

the **Arrival**



DAY 1 • MORNING • PIER

1. The Arrival.

Lucy stepped ashore, and the island hit her like a physical blow—a dense, humid wall of heat smelling of salt and something heavy and sweet, like overripe fruit. It wasn't air you breathed; it was air you tasted.

She adjusted her pale blue T-shirt, which was already clinging uncomfortably to her back. She felt too buttoned-up, too prepared. Beside her, Ruby set her suitcase down on the wooden dock with a loud thud, like placing a period at the end of a sentence.

Ruby looked like she already owned the place. Her coral sundress had slipped off one shoulder, revealing freckled skin that the sun had already begun to claim.

"God, finally," Ruby murmured, stretching her arms overhead.

Her hand "accidentally" brushed against Lucy's wrist. Ruby's skin was hot. The touch felt like a static shock – brief, but leaving a mark.

"Can you feel that?" Ruby asked, voice low. "This whole place is vibrating."





The path led them through a tunnel of palms where the shadows were deep and cool. At the end waited the reception pavilion: white stucco and lazily turning ceiling fans. Camila stood behind the counter, frowning at a tablet that seemed to be giving her trouble. She didn't look like hotel staff; she looked like someone who had seen every version of a "new beginning" and wasn't impressed by any of them.

Camila. Dark hair swept up into a bun with loose strands escaping to frame a damp neck. She leaned against the counter, assessing them with a gaze that was polite but piercing.

"Lucy and Ruby," she stated, not asking. Her voice was low, slightly raspy. "You survived the boat. That's half the battle."

"Do people fail the boat?" Lucy asked, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

Camila smirked.

"You'd be surprised how many women run when they realize there's nowhere to hide from themselves here."

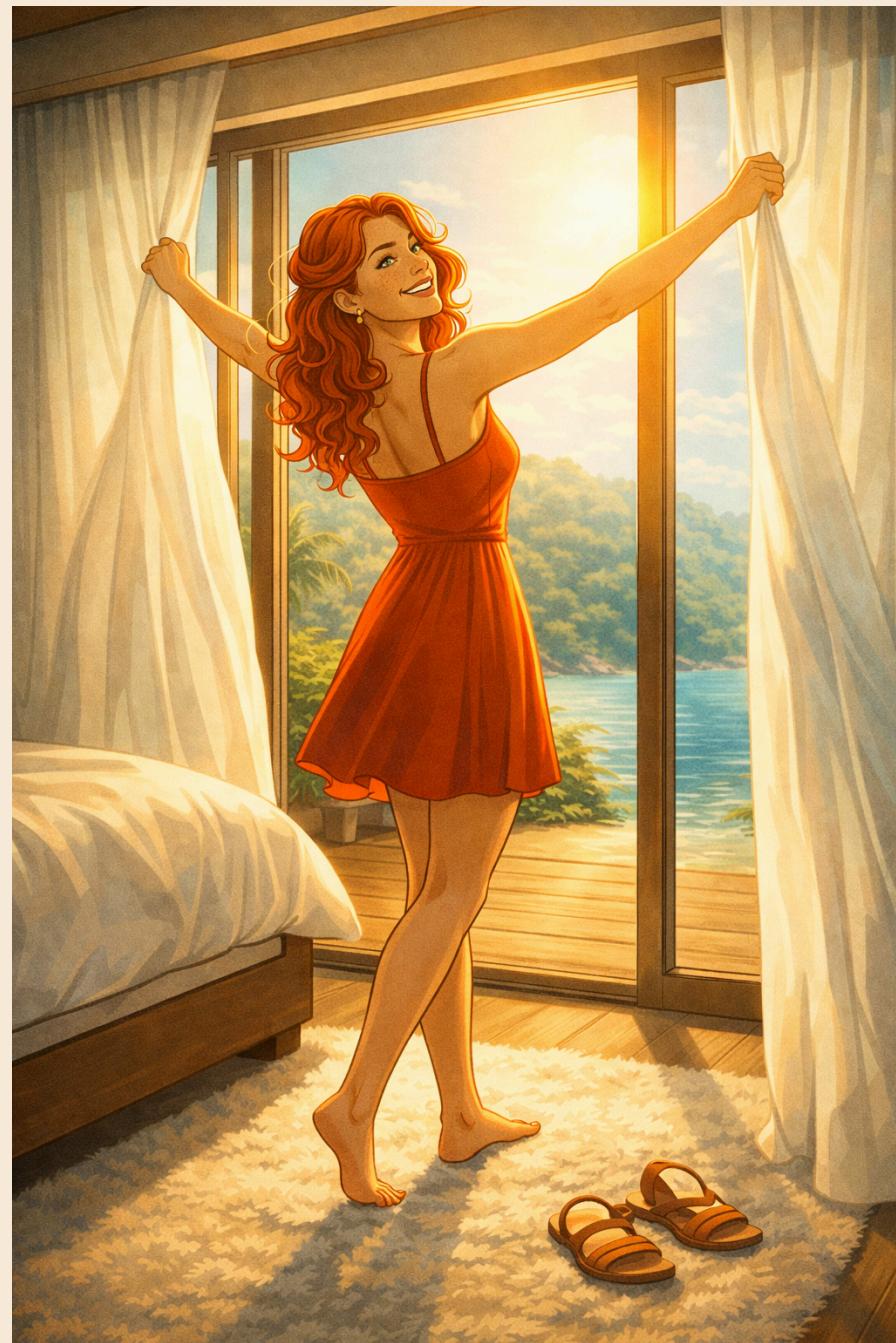
She slid a thin folder toward them, then paused to check a notification on the tablet beside her. "Bungalow three. It's secluded." She placed a heavy brass key on top of the folder with a sharp clack against the stone.

