Cameron. "You never even hinted at it."

"I'm sure he wasn't intentionally hiding it," Natalie insists gently, eyes soft with worry. "Dad would never deliberately hurt you."

I swallow tightly, emotions roiling sharply within me—hurt, confusion, betrayal. "Maybe not deliberately. But this changes things."

Mumbling a quiet apology, I hurry from the cottage, feeling suffocated and desperate for air. Outside, the beach suddenly feels foreign, strange, and unfamiliar. How could Cameron keep something so important from me? Why would he do that? Did he already plan for things to end, and wanted to make sure I didn't know how to find him?

I make it to the edge of the water before Cameron catches up to me. Anger and hurt flare brightly in my chest as he strides toward me. My heart is pounding sharply.

His smile falters, concern flickering gently in his eyes. "Cricket? What's wrong?"

"Star Mountain," I say tightly, voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "Why didn't you tell me you lived there? That you still have ties there?"

His eyes widen softly in surprise, his expression quickly shifting to one of quiet regret. "Cricket—I can explain."

"You deliberately kept it from me," I accuse softly, eyes stinging sharply with tears of confusion and hurt. "Why would you do that?"

“I didn’t deliberately hide it,” he insists gently, stepping closer, desperation evident in his voice. “Cricket, please listen to me. Things were already complicated—I didn’t know how to bring it up without risking everything.”

“You should’ve trusted me enough to tell me anyway,” I whisper, pain evident in my voice. “Finding out from someone else hurts more than the truth ever could have.”

“I know,” he whispers helplessly, regret softening his expression. “Cricket, I’m sorry.”

My heart aches sharply, torn between longing and confusion, trust and hurt. I step back slowly, needing distance, space, clarity. “I don’t know what to think right now, Cameron. I just need time.”

His expression falls softly, disappointment evident in his gentle eyes. “Please, don’t shut me out.”

“I have to,” I whisper, feeling tears sting sharply in my eyes. “I can’t trust my heart with someone who keeps secrets from me. Not right now.”

I turn swiftly, walking quickly away down the beach, needing distance from the confusion and ache threatening to overwhelm me. Behind me, Cameron calls my name softly, the sound painful and pleading. But I refuse to look back.

I need space. I need clarity. Most of all, I need to protect my heart.

* * *

Cameron

I stand helplessly on the beach, watching Cricket retreat swiftly, her posture tense and

guarded as she moves away. My heart aches sharply, pain and regret roiling within me. How could I have been so careless? I should've told her about Star Mountain the moment I realized we shared ties to the same hometown.

I sink slowly onto the sand, staring numbly at the waves gently rolling onto the shore. Memories swirl quietly within me—summers spent exploring the forests near Star Mountain, nights spent stargazing from my old porch, moments filled with happiness and peace before success dragged me away. How ironic that my greatest source of joy now—Cricket—also connects me back to the home I'd almost forgotten.

“You okay?” Luke’s gentle voice startles me softly, pulling me from my thoughts. He sits quietly beside me, gaze soft with concern.

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“Not really,” I admit quietly, voice tight with emotion. “I messed up, Luke. Badly.”

He sighs softly, watching the waves quietly for a long moment before responding gently. “Natalie told me what happened. Cricket’s upset about Star Mountain.”

“I should’ve told her,” I whisper, regret thickening my voice. “The moment I realized she was from there, I panicked. I didn’t know how to explain without risking everything.”

“Now, not telling her has risked even more,” Luke says gently, sympathy evident in his tone. “Trust is fragile, Cameron. She’s hurt right now, feeling betrayed and confused. You need to talk to her openly and honestly, without hiding anything else.”

“I know,” I murmur, guilt heavy within me. “I just don’t want to lose her. She means too much.”

“Then fight for her,” Luke encourages softly, squeezing my shoulder gently. “Show her she can trust you again. But first, give her the space she needs.”

“I will,” I whisper, determination hardening softly within me. “I’ll do anything to make things right again.”

Later, as evening settles softly over Love Beach, stars glitter gently overhead. I pace restlessly on the deck, heart aching with uncertainty. I decide to walk along the beach, hoping to run into Cricket.

