

Welcome to Heartmere



DAY 1 • MORNING • BISTRO

2. Welcome to Heartmere.

The canteen didn't feel like a cafeteria. It felt like the nerve center of a very exclusive, very feminine operation. Open windows breathed with the sea breeze, causing the white curtains to dance dangerously close to the breakfast plates.

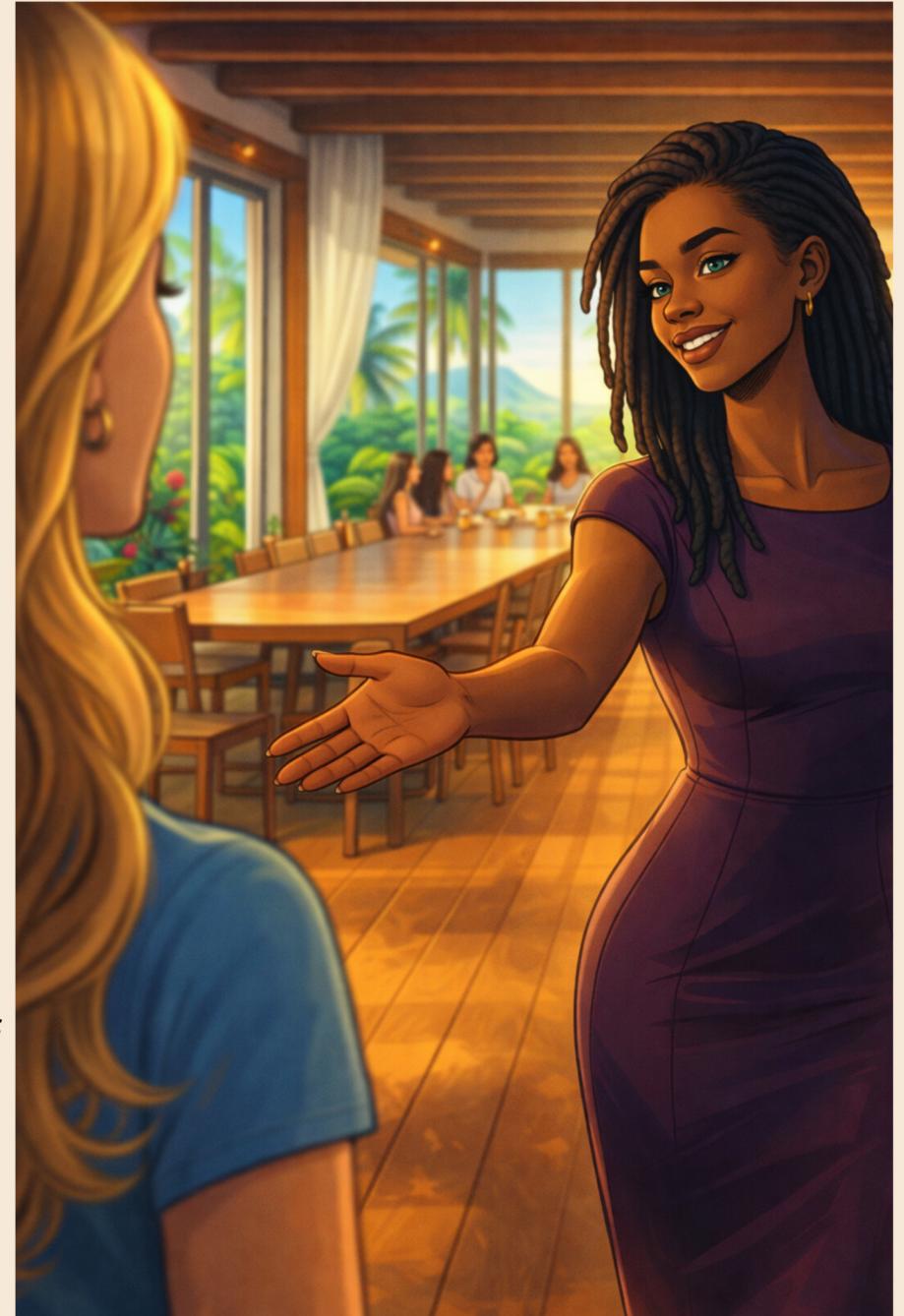
The noise hit Lucy first. A specific frequency of women's voices—laughter, debate, the clink of silverware.

