

The Light of the Blue Pearl



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THE BLUE PEARL

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For David...you know why

CHAPTER 1

Ethne stared up at the ceiling while lying lifeless on the couch. Not terribly comfortable but not caring much either she thought to herself: “What now?” The day was only half over and yet nothing of importance had happened; nothing ever really did. Life had become mundane and empty. It wasn’t a bad life by definition but not a very exciting one either. She felt the softness of the pillow with her head and tried ever so hard to think of what she should be doing.

The house was a mess; she should clean it but couldn’t bring herself to even care to get up. It was quiet; all she could hear was the wind blowing through a wind chime outside. “I should be enjoying this peace,” she said to herself. But instead she felt sad and empty, close to tears.

“I’m better than this, get up you stupid woman, do something with your day...what’s wrong with you?” she said to herself.

No one answered. No one ever did. She was alone, as usual. And although this was by choice, it was this alone feeling that kept her body firmly planted on the soft couch. Just then someone knocked loudly on her door making her nearly jump out of her skin. No one ever visited or came to her door so this was an unexpected shock and it took her a moment to gather herself up and head to the door to see who it could be, her heart pounding a bit from the unexpected disturbance.

Living alone always makes a young woman slightly nervous; she lived in a nice area though, so she had never feared for her safety. All the same she took a peek to see who it was and was slightly shocked to see no one there.

A prank, she figured, nothing more than a prank, *why on earth had I thought it could actually be anything interesting?* Nothing interesting ever happened to her, she was as average as they come, invisible to pretty much everyone alive, or so it seemed to her anyway.

She slowly made her way back to the couch but stopped short when she heard something being pushed under the door. She turned around to see an envelope now laying on her floor, average size, light blue, with no writing on it.

Intrigued, she picked up the envelope and turned it over in her fingers, inspecting it. It wasn’t addressed to anyone so she assumed it was probably just a stupid solicitation like the ones left on her doorstep from time to time. This was a bit more brazen of

them to violate the inside of her walls by pushing it under the door, but it was probably just junk all the same. For no other reason, other than lack of anything else to do, she decided to open it before throwing it away.

Inside the envelope was the most beautiful paper with elegant writing on it that was so stunning to look at she actually forgot to read it at first; staring dumbly almost frozen in her foyer.

After a time she focused her eyes on the writing and started to decipher what it said.

“To the girl with the sad eyes...you have exactly 1 hour to make your way to 2298 Market Street. Don’t be late.”

She looked at her watch. It was 4 o’clock and she had to be at work by 6. The destination was clear on the other side of town; the odds of making both destinations on time were slim. If she didn’t go to work she was likely to lose her job. But what else could she do? Nothing excitingly strange had ever happened to her before and she was intrigued. “‘To the girl with the sad eyes?’ Who on earth has been paying attention to my eyes? Or me for that matter?” she said aloud to no one in particular.

Before she gave it even another thought she was on her phone calling her boss.

“Hello?”

Imitating her best sick voice she coughed and said, “Hi...Scott?”

“Ethne? Is that you? You sound terrible.”

“Yeah, I feel it...I don’t think I can make it in tonight.”

“Oh....that’s a shame. We were already short a person tonight. But if you’re sick you’re sick. Get

some rest. We'll see you tomorrow," he said, shocking her a bit with what sounded like genuine concern.

"Okay...thanks," she replied, before hanging up the phone.

Now with that decided, she rushed to put on some clothes so she could do as the letter said and not be late for her 5 o'clock meeting. Scrambling to her room she grabbed her blue jeans and pulled them on, almost falling over from her clumsiness and excitement of where she was about to go. She threw on her favorite green shirt, quickly ran a brush through her long brown hair, checked the mirror, and stuck out her tongue at herself...."not much I can do here," she said, before grabbing her purse and keys and heading out the door to her blue Corolla.

As she drove to 2298 Market Street she was trying to think of what the address could be; she didn't have any recollection of it, though she rarely drove to that side of town anyway so why would she? It typically took about 25 minutes to get there, which was way too long for the anticipation she felt, especially since she only had 10 more minutes before she would be late.

"I barely even fixed myself up, how is it possibly this late already?" she mumbled to herself as she began to see the brake lights in front of her.

"You have GOT to be kidding me? There's never any traffic this direction usually, and now brake lights? Come on!! Can't anything ever work out?" she said to herself, clearly frustrated but with no option but to try and stay calm. Now she was going to be late, miss work and still have absolutely no idea what the note was all about, and DIE from curiosity...probably.

In addition to that she had no idea what would happen if she was late; the note didn't exactly specify.

The brake lights soon cleared and she was on her way again with a huge sigh of relief. "Maybe I can still make it," she breathed.

As she closed in on 2298 Market Street she saw that there was a coffee shop on the corner of it. "How cliché," she said to herself.

"Oh well, time to go see what this is all about." She parked her car, unlatched her seat belt and realized her hands were shaking a bit. "Probably won't be needing coffee..." she said as she got out of her car and crossed the street to the coffee shop.

Outside, there were nice tables and chairs with umbrellas and many patrons enjoying a cup of coffee and some food. She scanned the area and saw a man sitting by himself reading a book, his legs crossed in a very casual manner. He looked up, saw her and waved her over. She tentatively walked over to the man and shyly said, "Hello?"

"Are you Ethne," the man asked.

"Umm...yes..," she answered, still having absolutely no idea what was going on.

"I was told to give you this..." he said, reaching out and handing her another envelope, same color, different size.

He looked back down at his book and continued to read as if she wasn't even standing there anymore. She quietly said, "thank you," and walked back to her car.

After getting back into her car, she felt like she was in a daze, not even feeling quite like herself. "What is going on here?" she thought to herself as she looked down at the envelope in her hands.

Slowly opening it, she found an airline ticket – from San Francisco to Belize City.

“Belize! What the hell?”

Next to the round-trip ticket was another note...it simply said: “You’ll be gone 3 days, make arrangements.”

Okay, a trip across town is one thing, but an airplane ticket? This was getting a bit ridiculous. She couldn’t possibly! What would she tell her boss? How could she even pull this off, and was it safe? She had absolutely no idea what any of this was all about and now she was supposed to travel to a foreign country, right now!?

No...she couldn’t. Could she? All of these thoughts were frantically going through her mind as she was trying to decide. She looked at the airplane ticket and saw that the flight was in 2 hours, not much time to go home and pack; would she need much anyway? Of course she would. She put the key into the ignition and started driving home, figuring she would make up her mind on the way.

As she pulled into her driveway she still hadn’t made up her mind, weighing the pros and cons all the way home, she couldn’t really come to a conclusive decision of whether or not she should go. She felt like throwing all of it out the window and just going, no more weighing options. It was then she realized her decision had been made: she was going.

With her mind made up and feeling a bit exhilarated at the idea, she climbed out of her car and started walking up the stairs to her door. As she got closer to her door she realized there was something there waiting for her. It was a suitcase. A small black suitcase with a note attached.

“Everything you’ll need.”

She stood stunned for a moment, not really knowing why; a suitcase waiting at her door wasn’t any more unusual than all the other stuff that had already happened that day. Unlocking her door she picked up the suitcase and carried it inside.

Placing the suitcase on her bed she unzipped it, extremely curious about what could possibly be in it. Well organized and expertly packed, she almost didn’t want to disturb its contents but her curiosity wasn’t going to let her leave it be – who was she kidding?

Besides the typical items, toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo etc, there were also some gorgeous clothes, obviously brand new, some with the tags still on; the purpose of that a bit confusing since she couldn’t exactly take anything back or change sizes, having no idea where the stuff came from anyway.

There were just a few items of clothing, which made sense since she wasn’t going to be gone very long. It was probably wise that whoever did this packed for her, she would have over-packed for herself anyway.

There was a beautiful dress with white lilies on it that she could tell right away was going to look stunning, and even a pair of shoes to go with it. The idea that someone knew her size...and shoe size was a bit unnerving actually; her curiosity suddenly started to take a turn towards fear at the awkwardness of it all.

Who could possibly know these things about her? No one ever noticed her, talked to her or spent time with her. She really didn’t have any friends to speak of, not really; no one who really knew her like that anyway. In a way she found that sad, but she had her

reasons. However, it made what was happening now that much more intriguing.

She decided to put her fears aside and just see where this was going. Never taking time to travel and usually spending all of her time at work, the idea of flying somewhere new was extremely liberating...and terrifying.

After inspecting the other clothes inside, some nice shorts, a few shirts and a swimsuit that had her immediately nervous, she zipped it closed and headed for her car. Her heart began to race when she realized she was really going to do this. She was on her way to the airport to get on an airplane, for only the second time in her life, and head to a country she knew absolutely nothing about.

She didn't know why she was going in the first place and had no idea what to expect. Truly a bit of an adventure she made her way to the airport and found a place to park her car for the night. Never having any dealings at the airport, navigating all of the lanes and confusing parking situations, she hoped she found the right place to park, and that her car would be there waiting for her when she got back.

Pulling into her parking spot the evening air was a comfortable temperature and the full moon was just starting to rise over the horizon. If she hadn't been where she was now she would have missed such a beautiful scene. "I work too much," she thought to herself.

Grabbing the suitcase from her backseat, Ethne locked her doors and started making her way to where the transit bus would pick her up to take her to the terminal. She was the only one waiting, which

made her nervous being so unaccustomed to air travel, she hoped she was doing things right.

After a few moments a bus pulled up and she got inside. Just her and the driver on their way to the airport, she felt a little strange climbing the stairs, the driver glanced at her and gave her a look that made her feel a little uncomfortable. "This whole thing is making me paranoid," she thought.

It was a quick five minute drive to the airport and before she knew it she was getting off and making her way to the terminal. She had her ticket in her hand, gripping it like it was a rope that was keeping her from falling off a cliff. Once in line she set her suitcase down and started for the first time to think about what it was she was doing.

That's when the panic set in.

CHAPTER 2

She felt the cold sweat kick in and her palms start to feel sticky. If she had been looking in the mirror she was sure a pale white ghost would be staring back at her. Someone in front of her asked, “You okay, hun?” She barely even heard them and decided she better sit down.

With nowhere to sit she had to sit on the ground right there in line, getting up each time it moved. Her head was racing, what was she doing? Where was she going? And a plane ride? The thought of it just now sinking in. She had only flown once before to Europe to visit a sick relative, and that hadn’t gone very well now that she thought of it.

And now she was going to get on a plane and go to another country, all by herself? This was crazy, she couldn’t do this.

She had almost talked herself out of going when the airport security officer called “next.” She was

next. She somehow managed to stand up and grab her suitcase and bring it closer to the screening counter. It felt like it had gained several pounds since the last time she had lifted it.

"Ticket and ID?" the officer asked. Ethne handed them over, the officer having to pry them from her sticky and clenched palm. As she inspected them for accuracy she looked up at Ethne assessing the pale individual in front of her. "First time flying?" she asked.

"Second," Ethne replied.

"Well, you'll be alright; there is a bathroom just over there if you want to freshen up before you board."

"Thank you," Ethne said, not sure that any time spent in the bathroom was going to fix how she was feeling right now.

After making it through security, Ethne slowly made her way to the bathroom to see what the damage was. Setting her bag on the counter she looked in the mirror and saw her pale face looking back at her.

"What are you doing?" she said to herself.

She unzipped the bag and saw a note that she had somehow missed before. She pulled it out and leaned against the counter to read it.

"You're probably feeling a bit unsure about this trip right now. Don't worry, you'll be glad you went."

Well whoever wrote that note was dead on in their assessment; she was definitely feeling unsure about her decision to fly to Belize. "Belize ...what on earth could be there waiting for me?" she thought to herself glancing one more time in the mirror before she dug into her bag for reinforcements.

Slowly reapplying her makeup to try to bring a little color back to her face, she looked in the mirror and decided that was the best she could do given what she had to work with. A ghost is a ghost, no matter how much you try to dress it up.

She looked at herself in the mirror for a second before leaving, noticing how skinny she had gotten. Her brown hair was just past her shoulders again after she'd cut it months earlier – a huge mistake she had found out later. Her face was pale, though today a little paler than normal. Looking deeply into her own sad eyes she saw what the person had meant. Though she never thought much of her features, and up until now apparently no one else had either, she wouldn't say she was ugly. She saw her mother's face when she looked in the mirror, a small nose with strong cheek bones, except her lips, those were full, like her father's had been. Overall, in her mind she was just average. Average height, average look, average life. But she could imagine that if she had a little more life behind her brown eyes, maybe then she'd be worth looking at.

Her flight was going to board in a few minutes so she picked up her bag and started heading toward the gate.

On her way there she was tempted to grab something to eat. She hadn't eaten much all day but frankly her stomach was a bit too unsettled so she opted against it. She decided now was the time to make the dreaded phone call to her boss to break the news that she wouldn't be at work tomorrow either.

"Hello?" Scott answered.

Feigning a weak voice she said, "Hi, Scott? It's Ethne. Ummm...I'm really not feeling well, I don't

think I'm going to be able to come in tomorrow either."

"Oh? That's a shame," Scott replied. "Well I guess we will see you on Monday then since you're off until then anyway, hope you feel better."

"Thanks," she said, before hanging up the phone, feeling a bit terrible about the deception. But she didn't want to lose her job so there really was no other way around it.

As she walked up to the gate the line wasn't all that long, which was nice she supposed, considering the fact that she was unsure how this flight was going to go. The least amount of spectators to what might happen en route the better she figured.

When it was her turn in line she handed her ticket to the woman, smiled a faint smile and was soon taking the long walk to the plane's door. With every step it seemed her heart started pounding faster and faster, it probably was. She did her best to ignore it, but when it came time to actually step foot onto the plane, she froze.

Her foot seriously wouldn't move. It was inches from the plane's door but she couldn't take a step further. The people behind her started to get antsy and one of them even tried to push her, but to no avail. She wasn't going anywhere.

It didn't take long before one of the flight attendants came to her aid and tried to reassure her that things would be fine. She looked deep into the woman's blue eyes and tried to comprehend what she was saying to her but everything had gone silent.

"Oh no, it's happening," Ethne thought.

She tried to take a deep breath. About half way was the best she could muster, not quite enough

oxygen needed to stay conscious. She started to feel the room go black.

Someone behind her caught her arm and helped steady her as the flight attendant moved her off to the side so that everyone else could board the plane. She leaned against the wall for support and hung her head low trying not to faint. Another flight attendant brought her some water and helped her drink it.

“You gonna be okay, hun?” one of them asked.

She honestly didn’t know, but she nodded her head that she would and pretty soon the room started to look normal again. With her bearings established once more she took a deep breath and decided it was now or never. She had two options, one – get on the plane and see where this strange note would take her or two – go home.

Having seen enough of home, she stepped onto the plane.

The aisles were narrow, which she remembered from the last flight; she didn’t care for narrow. But she had committed and so she would see this through, even if it killed her. The flight attendant who had brought her the water was right behind her carrying her bag for her and making sure her newest passenger was well taken care of.

Her seat was mid-plane just in front of the wing, a window. Not really liking being on a plane to begin with she wasn’t sure it mattered which seat she was in. She honestly couldn’t wait to get off. But this was a long flight, with a couple of layovers; it was going to be a while before she got her wish.

The flight attendant put her bag in the compartment above her and handed her a pillow and blanket.

“Are you feeling a little better?” she asked Ethne.

“Yeah, a little,” she answered.

“My name is Robyn if you need anything, okay?” she said with a nervous smile on her face.

Ethne assumed that they dealt with nervous flyers all of the time, but doubted that they enjoyed it much.

“Yeah, okay thanks,” she answered, gladly accepting the blanket and pillow.

She hadn’t had much time to get to the airport and had pretty much handed her ticket over just a few minutes before takeoff, so it wasn’t long before they were under way and the plane was taxiing up the runway. She was gripping the armrest with white knuckles trying to breathe deeply, but wasn’t having much luck.

There was no one sitting next to her, which again was probably a good thing. Not only would she likely be terrifying them because of her nervousness, but in case something happened she didn’t want anyone nearby anyway. She forced herself to look out the window and think about other things.

The note from the morning was still in her pocket. She pulled it out and started studying the paper and the handwriting, trying to see if there were any clues as to who might have written it. She didn’t find any. She didn’t recognize the handwriting at all. She couldn’t think for the life of her who could have sent it and who had convinced her to travel so far from home.

The plane was done taxiing and was starting to pick up speed as it raced down the runway before taking the final leap into the air. Ethne closed her eyes and tried to ignore what was happening, which was

very difficult because it was so loud and so turbulent her mind could think of nothing else.

Soon though, they were up and things started to level out; she was in the air. Flying over her home she took a quick glance down at the city below. She had such a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach at the bizarre turn of events of the day.

"This morning I was sitting on my couch staring at the ceiling," she thought to herself. "Now I'm flying to Belize...I must be crazy."

Perhaps she was, but considering the kind of life she'd had up to this point, she doubted anyone would blame her. Living alone all of those years, spending her time only working and passing the time, this was probably the most exciting thing she had ever done. She was terrified.

She thought about what she was going to do once she landed, but decided not to even think about that because it brought on even more panic than the flight was. So instead she got up, got her bag down, and rummaged through it for entertainment.

She discovered another note.

"How do I keep missing these?" she thought.

Unfolding the note she read the three words on it: "Take a nap."

"Take a nap?" she thought.

Oh yeah, that was hilarious. Like she could even think about sleeping right now; not only did she have an extremely anxiety driven flight ahead of her, but then, after she landed she had no idea what was awaiting her. *Take a nap. Yeah...right.* Sleeping on a plane never held much appeal for her anyway, it certainly hadn't benefited her the last time she'd flown.

Just then the flight attendant walked by and asked if she wanted anything to drink. What she really wanted was something to take away her anxiety but alcohol wasn't really an option, so she declined and went back to contemplating her fate upon arrival in Belize City. The note stayed with her though. Everything else had been something for her to do, so perhaps taking a nap was essential for some strange reason.

So, fighting everything in her that wanted to stay awake, Ethne wrapped her arms tightly around herself and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER 3

The first time he had seen her sad eyes was the day he nearly fell over her in the hallway. She had dropped her purse and was bent down to pick it up; he was in a rush and hadn't even seen her while he was juggling paperwork and his cell phone; the halls can be quite dangerous if you aren't keeping your eyes open. He tripped over her and went flying into the wall dropping all of his belongings as well. She blushed and immediately apologized for being in his way and started helping him pick up his things. He felt like a total ass since it had been his fault for not paying attention to where he was going in the first place.

He was at a loss for words, he felt so stupid for having tripped over her. After they quietly finished picking up all of his papers he asked if she was alright. She gave him a small smile, shrugged her shoulders

and said she was fine before picking up her purse and walking away.

It wasn't the first time he had seen her of course, it was just the first time he had noticed her. He wasn't sure how she had escaped his gaze before, since after looking into her eyes that day he couldn't seem to think of anything else.

He made an effort to speak to her after that, but she typically kept the conversations very short and was obviously trying not to be bothered. Not doing much for his self esteem he wasn't sure why he wanted to pursue it, but something in her eyes had him so intensely captivated he could think of little else.

After about a week of thinking about her and failing miserably at trying to strike up a real conversation, he came up with an idea. He wanted to learn more about her, and obviously the typical tricks of the trade weren't going to help him here. She was a difficult one, shy and reserved but incredibly smart; he could tell that she was keeping everyone at a distance on purpose, and he decided he had to find out what that reason was. Naturally a problem solver, this was a puzzle he couldn't leave unfinished, so he set out to work on his elaborate plan.

It took him a while to iron out all of the details, and there were a lot of details, but after he had, he was quite proud of himself at its cleverness. It would take an interesting person to do the things that he had planned, but he had a hunch that she was indeed an interesting and rare person. The next day he had put his plan into action.

He was so nervous it wasn't going to work. That everything he had just spent forever dreaming up and

scheduling was going to go to waste. “Really, who in their right mind would travel somewhere with no notice and no explanation?” he thought to himself. It was outlandish, totally ridiculous to even consider. He had a sinking feeling his efforts were going to fail before the plan was set in motion; that this may be a puzzle that would go unsolved. That was a thought he couldn’t stand. Not being the type to ever leave a puzzle undone, he was already thinking of other ways to get the answers he was looking for when he heard the telephone ring down the hall.

The conversation wasn’t long and not much had been said, but her name being pulled from the work schedule that night was confirmation for him that the first step had worked. Whether or not she would follow through with the second step of his plan was a completely different question though, it was quite a bit to ask of a person really. And for her he knew it was going to be a gigantic challenge.

“What was I thinking?” he thought to himself. He knew very little of her past, but enough to know that the next part of his plan was going to be a gigantic hurdle for her. He had probably shot himself in the foot with the idea, but this step he had decided was the catalyst to the rest; a necessary piece that couldn’t be left out.

If she could do it, it would answer so many of his questions without any words being exchanged. Now, with the first challenge met all he could do was wait. Unfortunately, waiting was really not something he was good at. He was pacing the halls waiting to see if she came into work after all, waiting for another sign that the next step was going to be taken. He would have given anything to have been a fly on the wall of

where she was, but that wasn't possible. The most important part of his plan was that she couldn't know it was him sending her on what probably seemed to her a wild goose chase.

After about a half an hour he made a phone call and discovered that the first envelope had been received, opened and read. It was the closest he could be to being a fly on the wall. The complete stranger on the phone had been very kind to accept his offer of delivering the envelope. Though he'd had to compensate and convince him some, that wasn't unreasonable given the circumstances; the first domino has to start somewhere, and it had now been knocked over.

His heart was racing, wondering if what she had read in the note was even something she would consider. He knew most people probably wouldn't have, most would have thrown it away and ran; it was after all a bit insane. But something told him that she wasn't most people, that while it may seem outlandish at first, the idea in itself was exhilarating and intriguing. After that day in the hall he felt maybe she needed a bit of that in her life.

The sound of the phone ringing down the hall confirmed that he was right; she wasn't most people. She had accepted his offer and was soon going to be on her way to Belize.

He stood shocked for a moment when he realized the beginning of his plan had been a success; he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself at that point. It was going to be a very long time until he got another update. "What am I going to do with myself now?" he thought. He certainly wasn't going to be able to sleep.

The next hour or so was critical. This step was going to be so hard for her; he knew this when he planned it, but Belize was an integral part of everything, there was no other option. Still, even though he didn't know the whole story of what happened on her last plane ride, he knew flying wasn't at the top of her list because of it. He really wasn't sure how this was going to go. Half of him wanted to hop in the car and drive to the airport to help her get through it, but he couldn't. All he could do was wait and see if she was able to take this step on her own.

While he waited for news he decided to go over everything he had scheduled again to make sure nothing was left out, that he hadn't forgotten anything. Even the smallest of detail could mess this up; he was after all sending this poor girl to a foreign country and for whatever reason she was trusting him to take care of the details.

The plans he had upon her return were just as important as this trip. Even though he had tried to think up everything in advance, truth be told he was so excited about the first part and whether or not she would even take the bait, he had put more focus on it rather than the entire plan as a whole.

So it was time to get back to work. While he held his breath waiting to hear news, there was nothing else he could do but set things in motion for her return to the States. He poured himself another cup of coffee, although he didn't really need it, and did his best to keep his mind off of what was happening at the airport.

CHAPTER 4

Ethne was greatly surprised to find herself snuggled up in her blanket as she groggily came out of a deep sleep. Sleeping on a plane had never really been successful before. She hadn't thought she was going to be able to get any rest, but she must have been truly exhausted from the excitement of the day because it had taken no time at all to drift off. She slowly glanced around the cabin to see if she could make heads or tails of location or time.

The cabin was quiet except for a few passengers coming and going to their seats. She must not have been the only tired traveler that day, although she doubted anyone on the plane was doing something as crazy as she was. Now that she was done running around town and facing her fears getting on a plane, for the first time all day she started to really think about what she was doing.

With the excitement of receiving the first note her mind had been a buzz all day, almost as if in a dream, but for the first time the reality was sinking in. She had left her job, her responsibilities, and hopped on a plane without even a second thought as to why. It was a strange thing to be fulfilling the wishes of whoever was behind the notes, very likely a person she didn't even know. Her circles of friends was a dot really, she had more connections at work than anything else and even that was fairly non-existent.

The choices she made to keep people at a distance were her own, but it never made it any easier when she thought about the things she was missing out on. Perhaps that reason alone was why she found herself sitting on a plane, travelling to a country she had never given a second thought to.

Although she was excited and a bit nervous about what would happen when she landed, sitting there on the plane wrapped up in her blanket she felt a sense of calm. That was a strange feeling to have given the circumstances. She leaned over and looked out the window, although it was still dark she could see faint lights below and some wisps of clouds as they traveled by. This experience was definitely different from the last time she had flown.

"Do you need anything?" someone whispered to her. She had felt so alone in that moment staring out the window she had almost forgotten where she was. She slowly came back to reality and looked over to see the flight attendant looking down on her.

"Umm...I'm sorry, what?" Ethne asked.

"I was just wondering if I could get you anything. You were asleep when we had brought the drinks

around before, I didn't want to wake you, but I could get you something now if you like?" Robyn asked.

"Oh...sure I'll have some orange juice, thank you," she replied.

"It's no problem, I'll be right back," Robyn said, turning around and heading to the back of the plane.

"She must really be concerned about me," Ethne thought to herself. Although she hadn't flown much she was pretty sure that serving drinks throughout an entire flight wasn't really customary.

"Here you go," Robyn said, quietly handing her a glass of orange juice and smiling before turning to leave.

"Thanks," Ethne whispered, taking the drink from her hands before drinking it down in one gulp. She was not only thirsty, but famished; hopefully it wouldn't be long before she could get some food too. She had been too nervous to eat at the airport, but now her stomach was protesting loudly at the lack of sustenance. She wasn't accustomed to being at the whim of others, unable to just simply get herself a sandwich. Airline travel really wasn't her cup of tea.

The flight attendant had been very kind though, so she was going to do her best to be patient, albeit not her strongest of suits. To pass the time, which she figured was only about three hours into her five hour flight to her connecting flight in Miami, she decided to search the bag again.

Unbuckling her seatbelt and pulling herself up out of the seat, she retrieved her bag from above. She sat back down and started rummaging through it, hoping to find something of interest to entertain her. Two more hours on this flight wasn't that bad really. Waiting in Miami forever wasn't going to be that

thrilling, but it beat being stuck on an airplane for twelve or more hours; that was truly an inhumane experience.

After rifling through the bag for a few minutes she found the book she had thrown in last minute and an iPod with headphones. Unfortunately, there was nothing else in the bag to distract her, much to her disappointment.

A little disheartened, she placed her bag back up in the overhead compartment and sat down with her book and iPod in her lap. She was just about to pop the headphones in and try to forget the long wait she had to endure when the flight attendant showed up with some food.

Once she had devoured her dinner Ethne was feeling a bit groggy and figured sleeping was really the only option. She put the headphones in and did her best to get comfortable. It wasn't long before she was having an extremely vivid dream, completely unaware that she was 30,000 feet in the air.

The sand felt cool beneath her feet even though the hot sun was beating down on her. She raised her hand to shield her eyes and saw someone waving to her from a distance farther down the beach. She could see him smiling at her even though she couldn't make out who it was. She waved back and started walking towards him. At first it felt like her feet weren't even moving, instead like she was gliding across the sand towards him. After a few minutes she realized she must have been walking for hours but hadn't gotten anywhere; they were exactly the same distance apart, still unable to make out any features.

She started looking around her in a panic trying to see what could be keeping her from making any progress towards him. She looked down at her feet and saw that she was no longer standing in the sand. Looking up she realized she was back in her hotel room, completely alone.

When the plane touched down Ethne was jolted awake from her dream and once again remembered where she was. She was kind of glad she had been asleep for the descent; landing was never her favorite thing, but for some reason the dream had left her a bit unsettled. It took forever for it to be her turn to get off the plane, and her legs were more than happy to finally be walking freely again.

Once out into the airport she went in search of more food, her stomach once again reminding her of its neglect. She found a restaurant not far from the terminal and found a table. After ordering a turkey sandwich, which was so much more up her alley than the airplane dinner had been, she started looking through a brochure of Belize that the flight attendant had handed her when she was leaving the plane.

The pictures were gorgeous, but that wasn't unexpected. The place was after all a huge tourist attraction; she knew at least that much even if it hadn't been on her bucket list. When she flipped to the last page of the brochure there was a note stuck to it.

It read: "Congratulations on making it this far. Go to the Hudson News by Gate D29, the man there has something for you."

She had kind of forgotten about the notes with all of the excitement of the plane ride. But now it was

back in the forefront of her mind what she was doing, following strange commands from written words on a page. In a way though it was nice to have something to do with the five hour wait she had in front of her.

After finishing her sandwich and paying the waiter, she picked up her things and started making her way to Hudson News. It wasn't too far from where she had stopped for a bite to eat, which was good since the airport was massive and probably easy to get lost in.

There was nobody at the counter when she walked up, so she waited scanning the various magazines and newspapers. After a few minutes a man walked in and stepped behind the counter and smiled.

"Can I help you find something?" he asked.

"Umm...yeah, I was told you have something for me?" she said.

"Are you Ethne?" he inquired.

"Yeah," she responded quietly.

"Well, here you go then." He pulled an envelope from underneath the counter and handed it to her.

"Can I help you with anything else?" he asked.

"No, not right now, thanks," she said, taking the envelope and scanning the front of it which was blank.

He responded with a smile and said: "Okay, well let me know if you change your mind."

"I will, thanks," she said, barely even looking up.

As she walked away she was already opening the envelope to see what was inside. This felt a bit like Christmas and honestly she couldn't remember the last time she was excited about something like that.

She found a bench to sit on in a fairly calm part of the airport and started pulling out the contents. There was a small note, a hotel key, some money and another airplane ticket.

“Oh great,” she thought.

She had really hoped there wouldn't be any more flights after the next one. But here it was, right in her hands, another plane ride. She almost felt like throwing up, she seriously wasn't sure how she was still holding it together. She was so tired, so uneasy about her decision, and now even more so.

She put the hotel key and money safely into her bag and started reading the note.

“Once you've landed in Belize, you'll be flying on Tropic Air to get to San Pedro, it's a very short flight...hang in there. Once you land, there will be a man waiting for you who will take you to your hotel. Go straight there.”

So particular. It was clear that there was to be no sight-seeing upon arrival and that she was to specifically follow the instructions to the letter. And for whatever reason she didn't feel like she should deviate from the instructions in any way. After all, the instructions were why she was there; if she didn't follow them who knows where she would end up.

Well, at least now she knew that when she landed she had a plan; that was comforting in a way. She put the note in her bag and decided to find a quiet place to rest and wait for her next flight. It was late, nearly 3 a.m. and even with the excitement, she was exhausted.