I spot Cricket sitting quietly on the sand near the water’s edge, gazing pensively

toward the ocean.

Taking a deep breath, I walk slowly down toward her, approaching cautiously. She glances up briefly as I sit quietly beside her, but quickly returns her gaze to the gentle waves.

“Cricket,” I begin softly, voice filled with quiet regret. “I want to explain everything—if you’ll let me.”

She remains quiet for a long moment, her expression unreadable in the soft moonlight. Finally, she nods gently, still not looking directly at me. “Go ahead.”

“I never intended to hide that I knew Star Mountain from you,” I say sincerely, voice thick with emotion. “Yes, I lived there for years. It was home—still is, in many ways. But I moved away long ago, chasing success and leaving behind a life I’d almost forgotten. When you mentioned Star Mountain, I panicked. I worried that telling you would complicate things or make you stop whatever was developing between us. You kept saying we were only for a week, and I didn’t want to tell you that I could easily be with you in Star Mountain. I was wrong—I should’ve trusted you enough to be open from the start.”

She remains silent, absorbing my words carefully. My heart aches gently, desperate for her forgiveness.

“Cricket, please believe me,” I whisper. “I care deeply for you. My feelings for you are genuine, real, and far deeper than I ever expected.”

She glances toward me finally, her eyes softening slightly with reluctant tenderness. “I want to believe you, Cameron. But secrets hurt. And trust once broken isn’t easily repaired.”

“I know,” I whisper, my voice filled with sincere remorse. “But I’m asking for the chance to earn your trust again—to show you how much you truly mean to me.”

She sighs softly, turning back toward the ocean, her posture tense and conflicted. “I just need time, Cameron. I can’t rush this.”

“I understand,” I murmur, heart aching gently but respecting her need for space. “I’ll wait however long it takes, Cricket. You’re worth every moment.”

She nods gently, remaining quiet. I linger silently beside her, heart heavy with regret and uncertainty. Eventually, she rises quietly, brushing sand from her shorts, her expression still distant and guarded.

“Goodnight, Cameron,” she whispers, voice tinged with quiet sadness.

“Goodnight,” I reply quietly, watching helplessly as she walks slowly away down the beach, disappearing gradually into the darkness.

Left alone beneath the quiet stars, I silently promise myself that somehow, someday, I’ll make this right again. Cricket Adams has captured my heart completely—I refuse to lose her without a fight.

Nine

Chapter Nine

Cameron

I slam the front door harder than I mean to when I return to the house, the sound echoing through the quiet evening. My chest feels tight, my breath shallow, like I’ve been holding something in too long. I don’t bother with the living room or my

bedroom. I head straight for the back deck, needing space, needing air.

I lean over the railing and stare out at the dark ocean, waves rolling gently against the shore like they don't know or care that everything inside me feels like it's coming apart. I replay every second of what just happened—Cricket's eyes, full of hurt. The way her voice went soft and distant, like I'd become someone she didn't recognize.

I hurt her. I didn't mean to, but I did. The deck door creaks behind me. I don't turn around.

A quiet voice says, "You slammed the door. Which, by the way, is very un-dad of you."

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I sigh, head dropping between my shoulders. “Sorry.”

Natalie comes to stand beside me, wrapping her arms around herself. For a moment, neither of us says anything. Then, softly, “You okay?”

I let out a dry laugh. “Not even close.”

She nods. “Want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

She shrugs. “Try.”

I grip the railing tighter. “I messed it up. With Cricket.”

Natalie shifts beside me, watching the ocean like I am, like we both need something steady. “Tell me the whole thing.”

“She thinks I was hiding my connection to Star Mountain,” I say, then glance over.

“Were you?”

The question doesn’t sting coming from her, not like it did when I asked myself the same thing an hour ago. I rub the back of my neck. “I didn’t lie. But I didn’t tell her. I should’ve. I was trying to keep things uncomplicated.”

“Because she might leave if she knew too much?” Natalie asks.

I nod.

“That’s dumb,” she says, no hesitation. “But I get it.”