"Coffee's in the main canteen if you need a jolt. If you're looking to burn off some of those travel nerves, Jillian's usually at the gym till sunset. Anything else you're looking for... well, this island has a way of providing it, whether you've admitted you want it or not."

The path narrowed until the bungalow appeared, a low structure half-swallowed by a dense curtain of ferns and waxy leaves. Inside, the air held a sudden, artificial chill that smelled of floor wax and cut limes.

But it wasn't the decor that caught Lucy's attention. It was the bed. The bed was massive, covered in heavy, cool linens that looked almost too perfect to touch in this humidity.

Ruby didn't waste time. She kicked off her sandals, her feet sinking silently into the rug. She walked to the window and threw the curtains open with a sharp motion, letting the harsh afternoon light flood the room.





"It's perfect," she said, turning around. She leaned her hip against the sill, looking straight at Lucy. There was a promise in that look, and a challenge. "No distractions. Just us and this heat."

Lucy felt her throat tighten involuntarily. She started unpacking just to give her hands something to do. She lined up her notebooks on the nightstand with pedantic precision, trying to ignore the fact that Ruby was pulling a black lace bodysuit out of her suitcase and tossing it carelessly onto the white sheets.

"You don't have to organize everything like a grid, Lu." Ruby's voice was closer now; Lucy could feel the heat radiating from her body. "Nobody is grading us here."

"It's a habit," Lucy whispered.

Ruby stepped into her space, her skin still radiating the heat of the dock. "The grid doesn't work here. Give it a rest for once. Nobody's checking your homework."

She reached past Lucy, her fingers trailing over the corner of the topmost notebook before she picked up a towel from the foot of the bed. "I'm going to take a shower. Wash the travel off". Ruby

paused at the bathroom door, looking back with a half-smile that was more of a dare than a request. "I'll leave the door open, Lu. Don't make me wait too long for that shampoo".