She thought it wise to find a place close to her gate so she would hopefully not sleep through the departure. Laying her bag down and trying to find a

comfortable position to sit in, she leaned up against the wall and closed her eyes.

A couple of hours later, after having not slept at all, people started to line up at the gate. She found her place in line and got ready to make the next flight; not feeling any more confident than the last time.

This time though she at least managed to get on the plane without making a spectacle and found her seat, thankful that this flight was a lot shorter than the last. She wasn't as lucky to be seated alone this time and found herself sitting down next to an attractive young man sitting by the window.

It was then she realized how lucky she had been to have had the window seat the last time; sitting in the aisle she decided was not where she wanted to be. She started to feel her heart pound and her palms sweat. "Crap," she thought.

"Are you alright?" he asked, looking intently into her brown eyes. His own, an intriguing shade of blue and grey caught her off guard.

"Yeah....I guess," she answered meekly. "I don't really like to fly."

"Oh," he answered with concern on his face. "Would you prefer the window seat? I don't mind changing with you."

"Really?" she asked. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Nope, not at all," he said, standing up and preparing to help her into his seat.

"Thank you, that's very nice of you," she said.

"Don't mention it," he said, smiling and sitting back down.

She immediately started feeling better at being able to see outside, rather than staring down the middle of the plane – a tube in her opinion that

nobody should be in in the first place. She wasn't sure if this was simply because of her last experience, or if she would have had this claustrophobia anyway; either way, she was thankful to be sitting where she was.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"A little," she answered. "Thank you."

"I'm Ian by the way," he said, putting his hand out.

"Ethne," she said back, shaking his hand tentatively.

"Ethne? Really? That's pretty, don't think I've heard that name before."

She smiled back and shrugged, not really sure what to say. Conversations with other people didn't happen for her that often. This plus the nervousness about being on the plane was a little overwhelming, although there was something about him that made her feel at ease.

Before long the plane was taxiing to the runway and taking off for Belize. Ethne was doing her best to not act like a complete fool next to this person she had just met, but still she was hanging on pretty tightly to her armrest which she was sure he noticed. He looked down at her hand once and just gave her a reassuring wink.

Once they were in the air she relaxed a bit and put her hands back in her lap.

"So without sounding too cliché," he said, turning to face her. "Are you heading to Belize for business or pleasure?"

This was not a question she was expecting to have to answer. She was pretty good at dodging people

back home, it had actually become quite an art form, but he had caught her off guard.

“Umm...I suppose pleasure?” she answered as more of a question really.

He responded with a light laugh that made her smile. “You don’t sound too sure.”

“Well, I’m sure I’ll figure it out when I get there,” she said with a small grin. “How about you?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m going down to meet some friends, do some sight seeing, maybe some scuba diving. I hear the scuba diving is amazing down there. Have you ever been?”

“Scuba diving? Or to Belize?” she asked.

“Either, I guess,” he said.

“Well, neither then,” she said, looking down at her hands.

“Are you meeting anyone down there?” he asked, with a hopeful sound in his voice.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

He looked at her with a puzzled look on his face. “You don’t know?” he asked.

She must sound like a complete idiot to him by now and she could feel her cheeks starting to color. She decided now was the time to start making things up.

“A friend of mine bought me a ticket to San Pedro, said it was amazing. I don’t really know what to expect yet.”

“Oh! I’m going to San Pedro too!” he said, grinning. “That is so cool; well you’ll love it there. I’ve only been once before but it was amazing.”

Satisfied that she no longer seemed like a complete freak who had no idea what she was doing, she smiled at him.

“Are your friends on this flight?” she asked.

“No, they are already down there, been there a week. I was stuck at work,” he answered.

“Oh, that’s too bad, what do you do?” she asked, a little unsure of how she was making such casual conversation with a stranger.

“Oh, I don’t want to tell you, you’ll think it frighteningly dull,” he said.

“No I won’t, really,” she said, finding herself surprised that someone even cared what she thought.

“Well, right now I’m working part time for my Dad’s law firm, just doing administration stuff while I finish college,” he said.

“Oh, well that’s not dull,” she said. “Are you studying law then?”

“No! Of course not, I have no intention of being a stuffy lawyer, all that paperwork would drive me insane,” he said, realizing at that moment he had no idea what she did and hoping he hadn’t offended her. “You’re not a lawyer are you?” he asked sheepishly.

She laughed. “No, I’m not. I work at a hospital. Doing mostly administration stuff, you know, dealing with paperwork,” she said, smiling at him playfully.

“Well I have nothing against paperwork per se, I’d just rather deal with people, I guess, than paper,” he said, looking down at his lap.

“Yeah, I can understand that. My job wasn’t my first choice, but it is convenient for me and I like it well enough,” she said, biting her lip feeling a little uncomfortable with so much focus on her. She was

ready to change the subject. "So what are you going to school for?"

"I'm not sure yet, I'm having a hard time deciding," he said.

She wasn't sure if this was a dodge to her question as well, but given her own ambiguous nature she decided not to pursue it any farther. As if sensing her need for an interruption the flight attendant walked by and asked if they wanted anything to drink.

They both gladly accepted.

CHAPTER 5

The flight had gone by pretty quickly with the friendly and unexpected conversation, and before she knew it they were landing in Belize. It was a little after 10:00 a.m., and given that she hadn't slept much in the last 24 hours she was feeling a bit tired.

But it was a brand new day, no time to sleep; she had absolutely no idea what to expect now that she was actually there.

As they were departing the plane Ian asked how she would be getting to San Pedro.

"What do you mean how am I getting there?" she asked, feeling suddenly panicked.

"Well you can fly or take a water taxi, which are you doing?" he asked.

"Wait. There's a boat?!" she said, feeling rather irritated that there had been another option besides

air travel, and that she had been given yet another plane ride.

"I'm flying," she answered, making it pretty obvious she wasn't pleased about it.

"I am too," he grinned. "Care if I tag along with you?" he asked.

"Sure," she smiled, surprisingly relieved at the unexpected company.

"Do you know where you're staying in San Pedro?"

Yet another question she hadn't expected to have to answer, so she simply said, "I do, but I can't remember the name."

Unsure as to whether or not that was a brush off, he said a little disappointedly, "Oh, okay then."

They walked in silence to the next gate and made small talk until it was time to board the plane. They weren't seated together, but the plane was fairly empty and the flight attendant said she didn't mind if they sat by each other.

Not terribly looking forward to yet another flight, Ethne's nerves started to get the best of her again. Ian could tell right away and did his best to distract her with conversation.

"So what are you going to do when you get there?" he asked.

"I don't know yet, honestly I'm so tired I kinda want to sleep," she replied.

"Oh, bad idea," he said. "I'm assuming by the looks of it you don't travel much?"

"No, not at all actually," she answered.

"Well, either way I'm sure you've heard of jet lag. Sleeping after such a long trip is what you may feel

like doing, but it is definitely not what you want to do,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, a little crestfallen.

“But if you like I can help keep you company until later this evening?” he asked, with another hopeful look in his eyes. “I’m not meeting my friends until later.”

She really wasn’t used to this kind of attention. She wasn’t sure what to say, and besides that, the note had been very specific. But how was she going to turn down such a kind offer? She wasn’t accustomed to letting someone down, at all, let alone nicely.

“I’d love that, really, but honestly I’m not really sure where I’m headed. My friend basically told me to fly here and that there would be a cab waiting for me. I’d hate to take you out of your way if my hotel happens to be a long distance from where you are staying,” she added with as much reassurance as she could that she wasn’t just trying to get rid of him. She had actually been enjoying his company quite a bit.

“Oh I see,” he said, trying his best to understand this mysterious woman’s answer. “Well, that’s okay.”

Their conversation had taken up the entire plane ride; a short 15 or so minutes. She was thankful it was over and appreciative that Ian had distracted her once again.

As they got off the plane she could tell that he had really hoped to continue talking to her. She actually had hoped the same, but her next plans weren’t really up to her.

“Well, here, let me at least give you my number where I’m staying,” he said, scribbling his number on a part of his brochure. He tore it off and handed it to her. “If you find yourself wanting some company or

you would like to join my friends and me anytime you're welcome to," he said, smiling.

"Thank you, that's awfully kind," she said, smiling back.

"Well it was nice to meet you; maybe I'll see you around." He smiled and waved goodbye to her and turned to make his way outside.

"Yeah, you too," she smiled back as she watched him go. She had felt rather comforted having him close by during the flights; she was a bit sad to see him go even though they had just met and she didn't really know him.

Alone again, Ethne unzipped her bag and put his phone number safely inside, hoping that maybe later she could actually take him up on his offer.

It was a strange feeling meeting someone new and not instinctually keeping her distance, but everything about the last day or so had been strange and new. When she glanced back up she noticed a man holding a sign with her name on it.

She walked over to him and told him she was Ethne, he smiled at her and handed her another envelope. It was small and plain and had only a short message inside.

"This was your first test. You passed."

"Test?" she thought. "I was being tested?" She wasn't sure why, but that made her kind of angry. Maybe it was just because she was extremely exhausted and really hungry, but this little "game" apparently, was getting a little old. She had just travelled for twelve hours on two planes to a foreign country; she was ready to find out why.

She put the note back in the envelope and followed the man out to a cab that was parked

outside. It was nice not having to go to baggage claim since she only had the one bag, but she was actually a little disappointed at the thought that she might not see Ian again.

“Oh well,” she thought to herself.

The man took her bag and opened the door for her; she climbed inside having absolutely no idea where he was taking her. The room key had been unmarked, perhaps on purpose, who knows. Either way, she didn’t know what hotel she was going to, or even if she was going to a hotel. She started to feel a little uneasy.

As he pulled away from the curb all she could do was hold her breath and stare out the window, hoping she had made the right decision to come here.

The view out her window was spectacular as they drove speedily through the countryside passing beautiful beaches, palm trees and seeing nothing but the most beautiful blue water she had ever seen.

Her brochure had told her that this was Ambergris Caye, the largest island of Belize. It didn’t really matter though, she still had no idea where she was going and what she was doing here.

It hadn’t been very long since they had left the airport and the driver was already slowing down and pulling into the driveway of a hotel. He didn’t even bother to turn off the car. He retrieved her bag, handed it to her, smiled and was gone before she could even thank him. She suddenly felt very alone. Even though he hadn’t said a word to her during the drive, ever since she had met Ian on the plane the rest of the trip hadn’t felt quite as lonely. But she was used to being alone, so she shook off the abandoned

feeling and started making her way up the path to the hotel.

It was stunning. Actually stunning wasn't even accurate enough. She hadn't travelled much, had pretty much spent her entire life in San Francisco, which while having its own beauty couldn't even compare to this.

The hotel had a quaint spiral staircase with yellow trim leading to the balcony, and so many palm trees among the beautiful flowers that she found herself just staring in awe. And that didn't even include the breathtaking blue water that spanned from the pool all the way out to the ocean, which made the pool seem as though it simply went on forever. This is what people meant when they said paradise. She was incredibly disappointed that her trip here was going to be so short. She was set to head back Sunday morning, not nearly enough time to really revel in the beauty here; Sunday morning was going to come far too quickly.

The Pelican Reef Villas Resort didn't look inexpensive by any means; the thought of how much this trip had to be costing crossed her mind for the first time. It had to have cost a fortune so far, a large sum paid for by a possible stranger, for a stranger? She couldn't fathom why anyone would do that.

As she made her way up the cobblestone pathway to the lobby door, someone was coming out. She couldn't believe her eyes when Ian was staring back at her with a gigantic grin on his face.

"Well fancy meeting you here," he said, holding the door for her.

"Hi," she said, unable to keep herself from smiling back.

“This is very weird,” he said. “Of all the hotels, although I think you can agree this has to be one of the most beautiful ones yes?”

“Yeah, it’s amazing,” she said.

“Well if we’d only known, we could have shared a cab,” he said, grinning at her as she stepped past him into the lobby.

She laughed nervously. “Yeah, if we’d only known.”

“After you check in would you like to get something to eat?” he asked.

Although she was very pleased to see him again, she knew that given the circumstances of her visit having a new friend on the premises might complicate things.

The instructions had been very clear, she wasn’t to stray off course and while she hadn’t, it was pretty clear that the course may have other plans. She didn’t particularly want to share with a stranger why she was in Belize, it was a very unbelievable and strange story; he would think her mad.

It was highly coincidental that he was at her hotel too, come to think of it, but it could be just that, a coincidence. She didn’t want to add paranoia to her list of issues, so she did her best to put the idea out of her mind. She really did enjoy his company. Maybe there was a way to make both things work; what could be the harm in a bite to eat?

“I’d love that,” she said. “But I’m not quite sure of my plans just yet. Let me check in and get settled and get back to you?”

“Oh yeah sure, no problem, I’m in room 19,” he said, waving goodbye to her. “Just come knock on the door if you’re free.”

“Okay, I will,” she said, smiling back at him.

After he was gone she turned and waited for the woman at the counter to come back; she hoped she wouldn’t be long.

CHAPTER 6

The woman at the counter had been very friendly when Ethne had checked in, luckily there had indeed been a room waiting for her. She hadn't thought it odd at all that Ethne already had a room key. She appraised her like she knew something that Ethne didn't, and although Ethne was well ahead of check-in time, the room was already ready for her. While she didn't appreciate that the woman knew more than she did, it certainly wasn't the woman's fault that Ethne was being kept in the dark when other people obviously weren't.

She hadn't had anything for Ethne aside from information about the hotel and the offer of assistance should she need it. Just steps away from her door, she looked out once more at the crystal clear blue water before slipping her room key into the lock and stepping inside.

The first word that came into her head when she went inside and saw where she was going to be staying, was wow; just simply, wow. She was almost speechless at the extravagant accommodations that were to be just for her for such a short time. Honestly, with such a brief stay and just for one person, this place was way beyond necessary for anyone.

She would have been quite content in a one bedroom hotel room that simply boasted a bed, a bathroom and maybe a television, though she doubted she would have even used that. But this place was stunning, it made her home look like a college dorm if you were to compare.

For one thing, it was huge; she could tell already that it was far more than a single suite. She set down her bag and started making her way to the most amazing kitchen she had ever seen.

The granite countertops seemed almost sinful to be located in a place that no one lived in permanently. They were so clean and untouched by the clutter of everyday life that perhaps it was only right they belonged in a place like this, where no one had quite the time to ruin their beauty.

Sitting on the pristine countertop was an envelope with her name on it.

“Here we go,” she said out loud to herself, quickly making her way across the room to it.

Picking it up she could tell it was far more substantial than any other note she had received thus far. She carefully tore it open and started pulling out what was inside. There were a couple of brochures and a note.

“Welcome my dear to this lovely place. I hope this letter finds you well and that you are enjoying your stay so far. You should be rewarded for making it this far, you’ve had a long journey and you must be exhausted.

“Next to the master bedroom is a master bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub. Enjoy it, as you will have quite a day tomorrow.

“Inside the envelope you will find a brochure. There are two options on the brochure: one is to go scuba diving, and the other is to go snorkeling. You can do either, but you must do one.

“Whichever you choose, the arrangements have already been made for you, and all you need to do is be down at the lobby by 5:00 a.m.

“If you choose to go scuba diving, there is an instructor waiting downstairs for you right now who will teach you the basics. However, if you choose snorkeling, the rest of the day is yours.”

That was it, nothing else was said – just pick an excursion and go. Now she really didn’t know what to think, and frankly, she was almost too tired to care.

Walking down the hallway to the bedroom her legs felt fifty pounds heavier than normal. When she saw the ever so inviting bed and the veranda close by, all she really wanted to do was lie down and fall asleep to the peaceful sounds of the ocean. But she remembered what Ian had said, that she should fight the urge and do anything but sleep.

Ian. She just remembered she was supposed to go have a bite with him. While the Jacuzzi tub was tempting, she was absolutely starving and had the entire day to explore and do whatever she wanted in

paradise. The idea that she could perhaps not spend this day alone was far more tempting indeed.

True, at home she would have never attempted to build a relationship with this person. But this wasn't home and she was likely never going to see him again, so what was the harm?

She looked down at the brochures again before picking up her things to leave. The decision was an easy one, scuba diving was out, and so snorkeling it would have to be. The best part of that decision is that it meant the rest of the day was hers, and she knew exactly how she wanted to spend it.

When she emerged from her room the air was the perfect temperature, like being wrapped up in her favorite blanket. She had decided to put on the dress that had been packed for her, no doubt that outfit wasn't going to work for snorkeling and was far too stunning to stay packed away in her bag. Her trip was going to be so short she hated the idea of it going to waste. Only slightly did she have it in the back of her mind that she might be putting it on for Ian.

She made her way to room 19, her heart suddenly beginning to flutter a bit which took her by surprise. This was silly. It was just lunch, and she had practically spent the last day with the guy already, what was the big deal now? No matter what she said to herself, she couldn't seem to manage to slow its pace.

Taking one last deep breath she mustered the courage to knock on his door. "Maybe he wouldn't be there," she thought. But just as she finished thinking that thought the door opened.

"Well hello there," Ian said, grinning at her. "I was beginning to think maybe you weren't coming."

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, feeling a bit bad for having kept him waiting. “You should have gone without me.”

“Not a chance,” he said, stepping outside and closing the door behind him. “So, where should we go?”

“I have no idea,” she said, backing away a little so he could join her in the walkway. “I assumed you had a place in mind?” she replied, barely able to make eye contact.

He could tell she was a little nervous for the first time since they had met, not counting the obvious jitters from the plane rides.

“You look lovely by the way,” he said, smiling at her and moving past her to lead the way down the stairs. “I have the perfect place in mind if you have no objections,” he said, more as a statement than a question.

“Thank you,” she managed to say in response to his unexpected compliment as she turned to follow behind this stranger who had so quickly become her travel companion.

After the quick trip into San Pedro, they stepped out of the taxi in front of a lovely restaurant on the beach.

“I hope this is okay?” he said, looking at her questioningly for some sort of sign of approval.

“It’s perfect,” she replied, as they made their way to the door of the Blue Water Grill.

So far this entire experience had felt like a dream. She was now on her way to having lunch in a gorgeous restaurant that overlooked an unbelievable ocean, in a country she had never even thought of before – with a person she likely wouldn’t have met.

As the waitress led them to their table, Ethne couldn't take her eyes off the view. It truly was like a dream. She could barely feel her legs, this was perhaps due to some nervousness of being with Ian, but still she felt more comfortable with him than she had with anyone for quite some time.

They sat down and quickly perused the menu before deciding on sharing an appetizer and ordering a couple of sandwiches and drinks.

"I don't know about you but I'm starving," Ian said when the waitress left with their menus.

"Yeah, me too, I feel like I haven't eaten all day. I am sorry for keeping you waiting," she said.

"Oh that's alright, I'm sure you had a bit of settling in to do," he said, smiling at her before turning and looking out at the ocean.

"Thank you for the invite to lunch, that was very kind of you," she said, quite unsure of what they were going to talk about for the entire meal. She really was very uncomfortable around people, having purposefully kept her distance from most for so long. She nervously fumbled with her napkin in her lap and tried to look out at the beauty before her and ignore her thundering heart.

The comfort she had felt with Ian before had for the most part washed away now that they didn't have the distraction of travel.

"No...thank you," he said. "You're doing me a favor really, my friends aren't going to be back anytime soon and anyway, I enjoy your company."

"Thank you," she said, smiling at him before looking back down at her hands.

"So, what plans do you have for tomorrow? And don't think I'm being presumptuous, I wouldn't dare

expect that I could be lucky enough to get two meals out of you,” he said with a very playful grin.

She laughed a little at that before replying, “Apparently, I am off to go snorkeling,” she said, trying her best to make a believable story out of her circumstances so he wouldn’t think her completely insane. “A friend of mine thought it would be quite hilarious to send me on a trip with no knowledge of my plans.”

“Oh? A surprise vacation? What a fun idea. You must have a great friend to have come up with that,” he said, having no idea how far from the truth he was.

Not only was it not a friend, to her knowledge, but she didn’t really have any friends to speak of; certainly not one who would be so kind as to plan such a marvelous trip for her. All she could do in reply to that was nod her head in agreement.

“So snorkeling? Do you know where you are headed? There are so many places to choose from around here for that,” he said.

“I’m afraid I don’t, all I know is that I leave bright and early in the morning,” she answered back, once again looking out at the beautiful view they had.

The waitress came by just then with some stunning drinks in hand and said the food would be out shortly.

Eager to finally eat something for the first time in ages, they both thanked her before she was off again.

“Well, I’m sure your friend planned something wonderful for you, you can’t really go wrong here,” he said, gesturing out to the sea.

“No, I suppose not, it is very beautiful here,” she replied suddenly realizing her nervousness had

dissipated and she was once again feeling very at ease, which in itself was a strange feeling for her.

When the food finally arrived they sat in silence for a bit while they enjoyed their sandwiches, only stopping a few times to chat about some interesting details about the island Ian knew of since he had been here before.

After they finished eating and were on their way back to the hotel, she realized she was a little disappointed that their visit might be over so soon.

Almost as if reading her thoughts, Ian asked, "Do you have any plans for the rest of today?" He paused for only a second before adding, "I'd be happy to show you around if ya like?"

"I'd love that, if it isn't too much trouble. I wouldn't want to keep you from your friends, they must be expecting you by now?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't agree with her.

"Oh don't worry about them, they won't miss me....much, and I promise I won't keep you up late," he said, smiling at her with another one of his playful grins that just made her smile back without her even realizing it.

"Okay then, what did you have in mind?" she asked.

"Well we could go zip lining, or cave tubing," he said, grinning and looking over at her to see her reaction. "But I have a feeling you'd like something a little less adventurous for today?"

She laughed. "Yeah, I think tomorrow might be quite a day for me, something a little more low key would be nice."

“Well, we could just walk around town a bit and then spend some time at the hotel, you haven’t gotten to explore it much; it has a really nice pool,” he said.

“That sounds good to me,” she replied, although she wasn’t quite sure about the pool.

They started walking down one of the streets in the general direction of where they were staying. There were some people around, but not enough to make her feel crowded; it was actually quite peaceful.

“Do you know when you’ll be back tomorrow?” he asked.

“I think I’m supposed to be back around 5 o’clock or so,” she said, looking down at her feet, not quite wanting to make eye contact. She really hated having no idea what she was doing there, it made having a conversation about it rather difficult.

“Would you like to get dinner when you get back?” he asked, looking a little shy for the first time since she had met him.

“I’d love to,” she said, smiling up at him. “Although, I might be completely exhausted so I can’t say how much company I’m going to be.”

His face was beaming with a smile in reply to her. “Oh don’t worry about that, I’m having quite a day tomorrow too so I can’t guarantee my company either.”

She giggled at that as they continued slowly making their way back to the hotel.

CHAPTER 7

The rest of the afternoon with Ian had been very pleasant. They spent a little time at the bar talking and went for a short walk on the beach before Ethne decided she had better retire for the night. He had wanted to go swimming too, but she had still been a little too nervous to don the swimsuit that was in her bag.

After saying their goodnights, Ethne found herself in her room alone listening to the sound of the ocean outside her window. She was utterly exhausted but her nerves for the next day to come weren't terribly conducive to falling asleep. She spent most of the night tossing and turning in anticipation of the early morning that came far too quickly for her tired body.

When the alarm went off at 4:30 she reached over with a heavy arm and turned it off. Slowly slipping

out of bed she got ready for the supposed adventure she was to have that day.

After showering, getting dressed and having a small bite to eat – it was way too early for breakfast – she made her way downstairs to the lobby.

In the lobby there was a man leaning against the wall, almost seeming to need it to support his own tired legs. When he saw her his face lit up into a beaming smile that made her do the same. He was tall and skinny and looked like he was quite accustomed to island life, his wavy brown hair matching his relaxed appearance.

“Good morning! You must be Ethne?” the man said.

“I am,” she answered, shaking his hand.

“I’m Peter, I’m to be your guide for the day,” he said, offering with a gesture to take her bag from her.

“And where exactly will you be guiding me?” she asked, hoping to finally know where it was they were heading.

He chuckled. “Oh, I can’t tell you that I’m afraid.”

Her shoulders slumped a bit and he could tell that this was not the answer she had hoped for. Feeling her frustrations he added: “But don’t worry I assure you we will be there soon and I can almost guarantee that you’re going to love it.”

“Okay,” she sighed. “I guess I’m just going to have to let you lead the way then,” she smiled as they both turned toward the door.

Outside the air was warm even though it was still a bit dark, the sun not yet making an appearance. Ethne always had a problem with being up before the sun; it just didn’t seem natural, but for today she was

actually quite accepting of being up first, as she was going to be a witness to something she normally didn't get to see.

As they made their way to the end of the pier she could see a boat waiting for them. There was only one other person on it. The young blonde haired woman stepped off the boat and made her way over to them.

"Hi," she said, smiling and taking Ethne's hand. "I'm Lily."

"Ethne," she said, shaking Lily's hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Ethne. Are you ready to get going?" she asked.

"Yes I am." Feeling hopeful she might get an answer out of Lily she dared to ask again. "And where are we going exactly?"

Lily looked over at Peter and smiled. "I'm afraid I can't say, but you'll know in a couple of hours."

"A couple of hours?!" Ethne gasped. "On the boat? The whole time?"

"Yeah, but don't worry the trip is worth it," she replied.

"If you say so," Ethne said, reluctantly taking Peter's hand and stepping onto the boat.

She found a place to sit and waited while Peter and Lily finished preparing the boat for their departure. Before long they were pulling away from the pier and she was seeing her beautiful hotel disappearing into the distance.

Ethne had never really been on a boat; not specifically that she could recall anyway. She had no idea what to expect and was definitely more than nervous. Lily came over and took a seat next to her, obviously well aware of her anxiety.

"Are you enjoying your stay so far?" she asked.

“Yeah, although I really haven’t been here long enough to do much,” Ethne replied.

“Well, after today you won’t be able to say that,” Lily said with a mischievous grin on her face.

“Oh?” Ethne asked, hoping this time she might get more of a clue.

“Like I said,” Lily replied. “Today’s destination will be unlike anything you’ve ever seen I assure you.”

Ethne had no idea how to respond to that, it was pretty clear they weren’t going to tell her anything of detail.

She looked out at the ocean and did her best to put her mind at ease while they headed further out to sea.

Peter and Lily had been very kind during the trip trying to keep her company, and the time actually passed pretty quickly. It was exciting to be out and the ocean was absolutely beautiful.

Pretty soon Peter slowed the boat a bit and she could see why. Before her eyes was the most stunning lagoon; shaped into a perfect circle, located in the middle of nowhere, with coral surrounding water with the deepest color of blue she had ever seen. For some reason seeing the sight before her made her gasp; there was something about the color of this place that gave her goose bumps and her heart started to pound.

The boat made its way inside the circle and came to a stop, docking next to something to keep them from drifting.

“So? What do you think?” Lily asked.

“It’s beautiful,” Ethne replied, still looking out at the turquoise water that surrounded the deep blue.

“Where are we?” Ethne asked, seeming a bit distant.

"This is the Great Blue Hole," Peter said. "Isn't it amazing?"

"Yeah...it is," she replied, before following up with another question she was suddenly afraid of getting an answer to. "So...I'm supposed to snorkel here?" Ethne asked, feeling a lump form in her throat.

"Yup," Lily replied, smiling and pulling out their gear.

Ethne, having absolutely no experience in anything having to do with water that wasn't contained inside a swimming pool, looked out again at the large expanse before her.

"Is it safe?" she asked. "It looks so....deep. Are there any sharks or anything?" she asked weakly, feeling her knees start to shake a bit.

"Oh don't worry, it's perfectly safe, people come here to dive all the time," Peter replied.

"Die?!" she said. "People come here to die?!"

He laughed. "No, no...dive. With a 'v'."

"Oh," she said, not feeling that much better even given the correction.

Having come prepared for a snorkeling trip, as the note had instructed her to do, she reluctantly started taking off her clothes revealing the swimsuit that had been packed for her.

"Have you ever gone snorkeling or diving before?" Peter asked.

"No...I haven't," she replied.

"Okay, not a problem. I will walk you through everything and I will be right next to you the whole time," Peter said with a reassuring wink.

After a few minutes of instruction and help getting the mask on she was ready to get in the water.

She couldn't believe she was doing this. True, the place was beautiful, breathtaking really. But still, she was in the middle of nowhere, in a swimsuit, jumping into what she could only imagine was a bottomless pit.

The water was deep in color. She knew the color was only a hint of its true depth, and was afraid to ask how far down it actually went.

Peter got into the water first and motioned for her to do the same.

As she eased herself into the crystal blue water, she felt it envelop her heart and soul. Though her head was kept above water, the warmth beneath the surface surrounded her and made her feel...safe. That was the best way she could describe it.

While the expanse had made her nervous and the thought of how deep this lagoon was, she was somehow surprisingly comforted being in it.

With her mask on she saw Peter motion for her to put her head in. She nodded an okay and opened her eyes beneath the water to reveal everything she couldn't see before.

While there weren't many fish to see, the colors of the corals as well as the light coming from above were a brilliance she hadn't expected.

But there was something more to this spot than just the beautiful colors. She didn't know why, but even with all of her initial anxiety she suddenly felt no anxiety at all and was perfectly at ease in her surroundings.

After guiding her around a while and seeing what marine life they could, he motioned for her to return to the boat.

But, just as she turned to follow him, Ethne saw something shimmering on one of the shelves of the coral reef. Peter was already making his way back and she should have followed, but the light was drawing her to it.

As she got closer she saw that it was a perfectly round blue pearl. Peculiar that it was just sitting there on its own, but quite a find she felt as she picked it up and held it tightly in her hand and turned to make her way back to where Peter was.

When she turned around she couldn't see Peter and started to feel a rising panic. She kicked herself for being so stupid and straying from his side.

Something brushed across her leg and she jumped out of fear. She had felt fairly comfortable with Peter close by, but now that she was alone she no longer felt that sense of calm.

She was starting to have trouble breathing and decided to ditch the snorkel. Frankly, even if it had just been a fish touching her leg she didn't really want to know either way and had no intention of looking beneath the surface.

Just then something grabbed her arm. She turned quickly to see Peter swimming there next to her.

"You know you really shouldn't go off on your own yet," he said, winking and smiling at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, breathing heavily, starting to feel the calm settle back in. "I saw something down there and went to see what it was."

"Well no harm done, let's get back," he said, this time having her swim ahead of him.

Lily helped her back onto the boat and immediately asked her how it was.

"It was beautiful," Ethne replied. "This whole place is beautiful."

"See I told you it was worth it," she said, grinning at her and handing her a towel.

Ethne still had the pearl tightly gripped in her hand, being very mindful not to drop it.

"I have some food for you if you're hungry," Lily said.

Ethne was beyond starving, and gladly accepted the offer. Peter did as well and sat down next to her.

"So did you like it?" he asked.

"Yes I did, that was amazing. I never knew this place existed. I never knew a place like this could exist," she replied.