I huff a small laugh. “Thanks.”

“She really likes you, you know.”

“I know,” I say quietly. “But tonight, the way she looked at me—it’s like I’d broken something she didn’t think I would.”

Natalie’s quiet for a beat, then says, “You’ve always done that.”

“Done what?”

“Held things back. Tried to protect me, protect other people, by not letting them in all the way.” She glances at me, her expression softer than I expect. “I used to think you were just being strong. Now I think maybe you were scared.”

I swallow hard. “Yeah. I was.”

“Still are,” she says gently.

I nod, unable to pretend otherwise. “I didn’t want to risk what we had by making it more complicated. And now I think I’ve lost it anyway.”

Natalie rests her forearms on the railing. “So tell her. Be honest. Even if it’s messy. Especially if it’s messy.”

I look over at her, surprised by the echo of Luke’s wisdom in her voice.

She shrugs. “I live with Luke. Some of it rubs off.”

I smile despite myself.

“She deserves to know how you feel,” she says, more quietly now. “And if she’s mad, or scared, or unsure—fine. But don’t take her choice away by trying to protect her from something that’s already real.”

I close my eyes for a second. “I love her.”

“I know,” Natalie says. “So go tell her. Before you become the reason she doesn’t believe in stuff like this anymore.”

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I nod slowly, pulling in a shaky breath. “You’re a good kid.”

“Yeah,” she says with a smirk. “And my dad’s kind of a mess.”

I laugh. It’s weak and dry, but it’s real.

She bumps her shoulder against mine. “Go clean it up, Dad.”

* * *

Cricket

I sit curled up on the small porch swing outside our cottage, a blanket wrapped tightly around me even though the night air isn’t really cold. I sip slowly from a mug of tea, watching the stars blur and sharpen through the burn of unshed tears. My heart feels like a raw, open wound in my chest, throbbing with every quiet thought that surfaces.

I can’t stop replaying it—Natalie’s casual mention of Star Mountain, the way Cameron’s face had fallen when I confronted him, the way his voice trembled with apology.

He didn’t lie, but he didn’t tell me the truth, either.

That’s what stings the most. That somehow, somewhere deep down, he thought I wasn’t worth the whole truth. It’s irrational. Overdramatic. But the betrayal feels real, no matter how much I try to reason it away.

I bring my knees closer to my chest, resting my chin on top, and close my eyes. I came here for peace. For simplicity. For a break from responsibility and heartache. Falling for Cameron wasn't part of the plan.

I hear the door creak behind me, and Abby steps onto the porch, her arms crossed loosely over her chest.

"You okay?" she asks softly.

I shake my head slowly. "Not really."

She comes to sit beside me, pulling the blanket to cover both of us, her presence steady and comforting.

"Talk to me," she says.

I stare out at the dark ocean, listening to the rhythmic hush of the waves before finding my voice. "Cameron is from Star Mountain. He still has ties there. He never told me."

Abby's breath catches softly, but she doesn't interrupt.

"I don't know why it matters so much," I whisper. "It's just... it feels like I didn't know him. Like he was keeping parts of himself hidden from me the whole time."

"Maybe he was scared," Abby says gently. "Maybe he didn't know how to bring it up without making everything more complicated."

"I know," I say bitterly. "And I get it. I do. But it doesn't make the hurt go away. I feel like he didn't tell me because it would get my hopes up about us being together after this week."

We sit in silence for a long time, the only sounds the distant waves and the quiet creak of the swing.

Finally, Abby says, “So what now?”

I close my eyes, feeling a painful decision crystallizing inside me. “I think I need to leave.”

“What?” she says sharply, sitting up straighter.

I force myself to meet her gaze. “I think I need to cut this trip short. Go home early.”

Abby’s face softens, sadness flickering in her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“No,” I admit. “But he’s just a fling, and I have to get away and clear my mind.”

She wraps her arms around me tightly, and for a long time, we just sit there, breathing together under the stars.

“I’ll support whatever you decide,” she says finally, her voice thick with emotion. “But Cricket, don’t run just because you’re scared.”