"Okay," Ruby exhaled, running a hand through her thick, wavy hair, her eyes narrowing as she took in the layout of the tables. "The brochure definitely downplayed the talent."

"It's... intense," Lucy admitted.

"It's a casting call," Ruby corrected, grinning. "And I intend to get the part."

Naomi stepped into their path, the faint, sharp scent of expensive espresso trailing after her. She looked regal, her thick, dark dreadlocks cascading loosely over her shoulders, but she was checking a small smudge of ink on her thumb with a distracted frown.





"You made it," Naomi said, her voice a warm alto. "Come. Victoria is checking her watch, which is never a good sign."

She led them to the central table. Victoria was the anchor of the room. She wore crisp white trousers and a structured white button-down, sleeves rolled up to reveal forearms corded with the kind of lean muscle that came from years of high-stakes tension. She was typing on a tablet, ignoring the chaos around her.

"Sit," Victoria said, her voice dropping into that low, authoritative frequency that demanded immediate compliance. She didn't look up, but the sharp clack of her pen against the tablet was a command Lucy felt in the pit of her stomach. "We're starting, and I don't tolerate being ignored."

Lucy found herself squeezed between Ruby and Kylie, a brunette who had draped her professional camera over the back of her chair for the meeting. Across from them sat a striking Thai woman, Maya, who was stretching her neck with cat-like grace, ignoring the glare from a muscular Black woman—Isabella—sitting two seats down. The air was thick with invisible tripwires.



Victoria tapped the table. The sound cut through the chatter instantly.

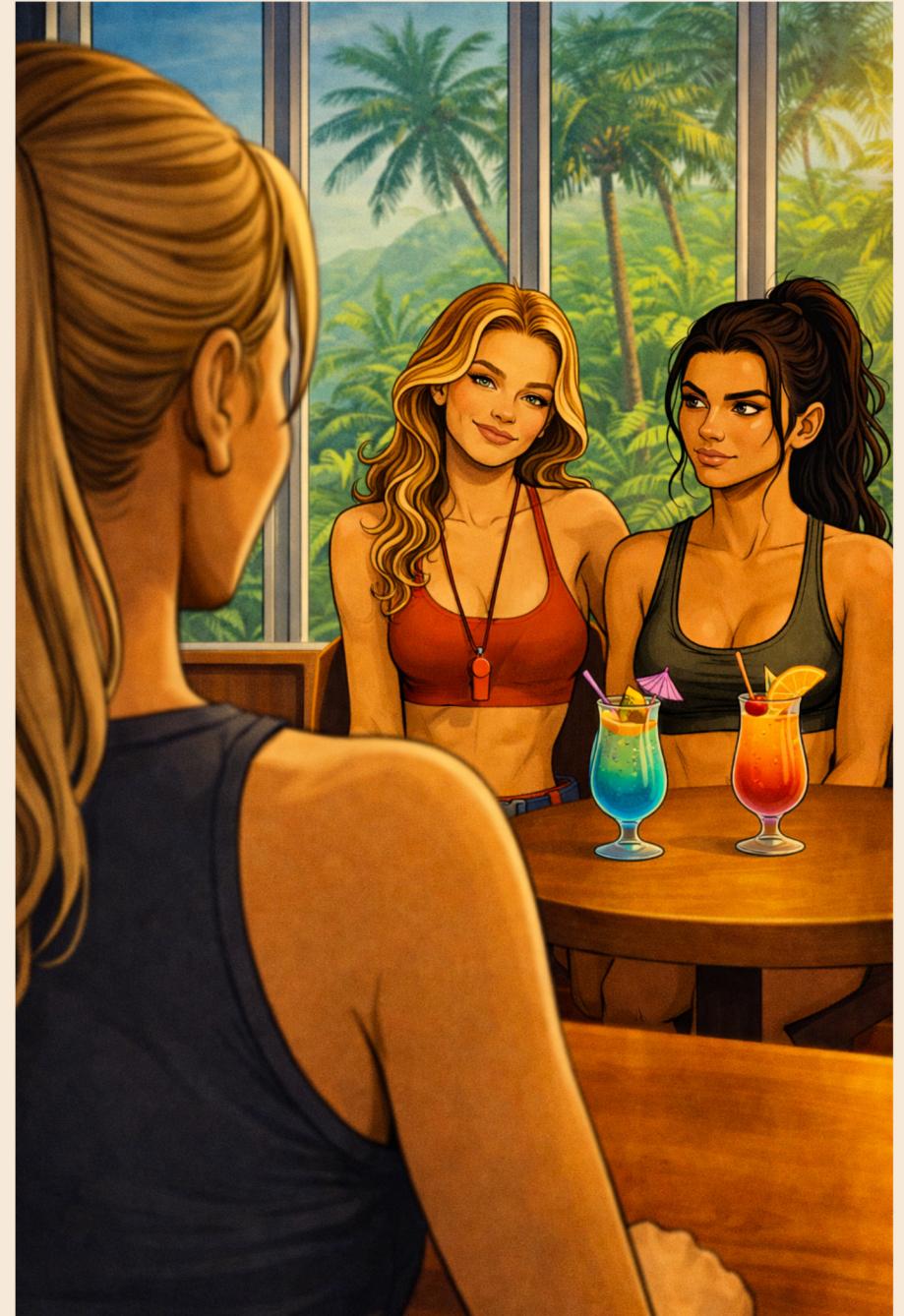
"Welcome to the orientation I hate giving," Victoria began, her gaze sweeping the room. "You know where the gym is. You know where the bar is. If you drown, Sophie"—she pointed to a sun-bleached lifeguard who was staring daggers at the platinum-blonde woman in the corner—"will drag you out, but she'll complain about it."