"You should see what it looks like farther down; it is beyond amazing," he said. "I could try to describe it, but I wouldn't do it justice; it's unreal."

"Oh, I don't think I'll ever be able to do that," she said, looking away out at the place she had just been.

"Well you would need some dive experience, but it is well worth it, believe me," Peter said.

She just nodded in agreement and ate another piece of pineapple, not wanting to reveal that it wasn't fear that kept her from doing such a thing.

"So what was it you went back for?" he asked.

Ethne thought for a second and then opened her hand revealing the pearl, partially wanting for some reason to keep her find to herself.

"Oh wow, that's quite a find. I've never found anything like that before and I've been here a million times," he said, almost sounding a bit jealous.

After they had finished their snack, Peter said it was time to be getting to the next spot.

“Next spot?” Ethne asked. “You mean there’s more?”

“Yep, we have a couple more places to visit before we take you back,” he said, giving her yet another wink.

While she had enjoyed herself, she wasn’t sure she was up for more. She was still really tired from her traveling and hadn’t slept all that well. And now with the pearl in her hand it felt like she had what she had come for. But she supposed that it wasn’t really up for discussion, so she just sat quietly as the boat made its way to the next spot, staring down at the beautiful blue pearl in her hand.

The water had been calm so the trip wasn’t an unpleasant one, and pretty soon they were coming to a stop.

“Where are we now?” she asked.

“This is Half Moon Caye,” Peter replied.

Having now gone on one snorkeling trip Ethne thought she was better prepared for what was to come. She got herself ready and found herself confidently getting into the water after Peter.

When he gave her the signal she put her head below the surface and was shocked by what she saw.

She felt like she had just entered a fantasy world of colors. While the Blue Hole itself was a magnificent hue, the colors that were contained in this water were indescribable.

Colors from fish and corals all weaving together a rainbow of creation she had no idea could exist.

In comparison to what she was seeing now, the colors above the water’s surface could only be described as stale. She was starting to feel even more comfortable in the water and followed Peter around

as he took her along the wall of coral, pointing to the many creatures along the way to be sure she saw them all.

As she was swimming she saw a turtle below her in its own heaven, completely unaware of the world that existed above it. Ethne envied the turtle for a moment, realizing that perhaps life below the surface was a freedom not felt on land.

After a bit they returned to the boat once again; Lily waiting for her with a smile.

She helped Ethne back onto the boat and handed her a towel.

“Well?” she asked Ethne, obviously knowing that this location was even more unbelievable than the last.

“It was amazing,” Ethne replied, a little too stunned from the experience to say more than that.

While the waters of the Blue Hole had been calming to her, this place had made her feel even more alive and she found she was no longer tired, but abuzz from the excitement and wonder at the beauty below. She was more than ready for their final snorkel, hoping it would be at least as great a spot as this was.

They spent some time having a picnic on a beach at Half Moon Caye and talked about what they’d done so far.

Peter told her the next location at the Aquarium was also to be full of vibrant colors like this one and that she would love it.

She did indeed and when they were swimming around marveling at the colorful fish around them, she noticed something waving in the water near one

of the corals. She swam over to it, this time mindful that Peter was still close by and saw that it was a note.

She should have known that there was going to be more notes hidden somewhere throughout this key excursion to paradise, but had somehow forgotten the madness that had brought her here. She had never imagined they would go to the lengths of hiding something beneath the ocean's surface for her to find.

The note was carefully attached to the coral; she gently removed it and held it in her hand as she made her way back out of the water.

She figured her guides were in on this strange little scavenger hunt, but in case they weren't, she thought it would be pretty weird to have to explain what she had just found so she decided to keep this little discovery to herself.

Once back on the boat Ethne was exhausted. This day truly had been one to never forget and it had taken everything out of her. When she was sitting alone she pulled the note out of her pocket, unfolded it and read what it said.

"This was test number two. Congratulations, you passed. Enjoy the rest of your time here. When you get back home someone will be waiting for you."

She read that line over and over a few times... "someone will be waiting for you" and wondered what that could possibly mean.

She would have thought about it more but frankly she was exhausted and with the day that she had just had didn't really feel like worrying about it.

She put the note back in her pocket and drew out her new prize, the flawless blue pearl. She would have never forgotten this trip for as long as she lived anyway, but now she had this magnificent jewel to

represent the wonder of how she felt the first time she had seen the mystical Blue Hole.

As they made their way back to the island she simply lay down in the boat in a completely tired but happy daze.

When they pulled up to the pier another boat was arriving back from obviously a similar excursion. The sun was in its early stages of setting so there was still enough light to see.

Peter helped her off the boat and handed her her belongings. She thanked him and Lily for a wonderful day and started making her way back to the hotel.

As she started walking back the people from the other boat were disembarking and she saw someone waving at her. She could see that it was Ian; once again smiling at her and once again making her do the same.

Ethne waved back, although extremely exhausted, her exhilaration from the trip was keeping her from collapsing.

"Hi!" Ian said to her, looking a bit more rested than she did, she figured.

"Hi!" she said back, trying to have the same enthusiasm, but fearing her exhaustion made that impossible.

"How was your day out?" he asked.

"It was amazing," she replied. "How about yours?"

"Mine was amazing too," he said, putting his backpack over his shoulder and joining her on the walk back to the hotel.

"What did you end up doing?" he asked.

"I went snorkeling at the Blue Hole and a couple of other places," she answered. "What about you?"

“Oh wow! The Blue Hole?” he asked. “I hear that place is amazing, I’m dying to dive there, but need some more training first. I haven’t been yet. What was it like?”

“It was...unbelievable,” she answered.

“That’s so cool. I’m afraid I’m a bit jealous now,” he said, looking over at her with a small but cute grin.

It was then she realized the sun was setting. She stopped to enjoy it; he did the same.

They stood in silence watching it descend before completely disappearing into the night. After it had gone down he offered to take her bag for her and she gladly accepted.

CHAPTER 8

When they continued their walk back to the hotel he asked her if she was up for a bite to eat. The truth was that she really wasn't. She was shattered and more ready for her bed than an intern on a 48 hour shift. But her stay was going to be brief and honestly she had missed Ian a little and was looking forward to spending a little more time with him.

"Sure," she answered, smiling at him. "Though I am a bit exhausted so I might not be much company." A fair warning that the conversation might lag a bit.

"Oh I am too, but you must be hungry?" he asked.

"Absolutely famished."

They decided to go back to the restaurant they had eaten at before; it was a great spot and neither of

them had enough energy to figure out somewhere new.

While eating they exchanged stories from the day and she laughed at his descriptions of his friends and their less than professional diving techniques. She hadn't told him anything about finding the note obviously, but near the end of the meal she had decided to show him the pearl.

"I found this at the first location, the Blue Hole," she said, holding her hand out to show the small but perfect pearl.

"Are you serious?" he asked, looking at it closely before asking if he could hold it.

She reluctantly handed it to him and watched as he inspected it.

"That's very rare; such a find is surely once in a million, if that."

She grinned quite sure he was right. He handed it back to her and she protectively put it back in the small box Peter had given her to keep it from getting lost.

After paying they made their way back outside, feeling only slightly more energetic than they had on their way in. The food had helped revive her a little, but she was still utterly exhausted.

She could tell he was too and that the evening would be an early one, but still she was glad she had gotten to share her day with him and hear about his as well.

They slowly made their way back to the hotel, talking some but sometimes just enjoying the peaceful night. He was a gentleman and carried her bag again, which made her feel silly as he had his own stuff to

carry. But he had offered and had taken it from her before she had even accepted.

When she got back to her room he handed it back to her, their hands touching briefly with the exchange which made her heart skip. He leaned against the wall near her door, obviously not quite wanting to call it a night despite their exhaustion.

“Can’t say I’m looking forward to going back to my room this early, my friends are surely going to be up a while and I’m beat,” he said, looking out at the shadows of trees and the ocean in the distance. “But I’m sure you are probably even more tired than I am.”

“I am pretty tired,” she said, staring down at the ground still recovering from the brief touch which obviously hadn’t affected him the same way. “But I might have a walk on the beach in me,” she said, looking up and seeing him smiling at her.

“Let me just put this inside. Do you want me to put yours in here too for now?” she asked before even thinking, hoping that it didn’t imply anything to him for later, but afraid that it had.

“Sure,” he said, trying to hide his smile but failing miserably.

She unlocked the door and they both put their bags in before heading out to the warm beach.

As she stepped onto the sand she couldn’t help but remember the dream that had haunted her when she was on the plane.

Obviously this setting wasn’t the same, it was night instead of day, and she was with Ian rather than waving at an unknown stranger. But for some reason the dream came to mind and she couldn’t help but wonder if Ian had been the stranger she had seen on the beach in her dream.

She was forgetting herself. Forgetting the reason she stayed away from people when she was home. But there was something about this place, something about Ian that made her not even care.

In the end she figured this trip would be over soon and Ian would be a distant memory, someone kind she had briefly enjoyed an island paradise with. She ultimately had no intention of it being anything more than pleasant company with an unexpectedly kind and admittedly attractive man.

"How long are you staying here?" he asked her, almost as if he had read her mind.

Not wanting to have to think about this she quietly responded, "I'm actually leaving in the morning."

Ian slowed his pace to a speed a snail could have kept up with. "Really?" he asked, obviously disappointed. "That is a pretty short trip," he said, quietly laughing to himself at the absurdity. "Your friend couldn't pay for more than one day for you to be here?" he asked, not really expecting an answer. "Almost seems cruel to make you travel all the way here, only to be here one day."

"Yeah," was all she could muster as a reply. She hadn't wanted to even come on this trip. She had been completely terrified, but now that she was here and saw how incredibly magical and beautiful it was, she didn't want to leave. Add to that the fast friendship she had found with Ian and the thought of going home in the morning almost made her cry.

"Well I'm kind of glad you didn't go straight to bed then," he said, quickening his pace just slightly and smiling again at her. "I'm exhausted and you are

too, but you have to see more of this place before you go, to do otherwise would be criminal.”

“But it’s dark now,” she responded. “What can I really see now?”

“Well we could go to a bar...or go dancing, but I think we are both too tired for that,” he said.

“Yeah, definitely too tired for that,” she said, smiling at the thought that he didn’t want to say goodnight to her either.

“Well then we should just enjoy the beach. It is beautiful, especially at night and much calmer for a couple of old people like us,” he said with a laugh.

She laughed with him, and they continued walking down the beach and seeing the stars look down at them.

They both tired after a little while and decided to take a rest. Not having brought a blanket but not really caring either they both plopped down on the sand and looked out at the dark ocean in front of them.

“What time do you leave tomorrow?” he asked.

“My flight’s at 9:00 A.M.,” she answered, a bit sad that the subject had been brought up again. “And I have to say I am not looking forward to the flight home, especially without my moral support,” she said, nudging him a bit and smiling.

“Yeah, what are you going to do without my boring stories about nothing to get you through?” he said, smiling back at her.

“When do you head home?” she asked.

“I’m here until Tuesday,” he replied. “Not too long, but a lot longer than one day. If I were you I’d give your friend a right smacking for not letting you stay longer,” he said, only marginally kidding. “I’m

going to miss having you around, it really was great to meet you, Ethne," he said in a more serious tone not befitting a young man on a vacation with his friends.

"That's very sweet, Ian, I will miss you too," she said, not really sure where the words had come from. Many surprises had happened on this trip, the least of all being the snorkeling and discovery of more notes. "It was nice crossing paths with you; you made a difficult part of my trip a much more enjoyable one, so thank you," she said to him, feeling suddenly unsure about the feelings she was having.

This was so far outside her comfort zone she almost felt like a ventriloquist with someone else feeding her the lines. And yet at the same time, they flowed naturally, she didn't have the same anxiety with him that she felt at home; but she was sure that was only because there was no way this could go anywhere. There was no threat of getting too close with Ian.

They were sitting side by side in the sand, their arms touching, he was looking at her and before she could object he took her hand in his.

She would have objected, but honestly, she didn't want to.

Instead she closed her hand around his and laid her head on his shoulder. They stayed like that for a couple of hours, talking a little bit about their lives back home, she ultimately letting him tell her more about his life than sharing much of hers, but nonetheless sharing more with him than she ever had with anyone else.

When they were both getting too tired to even make conversation he suggested they should probably

get back before they fell asleep on the beach and she missed her flight.

Half joking, but half actually wanting that to happen, he stood up and helped her to her feet. When she stood up she looked up into his eyes, their faces only inches from each other.

He brushed his hand along her cheek and tucked her hair behind her ear before slowly bringing his lips to hers and kissing her, softly, unsure of how she would react. When she kissed him back he pulled her closer to him and kissed her deeply, passionately.

After a minute or so he stopped the kiss, stepping back just slightly and apologized to her.

"That's alright, Ian," she said, surprised but appreciative. She smiled. "I wanted to kiss you too."

She came out of her blissful daze for a second and in a small panic asked what time it was.

"It's just after 10:00," he answered. "Don't worry there is still plenty of time for you to get some much needed rest before you brave the air once more," he said, not quite mockingly.

"Oh good," she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

When they reached her door she pulled out her key and unlocked the door not having a clue how the returning of his bag was going to go.

Ian had been nothing but a gentlemen this entire time though and this was no different. He leaned down and picked up his bag not leaving the frame of the door.

"Do you mind if I see you off tomorrow?" he asked.

"Of course not," she replied, surprisingly feeling disappointment that the night with him was almost over.

She was holding the door open for him as he put his backpack over his shoulder and turned to her before leaving.

“Well, goodnight, Ethne,” he said, looking intently into her eyes.

“Goodnight, Ian,” she said softly back to him before taking his face in her hands and kissing his lips one more time before closing the door.

Back in her room, alone again with the sounds of the ocean, her mind was in a daze from everything that had happened that day.

For a girl that nothing ever happened to, today was definitely something to write home about. Had she anyone to call she probably would have been on the phone that instant retelling her tales.

But she didn’t, and it was late, and she was still very much exhausted. She thought it best to have everything ready for the morning. Like the morning before it, it was going to come long before she was ready.

After packing up the few items that had made it out of her bag, she reached into it and pulled out her medication. She drank it down with water and looked out at the ocean one more time before crawling under the covers and drifting off to a pleasant place reminiscent of the day she had just had.

CHAPTER 9

It hadn't felt like she had been sleeping long before the alarm was going off. But she was getting used to that feeling, as loathsome as it was.

She rolled over and turned off the annoying sound before it had the chance to ruin her day, and lay back down just for a second to reminisce about the night before.

That put a smile on her face and enough energy in her body to get out of bed completely and start preparing herself for the departure from the island.

She was excited to see Ian again that morning, but saddened at the same time at the realization that it would probably be the last time she ever saw him. That final thought made her suddenly sluggish.

The feeling was stupid she knew, she had just met the guy and to feel a loss for something that a couple of days ago hadn't even been on her radar was silly.

She did her best to push the sad feelings aside and get herself ready to go.

She didn't do much besides shower and apply a small amount of makeup. She knew that that many hours on the planes and waiting in airports was going to wear on her face no matter how it started out. Working on pointless things was generally not her style. So she finished getting dressed, packed up the few things that managed to escape her suitcase during her short stay and looked around the room one last time before opening the door to leave.

Waiting outside her door was Ian. She definitely hadn't expected to see him standing there, even though they had agreed upon a visit before leaving, it was really early.

She closed the door to her oasis one last time and turned toward Ian and smiled.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," he said back, already reaching for her belongings before she could object. "Did you sleep well?" he asked, as they headed toward the stairs.

"Pretty well, although I am really sad to leave already," she answered.

"Yeah I can imagine," he replied. "Do you think you'll ever come back?"

Yet another question that never entered her mind, although now having spent a little time here she couldn't imagine herself ever staying away.

"Yeah, I think I will," she replied. She looked out at the ocean one last time before heading to the office to officially check out.

She found it incredibly hard to believe that after everything that she had been through in the last few

days that she was to say goodbye to a place that now took a prominent place in her mind.

Since she didn't travel often, she assumed this feeling was fairly natural of a place that was as magnificent as this; how could you not feel a loss for something beautiful, relaxing and eye opening? If you didn't she assumed there had to be something seriously wrong with you.

As they made their way to the office to check out she could tell Ian was holding his tongue and staying quiet for some reason.

It was an uncomfortable silence with someone who previously had only made her feel at ease.

Once she was checked out they made their way out front to wait for the taxi that would arrive shortly.

"I don't want you to leave," Ian said finally. Staring down at her feet he looked like a lost boy who had run out of crumbs.

"Oh, Ian....I don't want to go either, but I don't have much of a choice here," she answered, trying to get him to meet her gaze.

"Would you mind if I rode to the airport with you?" he asked, finally looking up and staring into her eyes. She doubted she would find it easy to forget the blue eyes gazing back at her.

"I would love that," she answered. Smiling at him she added, "You know me, I'm going to be a complete mess soon, freaking out every passenger on the plane. Your moral support up until that point will be greatly appreciated."

He laughed and finally seemed a little more at ease. She had given him just a few minutes more before the final goodbye would take place.

When the taxi pulled up they both reluctantly climbed in and were swiftly off to the airport.

After removing her belongings from the taxi and making their way to the airport terminal the uncomfortable silence of what was about to come resumed.

Instead of talking as they sat there waiting for her flight to be called, Ian took her hand in his and held it tightly.

"This is so weird," he finally said. "I barely know you."

"Yeah, I know," she answered, looking down at their fingers intertwined.

"Do you want to exchange numbers?" he asked...obviously terrified of the question and what the response might be.

She had anticipated this and was as scared as he was of what her reply would be.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Ian," she answered, doing her very best to not let him see her chin trembling.

"Oh," was all he said in reply.

"I have a complicated life," she said. "I wouldn't want to complicate yours."

"Oh," he said again. "Well, I wouldn't mind...I like complications."

She laughed. "Well, I live in San Francisco, that's all I'm going to say," she smiled hoping that would be enough to appease him for now. This was harder for her than he could imagine.

When they called her flight they both looked at each other and reluctantly stood up. He carried her bag again and they walked over to the line.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said. They were still holding hands. She honestly couldn’t believe this was happening. Three days ago she hadn’t even known who Ian was, and now she was going to miss him... a lot.

She let go of his hand and shot up on her tiptoes and hugged him tightly. “I’m going to miss you too,” she whispered.

She relaxed her hug a little and looked into his eyes. Without saying another word she kissed him passionately, savoring the taste of his lips. She reached down and took her bag from him, met his gaze one last time and said, “Goodbye Ian,” and walked towards the gate.

She heard him faintly say “Goodbye Ethne...good luck,” as she was walking away. She turned one last time before heading through the door and saw him wave, she waved back and tried to smile. As much as she didn’t want to say goodbye to him, she wanted even less to be getting on another airplane; the trip home was not high on her list.

After finding her seat and trying to settle in she reached into her pocket to try and find some comfort in her blue pearl.

The little container he had given her had been pretty small and there were a few things in her pocket, but she didn’t feel it.

Starting to panic she started taking everything out of her pocket. Once everything was removed she saw no little box.

This loss coupled with the one she had just experienced with Ian was almost too much for her plane riding, sleep deprived, stressed out self.

All she could do was look down at the contents of her pocket in disbelief that her magical blue pearl was gone. Gone. Just simply...gone.

She tried to think of what could have happened to it. It was possible it had fallen out when they were waiting for the flight, and there was still time before the flight took off; she thought maybe they'd let her go look.

"Ma'am," she said to the passing flight attendant. "I think I lost something out there while I was waiting, could I go back and look for it please?"

"Oh I'm sorry, I can't let you back off now," she said.

"Oh," Ethne said.

She figured there was no use arguing, plus she didn't even know if it was out there. Feeling even more crestfallen than she had saying goodbye to Ian, she put all of her belongings back in her pocket and looked out the window trying to fight back the tear that was making its way down her cheek.

These days, normally not one for tears, she tried her best not to make a scene; it was just a silly little pearl anyway.

But it wasn't just a silly little pearl; she knew that. There was something special about that pearl, about this trip and even about her meeting Ian. Losing the pearl was quite significant and having been a long time since she felt a feeling of loss it seemed everything was coming up all at once.

The one tear started to become two and before she knew it her entire face was made of salty rivulets. She didn't have any tissue with her and was trying to keep her sudden downpour under wraps, but

obviously failing because pretty soon the flight attendant was hovering over her.

"You okay sweetie?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm alright thanks," Ethne replied.

"I'll bring you some tissues," she said, smiling down at her, obviously trying to brighten the spirits of the sad, pathetic creature before her.

"Thanks," Ethne said.

After cleaning herself up a bit, she decided crying was going to get her nowhere so it was best to stop that right now. The plane was about to take off. The realization of her departure hit her hard in the stomach; she thought she might actually throw up. But that would be even worse than crying, so she decided that was not going to happen either.

What she needed was a distraction and without Ian there to be one, she figured music was the next best thing. She plugged her headphones into her ears, leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Had she been paying attention when the plane was taxiing she might have seen Ian waving to her from the window of the terminal, but she wasn't. Before the plane even took off Ethne was alone in her own little world doing her best to forget the reality of this one.

The layover and second flight had been as uneventful as her first flight; for this she was extremely thankful. Before she knew it they were touching down, back home in San Francisco.

She was almost always here. Yet to be back from what could only be described as a dream world suddenly seemed foreign to her, she felt dazed and definitely confused.

True, she was exhausted; she couldn't wait to crash and crash hard onto her own bed.

As she was departing the plane she suddenly remembered what the note she had found while snorkeling had said – that when she got home, 'someone would be waiting for her'.

A shiver went up her spine and she found herself scanning the room for someone watching her. She didn't see anyone.

Just as she was about to cross out into the room the flight attendant stopped her.

"Ethne?" she said.

"Yes," Ethne replied.

"This is for you," she said, handing her an envelope.

"Thank you," she said.

Taking the envelope from her she found a quieter place to set her belongs down so she could open it.

The note read: "Welcome home Ethne. You're probably exhausted. That was a whirlwind of a trip you just went on, I do hope you had some fun.

"Go back to the coffee shop on Market Street tomorrow afternoon, be there by 2 PM."

"More instructions," Ethne thought. "Oh for heaven's sake, when would the notes end?!" She was ready to know what this was all about. She hoped tomorrow's meeting would finally offer her some answers. The trip had been fun, unforgettable even, but she was really not up for anymore games.

Climbing onto one of the buses to take her back to her car she thought again about the loss of the blue pearl and choked back another tear before it had a chance to escape. She was exhausted and far too emotional to be reminiscing now.

As she pulled into her driveway she couldn't help but notice how nothing had changed. She felt completely different now, but nothing at home had changed, nothing ever really did.

That thought, the same thought she'd had the morning she was sitting on her couch when the first note had arrived struck a chord with her. She wondered if she was ever going to be able to go back to her old life now, knowing now how Ian had made her feel.

She had been used to being alone before. But now, she had a feeling that emptiness was a hollow shell she didn't really want to crawl back into.

Her house was dark and empty when she stepped inside. She turned on the light switch and closed the door. Not knowing how many hours of sleep she had gotten since she left, she figured unpacking could wait.

Stripping down and putting on her nightgown she quickly brushed her teeth, took her medication and blissfully crawled into her bed. Within minutes she was fast asleep, dreaming of the crystal blue waters of Belize and of a stranger on the beach who now had a face and was waving and smiling at her. In her sleep she was smiling back.

CHAPTER 10

When Ethne woke up she could hardly believe her eyes. Looking up she was staring at her own ceiling, feeling her own sheets and was once again tucked cozily in her own blankets.

No matter where you go or how amazing the destination is, even if the place you are coming back to isn't nearly as exciting or exotic, there really is nothing like being home, back in your own bed.

Ethne didn't want to get up.

She rolled over and looked at the clock; it was after twelve. Not all that surprising given how tired she had been, but this didn't leave her much time to get showered and dressed and all the way across town again.

For knowing so much about her, this mystery person really had been quite rude choosing a coffee shop all the way on the other side of town.

But then they had just sent her to Belize, so it was a moot point.

Stepping out of her bed, the floor was cold. She had already gotten used to the warm weather in San Pedro and even though it wasn't exactly cold here yet, it certainly was in comparison.

She hurriedly made her way across the room to the bathroom and took a shower. After having a quick bite to eat she was once again off on her strange little scavenger hunt; only this time she hoped it was nearing its end.

As she pulled into the parking lot across from the coffee shop on the corner, she found herself scanning the faces of the customers. No one stood out for her; she assumed this was going to be just another envelope delivery.

When she was making her way closer to the tables she saw a face that looked familiar to her. She thought it had to be a coincidence. Surely it had to be a coincidence?

Not seeing anyone else there that paid her any mind she walked over to him; he smiled and offered her a chair.

"Scott?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to meet you," he said. He was smiling a gigantic smile, one she had never seen before, that she could recall - she hadn't really ever paid him much mind.

"It was you?!" she asked. "You're the one who sent all the notes and sent me to Belize?"

She could hardly believe it, especially after he'd acted so innocently on the phone when she had called in "sick". The thought of her lying to him suddenly

made her face redden. She sank down into the chair that he had offered.

He could see the color in her cheeks, although he wasn't quite sure how to take the reaction.

"Umm...yeah, it was me," he answered.

She looked at him for a second not quite sure what to say, so she said the only thing that came to mind.

"Why?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Well..." he said. "I needed to know if we had any common interests."

She just sat there staring at him, probably resembling the codfish Mary Poppins was always referring to.

"Common interests?" she asked. "For what?"

"I wanted to know if we had anything in common before I asked you out on a date," he said.

She couldn't tell if he was being serious; it appeared he was.

"Why didn't you just ask me?" she asked. She couldn't believe this was his reason. She didn't know if she should be mad or flattered, but she was mostly just confused.

Not to mention the fact that now the question of a date had been added to everything else. This alone was enough to make her quite uncomfortable.

He could sense her feelings, and tried to think of something to say to lighten the mood. He couldn't think of anything.

"I tried to ask you several times," he said. He looked down at the table and was rubbing the back of his neck like a cute school boy asking a girl to a dance.

“It wasn’t terribly easy to do. That day I ran into you in the hall, I looked at you...you looked so sad. I tried many times after that to talk to you, you never seemed interested.”

He looked up again into her eyes trying to get some sense of what she was thinking.

“I know I probably should have taken that as a clue, but for some reason I couldn’t. I’m sorry if you are upset with me for sending you on that trip.” He looked down at his lap; she could tell her reaction hadn’t been what he had hoped for.

She thought for a second before answering him.

“Scott, it’s okay, I understand,” she said. “I’m not the easiest person to get to know.”

He smiled a little and said, “So you’re not mad at me?”

“Mad at you?!” she asked. “How could I be mad at you? You just sent me on an amazing vacation to a beautiful place. That was...probably the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. That had to have cost you a fortune. There must be more of a reason than finding out if we had anything in common for you to have gone to this trouble?”

Feeling that the conversation was headed in his favor, he responded with a small mischievous smile.

“Well, I’d hoped it would sway the answer in my favor, a small bribe you might say,” he said. “So...Ethne, would you like to go out sometime?”

She crossed her arms and studied him for a bit, trying her best to keep the smile that clearly had a mind of its own from giving him the answer.

Considering her history she knew she should say “no”. But after the weekend she had just had, she wasn’t sure “no” was the right answer anymore.

In the end she decided things had to change, she hoped she wouldn't regret this decision in the future.

Finally, she answered him with a playful grin, not wanting him to think she could be won over so easily.

"Maybe," she said.

"Maybe?" he asked. He laughed and leaned back in his chair looking at her quizzically. "So, what does that mean exactly? Am I going to have to send you to Hawaii next before you'll say yes?"

She laughed.

"No...of course not. I just don't want you to think I'm easy, that you can win me over with a fabulous trip to paradise," she said.

He chuckled and leaned forward and rested his arms on the table. "Oh I see," he said.

Her face turned serious and he could see immediately that the girl he had seen in the hallway was back again.

"What's wrong, Ethne?" he asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said.

"I can clearly see it isn't nothing. Tell me what's wrong."

"I don't really go out on dates, Scott," she said, bluntly stating a fact; something he probably already knew.

"That's alright," he said. "I don't either. I'm usually working all of the time, but you probably know that."

"Yeah I know. I work a lot too, but that isn't really why I don't go out on dates," she said.

"So why not then?" he asked.

"I don't really want to say right now. I just thought you should know I'm pretty inexperienced in the matter," she said.

She was blushing he could see; he knew from before that she was a quiet one, probably shy, although perhaps it was something more.

“Ahhh, an intriguing woman I see.” He laughed a little trying his best to bring back the beautiful smile of hers that was there just a second ago.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that,” she said. She bit her lip and looked around the room, just now noticing that there were actually other people around them.

“Well, I think it’s time we workaholics get out and do something fun, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yeah, I suppose so,” she said.

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee?” he asked. “I would love to hear about your trip.”

“Sure,” she said, finally letting him see that smile again. She was feeling a little more at ease, although the idea of the date did have her a little nervous; she couldn’t lie to herself about that.

“What would you like? I’ll go order it,” he said.

“Just a latte, thank you,” she said.

While he was gone she had a moment to try and collect herself, this had been truly an unexpected turn of events. Sure, this was better than the notes being from some sick serial killer, although a serial killer sending you on a lavish vacation really didn’t make any sense. The idea that it was her boss pulling the strings was still a strange notion for her to grasp.

She barely knew the guy, he had only been hired for the position a little over a year ago and up until this point their conversations had been brief and strictly work related.

He was attractive, with dark hair and dark eyes, tall and obviously fit, early 30’s she guessed, and

obviously doing well to work up in the ranks. But she was never looking for someone, so she really hadn't ever noticed him. He had a kind and welcoming face, with bright eyes and a strong jaw. She imagined it would look even more attractive with a little stubble, but he was clean shaven which fit with his career goals; he was one to be respected.

She didn't know if it was her intentional emotional guard that she put up that kept her from seeing him before, but the trip to Belize had obviously done something to weaken her resolve for distance, because now she saw him.

That resolve had been lowered considerably by Ian, someone who had managed to make it through to a place she never let anyone go. Her heart was something she protected like a king would his castle. Not only had it been severely scarred in the past, but the scars had taught her that protecting others was just as vital.

She wondered if she should tell Scott about Ian. Seeing how the trip was bought and paid for by Scott...for the purpose of a date, that hardly seemed appropriate.

Nothing had really happened to tell anyway, so perhaps she would omit that part, keep it just for herself. No sense in causing jealousy where none was warranted, although the thought that anyone would be jealous over her was too foreign to even consider.

Scott returned with two cups of coffee and something for them to snack on while she recounted her adventure to the master who had pulled the strings. She still wondered how and why he would have gone to such trouble for her.