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“I’m not scared,” I lie. Then sigh. “Okay, maybe I am. But mostly, I just need to protect myself.”

Abby pulls back, brushing a tear from my cheek with her thumb. “You’re stronger than you think.”

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “I’ll book a flight tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Abby asks.

“No, you still have four days of vacation, and you should enjoy it. Hang out with Natalie and have fun.”

Abby hugs me again fiercely, and for a few precious seconds, I let myself cry quietly into her shoulder—the heartbreak I tried so hard to avoid crashing down on me anyway.

I love him.

Tomorrow, I’ll leave Love Beach behind.

Tomorrow, I’ll leave Cameron Shaw behind, even if my heart never fully will.

Ten

Chapter Ten

Cameron

I tear down the narrow street toward Cricket's cottage, gravel spraying under my tires as I whip into the driveway. My heart hammers against my ribs, frantic, my hands slick against the steering wheel.

She's leaving.

Luke told me, his face tight with sympathy, when he broke the news fifteen minutes ago. Said he overheard Abby and Natalie talking.

I cut the engine, jumping out before the car fully stops, not caring that the door hangs open behind me.

She can't leave. Not like this.

I sprint up the steps, two at a time, and pound on the door. The world feels like it's tilting off its axis. I can't lose her. I won't.

"Cricket!" I shout, knocking harder. "Please open the door."

No answer.

"Cricket!" I bang again, desperation rising thick in my throat. "Please. Don't do this. Talk to me."

The door finally creaks open an inch, and her face appears—beautiful and guarded and breaking my heart.

Her bags are packed behind her, she's really leaving.

“Cameron,” she says softly, her voice raw. “What are you doing here?”

“Stopping you,” I choke out. “I’m not letting you walk away without knowing the truth.”

She closes her eyes briefly, pain flashing across her face, and I realize I’m seconds from losing everything that matters.

I step forward, bracing my palm against the door to keep it from closing. I lower my voice, willing her to hear me—not just with her ears, but with her heart.

“I made mistakes,” I say quietly. “I should’ve told you about Star Mountain. I should’ve trusted you with everything from the start. I didn’t think it mattered at first, and once I realized how I felt about you, I was scared—scared of complicating what we had, scared of losing you before I even had the chance to know you. But none of it—none of it—was ever about playing you or hiding from you.”

Tears pool in her eyes, but she says nothing.

I press on, desperate, my voice rough with emotion. “Cricket, from the first moment I met you, everything changed. You made me want things I’d stopped believing in. You made me feel alive again. And I got selfish. I didn’t want anything to ruin it.” I take a shaky breath, trying to hold myself together. “I didn’t expect you. I didn’t expect to find something real here, with you. But I did. And I love you for it.”

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Her breath catches audibly.

I step closer, lowering my forehead to the edge of the door, willing her to feel the weight of my truth. “I love you, Cricket. I didn’t plan it. I didn’t even know it was possible anymore. But it’s real. It’s the truest thing ever felt.”

Her hand trembles against the door, but she doesn’t push me away. She doesn’t slam it shut. She stays. And for the first time in hours, I let myself hope.

“Please,” I whisper. “Don’t leave. Not yet. I’m asking for forever. I’m asking for now. For today. For every day you’ll give me.”

Tears spill over her lashes, and she presses a hand to her mouth to stifle a sob.

I reach for her, cautiously, giving her every chance to pull away. When she doesn’t, I brush my knuckles softly down her cheek, wiping away the tears that break me to see.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, voice breaking. “I’m so damn sorry.”

She trembles under my touch, but finally, finally, she steps forward, pushing the door open wider, her arms sliding around my waist. I catch her against me instantly, holding her so tight that we’ll always be one.

“I’m scared,” she whispers into my chest, her voice broken and small.

“I know,” I whisper back fiercely, kissing the crown of her head. “I am, too. But we’re stronger together. I swear it, Cricket.”

She pulls back just enough to look up at me, her beautiful eyes searching mine.

“No more secrets?” she asks softly, fragile hope shimmering in her voice.

“No more secrets,” I vow, my voice thick with the weight of it. “Only honesty. Only us.”