Sophie didn't smile. She just crossed her arms, her eyes still fixed on Rebecca.

"But let's be clear about why you are really here," Victoria continued, her voice dropping a notch. "Heartmere isn't just a retreat. It's a production studio. We are relaunching The Magazine."

A murmur went through the room.

"The first iteration of Heartmere was safe," Victoria said, her voice dropping to a cool, professional level that commanded the room. "The layout for the Spring issue lacked teeth. It was pretty,





and on this island, pretty is just a waste of paper. Gizelle has already scrapped the primary editorial calendar for next month because the content didn't move the needle." She leaned forward, resting her knuckles on the polished wood. "We answer to no board of directors. We answer to no sponsors. That freedom is a privilege, but you have started treating it like a vacation. That ends today. We are relaunching because we demand perfection, not because someone paid us to. If you can't deliver content that shocks and seduces, there's a boat leaving next Thursday with Captain Halloway. Feel free to be on it." She straightened up, smoothing her shirt. "We are creating the definitive aesthetic of our world. And you..." she pointed at the group, "...are the content. The writers. The models. The muses."

"Does that mean I get to be on the cover?" a woman's voice drawled from the corner.

Ember. She was sprawled in her chair, dark hair loose, wearing a sports bra that left nothing to the imagination. She looked bored, but her foot was tapping a furious rhythm against the floor leg.