“Here you go...one latte.” He sat down with an obvious excitement to hear all about the trip that he had orchestrated. “So tell me all about it,” he said, resting his elbow on the table and taking a sip of his coffee.

She did the same before delving into the details and recalling all of the magic that was found in San Pedro and the Blue Hole.

She didn’t however tell him about Ian, or the blue pearl. She didn’t know why she omitted finding it, but she was still quite heartbroken that it was gone.

“So what made you choose snorkeling over scuba diving?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been scuba diving before, I guess I was too scared to try it,” she lied. That was definitely not something she was ready to discuss. One date with the guy was hardly any reason to dig deeply into her life.

“Oh, that’s a shame, you would have loved it,” he said. “Did you enjoy the snorkeling though?”

“Yes I did, it was beautiful. I’ve never done that before either,” she said. She could tell he was a little disappointed that she hadn’t chosen the more adventurous option.

“Was there a reason you wanted me to go scuba diving?” she asked. She was beginning to wonder what kind of note would have been hiding in the deep blue water had she taken the plunge.

“Oh, only because I love scuba diving,” he said. “I had hoped it was something you would enjoy too. Do you think it’s something you would ever want to try?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said.

“Oh,” he replied. “Well, that’s okay, at least you liked the snorkeling bit.” He smiled and took another sip of coffee.

She had thought he would have been more disappointed or inquisitive of her reasons, but he wasn’t.

“Have you been to the Blue Hole then?” she asked.

“I have,” he said. “It was remarkable. I didn’t expect that you would have done that full dive this trip as it’s a pretty serious depth, one you need more training for. But either way I’m glad you got to see it.”

“It was truly a magical place,” she said. “I suppose I should thank you now for sending me on such a strange scavenger hunt.”

He laughed. “Well, you don’t have to thank me; you just have to go out with me now. It would be rude not to,” he said.

She smiled at him. “I guess I have no choice then, I wouldn’t want to be rude,” she said.

It was nice that they seemed to have gotten rid of the uncomfortable nervousness...for now. Although he was her boss, he seemed warm and kind. And frankly, any guy who would go to such lengths was at least worth one date.

Having spent most of her life side stepping any such interactions, until Ian anyway, this was very strange for her. Not only was she at home now, but this was her boss; this could seriously complicate things. She was suddenly wondering if she had made a mistake accepting, but she really didn’t feel like he had given her much choice. It would have been rude to not accept after what he had done for her. If she had,

the next time at work would have been awkward anyway.

She took a deep breath and continued to drink her coffee, doing her best to keep her brain from being louder than he was.

He laughed. "I was just joking; seriously, don't feel indebted to me for a date. If you want to go, great, either way it's fine," he said.

She thought about it for a second, he had just given her an out. She maybe should have taken it, but something told her to do otherwise.

"No, I'd love to go out with you, Scott," she said.

"Great!" he said. "How about Australia? Ever been there?"

She nearly spit her coffee across the table. "What?!" she asked.

He laughed so hard at her reaction he nearly spilled his all over the table. "I was just kidding!" he said. "No...sky diving around here will do."

She looked at him and shook her head smiling. "You are a very strange person, Scott."

"How about a movie?" he asked.

"As long as the movie is not aboard a plane, then yes, a movie will be perfect," she said.

"Good," he said, hiding his smile behind his coffee cup as he took his last sip.

"Well, we better get going, you have work tonight," he said. "And no fair calling in sick, your boss knows for a fact that you aren't," he chuckled as he pulled her chair out for her.

"Ha ha, very funny," she said.

"Why did you choose this coffee shop anyway?" she asked.

“Oh, I live around here. They have great coffee,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, feeling rather stupid and uncomfortable at the thought that she knew very little about him, when he obviously knew quite a bit about her. But he didn’t know everything, and pretty soon she would have to decide if he ever would.

CHAPTER 11

During her drive home she ran the conversation over and over in her head. All in all it had gone pretty smoothly, which surprised her a bit. Being social and especially social like that was not something she was used to.

She wondered how she would act around him now at work. Luckily they didn't actually see much of each other, only during important meetings or the occasional passing in the halls, obviously.

Except for the day he ran into her she wondered how often they actually did pass each other - never really paying attention. She really needed to start paying more attention, for everyone's safety really. She laughed a little thinking about that day and how sheepish he had looked after their collision. It had been his fault, she wasn't the only one guilty of not

paying attention, but even so, he had obviously felt horrible.

She wondered if he had felt horrible enough to do all of this. But that thought was silly, no one would ever feel that bad to spend that much money over a simple mistake. But she also didn't buy that he had just done it so that he could ask her out, there had to be more to the story than that. It appeared she wasn't the only mysterious one.

There was something unique and interesting about Scott. Not everyone would have done what he did. Similar to Ian, he had a quality about him that somehow managed to break down the wall she typically kept up.

The wall wasn't down however, and she really had no intention of ever lowering it completely; possibly not even far enough for this to go anywhere beyond the first date. After Belize though, she figured she needed to see where things would go, stop fighting every little thing because frankly...she was lonely.

She had been lonely a long time. She had gotten used to it, or so she thought, but Ian had made her realize how lonely she really was. It was nice having coffee with Scott, but at the same time it made her think of Ian and how much she really missed him. She still couldn't believe that she could miss someone she had just met as much as she did. It had to just be because she was lonely, but for some reason it felt like more than that.

One thing was for sure, the life she had known a week ago was gone. No matter what happened with Scott, or Ian for that matter, she doubted she was going to be able to contentedly go back to her empty house day in and day out, only making her way

outside for necessities and work instead of an actual purpose.

The only problem was she wasn't sure she could change her ways. There was a reason she was the way she was, just because two people had shown her the true state of her life didn't change that fact. It was going to take a lot more than these brief interactions for her wall to come down; a wall that probably should never come down, in her opinion anyway.

When she pulled into her driveway she saw something taped to her door.

As she got closer she could see it was another envelope. She rolled her eyes.

The envelope was addressed to "The girl with the beautiful smile."

She knew it was stupid, but this actually made her smile. Once inside her house she opened the envelope and found a simple invitation to a movie that Thursday night.

Having your boss as your date was pretty convenient since he set the schedule. Although once again, the thought that she would be dating her boss made her a bit uneasy wondering how this could possibly end well.

"Oh well," she thought. It was too late now to change things, and honestly, she didn't really want to.

She got ready for work with some butterflies in her stomach; the butterflies had been a new addition ever since meeting Ian, and obviously they liked their new accommodations; they didn't seem to be going anywhere. It was actually kind of nice having them there, she felt...somehow more alive than she had in...well ever.

Even so, she did wish they'd settle down a bit – they made it hard to concentrate and it was time for work. Work was something she hadn't thought about since last week, and it had felt like a lot more than a week had gone by.

Honestly, the idea of dealing with paperwork now was the last thing she wanted to do; this thought made her once again think of Ian.

Before, dealing with computers and paperwork instead of people had just been easier. But after snorkeling and being encapsulated in the Blue Hole, now it just seemed...really dull.

This feeling had to be normal for anyone after a vacation she figured, so she climbed into her car and decided to make the best of it, like everyone else does.

She didn't run into Scott in the hallways this time, had only caught a quick glimpse of him when she was on her way to her office. He had looked up and smiled at her, she had smiled back.

Working was not nearly as much fun as having coffee, she decided. But she had the movie date to look forward to, and at least work had gone quickly. With so much to catch up on from the two days she had missed she was plenty busy.

Before long it was time to go home. A bit disappointed that he hadn't come to say hello, she picked up her purse and headed for her car.

Scott was leaning against it with a gigantic grin on his face as she walked up to him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said back.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Good. Busy," she replied. "What are you doing out here?"

“Waiting for you,” he said. “I was just wondering if you received the invitation. I don’t have any minions working for me anymore.”

She laughed. “Oh, well that must be rather difficult then, having to do everything for yourself.”

“Oh it is, back breaking work really,” he said, standing upright and allowing her to unlock her car door. “So then...will that day and time work for you?”

“Yes, it works just fine,” she said.

“Great,” he said. “Well, have a nice night, Ethne. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He turned to walk back to the building.

“Goodnight, Scott,” she said. “Thank you.”

“For?” he asked, turning to face her again.

“For the trip...for the coffee...for the date,” she said.

“Ohhh, that,” he said, sounding as if all of the above had really been no big deal. “My pleasure,” he said, smiling before turning to leave again.

She smiled back before climbing in her car and heading home; it had been a very interesting and long day.

Even though the day really should have been over since it was incredibly late and she was tired, she couldn’t keep her mind still.

Her thoughts were full of Ian and Scott and everything that had happened in the last few days. They were also on the things that were about to happen; she was incredibly nervous about Thursday.

She had never been on a date, not really. Her time with Ian and the coffee with Scott were the closest she had come, and she hadn’t had much time to anticipate those.

Now she had three days to do nothing but think about it. This was a very bad thing. So bad in fact that because she had been given too much time to think she would probably end up canceling.

She didn't want to cancel, but the waiting was going to be torture and sleeping was going to be even more elusive than usual.

Making her way up the stairs to her door her mind was racing, the butterflies were too, apparently. She was about to turn the key and open the door when she looked down and noticed a box at her feet.

Not expecting any deliveries this time, except for maybe mysterious envelopes, she picked it up and tried to make out the writing in the dark.

It was simply addressed to her: "To Ethne." There was nothing else to clue her in on its sender, so she tucked the box under her arm, opened the door and went inside doing her best to calm the swarm that had congregated in her stomach.

The box was small. Bigger than the one that had held her precious pearl, but for some reason she was still hopeful that it had miraculously made its way back to her; wishful thinking she was sure.

She inspected the box for just a moment longer before tearing the paper off the outside to see what it was and who it was from.

With still no indication of who sent it, it became pretty clear when she saw its contents.

As if reading her mind the entire time she had been driving home, inside the box was a note.

"I can't wait until Thursday. If you're free tomorrow at noon, I'll be waiting outside your door."

Not really sure why the box was necessary, but not complaining much either, she put the note back in the box with a smile on her face.

She was both relieved and excited that she didn't have to have such a long wait. Strange how part of her was dreading this supposed new relationship, but at the same time was finding pure joy from it.

Sometimes Ethne wondered if her solitude was really necessary or if the choice had been a hasty one, but it only took the thought of her past to make her recoil inside herself again. Now however, instead of finding herself alone when she did this, she was surrounded by butterflies that would not shut up.

Having no plans for the next day aside from work, which of course he knew, she got ready for bed with intentions to wake up and meet him outside her door; again having absolutely no idea what the destination was going to be. She was starting to find comfort in his surprises, which was kind of an oxymoron.

But all the same, the notes, meeting Ian and now Scott, getting to visit San Pedro and find her pearl, stirred up a feeling inside of her – something that had been lost a long time ago.

Lying in her bed with her blankets pulled up to her chin Ethne wondered what she was going to do. How long could she keep pretending? How long could she hide her past – her condition? She would have to tell him eventually, but she didn't want to. That however, was not an option.

Ultimately it was neither fair to her or to him to keep the relationship going. She would only hurt him in the end and she didn't want to do that. Nor did she want to be hurt.

No. She was going to have to tell him that this wasn't going to work, that she couldn't date him. That thought was more than she could bear for some reason; but she supposed the magic of San Pedro must be wearing off and the reality of being home back in her own life was once again sinking in. It sure hadn't taken long.

She rolled over to her side and hugged her blankets tightly to her, wishing for once she was hugging an actual person. How quickly the feeling of excitement had been replaced with a feeling of dread. As she drifted off to sleep a tear escaped her eye, rolled across the bridge of her nose and down her cheek. A few others followed it, though she wasn't aware of them since she was now in another world far away from the troubles of her own.

Instead of finding herself on a serene beach this time, however, she was being blasted by wind and sand; each speck of sand feeling like a tiny needle hitting her feet and ankles. The wind was so strong she could barely walk and yet to look around she saw sunshine and a gorgeous green ocean in front of her.

The water was choppy, a torrent obviously caused by the winds. Even though she was able to keep moving she felt each gust pushing her back as though it was telling her not to go on.

She was trying to get to someone, or something, though she couldn't remember what or who that was. The determined feeling urged her on through the angry wind and sweeping sheets of sand.

The wind was getting stronger and stronger and she had to shield her eyes from the angry shards of

sand that were joining the winds fight to keep her back.

She kept walking into the wind and sharp sand, despite its best efforts to stop her. Barely being able to breathe in air that didn't taste of salt and sand she kept going.

It seemed she had been walking for hours when all of a sudden the wind stopped. It vanished as if her nemesis had never even been there to begin with, pelting her skin, hindering her efforts to find what she was looking for.

She could see the water again, calmer and more blue than green. But she was still alone on the beach with no clear sign of any particular reason to be traveling in the direction she had been so determined to go.

When Ethne woke up, she found herself in her bed, a wet tear stain beneath her cheek and her covers grasped tightly in her hand.

The sun was already coming up. Although it was still early she was actually relieved to be awake. The dream had been one of those realistic kinds, the kind that leave you exhausted and in this case confused.

She had plenty of time before she was to meet Scott so she rolled over and tried to relax. The butterflies were back for more than one reason this time – excitement but also a flutter of anticipation of having to end something that had barely just begun.

CHAPTER 12

After lying in bed for a couple more hours, trying to shake the dream off so she could focus on her “date” with Scott, she finally rolled out of bed.

Once she was showered and dressed she went in search of some food, though the nervousness and doomed reality that was now dwelling in her stomach left little room for it.

She grabbed an apple and plopped down on the couch to eat it, finding herself once again staring up at her ceiling; she had come full circle in the course of less than a week.

There wasn’t much time before Scott would be arriving, but there was time enough for her to think; sometimes she absolutely hated time.

She picked up her remote and flicked on the TV knowing full well there would be nothing of quality on, but then there hardly ever was.

It was enough to distract her though; she let her mind wander to the clueless people on the screen, all so blissfully unaware of her current circumstances. That thought gave her a strange comfort; TV did little else for her except occasionally remind her that there were other people on the planet and that she wasn't completely alone. She knew her troubles didn't hold a candle to the problems of the world; although the stupid soap opera she was watching barely counted towards that fact.

With ten minutes to go before he was set to arrive she turned off the TV and took one more turn in front of the mirror. She wasn't used to giving one iota for her appearance, she supposed after today she'd be back to caring about that much.

Satisfied that she was ready she picked up her purse and headed outside.

Scott was waiting next to his car parked along the curb. He hadn't come to her door, but was at least out of the car and leaning against the passenger side door with a look of hopefulness on his face.

When he saw her he smiled and waved and walked to meet her halfway.

"Hi beautiful," he said.

She blushed, really unaccustomed to hearing such terms directed at her. The butterflies had returned now taking up full residence; she was suddenly having a hard time remembering what it was she had wanted to tell him.

"Hi," she said, smiling at him as they walked back to his car.

"I didn't come to your door in case you didn't want to go today; I hope you're not offended?" he asked.

“No...of course not, that was very thoughtful actually,” she said.

He held the door open for her so she could get in and smiled at her again before crossing around to his side.

Once they were buckled he turned to her and asked, “Ready to go?”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me where we are going today?” she asked, knowing full well what the answer was.

“Umm...nope,” he said, turning back toward the road and starting the car.

“I didn’t think so,” she said.

When they were on their way to...wherever it was they were going, she asked: “So why the box?”

“Hmmm?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the road.

“The box,” she said. “Why did you use a box this time?”

“Ohhh the box,” he said. “I figured you were getting tired of envelopes – didn’t want you getting bored.”

He was grinning at her from the side. She sighed and rolled her eyes and turned toward her window, not letting him see her small but amused smile.

They didn’t travel far. The destination was actually one of her favorite spots to run; a nice trail and beach that overlooked the Golden Gate Bridge. He pulled into a parking spot and turned off the car.

“I thought we could have a picnic,” he said. “Sound good?”

“Yeah, sounds great,” she said.

He got out of the car, opened the back and pulled out a blanket and picnic basket. Seeing how prepared

he was actually pretty adorable, she was really not used to someone doing so many nice things for her.

Again, she was struggling trying to remember the words she had practiced in her head. Right now she had absolutely no desire to say any of them.

After collecting their food, he met her on her side of the car and led the way to a nice spot on the beach. It was a surprisingly warm and sunny day, actually a perfect day for a picnic.

The beach wasn't as busy as it sometimes was which was really nice. As they settled onto the blanket he opened the basket and asked what she would like.

He had her favorite, a turkey sandwich, which she chose; he grinned at her. She just shook her head at the idea that he had known that and silently started eating and looked out at the water.

Her dream suddenly came to her like a bolt of lightening; hitting her hard even though the circumstances and weather were nothing like it. She tried to brush it off, but obviously not fast enough.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm fine."

"Are you cold? I have a blanket in the car," he said.

"No, I'm fine, really," she said.

She turned back to the water and started eating her sandwich again. She took a deep breath and did her best to wipe away the feeling of dread that had swept over her so suddenly.

Halfway through her sandwich she looked over at him; he was nervously eating, obviously not sure of what to say.

"This is really nice, Scott," she said.

He looked over and smiled, relaxing a bit. "Yeah, it is," he said. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Thanks for inviting me," she said.

The feeling the dream had hit her with was starting to pass. She was once again feeling the happy glow that she had felt when he had picked her up, once again pushing aside the talk she had thought she would have been having by now; a talk she decided she frankly didn't want to have.

"So what else did you bring to eat?" she asked. It seemed the butterflies were on break and she was suddenly starving.

He smiled a cute grin and dug into the picnic basket pulling out some pineapple and a couple of chocolate bars.

"That's an interesting picnic choice," she said. "But not one I'm going to argue with."

He laughed and handed her a container of pineapple and her own chocolate bar.

Feeling at ease she leaned back on her hands. She stretched her legs out in front of her and looked up into the blue sky and the white clouds above them. It was an uncharacteristically sunny day for this time of year they were getting to enjoy together.

"So how does it compare to San Pedro?" he asked.

"Well...it's not as warm," she said. "And I'm not sure I'd like to go snorkeling right now – but the company is nice." She looked over and saw him smiling.

"Aww, that's too bad," he said, lying down on the blanket and looking up at the sky, his fingers interlaced and resting comfortably on his chest. "Snorkeling was next on the agenda."

She laughed. "Yeah, sure it was."

Lying down completely, joining him on the blanket, they watched the clouds overhead float by.

"So you couldn't wait until Thursday, huh?" she asked.

"Well, I suppose I could have waited," he said. "But then, I have been waiting quite a while already, and I didn't want you to chicken out."

"Probably a good idea," she said. "I was going to cancel our date last night. But then I found the box."

She didn't know why she had blurted that out. Maybe he would think she was kidding, although it hadn't sounded like a joke.

"Really?" he asked, rolling onto his side and propping himself up on one hand. "Why?"

Now would have been a great time to say what it was she had wanted to say, and she probably should have – but she didn't.

"Oh, just nerves," she said. "Thursday was a long wait; a long time to think about it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too," he said. He lay back down, obviously satisfied by her answer. "You seemed like the type to chicken out if given the window of opportunity," he chuckled.

"Hey!" she said, elbowing him in the side.

"What?! You did," he said. "And you just confessed it, so I was right."

"Okay, fine," she said. "You were right."

They lay there quietly for a few minutes soaking in the sun and occasionally nibbling on their last bits of pineapple and chocolate.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" he asked.

"Sure," she said.

He put everything back in the basket and she helped him fold up the blanket. After returning everything to the car they made their way back down to the beach.

They were quiet for a while before he finally asked, "So why don't you date?"

"Boy, not wasting any time there, huh?" she said.

"Why don't you, Mr. Workaholic?" she fired back.

He laughed. "Touché," he said. "I suppose no one ever caught my eye. I do work a lot, that has been my main focus lately, but ultimately I haven't seen anyone worth the effort."

"Worth the effort?" she asked. "For a date? But planning a mystery trip for me to go on was what, a piece of cake?"

"Well...you caught my eye," he said.

She stopped and looked up at him. "I caught your eye?" she asked, less of a question and more of a realization.

He stopped too and turned to her. "Yeah...you caught my eye," he said. "And after you caught my eye, I couldn't stop wondering why you always kept to yourself. I mean...you're beautiful."

Obviously a shy soul as well, he was blushing and not wanting to meet her gaze.

She was speechless. She really didn't want to have the "why don't you date" talk right now, plus she was not used to being called beautiful.

So she did the only thing she could think of. She reached over and took his hand and started walking down the beach again.

He didn't argue with that and held her hand tightly as they traversed the sand and made their way down to the water.

After they walked in silence for a few minutes he stopped. She turned to look at him, puzzled.

"So...I told you my reason, are you going to tell me yours?" he asked.

It appeared the inevitable was upon her, despite all of her efforts to avoid it; unless she lied.

"I suppose no one ever caught my eye either and I'm not really one to make the first move anyway. No one ever asked me out," she said, actually telling more truth than she had anticipated.

"Well I find that hard to believe," he said. They continued walking down the beach; her fingers nestled cozily between his.

They had walked a long way before either of them realized that lunch time had long past.

"I guess we'd better get back," he said.

"Yeah, I guess so," she said. "This was nice though."

He smiled in agreement as they walked back to his car. "So do you still want to cancel Thursday?" he asked.

She laughed. "No...I don't," she said.

"Well good, cuz those movie tickets cost me a fortune," he said.

She giggled. "Oh yeah, compared to a trip to Belize, they're highway robbery," she said.

"So do you think you'll ever go back?" he asked. His words echoing the same ones Ian had said to her just before she had boarded the plane.

She answered him the same way. "Yeah, I think I will."

A pang of guilt suddenly hit her again knowing that she hadn't told Scott about Ian. But other than a

couple of casual dates with him, there really wasn't much to tell.

True, she had felt very comfortable with Ian, and she did miss him. But she knew she would never see him again so what did it matter?

She didn't like how things were starting off with Scott though. She actually really liked the guy, but she was lying to him. She may not have had many relationships with people in her life, but she knew enough to know that that wasn't good.

After he dropped her off and she was back in her house she decided she would have to tell him the truth on Thursday. It was the only decent thing to do. He had given her so much already and it wasn't fair to lead him on.

Trying her best to push it out of her mind, since it was a couple of days away, she relaxed a while before getting ready for work.

CHAPTER 13

Work had been rather dull again. She wondered if it had been dull before her trip, or if she had just been too numb to even care.

Either way, it was dull now and she almost couldn't stand it.

She only had to speak with patients and a few staff members on occasion, and suddenly she found herself dying for some kind of interaction with people. That was a very strange feeling.

Before her trip she kind of hated people, they drove her nuts if she was honest. Most of them so self-centered and whiny, especially at the hospital; and that was mostly the staff members.

Ironically the patients were easier to deal with. She didn't have to deal with them as often, since she handled mostly their paperwork, but on occasion she did interact with them.

She always found their attitudes refreshing. Maybe it was their fear; most people in their situations were humbled and had relinquished their egos at the door.

Sometimes there were people who were fighting the staff tooth and nail; that was from fear too. But those kinds of patients, the difficult ones, were rare.

She hadn't seen Scott that night, and truth be told she had been disappointed by that, but she hadn't always seen him before either so nothing was really different.

Pulling into her driveway and walking to the door she half expected to either see him or find a box, but there wasn't anything waiting for her.

Life it seemed, for the most part, had gone back to normal. She wasn't terribly pleased by this; in fact, she was on edge.

She was nervous about Thursday, not terribly thrilled about having to break the news to him. But at the same time not thrilled about what breaking the news was going to mean.

Her life was boring. It had no meaning, nothing at all. Before her trip she got up, wasted a bit of her day doing nothing, ran occasionally and went to work.

That was it. Aside from the usual boring details of going grocery shopping and maybe reading books or watching movies, that was her life.

She didn't have any pets. She really didn't have any friends to speak of; she doubted that any of her neighbors had even noticed that she had been gone for a few days.

The idea that she wasn't even missed hit her particularly hard in the gut. Although it was true she had designed her life this way, for other people's benefit as well as her own, she suddenly woke up to

the fact that in doing so she had isolated herself into oblivion.

She might as well not even be alive.

With that last thought she sat down, staring at the floor. She was feeling both anger and disbelief at the fact that she had lived 23 years of her life this way.

Yes, there was a reason; but that didn't soften the blow.

Having traveled to San Pedro and witnessed the beauty of the beach as well as the kindness of the people, being home made her realize she had locked herself away and thrown away the key.

No one else had done that to her, it had been her choice. She thought of her dream she had had that night, how it seemed now that perhaps she was the wind pushing herself back, keeping her from whatever it is she was trying to reach.

The only difference was she hadn't been trying to reach anything at all; in the dream, or in life.

She was simply just trying to make due with the circumstances she had been given, with the life she thought was already decided.

Now she began to wonder if it truly had been decided, or if she simply had been a fool.

Fear can do strange things to someone though, and pain and loss added to that was a recipe for nothing good. She knew that first hand, not just from her own life but from working at the hospital.

Sometimes there is no rational thought when all of the above are present and it takes a huge knock to your teeth before you wake up from it. Scott had knocked her teeth in.

He hadn't even realized it by planning this trip for her, or maybe he had, he had said he noticed her sad

eyes. Those sad eyes were present for a reason, she supposed no one else ever noticed or simply couldn't be bothered to go any farther than a thought.

The question now was...what was she going to do now? Just because she had been shown the truth of things didn't mean she could change her mindset of 23 years. It wasn't like switching on a light bulb.

The pain from her past and fears that now made her decisions for her weren't just going to go away. Ethne was stubborn, and she had made a decision a long time ago. It was going to take a lot to convince her to change it.

That being said, her life really was boring, and it was going to be that much harder to deal with this fact now.

It was late. Even though she was a bit worked up there was nothing to be done about it now. She rushed through her nighttime routine and crawled into bed, hoping that a dreamless sleep would come.

As she fell asleep she started thinking about her pearl, and the Blue Hole, suddenly drawn to that feeling she had experienced when she had first slipped into the water.

In the morning Ethne woke up, stretched and realized she had slept more soundly than she had in a long time. This surprised her. Especially after how she had felt when she first crawled into bed.

She could have run a marathon on the adrenaline from her anger and frustration that had been released the night before. It had felt like someone had popped the bubble she had been living in.

Part of her wanted to go back into the bubble, it had been comfortable there, she really hadn't been that aware of the mundaneness of her life.

Now that she was, half of her didn't want the knowledge. But what was done was done. There wasn't more she could do now besides learn to deal with it and figure out a new way to exist.

The first thing she had to decide was what she was going to tell Scott, if anything, on their date the next day. It hadn't gone over very well last time. Even having the words prepared, somehow he had stolen them away just with his smile.

That really was an unfair advantage, preying on a bubble victim freshly released. Although in all fairness to him he hadn't known about her servitude.

All the same, she couldn't keep pretending to be someone she wasn't.

After spending her day the way she usually did she headed off to work for the night, hoping this time she might actually get to see him. Given that she was probably about to end things she really would need to stop hoping for things like that.

When she walked into her office she saw a vase with a single rose inside. There was a card, of course.

It read: "Looking forward to tomorrow."

There was no name on the card, though it hadn't really needed one.

She picked up the rose; bringing it to her nose she smelled its sweetness.

It was red; her favorite color.

When she got home that night she realized she had barely even been aware of working, hopefully she hadn't made any mistakes. Although she was so

accustomed to things she probably could do it in her sleep, hell, she practically had been.

She fell asleep quickly holding one of the petals from the rose in her hand; no one had ever given her any flowers before.

When she woke up she still had the petal in her hand. She felt the velvet between her fingers and it made her smile instantly. She truly was a walking contradiction at the moment.

Today was the big day, her first real date with Scott. Though it may be her last, she was still going to enjoy it. There was no reason she had to tell him anything at the start of it that much she had decided.

The date wasn't until later that evening but she wanted to be relaxed and ready, as relaxed as she could be anyway, so she decided to go for a run first.

Running always helped her to clear her mind. She loved the freedom from it; it was one of the few things she got to do that made her feel any freedom at all – being alone didn't necessarily mean you felt free.

She decided to run to her favorite spot, which just happened to be where they had had their picnic. The weather wasn't quite as nice, but she never minded the rain. Not only did she enjoy getting soaked, she loved that it usually meant everywhere she went was pretty deserted.

Her recent desire for more human interaction did not apply to her running; she felt no need for distraction or interruption there. In fact the idea of running with someone confused her. Didn't running with someone defeat the purpose of running, of feeling free?

She thought so. She loved feeling like she could go anywhere she wanted, run as far or as fast as she wanted with nothing holding her back.

When she got home she felt like she was mentally ready for the date. Unfortunately, it was still hours away. She was pretty good at passing the time though, so that's what she did.

Before long the hand of the clock moved to the 6 and she realized he would be arriving at any moment. She wondered if he would actually come to her door this time, or if he would do some other ridiculous thing; he really wasn't normal.

She liked that about him.

The doorbell rang and she nearly jumped out of her skin; it was not a sound she was used to hearing. Even though she had expected him, her mind had been elsewhere.

She opened the door and saw Scott looking out towards the street with his hands in his pockets.

He turned when he heard the door opening and smiled at her.

He looked casual and comfortable, dressed up just enough to show that he wasn't just out for a late night movie.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," she said. She stepped out to meet him and locked her door before turning back to see him looking at her with a silly grin on his face.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, chuckling at her reaction. "I've just never seen you with your hair up. You look beautiful."

"Oh," she said, feeling a bit silly that she had practically bit his head off. "Thanks."

She had assumed by the look on his face that she had forgotten something important, or that there had been something embarrassing stuck to her ass that shouldn't be there. She really needed to learn how to read people better.

He held out his arm for her, in pure gentlemanly fashion, she laughed at the idea but hooked her arm in his anyway.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"It was pretty good...yours?" she asked.

"Can't complain," he said. "Pretty uneventful really."

"Yeah, mine too," she said.

On the way to the theater he looked over at her again.

"You should wear your hair up more, you look stunning," he said.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes, really," he said. "You don't take compliments well do you?"

"I suppose I'm just not used to them," she replied. She looked out the window feeling a little uncomfortable that the topic of her solitude was always in the forefront it seemed. "Well, thank you."

"You're welcome," he said.

"You look nice tonight too," she said.

"Thanks," he said. "Although you don't really need to return the favor, I just look like the same ole me."

"Well, now who isn't taking compliments well?" she said, laughing at him.

He laughed. "Well I guess I'm not used to them either," he said.

She knew he was only trying to make her feel better. Feel less of a freak for never dating, for being alone most of the time really. She knew he had dated before, there was no way this guy had spent his entire life alone like she had.

“Do you want some popcorn or anything,” he asked, as they made their way into the theater.

“Umm...sure, I guess so,” she said.

They had gotten there with only a few minutes to spare before it started, but the theater was empty.

“Well, I guess Thursday is the night to come,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess so,” she said.

“Where do you want to sit?” he asked.