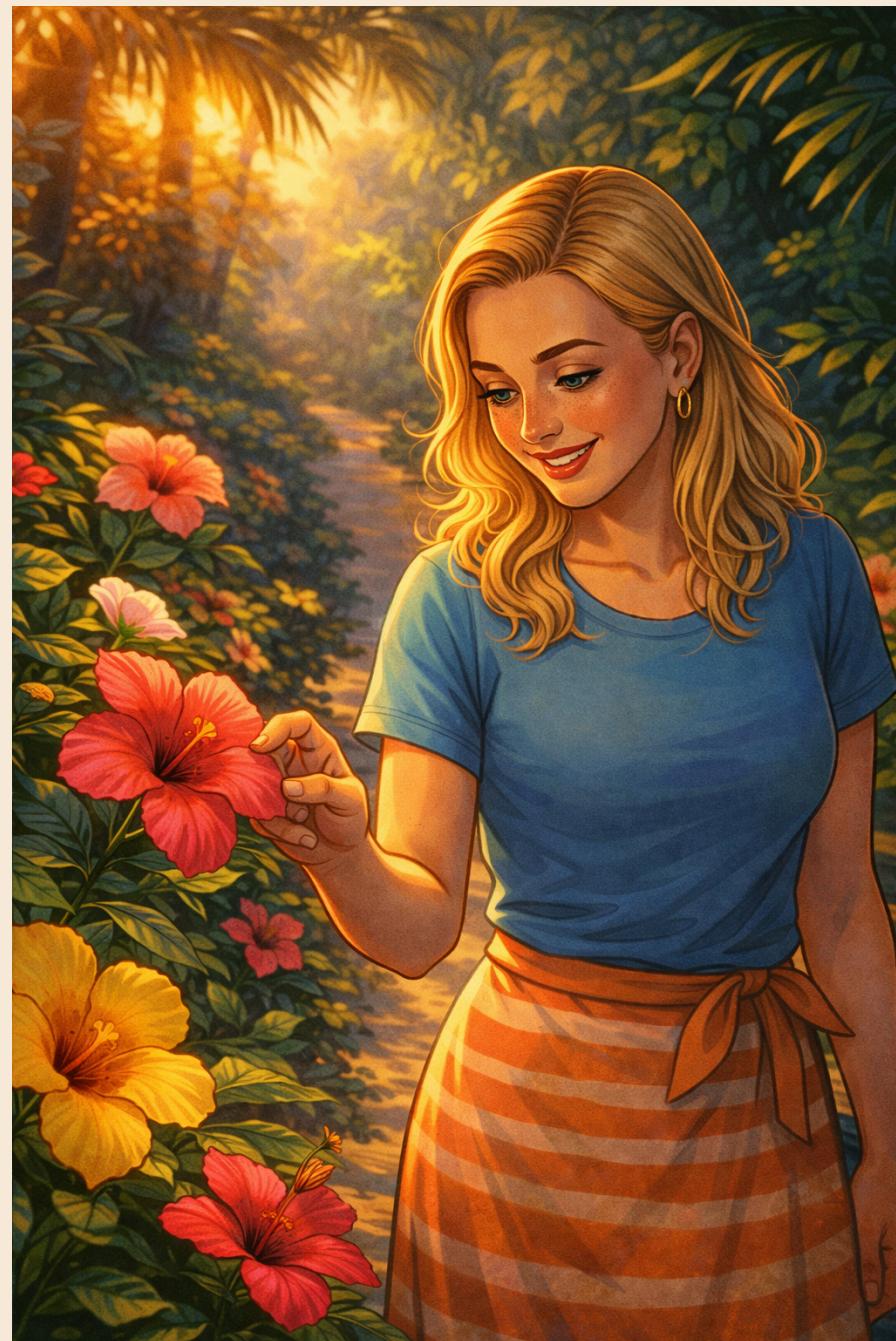
Ruby disappeared, and a moment later, the rush of water filled the silence, followed by her soft, rhythmic humming. Lucy stood frozen, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs. The invitation hung in the humid air, heavier than the scent of the citrus.

She couldn't do this. Not yet.

She had to get out. Just for a moment, before the steam and the humming pulled her through that open door.

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The tropical humidity clung to her like a second skin, heavy and unyielding. Outside, the silence of the bungalow was replaced by the chaotic symphony of the jungle - the rhythmic, electric buzz of cicadas and the distant, territorial cries of birds hidden deep within the canopy. Lucy followed a winding stone path that cut into the heart of the gardens, where the earth was packed hard and the air





felt weighted down by the scent of jasmine. Somewhere nearby, a hidden sprinkler hissed, a rhythmic metallic sound that cut through the buzz of the insects.

Here, the manicured paths surrendered to a riot of color. Massive, velvet-petaled hibiscus blooms in shades of blood-orange and sun-drenched gold arched over the walkway, their heavy heads bowing in the still heat. For a brief heartbeat, the frantic rhythm of her heart slowed, soothed by the vibrant stillness of the blossoms. She reached out, her fingers ghosting over the delicate stamen of a flower, letting the raw beauty of the island ground her before the chaos could return.

That was where she saw her.

A woman running along the path with such precision that her body looked like a machine built for motion. Her sweat-soaked tank top clung to her abs, highlighting every muscle with each exhale. Strong thighs, tense calves, rhythmic breathing. She was pure power.

She slowed as she saw Lucy, dropping into a walk. Her skin glistened with effort.

"New?" she asked shortly, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Is it that obvious?" Lucy crossed her arms, feeling strangely fragile next to her.