She studies me for a long, agonizing heartbeat. And then she nods. Once. Firm and sure.

Relief slams into me so hard I almost stagger.

I kiss her—soft and reverent at first, then deeper, fiercer, pouring everything I have into her. She kisses me back with a desperation that matches my own, her fingers tangling in my shirt like she’ll never let go again.

And God, I hope she never does.

When we finally pull apart, we’re both breathing hard, smiling shakily.

“Stay with me,” I say, brushing a curl behind her ear.

She hesitates only a second before nodding again, this time with a smile that lights up the dark, battered corners of my soul.

“I’d like that,” she whispers.

And just like that, hope blooms wildly in my chest again. We’re not over, we’re just beginning.

* * *

Cricket

I sit beside Cameron on the sand, the sun dipping low into the horizon, painting the sky in vibrant oranges and soft purples. His hand is wrapped firmly around mine, grounding me, anchoring me to this moment.

I glance sideways at him, at the man who nearly shattered my heart—and somehow, still made me believe again.

Hearing him say he loved me, hearing the raw desperation in his voice, the sincerity, broke something loose inside me. Something I'd been holding onto too tightly. Fear.

I've spent so much time protecting my heart that I almost missed the chance to give it to someone who might deserve it.

I squeeze his hand gently, feeling his answering squeeze immediately.

“So,” he says lightly, breaking the comfortable silence. “Where do you want to go tomorrow?”

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I smile softly, letting the question settle between us. He's not pushing. He's giving me space, choice. A future without demands.

"Surprise me," I say finally, leaning my head against his shoulder.

He chuckles, low and warm, pressing a kiss into my hair. "Careful what you wish for."

We sit quietly for a while longer, listening to the waves, the occasional call of a seabird. Everything feels softer now, more fragile and precious. Like a bubble we both know might burst if we move too suddenly.

"You scared me," I admit softly, not lifting my head.

He tenses slightly beneath me. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm scared now, too," I continue, voice trembling slightly. "Of how much I want this. How much I want you."

His arm tightens around me, pulling me closer. "We'll figure it out. Together."

I close my eyes, breathing him in—salt and sunlight and something warm and uniquely Cameron. Together.

"I love you, Cricket," he says with a smile.

"I love you, too," I say.

“God, I love hearing you say that. It makes me want to take you back to the cottage and show you just how much you mean to me.”

“Then do it,” I murmur, closing the distance between us.

His kiss is everything I remembered—soft and wild and endless. His arms wrap around me, pulling me into his warmth.

When we finally break apart, breathless and smiling like fools, Cameron stands and lifts me into his arms.

“I’m not letting you go again,” he whispers fiercely.

“You won’t have to,” I whisper back, my heart steady for the first time in days.

He kisses me again as he carries me to the cottage. I can’t wait to feel him inside me again, and I tell him just that. His pace quickens, and he takes the stairs two at a time. Finally, we fall into my bed.

Eleven

Chapter Eleven

Cricket

I wake to the sound of soft waves crashing against the shore, the gentle hum of the ocean a constant lullaby that fills the air. The room is bathed in early morning light, and I blink slowly, the remnants of a peaceful night lingering in my body. For a moment, I just lie there, basking in the quiet, letting myself soak in the comfort of this space.

And then I feel it—his warmth beside me.

I roll toward him, smiling softly at the way he's still asleep, his face relaxed, the faintest trace of stubble darkening his jaw. His lips are slightly parted, and for a moment, I just watch him, completely captivated. The weight in my chest that had been there for days—the weight of uncertainty and fear—is gone now.

When he wakes, I know he'll smile, those eyes of his lighting up like they always do when he sees me. He's been nothing but kind, understanding, and, most importantly, patient. He didn't push me, didn't try to force anything. And in return, I've let myself fall.

I love him.

I've been so careful for so long, holding pieces of myself back, afraid of the heartache I might face. But with Cameron, everything feels different. There's a trust between us now, something real that I didn't even know I was capable of. And as I stare at him, peacefully sleeping next to me, I realize how much I'm willing to risk.