“I don’t really care honestly, you can pick,” she said.

He led the way to a couple of seats near the back and sat near the center.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, this is great,” she said, sitting down and realizing that they were completely alone.

She wasn’t sure if this thought was comforting or terrifying. She hoped once the movie started she would start to feel a little more relaxed.

There was an energy between the two of them. Like her, it was a contradiction that fluctuated between feeling at ease, and feeling quite...electric. Since the day they were lying side by side on the beach and walking hand in hand, this was the closest they had been. Only this time it was dark, and they were alone.

Needless to say the butterflies were back, and they didn’t want any popcorn.

She ate some anyway trying to fill up her stomach so they didn't have as much room; she kind of wanted the feeling of ease to come back. She had felt this electricity with Ian too. She had liked it, but it was still very foreign to her and she was feeling a little unnerved.

The movie started after a few minutes and she settled in and tried her best to relax. When they had finished the popcorn he had taken her hand.

Her heart was pounding, and honestly she wasn't following any of the movie; the screen could have been black for all she knew.

It was a comedy, she knew that much, and he laughed occasionally making her realize that she really should be paying attention. But all she could think about was the feeling of his skin.

About halfway into the movie she started to relax a bit and started to pay attention. He had probably been relieved when she started to laugh too.

When the movie was over the lights came back on and he let go of her hand.

"Did you like it?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did," she said. "I haven't been to the movies in a long time; I usually just watch them at home. This was nice."

"We were lucky tonight; it is pretty rare that you get a personal screening," he said.

The date was going well, she thought. So far she hadn't done anything too embarrassing; although she was pretty sure her impersonation of a statue for the first half of the movie hadn't gone unnoticed, but oh well.

"I thought maybe we could go get something to eat now, if you wanted?" he asked.

“Sure,” she said.

They climbed into the car and he drove her to a really nice looking restaurant, so nice in fact she suddenly felt underdressed.

“Are you sure I’m dressed up enough for this place?” she asked.

“Ethne, I already said you look beautiful,” he said. “Stop fishing for compliments.”

She peered over at him with a ‘very funny’ look on her face as he held the door open for her.

The restaurant was darkly lit, quite nice for a date, something that made you feel comfortable to eat with someone new. First dates were notorious for making you feel awkward about eating; she was feeling that now and had so when she was with Ian.

The maitre d’ led them to a table in the corner, something that was fairly intimate and away from everyone else. She actually liked that.

They ordered some salads and their entrées; he asked if she wanted some wine. She declined.

While they waited for food the silence was palpable. She was pretty sure she could have cut it with the butter knife. Instead she took a piece of bread and used the knife on that; putting it in her mouth so that there was an excuse for not talking.

When she was done with the bread she took a sip of water. He had done the same, but now was just looking at her.

“I can’t figure you out,” he said.

“What’s to figure out?” she asked.

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, in a way that made you pretty sure you were going to. “You are so confident and natural, but at the same time, you look like a frightened mouse.”

She laughed. "You think I'm confident and natural?" she asked. "I'm pretty sure there is just a frightened mouse sitting over here nibbling on her bread."

He laughed out loud.

"See what I mean?" he asked. "You speak to me like we've known each other for years, but when I look at you, it seems like you are about to run away."

The term 'run away' struck her, since that was basically what she was planning to do. But he was right. She was a contradiction and honestly she did feel quite comfortable with him. He had read her like a book. She didn't know if she liked that or hated it.

"Well, to be honest, Scott, there was something I needed to talk to you about," she said, finally realizing that it was now or never. "There is another reason I haven't dated. Although I didn't really lie to you, no one has asked me, maybe a long time ago, but not recently."

"So why then?" he asked.

Just then the waiter showed up with their salads and asked if they wanted more bread.

After he had gone Scott turned back to her obviously ready for her answer.

"The truth is, I don't date people because...well...I can't," she said. That was the best way she could put it.

"What do you mean you can't?" he asked.

"I mean...I can't," she said.

She took a deep breath before revealing to him the real reason she never let anyone into her life.

"I have epilepsy," she said.

“So?” he asked, obviously unfazed by her confession. “Lots of people have epilepsy, that doesn’t mean they don’t date,” he said.

While this was true, there was more to the story, she didn’t care to go into it here.

“Well, there are other reasons, but that is the primary reason,” she said.

“So you never date because you have epilepsy,” he said, leaning back in his chair with a confused look on his face. “Do you care to tell me more?”

He could see it in her face that the scared mouse was about to bolt and he didn’t want her to.

“Not at the moment,” she said.

“Fair enough,” he said.

CHAPTER 14

The rest of dinner had been pretty quiet. They made some small talk, she could tell he was doing his best to not make her feel threatened.

She knew her reasoning to someone else would make no sense, which was half the reason she never went into it, half the reason she never bothered to get close to anyone. It was hard to talk about, and since she had made the decision, she really didn't see the point.

When they had finished eating he drove her home. He walked her to her door and while she was fishing out her keys he grabbed her elbow and pulled her to him.

In an instant his hand was holding her cheek and he was kissing her. She dropped her keys, her knees nearly buckling from the unexpected kiss.

She didn't resist him at first, but when it got to be too heated for her she pulled away. Breathless, she stepped back and looked at him.

"Scott," she said.

"I'm sorry, Ethne," he said. "But I've really wanted to kiss you, and if you are about to push me away for a reason you won't tell me...well I can't argue with that. But I still wanted to kiss you. You can't argue that there isn't something between us."

This was true. She couldn't argue with that, but then there had been something between her and Ian too. For all she knew her feelings were simply due to loneliness, she had no way to know for sure; she couldn't trust her feelings.

The only thing she could trust was the decision she had made. Although remembering how she had felt last night, she wondered if she could even trust that anymore.

She thought for a moment before answering him.

"You're right I can't argue with you," she said. "All I know is that I can't date you."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I don't want to hurt you," she said.

"Hurt me?" he asked. "How? Everyone always takes a chance when they date, what's your other reason?"

"I can't date you..." she said, taking a step back and sitting on the chair on her patio. "Because I'm not even supposed to be alive."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"When I was baby, I started having seizures," she said. "I had so many, Scott; I even slipped into a coma. I eventually came out of it, but they told my

parents that they weren't sure how I had survived and weren't sure how much longer I would."

She was crying now, she hadn't told very many people this story and it had been years since the last time she had.

"But you did survive, you're still here," he said. He was kneeling by her now and had taken her hands into his.

"Yes...I am," she said. "They eventually found a good medication for me and I haven't had any for a long time."

"Well, that's good then, right?" he asked. "So why are you still deciding to be alone?"

"Because," she said. "Medications aren't fool proof; there is no way to know if they will keep them away forever. And I can't do that to someone. I can't put them in the position of having to deal with me, or worse, lose me. I've gone through that – I won't do it to someone else. I won't do it to you."

"Ethne," he said. "That's very noble of you – but you can't live your life in fear like that. You can't live your life alone just because of something that 'might' happen. Frankly, I could say the same thing to you – that I'm not even supposed to be alive; I could be hit by a bus tomorrow. No one ever knows what's going to happen, you can't live like this – you shouldn't have to."

He took her in his arms; she rested her cheek on his shoulder. This was not exactly how she expected this conversation to go. She had planned on saying the basics and leaving it at that, believing that the relationship would have just ended right then and there.

Having him hold her and try to comfort her was not something she had anticipated; though she had to admit being in his arms made her feel very...safe.

When she had stopped crying he pulled away enough to look at her.

"So..., " he said. "Now what?"

"There is more to the story, Scott, more reasons why I can't just forget about things and pretend like everything is fine," she said.

"What other reasons?" he asked.

She took another deep breath before she told him about her past. Told him how her father had also had epilepsy, how he had been put on medication and was "fine."

He had taken the chair next to her at this point and was listening intently holding her hand, when she told him that when she was four years old her parents had gone on a date. They had kissed her goodnight and she had fallen asleep while the babysitter was downstairs watching TV.

She told him how the next morning rather than her mother waking her up the way she always had, she was instead awakened by her aunt.

Her aunt was in tears and was doing her best to tell her in a way that she could understand, that her parents were never coming home.

When she was older the story was told to her again. That her dad had been driving them home from a movie, that he had a seizure and had run head-on into an oncoming car, killing both of her parents instantly.

"So you see, Scott?" she asked. "I can't put anyone in that same situation. It was hard enough

losing my parents, and I'm as much of a ticking time bomb as my father was, medication or not."

He was quiet. Having no clever or insightful responses this time, he simply sat there holding her hands in his and didn't say a word.

For a few minutes all he did was look at her, the softness in his face telling her everything without words.

She knew what he was thinking, that she was right to make the decision she had. That anyone in her shoes would have done the same. What he said to her next though was as far from that as she could have imagined.

"Ethne..." he started. "I understand why and how you feel the way that you do. And I'm very sorry you had to go through such a terrible thing.

"But I still don't think you should be resigned to spend your life living alone in fear of what may or may not happen, just because of something that sadly did. Your life is not their life, what happened to them isn't necessarily going to happen to you."

She was dumbfounded by his words. Had he not heard her? Had he not just seen in her eyes and face what she has been living with? She started to feel anger rise up from deep down in a place that she rarely went.

"I don't expect you to understand, Scott," she said. "You weren't there, you haven't lived it."

He could hear the bitterness in her voice, saw her anger, but he wasn't going to back down.

She started to get up; he did the same, but reached for her keys before she was able to get them.

"Give me my keys, please," she said.

"I will, when we are finished talking," he said.

He put them in his pocket and tried to get her to sit back down. She refused.

If it weren't for the seriousness of the story she had just told him, he would have thought her huffiness was pretty cute. But in this case, he knew she was not in the mood for any of his humor.

"Ethne," he said. "I didn't mean to make you feel like your past didn't warrant how you've chosen to live your life. And you're right, I wasn't there. I didn't live through it – but we all have pasts."

She looked over at him and saw a sadness in his face that she hadn't seen before.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

He looked up and smiled.

"I've lost people too, Ethne," he said. "I know it's a very difficult thing to live through. And I know that given the fact that you have the same thing your father did that you might feel the way that you do. But you're not him, you're you – and you should get to live your life."

She sat down next to him feeling less angry than she had.

"I know," she admitted. "I've been feeling that way lately, ever since the trip."

"Really?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "It opened my eyes to how...asleep I've been - I haven't really been living at all."

He took her hand again and they sat there in silence for a few minutes.

"Who did you lose, Scott?" she asked.

"My sister. She was killed in a car accident too – she was 17."

"I'm sorry," Ethne said.

“It was a long time ago,” he said.

“Doesn’t really matter, does it?” she said. “I’m still sorry.”

“No, it doesn’t, thank you,” he said. “Okay, so we are now a couple of workaholics with sad secrets – what do we do now?”

He was actually grinning at her. How he could be grinning at her she had no idea, but it was kind of cute.

She smiled back at him and looked down at the ground.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I say we go skinny dipping,” he said.

She laughed and whacked him in the arm. “It’s a little cold to go skinny dipping.”

“You are such a chicken,” he said.

It was amazing to her that they could have just had the conversation they did and he could still make her laugh.

“I suppose that was part of the reason you didn’t go scuba diving then?” he asked, finally connecting some dots.

“Well...that and I’m a chicken,” she said.

He laughed at that and stood up grabbing her hands and pulling her up too. He hugged her tightly, she sunk into him.

“Why didn’t I know about your epilepsy?” he asked. “I mean, I am your boss, I should know these things.”

“Yeah, you know I like turkey sandwiches and chocolate, but not my health history,” she said. “I think you’ve been slacking off.”

“Ha...ha. No seriously, I don’t recall it saying that anywhere in your file.”

“*My file?*” she asked. “You’ve been looking at my file?”

“Well, I am your boss,” he said. He wrapped his arms around her waist and waited for an answer.

“I never wrote it in,” she admitted. “I didn’t start working there until after the medication started working, and I figured – hey, I’m at a hospital, if there are ever any problems, what better place to be.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” he said. “Though as your boss I really should fire you for leaving out such important information.”

“Well, go ahead,” she said, contentedly sinking further into him. “It may be a bit awkward dating my boss anyway.”

CHAPTER 15

Ethne woke feeling a soft finger slowly making its way up her right leg which was draped comfortably over Scott's abdomen. She lifted her head and gazed at him, her eyes coming to focus on his sweet smile.

It had been three months since that night on her porch when she had told him everything about her past. They had been together ever since, dating whenever possible.

Always keeping her on her toes, the notes hadn't stopped; they would still appear from time to time, telling her to go somewhere – usually to meet him, sometimes to find a nice gift.

He was always full of surprises and she loved that. In truth it had taken her a while to get used to the attention, but not that long. There was something about how he made her feel that she had no interest in arguing with.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said.

She lifted herself up a little so she could kiss his lips. The finger that was once making its way north was now a hand fully holding her thigh as she gave him a proper good morning kiss.

“Good morning,” she said, now fully awake and happier than she had ever been.

“What time is it?” she asked, trying to look around him to see the clock.

“It’s almost 3,” he said, as if sleeping until 3 in the afternoon was a normal occurrence and no big deal, which had actually become true.

“We should probably get up, huh?” Ethne asked with her head laying on his chest, showing no signs of moving.

“I suppose,” he said. “Though I was rather enjoying this thigh of yours.”

She giggled and responded by pinning him down, kissing him again; she had no intention of getting up just yet.

They didn’t spend every night together; it was actually fairly rare that they could. But when they did, they usually spent a lazy day doing little but enjoying each other’s company.

Sometimes they went for walks on the beach, sometimes he even joined her for a run, though even when he did she was still usually running by herself; a fun jab at him she enjoyed, since she ran just a little faster than he did. He didn’t seem to mind that she ran ahead, and she certainly wasn’t going to let him hold her back. It was nice that he understood that about her.

She had spent pretty much her entire existence on her own, he seemed to take it in stride and respected that she was rather independent.

They had gotten very close in a short amount of time. At times that made her uncomfortable; she always had her concerns in the back of her mind. But he made her incredibly happy; she felt alive.

It was too difficult to think of going back to waking up in her bed, always alone.

They were in a bit of a dream state, only returning to reality when it was absolutely necessary. She supposed that was why they were still together; she wasn't letting her concerned negative mind think at the moment.

"Want some breakfast?" he asked.

"Breakfast?" she said with a laugh. "It's the middle of the day – I think we are way past breakfast."

"Well I don't care, I feel like pancakes," he said.

"Oooh pancakes!" she said, already pushing him out of bed so he could start making her food; she was starving.

He laughed and put on some pants before leaning over and kissing her again one more time, looking at how beautiful she was lying there.

"What are you looking at?" she asked. "Go make me food!"

He chuckled. "Okay, okay I'm going."

She heard him whistling in the kitchen, banging pots and pans. She smiled at the thought of him in her kitchen, making her pancakes.

She toyed with staying in bed and waiting for her food, but she was going to have to eventually get

ready for work that night so she decided she better shower.

When she walked into the bathroom she turned on the light and looked at herself in the mirror, wondering what it was he thought was so beautiful – especially now given that she had just woken up.

She was thinking this thought when she went down, hard. It had come on suddenly with absolutely no warning.

When Ethne woke up, Scott was hovering over her with a very concerned look on his face.

She was very groggy and felt like she had just been rudely awakened; she looked around and saw she was lying on the bathroom floor.

That was weird.

“What happened?” she asked.

“You were having a seizure, baby,” he said, bluntly saying the words she had hoped to never hear again.

“Oh,” she said, still feeling a little dazed.

After a while he helped her back into bed and tucked her into her blankets.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, not really knowing what else to say.

“Tired,” she replied.

Her lower lip started to tremble as she finally realized what had happened. She hung her head and looked at her hands in her lap.

She had been so happy just a second ago. Then boom, like lightening, her worst nightmare happened; she now felt like a sitting duck, waiting for the lightening she knew could strike twice to find its mark.

He sat down next to her and held her hands, looking at her; she assumed trying to assess the damage. She had fallen and had hit the bathroom floor...hard. She had probably hit her head too, she couldn't remember.

But she knew enough to know that instead of a lovely afternoon together and work, she would be going to the hospital for a different reason.

"When you're feeling up to it we should probably get you to the hospital to have you checked out," he said, reading her mind.

"Yeah, I know."

"I will call ahead right now so they will be ready for you, hey, one of the perks of working there, huh?" he said, obviously doing his best to lighten the mood, but failing miserably.

"Okay," she said.

She took a deep breath and laid her head back down on her pillow and stared up at the ceiling.

Why did this have to happen now? She hadn't had a seizure in ten years; the medications were working so well. Why after finally finding some happiness, some kind of life, did that have to be taken away from her now?

She had learned a long time ago to not ask why, but to just accept. But she was having a really hard time remembering how to do that at the moment. She was getting angry, and her anger was coming out in the form of tears.

"Honey, don't cry," Scott said, after he returned from making the phone call.

She took a deep breath again. "I'm sorry. I can't help it," she said. "I was so happy with you, I'm so sorry."

“What do you mean was?” he asked, suddenly holding her hands even tighter. “Don’t you think for a second that one seizure is going to keep me from you.”

“But it probably won’t be just one, Scott, and I don’t want to do that to you, remember? It’s ultimately my decision to make here,” she said, pulling her hands away and turning on her side facing away from him.

“Well, while I respect you, Ethne, I’m not going to give up on you that easily,” he said. “Let’s get you checked out and take it from there.”

“Fine,” she said, feeling very, very grumpy.

They pulled into the hospital parking lot and even though she protested, he wheeled her up in a wheelchair. A few people recognized her in the halls as they passed.

Embarrassed, she sunk further down in the wheelchair. “Oh sure, now they notice me,” she thought.

As he had promised everything was ready for her, a room and a doctor were waiting for her when they arrived. When she had moved to San Francisco she hadn’t bothered to get a new doctor, her way of warding off never needing one again she supposed.

After she was examined they sent her for a CT scan to make sure she hadn’t caused any injuries to her head during the fall.

When she was back in her hospital room with Scott she lay there quietly looking out the window.

Scott had asked them to rush her results so he could get her back home. He was sitting on the edge of her bed holding her hand when the doctor came in.

“Hello again, Ethne,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she said.

“Good, good,” he said, taking a seat opposite them and looking over her chart. “Well, everything looks fine, Ethne, all of your tests came back normal and your CT looks clear. We may want to have you back for another look in a little while just to be on the safe side, that was a pretty good fall.”

“Okay,” she said, her mood as flat as her tone.

She was glad she was okay but she really didn’t feel like talking about seizures anymore, it was probably her least favorite subject.

“So now our obvious concern is why you have had a seizure after having such a long gap since your last,” he said, staring down at his notes again.

“Did you take your medication last night?” he asked, looking up at her.

She tried to think. Her days all ran into one another, especially when Scott was with her. She often found herself barely thinking about things like that, though she was still usually pretty meticulous about it. She knew it was important to take them, and obviously staying seizure free was a top priority.

Still, she was having a hard time remembering if she had taken it the night before.

“I’m not sure, it’s possible I forgot,” she said.

“Hmmm...well in that case, maybe this is just a minor hiccup and we can get you back to your old self in no time at all. Of course...,” he said, pausing with some news he knew she wouldn’t like to hear. “This does mean I can’t let you drive for at least 3 months.”

“Oh,” she said. She hadn’t even thought of that, but she of all people knew why. “Okay,” was all she could add.

“Don’t worry about that for now,” Scott said, winking at her.

Normally, she would have considered that wink incredibly cute; right now however, she was not in the mood for cute.

She tried to give him a small smile though; it wasn’t his fault any of this was happening after all.

After the doctor had left, Scott helped her get dressed and wheeled her back to the car, once again making her feel like a total idiot...at work.

No one had noticed her this time, which was actually a comfort.

They didn’t talk much on the drive back; he looked over at her a few times, but could tell she wasn’t in the mood for chatting just yet.

He had left notice he wouldn’t be working that night and snuggled her in on the couch after arriving home.

Cozy in her blanket, he brought her some tea and sat close by, but not too close, he was obviously unsure of where they stood now.

Finally, she spoke to him after taking a sip of tea. “Scott, I’m so sorry about what I said earlier. I’m never quite myself after a seizure, I remember that much even though it’s been a while.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I understand.”

He took one of her hands, she only marginally let him.

“I haven’t changed my mind though, Scott,” she said, knowing this news was going to hit him as hard as it was hitting her.

“Ethne,” he said, almost breathless. “Don’t do this. It was one time, just...give it time, please?”

“I don’t know if I can, Scott,” she said, pulling her hand away and doing her best to keep the tears from falling, she really didn’t want to cry. “I want to – but today just brought it all back again, I don’t want to put you through this...if it isn’t just one time, well...I don’t want to put you through this.”

He sat there looking stunned, like he had just been struck by the lightening that was meant to hit her again.

She felt awful. All she wanted to do was let him hold her. She was terrified what today might mean, she didn’t want to go back to that life. She didn’t want to feel like a time bomb just waiting to go off.

Maybe the doctor was right. Maybe she had just messed up, for all she knew she had missed more than one dose. The last few months had gone by quickly as if she were in a daze.

She had been so happy; it was completely possible that some nights maybe it slipped her mind.

All the more reason to not be with him right now though, she needed to make sure she stayed on top of things, couldn’t risk the distraction being the detriment.

“Scott,” she said, trying to get him to look at her again. “Please try to understand?”

“Oh, I understand, Ethne.” His tone was almost bitter, though she knew he didn’t mean it to be. “I just think you’re making a mistake,” he said, finally looking up at her. “I don’t want you to be alone right now. I want to help you get through this – I want to be there for you. Can’t you let me?”

This time she thought maybe he was right. She was a little scared to be alone now; she hated the idea of him seeing her like that. But being alone, if something happened, was even more terrifying to her.

She hadn't had to worry about that recently since she had been symptom free for so long. It was almost like a past life, a nemesis that was back now in the forefront ready to torment her again.

"I don't know, Scott," she said, this time not making him let go. "I want to; I don't want you to leave."

"Good then," he said, relaxing a little, but not completely. "I'm staying."

"At least for the night," she said. "Let me think about it, but no matter what I decide I hope you'll be able to respect it."

"We'll see," he said, smiling at her obviously trying to bribe her with that cute grin of his, which usually worked.

He pulled her close to him letting her head rest on his shoulder. Her knees were curled up so tightly she looked like a tiny little ball, a scared little child just wanting to be told that everything was going to be alright. She felt like a scared little child again. She hadn't really wanted to feel that way anymore; she felt safe with Scott and that was a nice feeling.

It wasn't long before she was sleeping soundly, Scott holding her with no intention of letting go.

CHAPTER 16

The next morning she woke suddenly; but instead of finding herself still curled up in Scott's arms, she was alone tucked into her bed.

The phone was ringing off the hook and forced her to leave her warm cocoon in order to make it stop.

"Hello?" she asked, realizing quickly how nice her cocoon truly had been.

"Hello, Ethne?" said the voice on the other end.

"Aunt Katherine?" Ethne asked.

"Yes, it's me sweetie, I heard about your ordeal yesterday, I wanted to make sure you were alright?"

"Oh, yeah...that, I'm alright, how did you find out about it?"

"Your friend called me, Scott is it?" she asked.

"Yeah, Scott," she said, wondering two things, how he knew about her aunt and where he had gotten her number.

Actually, three things, where was Scott?

He had practically begged her to stay last night, she never thought he would have just up and left her without saying a word.

Just then Scott came through the front door carrying something in a bag and two cups of coffee.

"Listen, thanks for calling. I can't talk at the moment, can I call you later?" she asked.

"Sure, sure, hun. I'm glad to hear you are okay, let me know if you need anything."

"I will," Ethne said, before hanging up and turning toward the man bringing her treats.

"Good morning," he said, walking over and giving her a hug and a kiss.

"Morning," she said.

"What are you doing up?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders innocently. "The phone was ringing," she said, before slowly making her way back to her bed.

"You should have let it ring," he said.

"I will next time," she said. While it had been sweet of her aunt to check in on her she really didn't feel like talking to anyone about it at the moment, or ever really.

She was feeling out of sorts, like she had just been swimming in the Blue Hole for hours on end. Why that comparison had just come to mind she had no idea, but nonetheless it was there and she was exhausted.

Her arms were tired; her legs were tingling, almost as a punishment to her for being on them when they didn't want to be. Her brain was only partially aware of her surroundings, preferring instead to be back asleep in her cozy cocoon.

She wondered how she had gotten there; she had no memory of him moving her.

As she lay back down, he helped pull up all of the blankets to tuck her in.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're very welcome," he said, smiling at her and kissing her forehead.

"What did you bring me?" she asked, only marginally caring through her tired haze.

"I brought you some warm milk, and a croissant," he said, putting the bag and cups down on her nightstand. "I didn't know if you'd be hungry or not, and I can certainly go make something else if you'd prefer?"

"What time is it?" she asked, suddenly realizing she didn't have a clue.

"It's about 4 o'clock," he said.

"Wow, 4, I was out a while," she said, starting to eyeball the little bag he had brought.

He followed her gaze and laughed. "A little hungry then?"

"A little," she said, taking the pastry from him and nibbling on it.

He sat down next to her and ate his own while taking slow contemplative sips of his drink, which she could smell was not warm milk.

Had she been more awake she might have been jealous, but the warm milk actually sounded good to her.

"You look pretty sleepy still, I think you should rest some more," he said.

"Yeah, I will," she said, drinking a little more of the milk before setting it on the table and lying down again.

“Don’t you need to get to work?” she asked, barely turning her head to look at him.

“No, I called in sick,” he said.

“Scott, you don’t have to stay with me, you can’t keep missing work because of me; they need you.”

“You need me more, and I have no problem staying,” he said. “Now try to sleep and don’t worry about anything else.”

As she closed her eyes she felt his hands lightly massaging her back, within seconds she was in a dark abyss far away from her home in San Francisco.

She had absolutely no idea how long she had been asleep that time when she woke up, but it was dark outside. Scott was lying next to her fast asleep. She lifted her head a little to look at the time and saw that it was 3 a.m.

Her stomach growled and she knew she would have to appease it before she had a chance of getting any more rest.

She slipped out of the covers as quietly as she could so she wouldn’t wake him and made her way to the kitchen. She turned the lights down low not really wanting to be jolted back into the world of the living just yet.

On the counter was a box.

She shook her head; the man was lying in her bed asleep and was still delivering her boxes.

Opening it, she found a little note and a small white box, of the jewelry variety.

“Hi, sleepyhead,” the note said. “I made you some soup, it’s in the fridge and there is some bread on the counter, please come and wake me.”

She had no intention of doing so, it was really late and he had had quite a time as well worrying and fussing over her. It made her feel incredibly guilty.

Putting the note on the counter she picked up the little white box.

Slowly opening it she saw a necklace inside, nothing hugely elaborate, but a modest silver chain with a delicate butterfly pendant.

She smiled instantly at the gesture, though the circumstances made her smile fade almost as quickly as it had come.

It was a very sweet gift, all of his attentions had been so; she only wished it had happened for a different reason.

She slipped the pendant back into the box and closed the lid and gently laid it back down on the counter.

Peering into the fridge with the light shining down on her bare legs she pulled the bowl of soup out and closed the door.

While she was starving, she was feeling really tired again and just wanted to be back in bed. She quickly heated up the soup, grabbed some of the bread and made her way back to her room.

She climbed into bed as quietly as she could and pulled the covers over her, waiting a moment for the goose bumps to leave.

As she ate her soup and the bread that Scott had made for her she watched him sleep, watched each peaceful breath that escaped his lips. She wanted to kiss those lips but didn't want to wake him, so she refrained and instead lay back down next to him, wishing she was snuggled in his arms again.

It wasn't long before she was dreaming.

Sitting in the sand, alone, Ethne watched the waves making their dedicated trip to and from the beach, each crashing sound filling her with a sense of calm.

She closed her eyes and let the sun soak into her skin knowing she would have to turn back soon. Feeling the sand through her fingers she sifted it in a rhythm that matched the waves.

With her eyes still closed she felt in her fingertips something larger than specks of sand and looked down to see a stunning blue pearl in the palm of her hand.

Suddenly, she was awake again, brought back in an instant to her life far from the sands of San Pedro. She woke feeling sadness that it had only been a dream, and that her pearl would never again be in the palm of her hand.

She felt the emptiness there before looking over and once again finding Scott gone.

This time it was only 10 a.m., she hadn't slept the entire afternoon away, and she was actually starting to feel a little more herself.

She could hear Scott in the kitchen making only as much noise as was necessary, which in a kitchen you don't know that well, was actually quite a lot.

Sitting up she tested the stability of her head; she had been feeling quite...groggy since the seizure, like her head was involuntarily swimming.

It was feeling better though so she swung her legs over the side of the bed and made her way out to the kitchen to see what her clumsy chef was up to.

Walking down the hall she remembered the necklace, she wasn't sure what she was going to say

about that. They hadn't been dating that long and she was pretty sure, though it was small, that the butterfly had diamonds on it.

For her history, that was a pretty huge gesture. And she still hadn't made up her mind about whether or not she was going to keep things going.

Appearing from the hallway Scott looked up, he was wearing her apron and looking absolutely ridiculous in it, which was really rather cute.

He grinned when he saw her coming. "Morning you, did you sleep well?" he asked, holding the frying pan he had just noisily unearthed from beneath the stove.

"Yeah, I did," she said. "Which is surprising considering the huge earthquake in my kitchen."

He sheepishly looked at her. "Oh...yeah, sorry about that."

She laughed. "I was just kidding, I was ready to get up anyway – did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yep...eventually," he said. "You don't make it easy to find things in here."

"Well, I know where everything is," she said, strolling over to him, distracting him with a long kiss before taking the frying pan from him.

"Want me to make you breakfast?" she asked.

"No, no...I want to make you breakfast," he said. "Hence the earthquake."

She laughed before relinquishing the frying pan again and making her way to the table to sit down.

He had already made a beautiful table laden with coffee and a fruit salad. There was a paper sitting on the table waiting for her and before she had even sat down he was draping a blanket over her shoulders.

She could get used to this; she wanted to get used to this.

“So...,” he said, returning to his chef duties in the kitchen. “I see you found your soup okay?”

She could tell the next question wasn’t far behind.

“Yes, I did, thank you,” she said, thumbing through the paper and taking a sip of coffee.

“Did you find anything else?” he asked, he had disappeared from view and was obviously on another quest for something, though what she couldn’t imagine.

“Yes...I did,” she said. She still had no idea what to say, so she went with the obvious. “Thank you, the necklace is beautiful.”

“Can I put it on you?” he asked.

“I suppose you can,” she said. “Although if I’m being honest I feel rather guilty about it.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because, it’s a very nice gift, Scott, and I haven’t yet made up my mind.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, that’s okay, I didn’t buy it for you to bribe you – I would have sent you to Paris or something for that.”