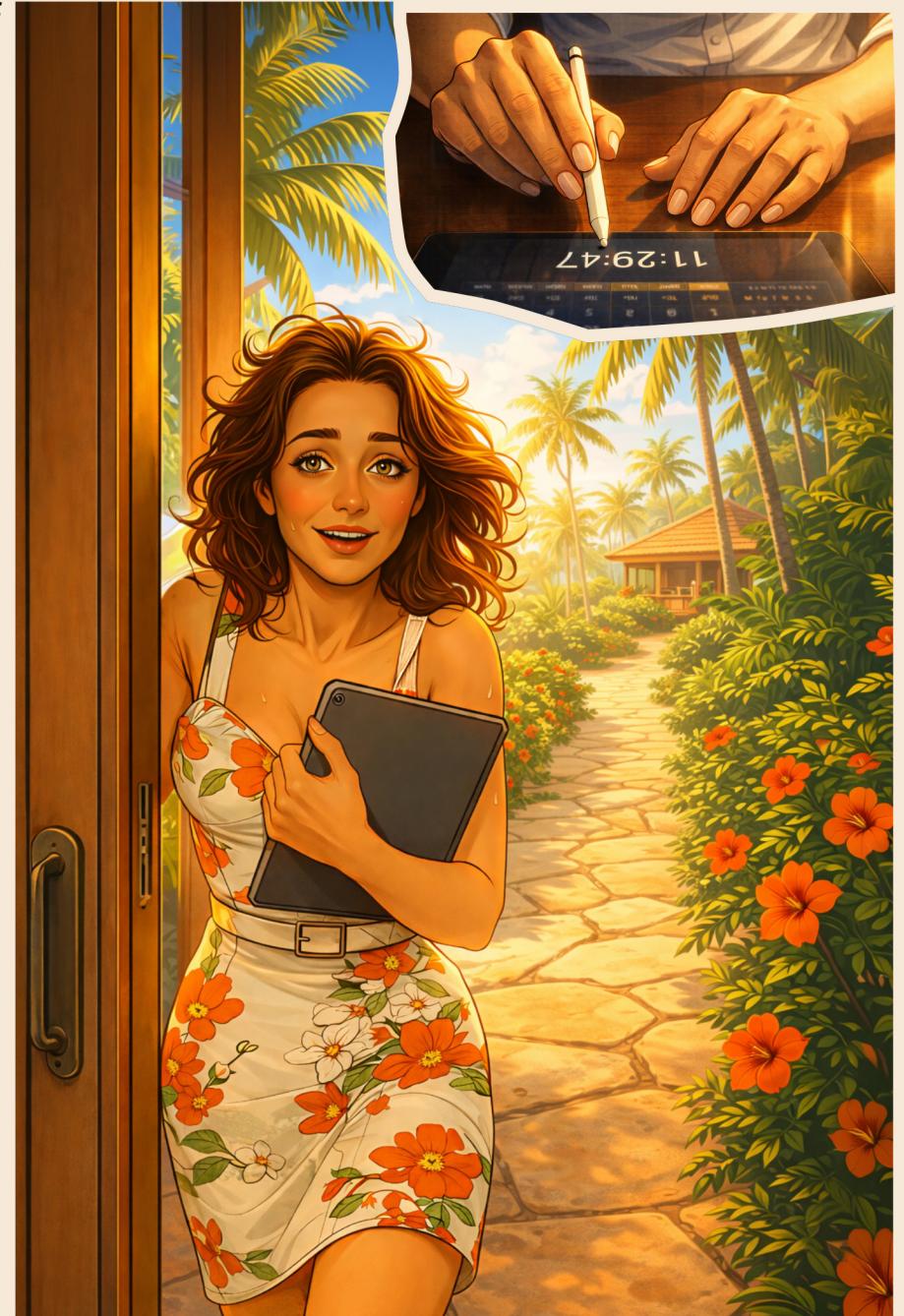
"If you earn it, Ember," Victoria replied coolly. "Speaking of earning it... where is your other half?"

Ember's jaw tightened. "Ask the spreadsheet."

The room grew uncomfortably silent. Even the clatter of cutlery ceased. Everyone knew that Monica was the only one who dared—or perhaps simply forgot—to fear Victoria's schedule. It was a dangerous game of brinkmanship that had been playing out for weeks. Victoria tapped her stylist pen against the tablet screen. Once. Twice. The rhythmic sound was a countdown. "If she isn't here in ten seconds," Victoria said softly, addressing no one in particular, "I'm giving the lead analysis role to Rebecca entirely." The threat hung in the air, heavy and electrified.

At that moment, the double doors swung open.

Monica burst in. She was a vision of beautiful chaos—wearing a white sundress printed with vibrant tropical flowers that seemed to vibrate against the room's clean palette. But the dress was haphazardly thrown on, one wide strap hopelessly twisted against





her skin, her hair was a wild halo of warm waves, and she was clutching a tablet like a shield.