Slowly, I slide out of bed, trying not to wake him, and quietly head to the bathroom to freshen up.

When I return to the room, I find him stirring, his eyes blinking open slowly, a smile spreading across his face when he sees me.

"Good morning," he murmurs, his voice rough with sleep, but warm and affectionate.

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“Good morning,” I reply softly, smiling back. “Did you sleep well?”

“Absolutely,” he says, stretching, his muscles rippling under the sheets. He looks so effortlessly handsome, it makes my heart race.

I move toward him and climb back into the bed beside him. His arm slips around me instantly, drawing me close as his lips brush the top of my head.

Our kiss is soft, tender, and filled with the sweetness of finally letting go of all the walls we’ve built. I let myself fully melt into him, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him closer, savoring the feel of him, of us.

For the first time, I feel completely sure of what I want. There’s no hesitation, no fear. Only him. Only us.

“I’m ready for whatever comes next.”

“Me too,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing lightly across my cheek. “Whatever comes next, I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

I smile at the thought of us together, genuinely together.

* * *

Cameron

I can’t stop smiling as I make my way to the small kitchen, quietly preparing

breakfast for Cricket. I wanted to do something special this morning, to show her just how much she means to me. I'm ready to give her everything—everything I have and more.

The smell of sizzling bacon fills the air as I crack a couple of eggs into the pan, my thoughts drifting to her. Last night was perfect. We'd talked, laughed, made love, and I'd held her in my arms, feeling like the luckiest man alive. She loves me.

It's everything I've hoped for, but more than that, it feels real. It feels like a foundation I can build on.

I finish cooking the eggs and bacon, setting the table with fresh fruit, toast, and coffee, making sure everything's perfect. As I hear Cricket moving around in the other room, I feel my pulse quicken. I want to surprise her—show her how much I'm thinking of her, how much she matters.

When she enters the kitchen, her eyes brighten at the sight of the spread I've made.

"You didn't have to do all this," she says softly, her voice filled with warmth and surprise. "But I'm glad you did."

I smile, walking toward her and placing a gentle kiss on her forehead. "I wanted to. You deserve it."

She leans into me for a moment, and I feel the weight of everything we've been through lift between us. The distance, the uncertainty, the fear—all of it has faded, leaving only the certainty of what we share.

We sit down to breakfast, the conversation flowing easily between us, light and easy. I watch her closely as she eats, my heart full of quiet joy. I want to spend the rest of my life making her feel this special, this loved.

After breakfast, as we clean up together, my mind races with ideas—plans for the future, for us. I’m determined to show her that I’m serious, that I’m in this for the long haul. But I know that it’s not enough just to tell her. I need to prove it.

I’ve been thinking about it all morning—the perfect way to show her how much she means to me. And as I finish washing the dishes, an idea begins to take shape.

“Cricket,” I say, my voice steady but filled with excitement, “I have a surprise for you.”

Her eyes light up immediately, her smile playful. “A surprise? What is it?”

“I’m not telling you yet,” I tease, a grin tugging at my lips. “But I think you’ll like it.”

She laughs, her eyes bright and full of curiosity. “You’re killing me here, Cameron.”

I slip out of the kitchen, giving her a moment to enjoy her coffee, and I head to the closet to grab the small, carefully wrapped package I’ve been hiding. It’s not big, just a simple gesture, but I want to show her how serious I am about us.

When I return to the living room, I find her sitting on the couch, her legs tucked underneath her, eyes fixed on me with soft, affectionate curiosity.

I sit down beside her, handing her the small package.

“What’s this?” she asks, her fingers tracing the paper gently as she unwraps it. Her eyes widen slightly when she sees what’s inside—an old, weathered map of Star Mountain, with the routes to the most beautiful viewpoints highlighted in ink and a key.

I watch her face carefully as she looks up at me, her expression a mixture of surprise

and something deeper. “Cameron...”

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“It’s a map of my favorite places in Star Mountain. I’ve had it for years and add to it when I find some new place.” I shrug slightly, feeling vulnerable but open. “I want you to see the places that matter to me. The key is for my house. I’m going to relocate to Star Mountain, and I want you to move in with me.”