She giggled; she could tell he was grinning even though he was still MIA behind the counter.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“A waffle maker,” he said. “Surely you have one?”

“Actually I don’t,” she said. “Never really needed one I guess. Besides you don’t have to make me waffles, eggs would be just fine, Scott.”

“Well, Ms. Selfish, I actually felt like waffles,” he said, closing the cupboard door and reappearing with a mocking grin on his face.

"I just usually eat the kind from the freezer," she said.

"Well that's just wrong, Ethne," he said.

"If you say so," she said, smiling and returning to the newspaper.

"This fruit looks delicious; did you go out again today?" she asked. "I know I don't have half of this stuff in my kitchen."

"Yeah, for a bit," he said, returning to the task of making her some eggs. "Go ahead and start eating, I'll be over there soon."

"No, I can wait," she said, drinking her coffee and watching him. "The apron looks stunning on you by the way, you should keep it. I never use it anyway, and I think the chicken on the front brings out the color of your eyes."

"Ha...ha, very funny," he said. "Anything to make you laugh though, it really is hideous you know."

"It was a gift," she shrugged, before returning to the paper.

She never read the paper; she wasn't sure why she was now.

Bringing over a huge plate of scrambled eggs and some bacon he sat down next to her.

"Geez," she said. "You planning to feed an army?"

"No, but I'm starving and I bet you are too," he said.

That was actually very accurate.

She started eating and surprisingly ate everything he had put in front of her, including a majority of the fruit.

"See," he said. "You were hungry."

“Guess so,” she said.

After clearing the table he came up behind her and started to put on the necklace, she didn’t object, though she still had reservations.

“That looks beautiful on you,” he said, standing back and appraising his shopping abilities.

She felt the pendant with her fingers and tried to look down to see it, but wasn’t able to.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t feel obligated to wear it, Ethne, I just wanted to get it for you - and as you know full well, I tend to get what I want,” he said, winking at her.

“Oh, you do, do you?” she asked, half as a challenge.

“Well, I did get you to face your fears and travel to Belize not knowing why, did I not?”

He had her there.

She sighed. “Yes I suppose you did.”

“I’m serious though, this is a gift, simply because I care about you, that’s all,” he said.

He grew quiet while he resumed cleaning the kitchen.

“You don’t have to clean up, I can do that,” she said, feeling a little guilty all of a sudden.

“It’s no problem,” he said. “You should still take it easy today; you’re off for tonight, but I have to go back in soon.”

“Okay,” she said.

She knew he was going to have to go back to work eventually, but the thought of being alone suddenly made her break out into a cold sweat. She sat down on the couch and tried to breathe calmly.

This was stupid, she had been alone most of her life, she could do this. Still, there was a fear in the

back of her mind, nagging at her like an impatient mother does to a child who isn't listening.

She decided she'd rather be the unmindful child and ignore the fear completely. That was easier said than done, but she didn't have much of a choice.

After he had finished cleaning up, he came and sat with her for a while.

He took her hand in his, stroking the back of it slowly before bring it up and kissing it.

"Will you be okay while I'm gone?" he asked.

Doing her best to hide how she was really feeling she said she would.

He showered and got ready to go and once at the door ready to leave pulled her into him, hugging her tightly.

He let go a little and kissed her, lingering on her lips, gently kissing her before turning to leave.

"If you need anything, call me, and I'll be back here before you can say...waffles," he said, smiling.

She nodded in agreement and said goodbye.

"I can't believe you don't have a waffle maker," he said, before turning and walking down the stairs.

She closed the door after waving goodbye to him and looked around the room suddenly feeling like the only one on the planet.

Her house was quiet, almost too quiet. She decided she didn't really want to hang around there all day letting the solitude gnaw at her like a pesky mosquito.

It had been a long time since her last seizure and she knew she should rest, but she had rested and she felt fine. After showering and getting dressed in something warm she went out for a walk.

The air felt so good on her skin, it seemed like she had been cooped up for a month rather than only a couple of days. And while she had only been marginally aware of the time, the fresh air was intoxicating. It would surely help her make the decision she needed to make about Scott. Whether she would let this necklace sway her decision, or whether or not she was going to have to break his heart, and hers.

She must have been deep in thought and not minding her location, because before she knew it she was miles from her house. That wouldn't have necessarily been a problem but she was suddenly very tired and didn't feel like walking the entire way back.

There was a coffee shop across the street so she went there to take a rest before walking back home. As she opened the door she looked up and found herself staring at Ian.

CHAPTER 17

Et hne just stood there like a statue, not even taking the time to blink. She was not only speechless, she was frozen.

He had smiled instantly when he saw her, obviously not nearly as surprised as she was.

“Hi,” he said. “I was actually about to go by the hospital to see if you were there – fancy meeting you here instead.”

“Umm...yeah,” she said, the words barely making it out of her mouth.

She finally blinked and shook her head making sure she wasn’t seeing things.

She wasn’t.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to find you,” he said.

She was still standing in front of the door and now there were people impatiently trying to move past them.

“Here, why don’t you come in, I’ll buy you a cup of coffee,” he said, holding the door for her as she stepped inside.

“What would you like?” he asked.

“Umm...a decaf latte, thanks,” she said.

When he returned he was still grinning at her, she realized she had really missed that grin and finally smiled back at him.

“So, why did you come here to find me?” she asked.

“Well...I missed you, for one,” he said, blushing a little. “I know it’s pretty weird for me to track you down since you barely know me, but I do have another reason.”

“And what’s that?”

He set his coffee down and reached into his pocket and pulled out the box. Her box.

“My pearl?!” she exclaimed.

He was grinning at her again; obviously aware at how happy he had just made her.

She took the box and opened it to find her beautiful blue pearl nestled in it, as safe as could be. She took it out, held it in her palm and looked up at him and smiled.

“Thank you so much, Ian,” she said. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

When she looked down at the pearl again, the sun hit it and it seemed to almost glow with an iridescent light. This light hit her suddenly with a flash of remembrance, like a memory coming back to a person with amnesia – the reason why the Blue Hole had felt so familiar to her.

The light of the blue pearl had reminded her of what she saw whenever she was waking from a

seizure. Up until now this memory was always washed away with the exhaustion and foggy mind that she was always left with.

Why it was coming to her so clearly now she assumed was because she had just had one only days before. Regardless of the reason, the encompassing blue light that she always felt afterward was a feeling of warmth and love – the same feeling she had felt when she was swimming in the Blue Hole.

She realized she must have been sitting there in silence for a bit longer than she thought; Ian was looking at her with a rather confused look on his face.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, wondering how long she had been quiet.

Trying to pick up where she had left off, she thanked him again for returning it to her.

“You’re welcome,” he said, smiling. “I knew it meant a lot to you, how could it not, it was quite a find. I’m sorry it took me so long to bring it to you.”

“Are you kidding?” she asked. “I never would have expected you to do that...but I’m glad you did.”

She was smiling, her first real smile since her relapse of the long past, partially forgotten seizures. Ian had no idea what kind of gift he had just given her.

She didn’t know why remembering this blue light comforted her, especially since she saw it after she had one of the dreaded episodes, but for whatever reason it did.

“It gave me a good excuse to come see you, though I might have come anyway,” he said.

He was blushing a little again she could see; she probably was too. She had really missed him, but

things were a little more complicated now; a lot more complicated now actually.

"I'm flattered, Ian," she said. "I really am...I've missed you too."

With that little bit of information she could see his confidence returning, she hated to have to dash it again.

"You did?" he asked. "Really?"

"Yeah, of course I did," she said. "I hated having to say goodbye to you that day, and I have thought about you a lot. The truth is though; my life has gotten even more complicated."

"Oh?" he asked. "How so?"

"Well, I need to be completely honest with you, I'm seeing someone now," she said, looking down at the pearl in her hands and knowing she would have to confess the rest now too.

"Oh," he said. "Well, I can't say that I'm surprised, you're very beautiful, Ethne. I always thought it was strange when we met that you weren't already with someone."

She blushed, still not used to compliments.

He gave her a little smile, trying to reassure her that he'd live, albeit in disappointment.

"That's the other thing I need to tell you," she said, taking a deep breath and putting her pearl back in the box; she told him about her seizures.

She didn't feel the need to say her entire life history just then, but enough to hopefully explain why she hadn't been with someone sooner.

"So that's why you've been alone?" he asked, obviously unconvinced the way Scott had been. "That's pretty sad, Ethne, and to me unnecessary, but I'm not you so I won't judge you – I just think it's

sad. What changed your mind then? Who is this lucky guy who won you over when I couldn't?"

"I wouldn't say you didn't win me over," she said, smiling at him shyly. "Had you had more time things may have ended differently."

"You think so?" he asked, with an incredibly cute grin on his face. She absolutely hated having to talk to Ian about Scott, the same way she would have felt the other way around.

"This other guy though, was actually the one who sent me on the trip," she confessed, realizing now that she might have to explain the bizarre circumstances of the trip, or perhaps not – maybe she could omit a little of the *crazy*.

"He is my boss actually, and one day decided I needed cheering up I guess, so he sent me to Belize," she said, keeping the details at a minimum. "We didn't start dating until I got back, and even then he had to do a lot of convincing too, so don't feel bad. I have really missed you though, Ian. I've thought about you a lot."

"Did you tell him about me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I didn't know at the time that he wanted to date me, I didn't want to hurt his feelings; you can understand that I hope?"

"Yeah, I do," he said, chuckling. "That probably wouldn't have gone over well."

She laughed. "My thoughts exactly."

"I was actually trying to decide whether or not I should keep dating him when I ran into you," she said, hoping that didn't spring any false hope for him. If she decided against it, the odds were not in Ian's favor either.

"Why?" he asked.

“Because of my condition,” she said, knowing full well nobody could understand her thinking but her; she was going to have to figure this out on her own.

“Well, I know it’s none of my business,” he said. “But I don’t think you should stop seeing him just because of that. I know I wouldn’t want you to, I’m sure he feels the same way.”

She looked up and nodded at him. If Scott couldn’t convince her, it wasn’t likely that Ian could either.

Although, while looking at him all of the memories of their time together flooded back, and with them so did the butterflies. She remembered the night walking on the beach, how comfortable she had been with him, how attracted they were to each other. How they had only kissed was beyond her, but she supposed that was probably all on her too.

She realized now that maybe having coffee with Ian had been a mistake, even if it had been completely unplanned. She had felt bad enough never telling Scott about Ian, but now she was sitting and having coffee with the guy while Scott was at work worrying about her.

She suddenly felt a huge pang of guilt. She had feelings for Ian, and he for her, and they both knew it. The only one who didn’t know it was Scott.

It seemed Ian could read her mind and he stood up. “I should probably go, Ethne; I don’t want to complicate things more for you.”

“Oh, Ian,” she said. “I’m sorry you feel that way...I know you’re right, but I have missed you too and I am so grateful you brought this back to me.”

She stood up and hugged him, feeling his heart beating quickly against hers. The hug lasted a lot

longer than she had planned. After they separated and were looking into each other's eyes she could tell they both wanted the same thing, but neither of them said anything.

Instead he picked up his coat and hung it over his arm. "Will you be okay getting home?" he asked. "Don't take this the wrong way – you look a little tired."

She laughed a little. "Well, honestly I am feeling quite tired, I probably walked farther than I should have today. I might just wait here a while longer before I go."

"Ethne, I don't feel right leaving you here like this, let me give you a ride home," he said.

She would have put up more of a fight given the circumstances, but she was exhausted.

"Okay," she said finally, standing up and walking to his car with him.

"I still can't believe you came all this way to see me...to give me this," she said.

"Well, I only wish I'd come sooner," he said. "Though by the sounds of things that probably wouldn't have made a difference."

"It's hard to say," she said.

He looked over at her then. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Realizing she had just opened a can of worms that should not have been opened – things were hard enough as it was."

"No, tell me," he insisted.

"I just meant that I really missed you, that I really hadn't wanted to leave that day, and had Scott not come into the picture, I would have been wondering about you – that's all."

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t help to dwell on what might have been,” he said, doing his best to make her, and himself, feel better. “Do you love this guy?” he finally asked.

She paused for a second before answering. “I don’t know...I think so.”

“Well,” he said. “He is a very lucky guy then – I hope you give him a chance, Ethne, you deserve to be happy.”

He opened the door for her and helped her climb in. Her legs were simply exhausted, like two shaking branches on a tree in the wind, though part of that may have been nerves – it had been quite a shock to see Ian again.

She gave him directions to her house and he helped her to her door.

They hugged goodbye, lingering perhaps a little too long, knowing they would likely not see each other again. She kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you again, Ian,” she said, not quite wanting to let him go this time.

“No problem, Ethne,” he said in the casual way he had about him. “And hey, if things don’t work out with you guys, you know where I live...Miami – you can come find *me* this time.”

She laughed at him, even though she was sad to see him go, he always seemed to make her feel better. She waved to him as he got back in his car and drove away. She hadn’t noticed Scott’s car parked on the street. With the box holding her precious pearl in her hand she unlocked her door and went inside.

CHAPTER 18

The house was quiet when she went inside; she was getting so used to having Scott around a quiet house was not as common as it used to be.

Even though she felt tired, she almost wished she wasn't home already – the house was going to feel quite empty until Scott got back.

She was a little relieved he hadn't been around though when Ian had brought her home, saved her an uncomfortable afternoon of explaining.

As she walked into the living room she suddenly got a weird feeling that she wasn't alone. When she rounded the corner to the kitchen she saw Scott sitting at the dining room table and a new waffle maker sitting on the counter with a huge bow on it.

"Hi!" she said. "What are you doing back so soon? – and what's this?" she asked, looking at the shiny new appliance.

Excited at the prospect the afternoon might not be a quiet one, she walked over and wrapped her arms around him from behind and kissed him on the neck.

She was too happy and exhausted to even be aware that he hadn't responded to her yet. When she sat down next to him she saw his face, and a look she'd never seen before. She suddenly was hit with a feeling of dread that perhaps the afternoon of explaining was about to commence.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "I was really worried about you."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I went for a walk after you left – ended up walking too far and got really tired."

"Are you okay?" he asked, the look on his face softening only a little.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said. "So, why are you back from work so soon?"

"I tried to call you – you didn't pick up, I got worried," he said.

He stood up and went into the kitchen to make some tea, walking as if he was in a daze.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I must have left my phone off."

He didn't look up. She was definitely getting the feeling that this had less to do with the walk and more to do with the person who had dropped her off from it.

Her heart started pounding at the thought that Scott had seen her with Ian.

"Are you sure that's all it was?" he asked.

“What do you mean?” she asked, hoping she was wrong.

His shoulders slumped a little as he walked over and set her cup of tea down on the table. He sat down next to her holding his cup tightly in both hands.

“Ethne, I saw you,” he admitted finally, still not looking her in the eye.

“Saw me?” she asked.

That last question was her final futile attempt at denial, she knew now that he had seen her.

“Yes, I saw you – just now, hugging another guy,” he said. “Who was he?”

“Oh,” she said, the only words she could muster just then; the walk and seeing Ian really had been a bit much for her. Her mind and body were exhausted, but she knew this conversation wasn’t going to wait.

“That was Ian,” she said. “I met him on the plane trip to Belize. He was returning this to me – I had lost it the last day I was there.”

She set the white box on the table and let him open it.

“That’s a nice pearl,” he said, with very little emotion. “Did he give that to you?”

“No, actually,” she said, taking the box back and picking up the pearl as if it were her protection from the conversation they were about to have. “I found this while snorkeling in the Blue Hole.”

“You found it?” he asked, with a little more interest as he leaned in to take a closer look.

She could tell from his tone that he didn’t believe her, and she couldn’t blame him, it really was rather hard to believe.

“Yes, I did,” she said. “I was on my way back to the boat when the sun hit it; I went to see what it was and found it laying on one of the shelves of the reef. I think the box fell out of my pocket right before I got on the plane to come home – I thought I’d never see it again. Ian must have found it,” she said, shrugging her shoulders and hoping that would be enough of an explanation, though that was doubtful she knew.

“Oh, I see,” he said.

After a few moments of silence he finally looked up into her eyes.

“Was he going home the same day as you then?”

“What?...oh...no,” she said, feeling like a cornered cat who had no chance of escape.

“So...then why was he at the airport with you?”

“Well...he just came to keep me company before I had to leave – he knew I was rather anxious about flying home.”

“Oh, so you got to know him a bit then?”

“A little, he was sitting next to me on the way there, so he kind of got to see my anxiety first hand,” she said.

“You looked like you knew him pretty well to me,” he said, standing up and heading back to the kitchen. “And he did come all the way here to return that to you,” he said, pointing at the pearl in her hand.

“I am as surprised as you are that he did that. I would have never expected anyone to do that, although I’m grateful he did, this pearl meant a lot to me. But honestly, I don’t even know how he found me, all I had told him was that I was from San Francisco and worked at a hospital – that’s not a lot to go on,” she said, hoping it wasn’t going to be

necessary to bring up her feelings for him; she couldn't see any good coming from that.

"Ethne, I'm not stupid, I saw your hug," he said. "And you kissed him. Just tell me the truth, please?"

She could see it in his eyes that he knew there was more than she was saying. Obviously she wasn't wrong in thinking there was something strong between her and Ian, Scott had seen it too.

"I don't really know what to say, Scott," she said, staring down at her tea cup that she hadn't even touched. "I met the guy on the plane, we chatted a bit – it turned out we were staying at the same place, so after I arrived he was there too. I had a lunch and a dinner with him and had told him about my snorkeling day. I'm not going to lie, I liked him – but you know me, I don't date people...well, didn't date people, so I knew it wasn't going to go beyond that."

She didn't enjoy this feeling of being attacked, but knew he had every right to be a little upset. That was why she had decided not to say anything – she had never anticipated she would ever see Ian again.

She was starting to feel really tired and although she knew he wanted more of an explanation, she didn't know if she had it in her.

The wave of tiredness was almost too much to take; she was starting to feel dizzy.

"Ummm...Scott, I think I need to go lie down."

The look of hurt in his eyes that she had seen before was now replaced with a look of concern.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I think so, I'm just really tired, I think I overdid it today," she said.

"Let me help you into bed then," he said, walking back over to her and helping her out of the chair.

She looked up at him and still saw a remnant of sadness in his face.

“Scott, I will tell you more about it later if you want. But honestly there isn’t much to tell, and I met him before I even knew about you.”

“Yeah, I know, Ethne,” he said.

They walked quietly to the bedroom together and he helped her get undressed and settled comfortably into bed.

After she was all tucked in he stroked her hair lightly and felt her soft cheek. He leaned over and kissed her. “I just really care about you, Ethne – I think I’ve fallen in love with you.”

She smiled at him through her tired haze, touched his cheek to keep him from pulling away and looked him in the eye.

“I love you too, Scott,” she said.

His eyes brightened as he smiled at her; obviously those words put his mind at ease a little after what he had just seen and heard.

“Well, if that’s true, then tomorrow you will tell me why you didn’t tell me about that beautiful pearl you found.”

“Okay,” she said. “And Scott,” she said, almost in a whisper.

“Yes?”

“Thank you for the waffle maker,” she said, before finally letting sleep overcome her and take her far away from the happiness and confusion she found herself in. With her pearl safely back in the box and sitting on her nightstand only an arm stretch away, Ethne slept a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 19

In the morning Ethne was feeling almost herself again, she must have slept forever. Stretching, she sat up feeling a little saddened that Scott wasn't lying next to her.

It was almost 11 o'clock; she *had* slept forever.

She could almost kick Scott for letting her sleep so late. But after remembering their conversation from the day before, she figured he had probably already been kicked enough.

The house was pretty quiet, which for some reason concerned her. She tried to recall how much she had actually told him, but was having a difficult time with all of the details.

She did vaguely remember him saying he loved her, and she saying the same, so he wouldn't have left, would he?

Grabbing her favorite shirt she put it on and went searching for him; there were no earthquakes going on in her kitchen that day.

The living room and kitchen were empty; there was no sign of Scott and no breakfast waiting for her. She duly noted the disappointing feeling of that, and it scared her a little.

“It was far too early for him to leave for work, where could he be?” she thought, before collapsing on her couch feeling slightly annoyed that the day was starting out this way.

She could think of a million other ways it could have started. After telling someone you love them this was not one of the ways.

Finding herself staring at her ceiling again she started thinking about her pearl and her new found awareness of the blue light. She was suddenly curious as to what it could mean, if perhaps other people saw and felt such things during a seizure.

Getting off the couch she went back to her room to do a little research, hoping in the back of her mind that Scott would come back soon.

While she waited for her slow computer to wake up she took the pearl out of the box and stared at it. She couldn't believe how good it felt to have it back. It was like a piece of her had been missing after she had lost it, as stupid as that sounded.

As she went looking for information about the mysterious light that she recalled seeing after her seizure, she found that indeed she was not alone.

The information she found was quite shocking really, and it kept her reading other people's accounts for at least an hour.

While no stories she read mentioned anything about seizures and seeing the light, plenty of others had seen what they referred to as the Blue Pearl. Even though it did have other names, that particular name made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up – considering the peculiar find that was now in her hand, as well as the fact that the Blue Pearl was defined as the physical manifestation of the soul.

The information she had uncovered, in her mind, was basically saying that she was seeing her soul, or perhaps the soul of another. Considering how she felt about death that little bit of knowledge freaked her out.

One of the references even stated that death was just the name that was given to the departure of the Blue Pearl from the body.

Knowing this now, she wondered why she had felt comforted by the Blue Hole and even with this pearl in her hand. If when she saw the light it may have meant for a time her soul had left her body...that she had died...why would she feel comfort in seeing the light?

She supposed that could be because she was seeing it, which meant she hadn't died. But still...seizures were scary enough; she knew that they were dangerous, dangerous enough that they had taken her parents from her. But she had never considered the idea that she may actually be dying while having one.

The other possibility was that when you see the light, as one person stated, that it was a symbol of the door into the kingdom of God. Many felt comfort in this connection.

Ethne was not a very religious person, however, so this concept was foreign to her and not really one that brought her any comfort.

Working in a hospital she knew that these claims would be considered ludicrous by a doctor, so she tried to take them with a grain; but the thought still nagged.

The commonality of everyone's accounts was that experiencing this light was a "divine" experience, one that some people actually sought out in meditation.

If this were true, then maybe seeing the light wasn't as dire as she thought. If seeing the Blue Pearl was a normal occurrence for some people who weren't having seizures, and that they actually wanted to see it, maybe it was a good thing she saw it; and that is why it had comforted her.

She had felt a sense of love and warmth when she recalled having seen it. It was the same feeling she had felt when she was swimming in the Blue Hole, and the same feeling she felt while she held the pearl.

While she did fear death, fear was not something she felt when she saw the Blue Pearl. Although, she didn't really care to see it again if it meant another seizure; she truly hoped she'd never have to have one of those again.

When she turned off her computer she realized she was starving. It was after 1 p.m. and Scott was still not back; she was starting to get a little worried.

She put the pearl back in the box and decided to take a shower, hoping he would be back by the time she was out.

It really wasn't like him to leave like this, with no note, no nothing.

Just as she was about to get in the shower she heard the front door open. Standing there naked she truly hoped it was Scott. Deciding it couldn't really be anyone else she grabbed her towel and wrapped it around her before running out to see him.

When he saw her running down the hall in just her towel he laughed loudly and caught her as she jumped into his arms.

"Where were you?!" she said, giving him a kiss before he put her down.

"I went out for a run," he said. "Didn't you get my note?"

"No, what note?"

"It was in the fridge, next to the waffle batter. I told you to make me some," he said, crossing his arms. "Are you saying you didn't make me any waffles? That is very rude, Ethne," he said, with a playful grin on his face. "You must be starving! Don't tell me you just got up, you lazy thing."

"No! Of course not," she said.

"Well, then what have you been up to, if eating wasn't on your agenda?" he asked.

The knowledge of seeing the Blue Pearl was new to her. She was still letting it sink in and wasn't ready to share anything with him yet. She wasn't sure how she felt about all of it – knowing what she may or may not be seeing had affected her. She didn't know just yet what the effect meant for her future.

"Nothing really," she said, choosing for now to omit her research session. "Just waiting for you, you had me a little worried."

"Did I now?" he said. "Well, we will have to stop doing that to each other now won't we – and if you weren't so lazy and had gotten food for yourself like a

normal human being, you would have known that I was fine.”

He grabbed her towel and pulled it free from her before racing down the hall with it, leaving her standing naked and freezing in her living room.

“Hey!” she said, running after him with a huge smile on her face.

She found him in the bathroom preparing the shower. “Care to join me?” he asked, holding her towel as ransom for her answer.

Walking up to him, she took her towel back and threw it on the floor, answering him with a kiss.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, baby,” he said, holding her close to him before letting her get into the hot water first.

After their shower Ethne was standing in front of the mirror brushing her hair when Scott came up from behind and wrapped his arms around her. She leaned back into him and smiled at him in the mirror.

“So...,” he said. “I suppose you’re going to make me break in your new waffle maker?”

She giggled. “Well, it does seem rather complicated, so much harder than just popping one in the toaster – but I think I can handle it.”

“Here,” he said, handing her her apron. “Don’t forget this...no need to get dressed first.”

“Ha ha ha, very funny,” she said, hitting him on the arm.

He laughed back at her before heading out to the kitchen. She joined him after getting dressed, but left the apron in the bedroom; it really was hideous.

Making the waffles had been easy, especially since he had been sweet and had made the batter already.

They both ate them quickly since they hadn't eaten anything all day.

Soon they would both be going to work. While being ill was not at the top of her list, she hadn't minded getting the days off.

While he sipped his coffee he looked at her, obviously with something on his mind.

"So?" he asked, in a way that implied she knew what it was he was wanting.

"Yes?" she said.

"Do you want to tell me more about the pearl?" he asked. "About Ian?"

She had just had so much fun and had been so happy to see him; this discussion was the farthest thing from what she wanted to do. But she supposed he deserved to know more.

"What do you want to know exactly?" she asked, taking a sip of her coffee and slightly dreading what his questions would be.

"Well...I guess for one, I'd like to know why you didn't tell me about either of them? Meeting Ian, I can understand I suppose. But why didn't you tell me about finding the pearl?"

She thought about that for a moment. Having found out more about the feelings it invoked she understood a little more why she had left it out, but she wasn't ready to talk about that.

"I guess, because I was so sad about having lost it," she said. "I had planned on telling you about it after Ian returned it to me."

"Fair enough," he said. "Can I ask you one more thing?"

"I suppose," she said, feeling suddenly uncomfortable about where this was going.

“Did you kiss Ian?”

She had not expected that question. Her heart started pounding at the idea of telling him about her moments with Ian. They were personal, and frankly she didn’t see them relevant to their current relationship. It had happened before they were dating – albeit while on the trip that Scott had planned, unbeknownst to her.

Ultimately though, she supposed there was no need for detail, honesty sure, but detail...no.

“Yes...I did,” she said.

“Did you like it?” he asked.

“What kind of question is that?!” she said, hitting his arm.

He laughed. “Well, I need to know if I should be jealous.”

“Ha ha – well, I don’t think it’s any of your business, Mr. Nosy.”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “But honestly, it looked to me like you really like the guy.”

His tone was more serious now; she didn’t know what she could say to him to put his mind at ease. While it was true she did have feelings for him, she had made no attempts to keep the relationship with him going.

“Well...I do,” she said, shocked by her own honesty. “But, I have no plans to ever see him again, Scott. I don’t even know anything about him, really, except that he lives in Miami.”

He thought for a minute about her confession, she didn’t think he had expected her honesty either.

“Do you like him better than me?” he asked, a question she *really* hadn’t expected. He certainly wasn’t holding back today.

“Scott,” she said, taking a deep breath that she released slowly to let out a little of the anger she was feeling by this inquisition. “I don’t think that’s very fair to ask me, or that I could honestly answer you – I’m a bit confused by all of this, if I’m truly being honest with you. Don’t forget about what just happened two days ago, I’m not even sure I should be dating...you or anyone for that matter.”

“Oh, so we’re back to that?” he asked, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

“Back to it?” she asked. “Had we ever left it?”

“Well I thought we had, after all I did buy you a waffle maker,” he said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah...you did,” she said, feeling her anger subside a little. “Although, he brought me back my pearl,” she said, with an obvious jab at his insinuation of debt over a waffle maker.

He laughed. “Honestly, Ethne, I don’t see how you possibly think you’re going to get away with living alone at this point – when you have two guys who have other ideas.”

She rolled her eyes. He obviously still did not understand her seriousness on the matter, or she supposed he just didn’t want to.

“So...you really like this guy, huh?” he said, turning the subject back to things less dire than the subject of seizures.

“I did,” she said, hoping the past tense would make him drop the subject. “Why?”

“Just curious – guess I’m going to need to up my game,” he said, finishing his coffee with a little smirk.

“More mysterious notes?” she asked.

“We’ll see,” he said, grinning before getting up to clear the table.

CHAPTER 20

The next few months went by uneventfully, though she was constantly paranoid that the calm was going to be interrupted by a storm. The paranoia made things less enjoyable and she and Scott often found themselves arguing over the stupidest things.

She could tell he had paranoia too, over a different matter though. Less worried about the seizures and more worried that she was just going to change her mind one day and end things, which honestly wasn't far from reality.

While she loved being with Scott, absolutely loved having him in her life, she was constantly afraid of losing him – and the longer they were together, the more attached she was. After losing her parents she had sworn to never get attached to anything or anyone ever again.

Scott had brought her back to reality by sending her to Belize, but what he couldn't do was heal the scar from her past. A scar that was always with her, reminding her of how fragile life was; no matter what Scott tried to do, he couldn't take that fear away from her. And becoming so close to her had just made that fear all the more prominent.

He was beginning to worry about her. She hadn't had a seizure in over six months. She was driving again and life was returning to normal, but he could tell that she still felt like a ticking time bomb.

The doctors were optimistic that she had once again found a balance with the medications. But they too couldn't promise that she would never have a reoccurrence.

He had upped his game as promised and was constantly surprising her with things. She loved it, and he loved seeing her face when it lit up from something he had done for her.

Tonight was something he had planned for a long time. He was just walking up to the door with roses in hand when he noticed that the lights were off, which was strange given the hour.

After somehow managing to unlock the door without dropping everything he was carrying, he went inside. The house was quiet and dark, no sign of Ethne anywhere.

He set everything down in the kitchen and went looking for her in the bedroom. She was curled up in bed fast asleep. She hadn't known about the surprise he had planned, but it was only 8 o'clock so it was rather strange that she was already in bed.

She looked incredibly peaceful sleeping. He hated to wake her, but he was concerned about why she was

in bed, and he also had reservations he needed to keep...if possible.

He sat down next to her and started stroking her hair and back trying to gradually wake her up. It didn't work. After a little longer of trying the subtle way, he finally shook her gently and said her name until her eyes focused on him.