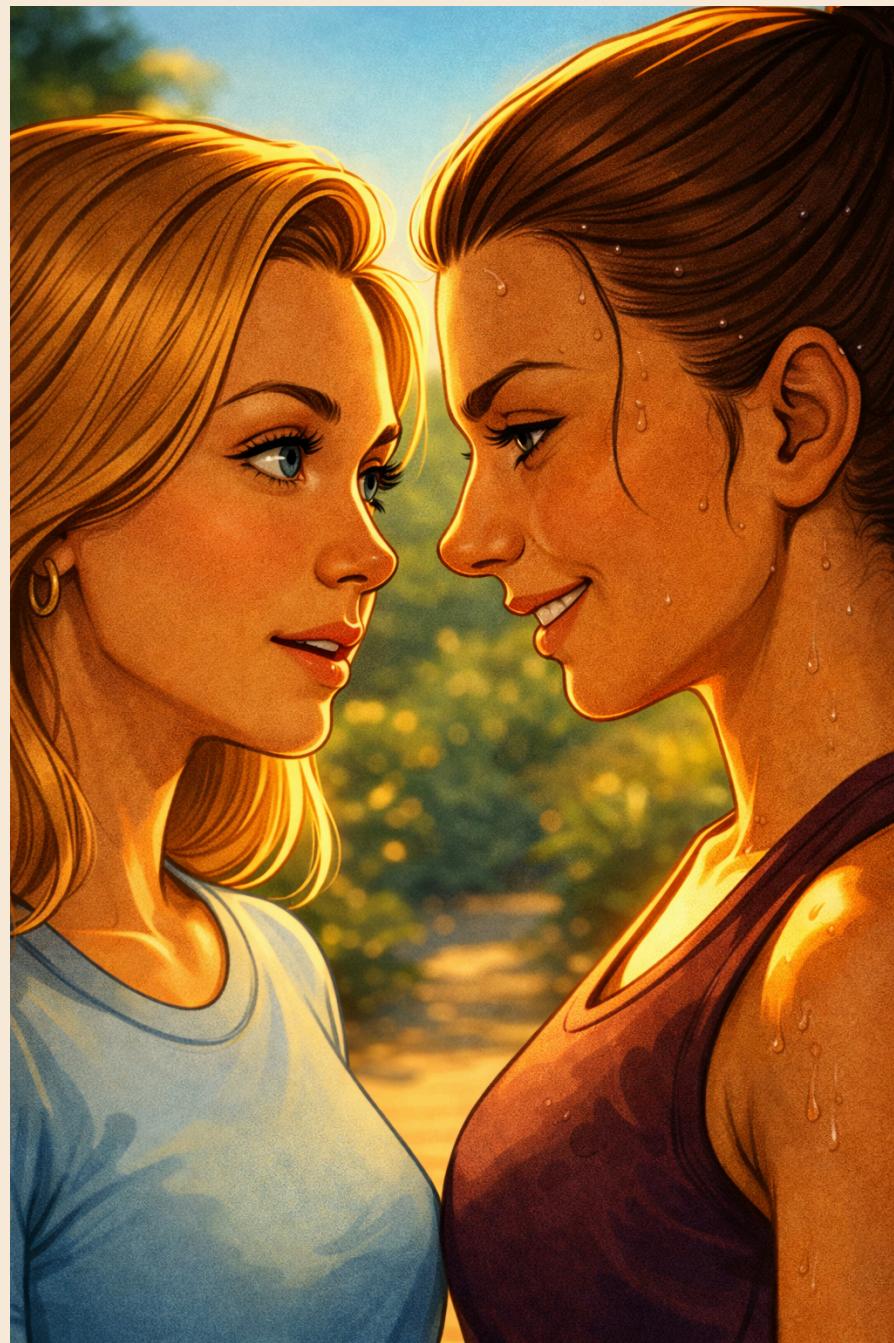
"It is." The woman stepped closer. She smelled intense—salt and exhaustion, a raw scent that was strangely compelling. "You have that look. Like you're scanning for emergency exits. I'm Brianna."

"Lucy."

"Lucy," Brianna repeated the name as if tasting it. Her gaze traveled over Lucy's frame, lingering for a second on her mouth. "Take my advice, Lucy. Don't look for the exit. Let this place chew you up."

"Sounds dangerous," Lucy managed to say.

"Sounds like fun." Brianna stepped into Lucy's space, the scent of salt and exhaustion hitting Lucy like a physical invitation. She didn't look away, her gaze dragging slowly from Lucy's eyes down





to her mouth. "I run at sunrise. If you want to see what this island is really capable of... you know where the path starts."

Brianna took off again without waiting for an answer, leaving Lucy with the view of her working back muscles and glutes tight in athletic gear.

Lucy took a deep breath. The island wasn't joking around.

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She returned to the bungalow just as Ruby was stepping out onto the porch. She looked... devastating. She wore a light dress that suggested more than it covered, and her damp hair smelled of coconut.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Ruby laughed, fastening an earring.

"More like a gladiator," Lucy replied, her fingers still tingling. "I met Brianna."

"Oh." Ruby raised her eyebrows, that familiar, mischievous spark lighting up her eyes. "The runner? Rumor has it she can exhaust a person just by looking at them. Did you like it?"

Lucy looked at Ruby. At a drop of water slowly tracing a path down her collarbone.

"I don't know yet," she said softly.

They headed toward the canteen. The hum of conversation, the clinking of glass, and laughter drifted from the distance. Naomi and Viktoria were waiting there. Other women were waiting.

Before they entered, Ruby stopped. She placed her hand on the small of Lucy's back, right in that sensitive dip, and applied just enough pressure to pull her an inch closer.

"Ready to see what we're up against?" Ruby whispered.

Lucy felt the touch in every nerve ending. She looked at the open doors of the canteen, spilling warm light and the scent of food, wine, and expensive perfume.

"No," Lucy answered honestly, feeling adrenaline mix with desire. "But let's go."

They walked inside, shoulder to shoulder, ready to let Heartmere do exactly what it was designed to do.