She looks at the map and key again, and then back at me, her eyes softening with affection. “You’re incredible, Cameron.”

I smile, my heart swelling with gratitude. “And I’m not going anywhere. Not without you.”

Her eyes meet mine, and there’s no more hesitation between us. I lean forward, pressing a kiss to her lips—gentle, slow, and filled with everything I feel. When I pull back, she’s smiling, her cheeks flushed with happiness.

“Thank you,” she whispers, resting her forehead against mine. “For showing me that you’re serious. For showing me that you mean it. Of course, I’ll move in with you.”

“Thank you for giving me everything I’ve wanted,” I say firmly. “I’ll keep showing you, every day, for the rest of my life just how much I love you.”

Twelve

Epilogue

Cricket

The morning light spills gently through the windows, casting a warm, golden glow on the room as I wake up slowly. The quiet hum of the morning outside, the rustling of leaves from the trees surrounding our house, feels peaceful in a way I didn't think was possible a year ago. I stretch my arms above my head, smiling softly as I feel the familiar weight of Cameron beside me.

I roll over to find him still asleep, his face relaxed and content, his arm draped across my side. I can't help but watch him for a moment, my heart swelling with the quiet realization that everything has changed—and all for the better. It's been a year since that whirlwind trip to Love Beach, a year since we finally opened up to each other, acknowledged our love, and committed to building a life together. I never could have imagined how quickly everything would fall into place.

I reach out gently, brushing my fingers through his hair, feeling the familiar warmth of his skin, the softness of the sheets we've shared countless nights in. A smile curves my lips as I feel him stir next to me.

"Morning," he murmurs, his voice rough with sleep, his eyes opening slowly to meet mine. The smile he gives me is all love and softness.

"Good morning," I reply, my voice thick with affection.

His hand reaches out to cup my cheek, his thumb tracing the curve of my jaw as he leans in to kiss me, slow and tender, as if he's trying to savor every moment of our quiet mornings together. It's the kind of kiss that speaks volumes, one that reminds me just how lucky I am to have him in my life.

"Are you ready for today?" he asks softly, his voice full of excitement and anticipation.

"I am," I reply, leaning into him, letting the weight of his touch settle in my bones. A

soft laugh escapes my lips as I bury my head into his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath me.

I chuckle softly, feeling the deep sense of love and contentment that fills me whenever I'm near him. I was scared once, scared that I might lose him or that I was rushing into something that would end in heartbreak. But here we are, a year later, stronger and more in love than ever.

"I love you more than you'll ever know," he says, his words low and full of sincerity. "You're everything to me, Cricket. I don't think I could live without you now."

I close my eyes, letting his words wash over me like a gentle wave. I feel safe in his arms, completely at home. A year ago, I was scared to love him, scared to trust him. But now, I can't imagine my life without him.

"I love you too, Cameron," I whisper back, my voice thick with emotion. "I never thought I'd feel this way, but I can't imagine being anywhere else, with anyone else."

His arms tighten around me, pulling me even closer as he kisses my temple, then my cheek, finally landing on my lips, slow and sweet.

"I'm glad you're with me," he murmurs against my lips. "Forever."

I smile against his lips, feeling the warmth of his promise settle into my heart.

"Forever," I agree, threading my fingers through his hair. "I never want to be without you."

He smiles, the look in his eyes a perfect reflection of everything we've built together over the past year. "You won't be. I'll make sure of it."

After a moment of quiet intimacy, he sits up, a grin spreading across his face. “Come on. We have a flight to catch. Our anniversary trip awaits.”

I stretch and groan, pretending to be annoyed, but I can’t hide the smile tugging at my lips. “Are you that excited to go to Ireland?”

“I’m excited to spend time with you,” he says, his voice full of affection. “I want to see you experience the world.”

I laugh softly, rolling out of bed and slipping into the clothes I laid out the night before. “I can’t wait to experience the world with you.”

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* * *

I look out the window as the plane lands, we are flying private and it has been an easy flight, but I thought we didn't have any stops until we were overseas.