She looked around, seeming a bit confused, yawned and stretched before asking him what time it was and why he had woken her up.

"I think the more important question is why were you asleep so early, are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"Umm...", she said, pausing to try and recollect why she had been sleeping – everything seemed rather fuzzy. "Yeah, I'm okay, I had a headache earlier so I lay down for a while, guess I dozed off."

"Is your head better now?" he asked, a little worried since this was the first sign of anything wrong since her seizure had happened.

She stretched again and yawned as if her slumber had brought her back from another world. "Yeah, it's better now," she said, smiling at him and giving him a hug hello.

"Oh, good," he said, getting up and hurrying out the door. "Hang on, I'll be right back."

She giggled. "Okay."

When he returned to the room he was carrying the red roses and had a huge smile on his face.

She smiled back at the lovely surprise and instantly took them and started inhaling their intoxicating scent.

"What are these for?" she asked, not that he ever needed an excuse it seemed.

"I was hoping they could convince you to get dressed and go somewhere with me."

"Oh?" she asked, surprised by the short notice. "And where are we going?" she asked, already knowing he wouldn't give up that information even if she spent an hour torturing him with tickles.

"Just wear something warm, nice...but warm," he said, leaving her to her devices and heading back to the kitchen.

Within a half hour Ethne was making her way down the hall dressed and ready to go. Scott looked up at her and smiled his approval of the outfit she had chosen.

"Are you still feeling okay?" he asked. "I wouldn't want to go do this if you weren't feeling well."

"Well, unless you're taking me bungee jumping, I think I'm good," she said.

"Shall we?" he said, offering her his arm and walking her to the door.

She hadn't been completely honest with him about how bad the headache had been. Typically she wasn't one who was ever in bed before midnight. But her head felt fine now, so she didn't see any point in worrying him.

She took his arm and they headed out into the night. It was a gorgeous night, the perfect temperature even though they were heading into the colder evenings.

Ever since Ethne had met Scott she found herself getting to enjoy little beauties like these; the small things she most assuredly had been missing before.

They got in his car and started heading to his secret location. She wondered if one day he would

stop surprising her like this, but knowing him, she doubted he was capable.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Yeah, I am,” she responded. “I haven’t had dinner yet. So...where to, Paris for some croissants?” she giggled, pretty sure one day he would probably answer yes to that.

Even though he hadn’t done anything quite as extravagant as the trip to Belize, he still constantly had something up his sleeve. She hoped he did it because he wanted to, and not because he felt he had to.

She wasn’t sure she knew any other man on the planet that did as much planning of things and surprising as he did. Rather than worry about it too much though, she decided she should instead enjoy all of the sweet little things he did for her; it was quite a change from how her life had been.

When they pulled into the parking lot of the marina she started feeling a little anxious, it looked like a boat ride was in her near future. While she didn’t necessarily mind boats, she had never been on one this late at night.

He seemed pretty excited though so she decided to keep her reservations to herself.

Pretty soon they were standing in front of a yacht. A beautiful white yacht. She looked over at Scott with a skeptical look on her face; he was grinning at her.

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” she said.

“After you...,” he said, helping her step onto the boat.

Inside the lights were lit low, they were greeted by a young man.

“Welcome aboard,” he said, taking their coats and showing them to a table that was romantically decorated with candles and champagne glasses.

Scott held the chair out for her and she sat down, still not believing that he had chartered a private yacht for just the two of them.

He told the young man to bring out their dinner shortly after they had left the dock, the man nodded and left, leaving them alone.

“Who are you?” she asked, only half jokingly.

“Batman’s cousin,” he said, pouring her some cider.

Not long after leaving the dock a waiter brought them their food. The dinner alone at a fine restaurant would have cost a pretty penny; she didn’t even want to think of what the rest of this had cost.

All the time she had known Scott they had never discussed money. While it had occurred to her he must make a nice living, since he had spared no expense on her from the beginning, it was an issue that never came up.

This however, was a whole other ballgame; she couldn’t believe anyone would go to such lengths for her.

The boat slowly made its way out into the bay and she could see the lights of the city and the glow of the bridge. It was beautiful and peaceful and a side to the city she had never experienced before; she didn’t even realize she was smiling until she looked over and saw him smiling back at her.

His eyes were bright with the recognition and confirmation that she loved it.

After dinner he asked her if she wanted to dance, this officially being the first time that they had. She nervously accepted.

They danced a few slow songs swaying with the water below them before heading out onto the deck. It was getting colder, but it was still nice out as they snuggled up against each other and stared out into the night sky.

The moon was casting a beautiful reflection on the water, and Scott had his arms wrapped around her tightly, his lips lightly kissing her ear. The whole thing felt like a dream, she wondered in fact once or twice if it was.

She looked up at him after a while, just staring into his eyes, kissed him and whispered "thank you" in his ear.

A few hours later the boat had travelled quite a distance, Ethne asked him how long they'd be gone.

"Oh...until tomorrow," he said.

"What?!" she said. "But I didn't bring anything for overnight."

"Oh don't worry you, I packed everything you would need, it's in our room."

She just looked at him in complete disbelief.

"You really aren't normal, you know that right?" she asked, snuggling back into his arms, quite happy of this fact.

"Well, neither are you my dear," he said, poking her side until she couldn't help but laugh.

"Yes, I know," she sighed.

When they both started yawning he asked if she was ready for bed. Having had a long evening she said she was and they made their way to their cabin for the night.

On the bed she saw a bag waiting for her; alarmingly it didn't look very full. She opened it to find that the only thing inside was her ugly apron.

"Oh, very funny," she said, pulling it out and throwing it across the room at him.

"What?" he said, laughing at her reaction.

"Please tell me you brought me something else to wear," she said, only partially amused.

"Nope," he said, with a huge grin on his face. "Guess you'll just have to sleep naked, or wear a chicken apron, your choice."

"Scott?!" she said, for once actually thinking he was being serious. There was no way she was going to be spending the night on a boat naked, or in a chicken apron.

"Oh relax, baby," he said, throwing it back at her. "Go open the closet."

She skeptically walked over to the closet and opened it revealing a gorgeous dark blue nightgown; it was long and elegant like an evening dress, with a slit up one side, only it was sheer, so maybe not something you'd wear out on the dance floor. The color of it reminded her of the beautiful waters in Belize.

He was watching her from across the room, seeing if the nightgown was going to be flying his way too. But instead she took it off the hanger delicately and looked up at him.

"Do you like it?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

She just nodded and started to put it on.

He walked to her side of the room and looked at her staring at herself in the mirror.

“You look beautiful my love,” he said. “Ready for bed?”

Turning around quickly and catching him off guard, she knocked him over onto the bed and kissed him passionately.

After a minute she came up for air and pulled away slightly to look at him.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, helping her crawl under the covers and snuggling in close.

It was then that Ethne had made her decision about Scott. She decided that there was no way she wanted to continue her life without him, fear or no fear; seizures or not. He obviously was willing to take the risk, she decided now that she was too.

The headache she’d had scared her, and the thought that she had been alone when it happened had scared her even more. She didn’t want to bring any strife to his life, but the idea of being alone just didn’t appeal to her anymore. Having him with her made her feel at ease, and happier than she had ever been – why would she choose anything else?

She was snuggled tightly against him while one of his hands slowly followed the opening of the gown that exposed her leg. He kissed her neck and she turned to face him, looking in his eyes a moment before kissing him softly on the lips. Helping her stand, he slowly lifted the nightgown over her head and laid it on the bed and looked at her naked body in the moonlight. It wasn’t the first time they had been together. But it was the first time that she had felt like this, letting herself go completely she had finally invited someone into her heart without fear. He laid her down on the bed and made love to her while the boat drifted peacefully along the coast line.

Before she fell asleep she took a deep breath and felt his arms wrap tighter around her. Listening to his soft restful breaths, Ethne finally knew what it meant to be truly happy.

CHAPTER 21

When the boat docked in the early morning there was a light fog clinging to the water. Ethne was still sleeping soundly cuddling close under the blankets and didn't hear the voices of the crew outside. Scott lay there listening to them, happy that they weren't waking her.

They had been instructed not to disturb, apparently that had a different meaning to them than it did him. They had the boat only for another hour but he figured sleep was probably the best way for her to spend it.

He was thinking about the headache she'd had the day before. He hadn't let on at the time how much it worried him.

Luckily, it hadn't returned and they had enjoyed quite a pleasant night together. He saw a change in her instantly after she had put on the gown. It had

been a look he had been hoping to see. Now that he had, he couldn't stop smiling.

He decided he should probably tone down his elation a bit, lest she recoil back into that shell of hers.

The voices must have seeped deeply into her dreams; before he realized it she was looking up at him. She was grinning too, a smile he couldn't resist kissing.

"Good morning," he said. "Did they wake you?"

"Maybe, I don't know...it doesn't matter," she said, stretching a little but then snuggling back into him, not quite ready to let the cold air touch her skin.

"I will have to have a word with them," he said, slightly annoyed that he had given specific instructions that hadn't been followed.

She giggled. "Oh, don't worry about it, I'm glad I'm up."

Truth be told, so was he.

"Well, we only have a little while left before we have to pack up and be off. But there is time for breakfast. Go put your apron on; the chef wants to see you make waffles."

"Yeah, I'll get right on that," she said, pulling the covers up higher.

"No?" he asked. "Oh, he will be so disappointed."

"You're welcome to, you look much cuter in the apron than I do anyway," she said.

As if he had heard them there was a knock at the door.

"Boy, they really don't understand the concept of 'do not disturb' do they?" he said.

She chuckled and pulled the covers up even higher before he gave the consent to come in.

Carrying a tray of delicious looking food was one of the waitresses from the night before. She set it down next to Ethne and asked if they needed anything else.

"Nope," Scott said. "Thanks."

She nodded before leaving the room as quietly as she had entered it.

After eating everything in sight they got up and packed up the few things Scott had brought for them.

"This was a lovely surprise, Scott," Ethne said, as they stepped off the boat and onto the pier, the crisp air making them both wish they were back under the covers.

"You're welcome, Ethne. I only wish we could have stayed longer but I have to work today."

"I know, it's all right, it was a lot of fun."

"Well, maybe after we go bungee jumping we could do this again," he said, playfully nudging her.

She was laughing when they rounded the corner of the pier; they had both been looking at each other and hadn't noticed the blue car headed straight for them.

Scott saw it first and quickly pushed her out of the way but didn't have time to do the same.

He was struck on his side, the sheer force of it throwing him up over the hood and back over the other side of the car. She screamed his name and watched in horror as his body rolled away from her on the other side of the street.

He had looked like a rag doll, not like the strong man she had just been lying in bed with.

The driver didn't stop, but sped away ignoring the carnage he had just created.

She hadn't seen the driver enough or thought to take any plates in the confusion; the only thing she could think about was Scott, who was on the other side of the street, not moving.

With tears running down her face she raced over to him to see if he was alive.

"Scott!" she said, so many times she thought he would get up just to shut her up, but he didn't.

He had blood on his head and a deep gash on his side and multiple scrapes all over his body. She screamed for help, although it was early there were a few people around.

Some of them came running over to see what had happened. Others darted away quickly not wanting to be apart of the drama.

Only one person was kind enough to call 911 for her while she sat next to Scott.

He was breathing, but was unconscious. It seemed like hours before she heard the siren blaring its way to them. She was in a complete daze, unbelieving and non-accepting of what had just happened.

She had a few scrapes and bruises too. When Scott had pushed her out of the way she had fallen, but she didn't feel any of them. She didn't feel anything at all, except for concern and fear.

The medics were assessing Scott and preparing to load him in the ambulance while an officer questioned her, but she wasn't much help to him. She told him what she could remember but instead just kept asking if she could go be with Scott now.

Finally, he agreed and said he would be over to see her in the hospital later to see if she had remembered anything new.

She shook her head not following anything he was saying and he helped her climb into the ambulance before they closed the doors and rushed Scott to the hospital.

Per her request they took him to where they worked, she wanted to be sure he got the special treatment he deserved.

He was still unconscious which she took to be a very bad sign.

The EMT tried to reassure her that such a response after an accident like that was normal and that it didn't necessarily mean the worst.

She refused to have any false hope and was only interested in fact at that moment, and the fact was, Scott was barely alive.

Pacing the halls it seemed years had gone by before someone came out to talk to her. They had spent far too much time attending to her wounds, even though she assured them she was fine.

They had insisted on getting her head checked out as well considering her history, everything had come back normal for her. Many of them kept repeating how heroic Scott had been, that he had saved her life. Had she been hit, it likely would have killed her instantly.

She didn't need them telling her this. She already knew how much of a hero Scott was. He had already saved her life once already; the second one wasn't needed to convince her of his status.

The doctor sat her down before going over the extent of Scott's injuries.

"Okay, first...Ethne, I want you to take a deep breath, you're going to hyperventilate.

“Scott is out of the woods...for now,” he said, taking her hand and trying to calm her down. “He is still unconscious and there is some swelling in his brain, we are keeping a close eye on that. Once it decreases I am very confident he will wake up.

“He has three broken ribs and many cuts and bruises, but the head injury and main point of impact on his side are our biggest concerns right now. There is no internal bleeding as far as we can tell, but he does have a lot of internal bruising so we will monitor that very closely. Do you have any questions?”

There was only one question in her mind that she wanted an answer to.

“Is he going to die?” she asked. While she had been listening to the list of Scott’s injuries, the technicalities of it all made no difference to her – the overall outcome did.

“No, I do not believe so, as of right now he is stable,” he said, still holding her hand but not having much affect on her physical state – she was still panicked. “Like I said, right now we are simply in a waiting game until the swelling goes down. Then we will see if he will wake up on his own.”

“Is he in a coma?” she asked.

“He is sedated, he may have already woken up on his own by now, but it is safer for him if we can allow some time for the swelling to go down before he wakes up,” he said.

“Oh...,” she said taking her hand back, getting up and walking to the window to look outside. “Okay.”

The sun was fully up now and everyone was going on about their day as if this hadn’t happened, totally unaware that her world was falling apart.

“When can I see him?” she asked, still looking out at what would have been a beautiful day.

“Right now,” he said, taking her elbow and leading her down the hall to his room.

Scott was lying lifeless on the bed, hooked up to monitors that were so loudly disturbing the room she felt like putting her hands over her ears.

This was a far cry from the peaceful and serene moments they had just had the night before.

He looked the same as he usually did, only with a few extra cuts and bruises. Had you tried to assess that he had a brain injury from his appearance you wouldn’t have been able to, aside from a small cut and scrape on his forehead.

She sat down next to him and took his hand; his finger was inserted into a monitor she was afraid to mess with so she did her best to not touch anything but his skin.

“I’ll leave you alone with him; let me know if you have any other questions...I won’t be far,” the doctor said, before disappearing.

“Thank you,” she managed to say to an empty room, time seeming to have slowed down to something like you’d see on *The Matrix*.

If only time had been moving that slow this morning, perhaps they both could have gotten out of the way of the car. She still couldn’t believe this was happening.

Touching Scott’s face she traced the line of his jawbone lightly with her finger, he seemed so fragile to her now. He was fragile; she knew that – she knew everyone was.

“Scott?” she said, hoping he could hear her. “Please wake up, Scott, I need you – I can’t lose you now.”

The tears seemed to be rolling down her face constantly now. It was like she had turned on a faucet and left it running. Her face, hair and shirt were damp from it all. She tried to stop, but couldn’t.

She was scared to death, and there was no one here to comfort her. Her only comfort was lying in a hospital bed, near death, because of her – because he had saved her.

A huge pang of guilt flooded through her in that moment as she retraced all of the reasons he was now where he was. All of the reasons were because of her.

This realization made her want to run, she felt like bad luck; a jinx that no one should be around. There was a reason she had stayed away from people, maybe that was the reason and she just had never wanted to admit it.

Scott lying there helpless and injured proved that to her.

Had she not been the guilty party for having put him in that hospital bed she would have run; gotten as far away from him as possible so that it couldn’t happen again.

But she *was* the reason and there was no one else here to be with him. She couldn’t abandon him; there was no way she could do such a thing.

She loved him and jinx or no jinx that was a fact.

After getting some Kleenex and doing her best to squelch the tears, she sat down by him again not taking her eyes off of his face; wanting nothing more than to see his eyes open to look at her.

She knew it wasn't in his power to do so at the moment, but it didn't stop her from wanting it.

After a little while of sitting there alone she heard a tap on the door, there was a young woman standing there holding her and Scott's bags.

"Excuse me," she said. "I hate to bother you, but these were dropped off for you."

"Oh...thank you," Ethne said, not really wanting to let go of Scott's hand.

"You can just put them anywhere," she said, waving to one of the chairs nearby.

The woman gave her one of those 'I'm sorry, hope you're boyfriend doesn't die' kind of smiles before leaving her alone again.

She wasn't really able to or willing to give her the 'It's okay, I'll be alright' smile in return; she didn't know that she would be.

Their bags...only sitting a few feet from her now reminded her of the fun night they had just had; she couldn't stop staring at them.

How is it possible that life can change so suddenly? Instantly without even a second thought to its players?

This was the reason she supposed that she had locked herself away for so long; she already knew the underhanded way that life tended to play.

She didn't want to play anymore. She wanted Scott back, that's all she wanted.

It seemed days had gone by instead of merely hours when a nurse came in to check on him.

"Do you know how long they plan on keeping him under?" Ethne asked.

"I don't," she said. "But I can go get the doctor for you so you can discuss it with him if you like."

“Thank you,” she said.

When she returned with the doctor Ethne was nearly asleep, she was exhausted and could barely keep her eyes open.

“Hi, Ethne,” the doctor said, startling her back to reality. “You have a question for me?”

“Yes, I was wondering how long you plan on keeping him sedated?”

“Well, that depends on the rate at which the swelling goes down, but it could be just a few days, maybe a week. He was very lucky, Ethne, he has brain function and is likely to heal from this, we just need to give it time; honestly given the circumstances I’m surprised his injuries aren’t more severe – he really is lucky to be alive.”

‘A week’...was all she heard. Well that and ‘lucky to be alive’.

She had to remember that doctors sometimes had a way of doom and gloom. They tried to be optimistic, but in their line of work, they saw it all, and unfortunately death was a part of the equation.

It occurred to her she should have been a doctor, she seemed to share their attitude on things.

“How are you feeling, Ethne?” he asked her. “Any problems or injuries of your own?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said, just wanting to be back at Scott’s side and left alone again.

“Okay, well if you need me just have me paged.”

“Alright,” she said, sitting back down as he left her be once more.

Gently picking up his hand again she laid her head down next to him.

She really hoped it would not be an entire week that she would have to wait to see his beautiful eyes on her again.

CHAPTER 22

She had fallen asleep almost instantly and was now being woken up by loud beeping sounds and noisy people telling her she needed to get out of the way.

Scott's monitors were going off, he was crashing and they needed to resuscitate him. This had not been part of the deal.

She felt tears of fear and anger well up into her eyes as she watched helplessly from the sidelines, doing her best not to get in the way of the people trying to save his life, trying to save her Scott.

Stumbling backwards she sat down on the chair next to the bags and waited. Her heart seemed to no longer be beating – she was frozen in time, waiting to see if in a moment her life would still be worth living.

It took them three tries to get him stabilized; three times she had to watch them hit him with the paddles, each time making her jump.

She suddenly wanted to hunt down the driver and kill him with her bare hands. How anyone could be so heartless as to do this to another person and not even have the decency to stick around was beyond her. That was the ultimate definition of a coward in her eyes, and not someone who ever deserved to be behind the wheel again.

When he was once again stable, the drama that had woken her up started to calm a bit.

The room started to clear and only the doctor and one other nurse still remained.

“What happened?” she finally managed to say.

“He went into v-fib, which can sometimes happen as a side effect of the sedation medication. But he is fine now, although I am going to check his vitals and see if we can pull him out of it sooner rather than later. If his scans come back and the swelling has decreased enough, we will do that – I’ll be right back,” he said, before rushing out the door.

She was once again left alone. Luckily she wasn’t completely alone; Scott had stayed with her, even though he had scared her to death, again. She was seriously going to have to punish him for that later.

She hoped she got that chance.

It seemed like ages before the doctor returned. She spent her time holding his hand and kissing his cheek, knowing he couldn’t wake up, but wishing he would anyway.

When the doctor came back he said they were going to take Scott for some tests and be right back.

The wait for them to return that time had felt even longer, she didn’t know what to do with herself. After about an hour she decided to look through her bag. That, she decided, had been a huge mistake when

she opened it to find the apron. At first it had made her smile, but then eventually she started to bawl. And then she came to the beautiful nightgown he had given her.

Upon that discovery she felt it briefly, closed her eyes and remembered last night – but then quickly zipped the bag shut not able to handle that memory either.

When they finally returned with Scott and rolled him back to his place in the room, the doctor came in and was smiling.

That was a good sign, she hoped.

“His tests look good, Ethne,” he said. “We are going to slowly take him off of sedation – it shouldn’t take him too long to wake up, we hope.”

She knew he had to throw in the ‘hope’ line. There were no guarantees in medicine, as there were no guarantees in life.

After everyone had finished with Scott she was once again allowed to return to his side.

It was late; she could see the moon outside and all of the lights of the city. She was exhausted.

She went back over to her bag and unzipped it again and pulled out the blue nightgown.

She slipped it on which was a bit daring for her setting, but she didn’t care anymore. She grabbed a blanket and snuggled up against Scott.

Within minutes she was asleep.

She woke up to a hand making its way up her leg, vaguely remembering where she was, she lifted her head and looked up to see Scott looking at her.

“I was hit by a car and you still won’t wear the apron for me?” he said, squeezing her thigh.

Her heart skipped when she realized what had just happened. She smiled and kissed him instantly.

“Scott!” she said, doing her best to be gentle with him, but just wanting to hug him as hard as she could.

“Easy, easy,” he said, laughing only a little at her reaction. “I’m injured remember?”

“Oh, sorry,” she said, getting up quickly from the bed.

He looked at her and whistled. “You might want to put that apron on now, Ethne,” he said. “We are in a hospital!”

She laughed when she realized she was standing there practically naked, but she didn’t care.

“Were you trying to bribe me into waking up by wearing that nightgown?” he asked. “Shame on you, I needed my rest.”

She was so relieved to hear him back to his joking self when only days earlier, seeing him on the side of the road, she hadn’t been sure he was still alive.

“How are you feeling?” she asked finally.

“Oh...like I’ve been hit by a car,” he said, winking at her.

“Yeah, you know you really didn’t need to prove your point on that one.”

He laughed. “Well, I like to be thorough; I can never tell if you listen to a word I say.”

She smiled. “Well...for the record, I do. I should probably go change,” she said, suddenly paranoid that someone was going to come in.

“Awww, really?” he said. “I think you should show off the nice present you got.”

“Funny,” she said, grabbing her bag and heading into the bathroom to change.

"You're not even going to let me watch...?" he called after her.

"What, and risk your heart stopping again," she responded playfully from the bathroom. "Not a chance."

When she got back she looked at his face, it looked rather serious.

"My heart stopped?" he asked.

She suddenly realized how insensitive her comment had been. "Oh baby, I'm sorry...I didn't mean to tell you like that," she said, going over and sitting next to him again.

"So tell me now...how badly am I hurt?" he asked, all of the humor had left the room and was replaced by a hovering fog of fear.

Fear was not something she saw from Scott very often.

"I think it's best you talk to the doctor about all of that...I'm afraid I've been in a bit of a state worrying about you."

"Well you do tend to worry," he said, smiling again.

He never seemed to stay in the deep end of the pool for very long, which was one of the reasons he was so good for her, without him she probably would have drowned there.

After getting to enjoy each other's company for a little while before being bombarded with doctors and nurses again, Ethne let them know he was awake so they could check him over.

He was told that things looked good but that he would need to stay for another day or two for observation before he could go home.

Scott said that that was fine with him as long as Ethne got to stay too; there was no argument from anyone.

The doctor had told him the extent of his injuries and later he had asked Ethne to describe the day of the accident.

They discussed it only briefly; it wasn't something either of them wanted to dwell on. It would be a long time before she no longer saw him getting hit by the car in her nightmares.

That day had been one of the scariest days of her life. He was almost lucky to not remember most of it, though he said he did remember the feeling of panic he'd had when he saw the car. He said he hadn't even thought twice before pushing her out of the way.

He even apologized if she had been hurt by him doing so. Scott had saved her life, and still he was worried that his actions had hurt her. He too wanted to strangle the person who had been driving the car.

When it was finally time to go home, Ethne helped him up from the wheelchair and into his car. She drove them home, a little alarmed at being out in the real world again.

She felt so much better when she was pulling into her driveway; it felt like it had been ages since she had been home, but there was no way she was going to leave Scott's side.

When they were both settled in and sitting on the couch together, the house quiet, she curled her legs in and laid her head on his chest. Neither of them had anything to say. Just sitting there with each other was enough, they didn't need to talk; they both knew what a close call they had just had.

They stayed that way for quite a while before heading off to bed. She helped him to try and get comfortable, he was pretty sore and it was very difficult for him to find a position he was happy with.

The doctor had warned him about seizures, the irony not escaping either of them. They both took their medications, his for his pain, hers for her seizures, before she reached over to turn out the lights.

Lying there in the dark, she knew he was going to have a rough night, she reached over to take his hand – he gladly accepted and squeezed his appreciation. She had hoped to stay awake with him but her body had other plans and she was asleep within a matter of minutes, her small hand resting in his.

She hadn't been asleep for very long before her hand was being squeezed and she was brought back to reality, sudden concern coming over her when she realized Scott was calling her name.

"What's wrong?" she asked, turning the light back on and looking over to see Scott's ashen face looking back at her.

She looked down to see blood soaking through his t-shirt and immediately sat up with alarm.

"Oh my god, what happened?!" she asked, rushing to turn on the bedroom light.

"I don't know, I just turned to try and get comfortable and felt something snap, I think I pulled a stitch or something," he said.

"Or something..." she said, pulling up his t-shirt to get a better look at the wound.

The car had hit him full on in this spot. It had actually been a miracle he had only needed a few stitches for the laceration it had caused. She could

clearly see that one of the stitches had come loose, she cursed under her breath.

The idea that their tired bodies were going to have to make their way back to the hospital in the middle of the night was not appealing. But she was not equipped to handle this and it clearly couldn't wait until morning.

She looked at him and tried to give him a reassuring smile, but he knew what she was thinking.

"Well, let's get you dressed," she said, putting an arm around his back and helping him to get up.

"I'm sorry, Ethne," he said.

"Sorry?" she asked. "For what? – You have nothing to be sorry for, now come on."

After about four hours spent in the hospital waiting and getting stitched back up, they made their way back home.

It was still dark outside when she pulled into her driveway once again and helped to get him situated as comfortably as possible back in bed.

The nurse had apologized profusely for the mishap, saying 'it happens'. They had simply nodded in synchronized zombiesque fashion, too tired to make idle chitchat.

They were still in this state when she crawled back into bed hoping for no more excitement for years, simply wanting to close her eyes and go to sleep.

She leaned over and gave him a kiss goodnight, doing her best to avoid touching any spots that might cause him pain.

This time when she drifted off to sleep she found herself in a place far worse than her current reality.

Turning the corner of the building Ethne felt for the necklace around her neck that he had given her only a week before.

She walked in a stunned daze, people bumping into her every so often, some shouting obscenities at her obvious rudeness for being in their way.

As she turned the next corner she could see the cemetery not far off, but far closer than she wanted it to be.

To set foot in it would make things far too real, she decided, a desire she simply did not have. She turned around to head the other way when someone caught her elbow.

It was Scott's mother.

Escaping, it seemed, was not going to be in her future. She had been caught, trapped like a mouse running in a maze for some sick scientist's experiment.

"Ethne dear," his mother said, obviously handling things far better than she was since she hadn't uttered a word since it had happened.

She simply nodded her head in acknowledgement. "I'm so glad you came – I know this must be incredibly difficult for you."

Ethne just stood there staring at her in total disbelief – had she really just said that to her? His own mother, offering her words of comfort when it had been her fault that her son was dead?

The idea was so absurd to Ethne that had she not already been speechless she certainly would have been then.

All she could do was nod her head in agreement and let the woman lead her to the dreaded place of her nightmares.

The grass was dry, the weather pleasant, not your typical rainy and miserable cemetery scene; but regardless of the setting, the current weather did not match her mental state.

For all she knew the funeral could have taken place in the middle of a hurricane and she would have been numb to the fact.

When they joined the rest of the party that had gathered to honor him she was somehow pushed to the front, as if she deserved to be there, set in a higher status above the rest. When truly her place should have been in the box he found himself in.

She hadn't heard a single word that was spoken. She remembered placing a rose on the coffin and watching them lower him into the ground, but everything after that was black.

When Ethne woke up she was soaking wet, from tears, from sweat, she might as well have been sleeping in a bathtub - not a single inch of her was dry.

She was shaking uncontrollably and obviously she hadn't been quiet about it because Scott was calling her name, trying to bring her out of the hell she was just in.

When she fully realized that it had just been a dream she was awash with mixed emotions. The first being relief that it *had* just been a dream, the second being....fear.

"Ethne?" she heard Scott say, probably for the millionth time. "Are you okay?"

Wiping the tears from her eyes and realizing that she was completely soaked she looked up to see a concerned Scott looking at her.

“Ummm...,” she said, clearly not okay but having no desire to admit to what she had just dreamt about, she lied. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You sure?” he asked. “You don’t seem okay.”

“I’m fine,” she said, getting up. “I just had a nightmare.”

“Oh,” was all he said.

Clearly after the day they’d had, a nightmare wasn’t all that strange; perhaps he wouldn’t feel the need to press it further.

After she changed her nightgown and washed her face she had planned to return to bed, though the pool that was left on her side was less than appealing.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “Did you sleep at all?”

“No,” he said. “Not really – I couldn’t get comfortable.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, sitting down next to him and taking his hand, having no desire to deal with the mess her nightmare had left.

He looked over at her side of the bed, although it was nearly morning, neither of them had really slept.

“We should change the sheets so you can go back to bed,” he said.

“I suppose,” she said. “I’m sorry about that – I hate to make you get up right now.”

“It’s okay – you look like hell” he said, poking her in the side, trying to make light of something that had obviously really upset her. “No offense.”

“None taken,” she said with a blank expression.

“Did you want to tell me about it?” he asked, the look on her face actually having him quite concerned.

“No, not really,” she said. “I’d rather just forget it.”

“Okay...if you’re sure,” he said.

She helped him get out of bed and took care of the sheets quickly so that he could lie back down. Although he couldn’t find a comfortable position, his body nonetheless needed to rest; she would be damned if she was going to give that nightmare a chance to come true.

For the third time that night she lay back down next to Scott, this time snuggled up closely to him, needing to feel his warmth to shake off the cold numbness of the nightmare.