For a heartbeat, she just stood there, framed by the tropical sun, looking like a survivor of a shipwreck who had washed up at a board meeting. Her chest heaved, fighting for oxygen, and a bead of sweat traced a path down her flushed neck. The silence in the room was absolute, broken only by the hum of the air conditioning and Monica's ragged breaths. She took a step forward, and her sandal caught on the edge of the rug. She stumbled, corrected herself with a wince, and straightened her spine, trying to summon a dignity that her twisted dress was actively undermining.

"I'm here!" Monica gasped, breathless. She scanned the room, eyes landing on Ember for a split second—a look of apology and hunger mixed together—before darting to Rebecca.

Ember deliberately looked away, viciously stabbing a piece of melon.

Lucy watched the scene unfold with a mixture of fascination and second-hand embarrassment. It was like watching a nature



documentary where the gazelle decides to trot right past the lioness. Every eye in the room tracked Monica's progress. Across the table, Naomi caught Sophie's eye. It was a microscopic interaction—a slight arch of a brow, a barely perceptible curve of lips—shared between two women who held more power than their job titles suggested. They watched the chaos with the amused detachment of queens watching a jester stumble. Meanwhile, Lucy felt like she was watching a car crash in slow motion.

Monica marched past Ember without stopping, making a beeline for the empty seat beside Rebecca at the main table. She practically threw the tablet onto the wood in front of the blonde.

"The full sector analysis," Monica panted, her cheeks flushed a deep rose. "The fruit production numbers, the self-sufficiency plan—it's all there. Every last byte."

Rebecca, sitting with the posture of a statue in a slate-grey top, looked at the tablet, then at Monica's disheveled state.





"You're eighteen minutes late, Monica," Rebecca said, her voice devoid of emotion, though her eyes lingered on the twisted strap of Monica's dress.

"The sustainability model wouldn't settle," Monica said, her eyes flickering toward Ember's turned back. "I had to rerun the greenhouse projections four times just to get the numbers to lock."

"Locking numbers," Ember scoffed, loud enough for the table to hear. "Is that the new word for oversleeping because you couldn't leave your screen?"

"The data is solid, Rebecca," Monica pleaded, ignoring Ember. "I prioritized the long-term sustainability of the island over... immediate comfort."

"Comfort," Ember muttered, loud enough for half the room to hear. "Unbelievable."

"Enough," Victoria's voice cut through the tension. "Monica, fix that strap. It's distracting. Ember, I want those mood boards on my desk by noon. Rebecca, integrate the data. We're forty-eight hours away from the print deadline."

She turned back to Lucy and Ruby.

"Welcome to the team. Ruby, I hear you have a way with people. You'll be working with Jade at the Tiki Bar—collecting stories for the 'Confessions' column. Anonymous, of course."