"Why did we land?" I ask Cameron.

"Um, we're here."

"Where?"

"Love Beach..." he says, watching my face closely.

"I thought..."

"I wanted us to return to where we fell in love. I know we've been back to see Natalie and Luke, but this trip is about us. They don't know we're here, and if I have my way, they won't find out."

"You're crazy!" I exclaim. "What if I was upset we aren't really going to Ireland?"

"Are you?"

"Of course not. I just want to be with you," I respond with a smile.

When we arrive at the cottage, I can't help but take a deep breath, inhaling the salty air that smells like so many unforgettable moments. The house is just as I remember

it, cozy and warm, nestled right on the sand. The memories of that first day we met, the day Cameron changed everything for me, flood my mind, and I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the life we've built since then.

Cameron takes my hand as we step inside, and I look up at him, my heart swelling with love. "I can't believe we're here," I whisper.

"It feels right, doesn't it?" he says, his voice soft and full of emotion. "This is where we started. This is where everything began for us."

"It is," I say softly, my fingers tightening around his. "I'm so glad we're back."

We spend the day exploring the beach, revisiting the places we visited during that first trip—places that hold so many memories for us. We walk along the shore, hand in hand, laughing at old jokes and making new ones, taking pictures, and holding each other close. There's a comfort in being here, in the simplicity of being with him, and I'm reminded once again of how lucky I am.

As the sun sets, Cameron leads me to a small beachside restaurant for dinner. The table is set on a quiet patio, a perfect spot to watch the sun dip below the horizon. The atmosphere is intimate, romantic, and it feels like we're the only two people in the world.

We order dinner and wine, enjoying each other's company, talking about everything and nothing at all. The laughter flows easily, the conversation deepening as we talk about the future, about our plans, our hopes, and the life we want to build together.

When the night falls, Cameron takes my hand, pulling me gently toward the beach. The moon is bright overhead, casting silver light on the water, and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore fills the air with a peaceful rhythm.

We walk silently, side by side, the cool sand beneath our feet, and Cameron stops in

front of me, turning to face me with a serious expression.

“Cricket,” he says, his voice soft but full of certainty, “one year ago, I didn’t know how my life was going to change. But meeting you, falling in love with you, has been the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I don’t ever want to be without you.”

My heart races as I look up at him, feeling the weight of his words settle deeply within me. “Cameron,” I whisper, my voice trembling slightly, “I feel the same way. I never thought I could love someone like this, but you’ve shown me what real love is. And I’m not going anywhere either.”

He takes a deep breath, his hand reaching for mine. “Cricket, will you marry me?”

Tears fill my eyes as I stare at him, my heart swelling with love and joy. “Yes,” I whisper, my voice shaking with emotion. “Yes, Cameron. I will.”

Cameron exhales a shaky breath of relief, a laugh caught somewhere between joy and disbelief. “Yeah?” he says, voice rough. “You mean that?”

I nod, tears spilling freely now, but I’m smiling so wide I can barely speak. “Yes. God, yes.”

He pulls me into his arms, lifting me off my feet as I wrap mine around his waist, our laughter caught between the tearful gasps of two people who didn’t know they could have this kind of happiness—this kind of home. He kisses my cheek, my jaw, the corner of my mouth, until I find his lips and press mine to his, full of emotion and certainty and promise.

The kiss deepens quickly. His hands frame my face, thumbs brushing away tears as his mouth claims mine with a mixture of reverence and hunger. I kiss him like I never want to stop.

His body is warm and solid against mine, grounding me, thrilling me. I can feel his heart racing beneath my palms, feel his breath catch when I whisper his name into the space between kisses.

“I love you,” I murmur, voice thick with emotion.

He presses his forehead to mine, his breath shaky. “I love you, too. So damn much, Cricket.”

We kiss again, slower now, like we’re memorizing the shape of forever in each other’s arms. His hands trail down to my waist, pulling me close, anchoring me to the moment. And I let him. I let myself fall completely, without fear or hesitation.

Because this man, this strong, quiet, fiercely loyal man, is mine...and I’m his.