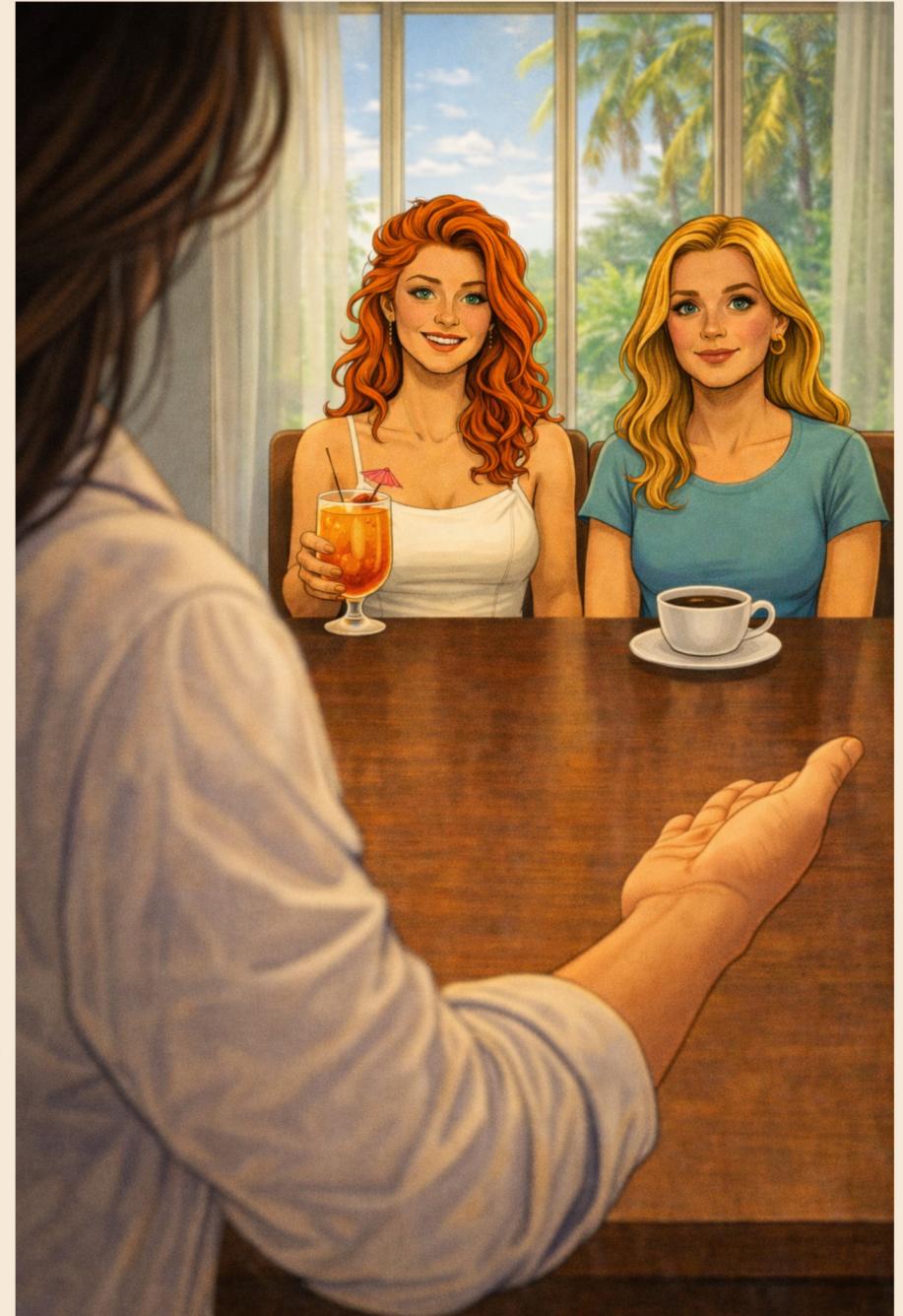
Ruby beamed. "I love secrets."

"And Lucy," Victoria's eyes narrowed slightly, assessing her. "You're a listener. Rebecca needs help translating the articles for the international edition. You'll work with her and Monica."

Lucy felt a chill. She looked at the toxic, electric triangle in the corner—Ember seething, Monica flustered, Rebecca coldly triumphant.

"Good luck," Ruby whispered, nudging her. "You're going to need a hazmat suit for that table."

Victoria stood up. "Meeting adjourned. Go make something beautiful. Or scandalous. I don't care, as long as it's printable."





As the women dispersed, Lucy heard a snippet of conversation from a nearby table where Jillian, the muscle-bound coach, was whispering to Sophie.

"Look at the Princess," Jillian sneered, nodding at Rebecca. "Acting like she runs the place because she speaks six languages. I bet she snaps like a twig on the mat."

"I'd pay to see that," Sophie muttered, her eyes dark.

Lucy took a deep breath. The island wasn't just a paradise. It was a chessboard. And she had just been placed right in the middle of the most dangerous game.



As Lucy followed Ruby out of the suffocating tension of the room, she glanced back one last time. High above the main floor, in the shadowed recess of the mezzanine, a silhouette watched them. A woman with poise that rivaled Victoria's, holding a glass of dark red wine despite the morning hour. She caught Lucy's eye, a slow, predatory smile touching her lips as she raised the glass. It wasn't a greeting; it was an acknowledgment of a new piece on the board. She drank, her eyes never leaving Lucy's, before vanishing into the

shadows. "Who was that?" Lucy whispered, a shiver running down her spine. Ruby didn't look back, her voice dropping to a respectful hush. "That's the reason Victoria doesn't sleep. That's Gizelle."