After a few moments she could hear him breathing peacefully and looked up to see him sound asleep; a blessing after such a long night.

She hadn’t wanted to close her eyes again, lest she slip back into that dark place, but she had no choice. Her body and mind were beyond exhaustion. For all she cared, she would be happy to stay in that bed forever, never leaving Scott’s side again. Which is why the decision she had made after waking up from that nightmare was all the more difficult, but she would deal with that later.

For now she was simply going to relish in his warmth. She touched his hand with hers, lightly, not wanting to disturb him, and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER 23

When they had both finally woken from their less than ideal night, it was mid-afternoon. Scott had already been awake when she finally opened her eyes, though he said he had slept well and actually looked to be telling the truth.

“Want some breakfast?” she asked, groggily turning to face him.

“Maybe,” he said. “But, not yet.”

“How are you feeling?” he asked, clearly still concerned about her attempt to turn their bed into a pool.

“I’m fine,” she said, with no intention of returning to that subject. “How are you?”

“I’m feeling a little better,” he said. “Still sore, but I think I’ll live.”

He smiled at her thinking that statement would make her do the same, but instead saw a completely different expression on her face.

“Boy, tough room.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” she said, apologizing with a morning kiss. “I am just worried about you.”

“Well, don’t be,” he said. “I’m going to be fine; another week or two and I’ll be as good as new. And in the meantime you can pamper me, it’s about time it was the other way around don’t you think?”

His sense of humor had obviously not been a casualty of the accident – she was very pleased about that.

With head injuries and accidents like that in general, it truly was a gamble what the outcome would be. Scott had been very lucky; she had been too.

Not only was she reeling at the fact that she had almost lost him, but the realization of how close she had come to dying had not gone unnoticed by her.

She had spent so many years afraid of one potential cause of death; she had been completely ignorant to the fact that she too ‘could be hit by a car tomorrow’.

The effect of this realization was not really bringing her to a positive conclusion, but she didn’t want to share that with Scott...not yet anyway.

He needed her now and she was going to make sure that he made a full recovery, and quickly.

After lounging lazily in bed together she finally got up to make them something to eat. She ordered him to stay put.

He was not pleased by her bossiness but could tell arguing would only result in him not getting any food, so he stayed in bed.

She brought him a book to read while he waited, he opted instead for some pointless TV, he wanted to be distracted, but he didn't really want to think.

After a while she came back in with a tray full of waffles, orange juice, bacon and fruit.

"I should get hit by cars more often," he said, with a huge grin on his face.

"That's not funny," she said, setting the tray over his lap and joining him back on the bed.

"What are you watching," she asked.

"I don't know," he said, flipping the TV off.

They sat in silence eating and looking at each other. When they finished Scott said he was feeling tired, so she gave him his pain pills and pulled the covers back over him.

She had no desire to face the day either, so she lay back down with him and did her best to stay quiet.

They spent the next three days like that. She should have gone back to work but had no desire to. He half joked that her boss was going to fire her if she didn't; she said she didn't care.

Scott was back on his feet the next morning, albeit with strict orders from her to do nothing strenuous. He laughed at the thought that she had any control over him.

Nonetheless he did follow her advice; he too had no desire to go back to the hospital.

Three weeks had passed since the accident. Life had almost returned to normal, except for one fact: Ethne had not.

Scott had seen a shift in her ever since the night she woke up completely soaked. He had been

incredibly concerned, but she clearly wasn't going to talk about it so he had let it be.

When he got home from work that night the house was dark, which wasn't abnormal. He opened the door quietly, not wanting to wake her if she was sleeping, and slipped inside.

He took off his shoes and coat, set down the white box on the counter and was just about to head to the bedroom when he saw the note.

His heart stopped. She had never left him a note before, had reserved that fun for him. Given her recent behavior he knew this note was not going to be of the same nature.

He took a deep breath and opened it.

“Dear Scott,

I don't know how to do this anymore. I love you and I'm sorry. Please let me go, you're better off without me. Please forgive me.

Love, Ethne”

Although he had expected something like this, reading the words ripped at his heart more than he had ever imagined they could.

While Scott knew Ethne's past he really hadn't told her much of his. He too had taken a chance in letting her into his life. And although he knew it was a gamble, he felt now that it was a gamble he had lost.

Feeling the ache in his ribs increase with every panicked breath he sat down at the table and put his head in his hands.

The note had said nothing about where she had gone; she had been off work that day so there was no telling when she had left. He had no idea where to even start and no idea if he even wanted to.

He loved her, but felt betrayed. His body was only partially healed from the accident, although he assured her everyday he was feeling better, the truth was he hurt like hell.

How she could have left him now after everything they had been through was beyond him. She was always a flight risk, he knew that, but they were happy together, or so he had thought.

Suddenly bitterness filled his insides when he looked around the room realizing that he was in her home. He had practically lived here since they met – even though this was unspoken and never officially established – he had been here nearly every night with her.

And since the accident he had only gone home to his place once or twice. He closed his eyes, squeezing them shut so tightly the darkness almost turned to light again.

He was really not one who cried, but still he felt the tears forming and an uncontrollable sadness taking him over. Coupled with anger and confusion he didn't know what to do with himself.

It had been a long day, he was tired, and he needed to rest, but he would be damned if he was going to rest here; the darkness and silence mocking him, telling him how much of a fool he had been to trust someone again.

Crushing the note in one hand he left it on the table and grabbed his coat. He looked at the white box on the counter, a surprise he'd had for Ethne,

before he slammed the door and left; he drove home in a quiet rage.

CHAPTER 24

Writing the note had been one of the hardest things Ethne had ever had to do. It absolutely broke her heart to write the words, and broke it even more when she grabbed her bag and left her house, knowing he would be home in a couple of hours to find it empty.

Leaving like this was never her plan, she actually didn't know what she was doing. But ever since the accident and the nightmare she just couldn't live in denial anymore. She was too afraid to stay with Scott; too afraid that something would happen to him or to her.

It had been almost exactly one year since she had received the first note that had sent her to Belize, and now she found herself heading there again.

She didn't know where else to go, she felt completely lost.

The note had said nothing about her plans. She didn't want him coming after her, she doubted he even would have; he was likely to hate her forever after this – which she supposed was for the best.

It was better he found someone else. She never should have started the relationship in the first place; true she had been very happy with him, but it was her fault he was hurt, and she loved him too much to ever take that chance again. She hadn't had anymore seizures, not yet anyway. But that didn't mean she wouldn't, and either way, she just couldn't bear the thought of him being taken away from her...or her from him.

She shouldn't have let him in. She shouldn't have let "them" be a possibility. She had fought it, or at least tried to, but somehow he had managed to get past her defenses.

The nightmare however had reminded her full well why she had them, and they were up again...completely. So much so that they blocked against any reasoning for what she now found herself doing.

When the plane took off she felt no fear, only sadness. A tear ran down her cheek as she looked down upon the lights of San Francisco. She realized then that she had forgotten her pearl, why that mattered she didn't know. Another pang of sadness hit her, joining the searing pain of what she had just done to Scott.

She had made the decision to leave that day so abruptly she had actually barely packed anything. Although leaving had been in the back of her mind ever since the nightmare, she really hadn't taken the feeling seriously until today. Something in her had

snapped with no warning, she found herself booking the flight and packing her bag without really even thinking. She had no plans; she just knew she had to leave. She wished she could just sleep rather than feel the pain she was feeling. Imagining Scott down there somewhere reading her note made her feel sick to her stomach. Another tear ran down her cheek, she wiped it away expecting another to replace it soon enough. It was going to be a very long flight.

The first flight had been excruciatingly long. Though the worry and fear of flying had been replaced by self loathing for what she'd done, neither option made plane travel any easier.

When she landed in Miami she thought of Ian. For a brief moment recalling the first time they'd met – how much help he'd been in relaxing her nerves on the plane. Although a distraction would have been welcomed this time around, she was undeserving of it and frankly adding more complications to her current situation would not have been helpful.

She had managed to stay composed, doing her best to keep her crying to a minimum. Though that had not been easy and she had failed a few times, drawing the attention of a few passengers nearby.

There had been no one sitting next to her this time on any of the flights and though that struck her as odd, she was actually quite thankful for the peace and quiet that allowed; she needed the time to think.

She had a lot of things to sort out, she had no plans; she hadn't planned this escape thoroughly and was now back in Belize with no real idea of what to do next.

Hit head on like headlights facing a deer, her unknown future struck her like the car that almost had.

Given the situation it was likely she would be out of a job when she returned home, she hadn't been able to notify anyone she would be gone, obviously. Right now though she just didn't care; she was numb.

All she wanted to do was get to her hotel room and go to sleep. She wanted to forget the world, forget everything and just be alone.

It had been a while since she had been alone; it hadn't been something she wanted to return to, now though it seemed she had sealed her fate of exactly that. She didn't see how Scott would ever forgive her for leaving; honestly, she wasn't entirely sure she could forgive herself.

After landing in San Pedro she took the short taxi ride to her hotel, barely even noticing the blue waters. She checked into her hotel room, thanked the woman for her key and made her way up to the same room she had stayed in before.

No longer awestruck of the place that had taken her breath away only a year before, she set her bag down and crawled into bed.

She stayed there for three days, only waking to take the time to eat a little food before falling back to sleep, not wanting to face the reality she had created.

She had heard people say 'you've made your bed, now you must lie in it', she hadn't ever really given that saying much thought because up until this point she hadn't ever felt like her destiny was in her hands.

She had always felt that her circumstances had been out of her control. And while most of the things in her life that had shaped how she lived it *had* been,

she knew that losing Scott was her own fault – that her decision to leave had just ended the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Lying there in bed listening to the waves outside, one bare leg exposed to the warm air hinting at joining the world again, Ethne thought it was probably time she got up.

It was 4 p.m., she had nearly spent a fourth day in isolation, leaving it only to order room service and to check to see if she had any messages; there were none.

Part of her had hoped he would fight for her, but most of her knew she didn't deserve it. The fairy tale that she had been living in for the past year had been brought to a halt partially because of a seizure, but mostly because of a reckless stranger driving a car, not caring that he had changed the course of her life forever that day.

While they had been lucky to survive it physically, they hadn't truly survived it. Neither of them had been the same after it happened. She knew that was mostly because of her, but she had seen a change in him too.

Of course he would have never admitted that, he was so stubborn sometimes, but she supposed she was too. She was really going to miss his sense of humor; he was almost always able to make her laugh, no matter what kind of mood she was in.

All she wanted to do was pick up the phone and call him, to apologize and to see if he was okay. But she couldn't bring herself to do it.

She was starting to go stir crazy, it was time she got out of her room.

After taking a shower and cleaning off the laziness of the days spent in bed she almost felt human again – almost. She still felt like the worst human being on the planet, but at least now she was clean, for whatever that was worth.

She had grown tired of room service and decided to head to a real restaurant this time to get dinner, although the idea of eating alone was less than appealing.

When she arrived and was waiting for a table she looked up and saw a familiar face looking at her from across the room.

Running into Ian had definitely not been on the menu, and seeing his face light up for her, someone she currently loathed, was not something she was prepared for.

But instinctually, as had been the case time and time again, her face lit up when she saw his as well.

He made his way across the room to her, seeming to practically skip his way there and instead of the traditional ‘hi, how are you greeting’ proceeded to pick her up and hug her. With his enthusiasm she was surprised he had refrained from swinging her around in a circle – though that would have been highly inappropriate for their current surroundings.

He set her back down, still with a huge smile on his face.

“You know, if you keep this up I’m going to start to think you’re following me,” he said.

She laughed a little, still blushing from her current trip half way to the ceiling. “Well, I could say the same thing.”

“True,” he said. “So how are you? What on earth are you doing here? Is your boyfriend here too?”

Why was it people always tended to ask her questions she really wasn't in the mood to answer?

She shrugged her shoulders. "No, I'm alone," she said, not elaborating further.

By the look on his face she could tell he was now both concerned and intrigued.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I suppose," she said, still not knowing what exactly to say, she didn't really want to talk to anyone about her current title of worst human being she now held, especially not with Ian – oh how the fates did have a sense of humor. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"Okay," he said. "Well do you want to join me for dinner?"

"Sure," she said, with mixed feelings – part guilt and part relief that she wouldn't have to dine alone.

Ian did his best to steer clear of the topic that had brought her there; instead he talked about school, having finally chosen to focus on marine biology, he was close to finishing his degree.

He was there with his friends again, whom he had deserted once more, to enjoy her company, which he pointed out with a subtle wink.

"You really shouldn't keep ditching your friends for me," she said. "Not that I don't appreciate the company."

"Oh they don't mind, besides...I'm sure they understand, I've talked about you enough – they practically shoved me over here."

She laughed. "Oh yeah I noticed that when you saw me, I think you left your friend there in mid-sentence. "And what do you mean you've talked about me?"

He grinned. "Oh don't worry about that, he never has anything important to say anyway, and of course I've talked about you. Most of them needed to know why I was flitting across the country carrying a pearl of all things."

"Oh, yeah...that," she said, the mention of the pearl suddenly bringing her back to the reality of things.

"And how is the pearl, do you have it with you?" he asked, appraising her hands and neck to see if she were perhaps wearing it.

"It's fine," she said, her mood darkening. "And no, I don't, it's at home."

"Oh," he said, obviously aware of the dark cloud that had descended upon them just then. "Ethne...what's wrong?" he finally asked, after a moment of silence had passed.

At the mention of those caring words from the first person who had asked her, she nearly broke down into tears. Somehow she managed not to.

"Everything," she said finally, choking back the tears that wanted to escape as badly as she did.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked, reaching over and taking one of her hands.

"No, I don't think so, but I really don't want to talk about it here," she said, looking around the room at all of the people enjoying their meals seemingly with no worries of their own.

"I understand," he said. "Let me get the check and we can get out of here."

Once they were outside, the night sky just starting to make its appearance, Ian put his hand on her lower back and guided her to the beach where they could talk in private.

She was still in a daze of where she was. None of it seemed real. So to recount what had happened since the last time she'd seen him, to tell him about the accident and how she had left Scott, she honestly didn't know where to begin, or if she could.

After finding a quiet place for them to sit, the ocean only a few feet from their own, she looked out at the water and tried to think of what to say.

For one, it felt completely wrong to talk to Ian about it all, considering how she knew they felt about one another. But for another she didn't want to relive the accident, she much preferred to never think of it again – though that was never successful.

She realized she was shivering, not from being cold, but simply from nerves. He put one arm around her and tried to comfort her, waiting in silence for her to begin on her own.

When it was clear she wasn't going to, he finally spoke.

"Ethne," he said. "You are clearly upset, please tell me what happened."

A tear ran down her cheek and her chin started to tremble, but after a few moments she told him everything.

In the comfort of his arms she told him about losing her parents, about her seizures as a child as well as the current one and about her ultimate decision to be with Scott despite her reservations.

She told him about the terrifying morning that had nearly ripped him from her life and the close call of her own. Though she was trembling and sobbing and barely able to speak she told him how a few days earlier she had packed up and left him without a

word; how she had cowardly run away and broken his heart.

The night sky had turned to a deep blue while she described it all. When she was finally done she nearly collapsed against him, relieved from the burden of her secret.

He had stayed quiet the entire time, only offering small squeezes of support to her shoulder, both out of respect as well as not knowing what to say.

When she had finished, he simply held her, letting her cry until the tears no longer fell.

By then she was exhausted, had he let her she could have fallen asleep leaning against him, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder.

After many moments had passed she finally sat up and looked at him.

“So do you hate me now too?” she asked, already sure of the answer.

“What do you mean do I hate you?” he asked, completely puzzled by the question.

“I’m a terrible person,” she said, turning then to look out at the ocean, not wanting to hear the confirmation of that.

“No, you’re not,” he said, taking her chin and making her look back at him.

“You’ve been through a lot, Ethne, and your fears considering everything that has happened are warranted. I’m sure Scott understands – although I’m sure he is probably hurting as much as you are – I doubt he hates you.”

Dumbfounded by his answer she simply stared back at him in disbelief, having no comeback for something she only partially believed.

She stood up then, almost in defiance no longer wanting to be comforted by someone who clearly didn't understand. She started walking down the beach as quickly as she could, her feet slipping in the sand and making it difficult to walk away in a huff.

He could tell he had hit a nerve and was following closely behind her with absolutely no intention of letting her disappear into the night alone.

"Ethne," he said, trying to catch up to her. "Wait!"

She didn't. She kept walking with no idea of why she had thought to share her story, how stupid and pointless that had been. Nothing and no one could make her feel better, she had no right to feel better after what she had done and no one was going to convince her otherwise.

He grabbed her by the arm, forcing her to stop to face him.

"Ethne," he said, holding her firmly making his intentions clear.

She didn't answer him, but instead stood there staring at him with a coolness he had never seen before, a coolness he didn't particularly like but one that commanded his respect all the same.

He loosened his grip only slightly, knowing full well if he let go she would be gone again, likely at a pace that this time would be hard to match.

She took a deep breath, not appreciating the hand that firmly held her, keeping her from running from the things she no longer wanted to face.

"Let go," she finally said.

"No," he said.

"Ian, please, just let me go."

"No."

They stood there for several minutes in a dead lock of defiance, neither of them willing to back down, although Ethne wanting to run wasn't exactly getting her way.

"What makes you so sure of the words that you said?" she asked finally.

"What words exactly?" he asked.

"That you think Scott understands?"

"I don't know, I suppose because that is how I would feel if I were him," he said letting her arm go finally, hoping the hint of conversation meant she had given up on running away.

"I don't believe you," she said, crossing her arms and turning away from him.

"What don't you believe?"

"That you would understand," she said coolly. "I'm sure you would hate me just as I'm sure he does."

"No," he said firmly, having to give it no thought. "I could never hate you."

"That's easy for you to say, you barely know me."

"I feel like I know you quite well, Ethne, and I know for a fact that I could never hate you...I think you know full well how I feel about you."

It was Ian that turned away then, not wanting to look at her after his confession; something not all that entirely secret, but still something hard to confess especially given the circumstances.

She didn't know how to respond to that. She did know how he felt about her, and she knew how she felt about him, which was part of the reason all of this was so difficult.

To discuss breaking the heart of another man when she had clearly already done that to the one

standing next to her, even though she hadn't done anything nearly as intentionally severe, the effects appeared to be the same.

"How the hell did any of this happen," Ethne thought to herself, completely bewildered by the events of the past year.

After a moment of feeling stunned, Ethne started to warm again, the coolness of her anger fading and disappearing into the night.

Ian was still facing away from her, which was something she didn't care for. She walked over and touched his arm trying to get him to look at her again.

When he finally did they stared into each others eyes for a moment before he reached over and took her face in his hands. He gently wiped a tear away before bending down and kissing her.

She tried to stop him, although half heartedly, but instead found herself kissing him back – feelings of confusion and guilt and utter bliss all mixing into one.

Eventually she pulled away gasping and turning away from him, trying to find her bearings again but truly feeling as though they were lost forever.

"Ethne," he said. "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have done that."

She looked at him seeing in his eyes a true sadness, something she knew all too well.

"No...you shouldn't have," she said. Grabbing his face in her hands this time she pulled his lips to hers and kissed him deeply, forgetting everything else she lost herself in his arms.

CHAPTER 25

When Scott pulled into his own driveway for the first time in what felt like years he was still seething. It was strange to feel both hurt and angry at the same time. Usually his sadness made him feel helpless, but this sadness was feeding his anger and making him feel like if he didn't calm down things were going to get broken.

He tried to take some deep breaths as he walked up to his door, his heart was pounding out of his chest, he finally understood the meaning of 'seeing red'.

After he made it to his door he was about to unlock it but couldn't bring himself to go inside. He already knew how empty it would feel. Instead he sat down on his porch and tried to think about something else.

Unsuccessful in diverting his thoughts he tried at least to think about why she had done it.

He knew why though; if he had allowed himself to see it earlier maybe he could have stopped her. He had noticed her behavior, she had grown colder since the accident; he just hadn't wanted to accept it. It was hard enough dealing with his own thoughts after the accident than having to deal with her irrational ones as well.

Since the accident, he grew to understand her a little bit more. While he had lost people in his past too, having the doctor tell you that you might experience serious side effects, possibly life changing ones from the crash was eye opening. Being hit by the car had been eye opening enough; he didn't really need anything additional.

He wanted to live, and he wanted to live with Ethne; now she had taken that away from him, hadn't even given him a chance to change her mind, or say goodbye.

Forgiveness was the farthest thing from his mind when he finally stood up and went inside; until he actually stepped inside.

The house was quiet and dark and absolutely empty. Not in the sense that he'd been robbed, but as it felt, he may as well have been. The air was stagnant and lifeless; there was nothing there for him.

It only took him a moment to realize that and for his anger to dissipate. Instead of hanging onto it he decided he needed to find her and once again try to talk some sense into her.

She really was a frustrating woman. But he had fallen in love with her and had even grown to love her stubbornness. He had been right that day he looked

into her eyes, there was something behind them. He just hadn't known at the time that in addition to the pain, there was someone quite rare indeed.

He fished into his pocket for his cell phone, but right before he was able to dial her number his head exploded with a pain he had never felt before. He fell to his knees in agony holding his head and trying to open his eyes but couldn't.

The phone had fallen from his hands. In his state he tried to feel for it, everything had gone blindingly black in that instant. The only thing he was aware of was the pain; it was like two lightning bolts were fighting for the right to claim his existence, one on each side. Pain shot through his temples, through his ears and behind his eye sockets, he thought he might actually pass out.

Right before he did he found his phone. Only being able to guess at what he was dialing, he hit speed dial and a random number hoping someone would get the call.

When he was finally able to open his eyes he saw blurry faces of people hovering over him. He wasn't able to make out anything they said to him and his eyes didn't really care to stay open; he drifted off again quickly.

At the hospital he saw the bright lights above him as they wheeled him to a room. The bright lights were excruciating, he did his best to shield them but it seemed the lights were adamant about penetrating to the back of his skull.

Although the lights were painful he was more alert than he had been; now in addition to the pain he was also filled with confusion.

One of the EMTs bent over him and asked him how he was feeling.

"Like I've been hit by lightning," he said.

Before he made it to a room one of his employees ran over to him.

"Scott?! Are you okay?"

It was Amber, one of the night nurses.

"I guess so," he said, not really sure how to answer since the lightning bolts hadn't yet decided to give up their quest for glory.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

"You called me," she said.

"I did?" he asked, not remembering any such action.

"Yeah, you did, I heard you say help...frankly you scared the crap out of me," she said. "So I called 911 and had them check on you. What happened?"

"I don't know," he said, honestly having no idea what had hit him so hard and taken him down so quickly.

"Well, we'll figure it out," she said, with a reassuring pat on his shoulder.

After they ran some tests the doctor told him he had experienced a migraine. "A migraine?" he thought. "That had to have been the mother of all migraines."

He was told stress could be a factor and that he needed to try to relax.

"Relax? Yeah right," he thought.

Migraine or not, it was scary and debilitating. Having no desire to go back to an empty house he decided to stay at the hospital, just in case.

After getting some sleep he woke up, the memory of Ethne leaving him hitting him hard again. This

time though the anger was not there, he simply felt lost.

He stared up at the ceiling for a while before climbing out of bed and heading to the window. He stared down at the people below, milling about like unorganized ants. He checked his messages. There were none. He still couldn't believe she had just left him without a word, it was like a nightmare. He felt anxiety spreading back into his body, taking some deep breaths he sat back down on the bed trying to figure out what to do.

Swallowing his pride and ultimately finally realizing that he was really worried about her he decided to call.

The phone rang; he held his breath not really knowing what he would say if she picked up. That problem wasn't one he was going to have to worry about though, there was no answer and he didn't feel like leaving a message.

CHAPTER 26

After a moment of being breathlessly lost in one another Ethne finally broke free, "I can't do this, Ian."

"I know...I'm sorry," he said, stepping back, obviously needing the space to be able to think clearly. "You should be with Scott; I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry," he kept saying over and over again.

"No...it's not that...I can't be with either of you," she said, turning and making a break for it again, running quickly away from him down the beach.

He stood there stunned only for a moment before running after her. "Ethne...wait!" he said, his voice drowned out by the waves.

She didn't know where she was going. She only knew she had to get away, she couldn't be around him either; she was too drawn to Ian, as she was to Scott. She couldn't think clearly around either of them.

Scott had broken through her defenses when he had started sending her the notes, he had seen she needed something in her life and in doing so he had ignited a spark in her that had long been burnt out.

But this was a spark she hadn't wanted brought back to life; it was too painful – the confusion she felt now was almost as bad as the pain of losing someone. It was far easier to be alone, as painful as that was now, the intensity didn't compare to this.

As she ran along the beach trying to break free from the feeling of Ian's lips, she suddenly realized that what was happening now was almost a mirror image to the dreams. The only difference was, in the dreams she felt she was trying to find something or someone, but here she felt she was trying to get away.

It was hard to run in the sand, especially since she was utterly exhausted, and it was dark; she could barely see anything in front of her. But she couldn't bring herself to stop, as tired as she was of running; she didn't like the alternative.

Her tired legs were no match for Ian's though, he caught up to her and took a hold of her wrist, making her stop to face him; the defiance he had seen earlier had returned.

"Ethne, please..." he said, holding firmly to her small wrist. "What do you mean you can't be with either of us? That's absurd."

"To you maybe...but not to me," was all she said in reply.

"Explain it to me then," he said.

"Let me go," she said, looking at him icily, standing her ground even though her legs felt like they could give way at any time.

"I won't," he said, giving her the same determined look.

The heat radiating from his touch coupled with her anger at being detained nearly made her heart jump from her chest.

She couldn't possibly explain her position to someone outside of her shoes, someone who had never lost anyone. Even Scott who had couldn't understand what her life had been like up until this point. To everyone else, her fears although warranted, to them, were not excuse enough to choose a life of solitude.

But the accident and near loss of Scott had been too much for her. She couldn't bear it; still no one could understand her.

"Ian...please," she pleaded, her resolve breaking down, the determined look replaced with one that begged for her release.

He saw the tears welling in her eyes. The softness in her face made her look like a lost child rather than the funny, independent and attractive woman he had met a year before.

The pain he saw in her eyes spoke to him far more than any words she had said that night. He pulled her into him, hugging her tightly, fighting against her resistance.

She struggled to get free. "Let me go, Ian!"

"I won't, Ethne...", he said, taking hold of both of her wrists and staring into her confused and frightened eyes. "You don't deserve to feel this way; you don't deserve to be alone."

He kissed her, not only trying to quiet her damaged heart and deprecating thoughts that were

obviously trying to keep her from living, but simply because he wanted to.

She fought him only for a moment before joining him, letting him steal her away from her sadness. He released her arms and instead held her face in his hands, drawing her closer to him, her arms falling limply at her sides as she surrendered finally – her defiance falling silent.

Feeling the warmth of his mouth on hers all she could do was wonder why she fought against this so much. She felt completely at peace in his arms, the negative thoughts ceased to exist. The only thing in her mind was Ian.

She barely heard the sounds of the waves hitting the sand, barely felt the ground beneath her. All she could really feel was Ian, his love for her taking precedence over everything else.

When he stopped kissing her she opened her eyes slowly, coming back to reality. She had quieted; her mind and will no longer feeling the cold presence that had taken hold of her moments before.

He looked into her eyes and smiled. “That’s better” he said, swinging her around so that she was leaning into him, his arms wrapped around her as they both stared out at the ocean. She could feel his heart beating.

“What am I going to do?” she sighed, a statement as much as it was question.

“I can’t answer that,” he said, his voice smooth and calm, at peace in the moment they were sharing.

“All I know is...,” he said, pausing for a moment to turn her back around to look at him. “I’m not going to let you choose to be alone. Either you’re

with Scott or with me, whoever you choose is fine. I'll be okay, but alone...is not an option."

In the conviction of his words she knew he was right, she was surprised Scott hadn't fought for her in that way, especially after everything they had been through. But she didn't care. If he wasn't going to fight for her, she would just have to fight for him – starting by first begging for his forgiveness.

She loved Ian, although it was strange since they had practically just met, but there was a peace with Ian that she found nowhere else. In him she had escaped her life of solitude, for the first time finding comfort in another human being. She had learned to laugh with him again, in truth, the person who Scott had met when she had returned home had only begun to exist again because she had met Ian.

How she would tell Ian who her choice was, she didn't know; breaking anyone's heart was not something she ever wanted to do, that was part of the reason she had chosen the life she had. It was as much to protect her own as it was another's, she knew all too well the pain of loss. She certainly didn't like to be the one that brought it. But she had to trust in his words, he seemed to only be concerned about her, less worried for his own self. That valiance was something in his character that would be hard to let go of.

She wished she didn't need to. But she couldn't have both; she would have to choose.

Ian had wrapped his arms around her again, not pressing her for an answer; she not giving one freely. She felt so incredibly safe in his arms. She didn't want that to end, he obviously didn't either; he made no moves to return to the hotel. Even though it was

getting late and she would have to get back soon to take her medication (she was vigilant now about taking it, not wanting to welcome a relapse), she too stood still in the sand, holding his arms that held her, not wanting the moment to end.

When she couldn't wait any longer she broke the silence and told him she needed to get back to take her medication. Being honest about her condition and no longer needing to hide it was an exhilarating feeling. A freedom from her life that now seemed so distant.

They walked hand in hand along the edge of the water, feeling the ocean lick at their heels until they had made it back to her room.

All she really wanted to do was invite Ian in. Given her decision she knew she shouldn't, but somehow he managed to make it past the doorway anyway. After she took her medication she joined him in the living room and sat down next to him on the couch.

Neither of them wanted to discuss anything, he was probably as afraid to hear her answer as much as she was to say it. Instead he took her hand and they sat on the couch in silence.

After a while he finally asked what her plans were, how long she planned to stay in San Pedro.

"I actually still have a few days left," she said, suddenly terrified of the idea of going home.

She knew she would have to face Scott eventually, and actually the longer she was gone the worse things would be. But all the same, she didn't want to leave Ian, and she didn't want to know Scott's answer. It was entirely possible that he wasn't going to forgive her.

“Well, that must be nice getting to spend a little more time here. Unlike last time,” he said, stroking her fingers softly with his.

“Yeah, it’s just too bad I wasted half of the trip in bed,” she confessed, almost ashamed of the fact, but at the time not feeling like there had been any other option.

“Really?” he asked. “That’s a shame. Too bad we hadn’t run into each other sooner.”

“Yeah, it is,” she said, in complete agreement. Although the three days had probably been necessary for her to be as composed as she had been that night, and even so her composure had been marginal at best.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked. One of his hands had made its way to her knee as he turned more to face her. He started stroking her thigh lightly which was making it incredibly hard to think.

“Umm,” she said, trying to remember what they were talking about. “I don’t know yet...I had hoped to go to the Blue Hole again...but I didn’t get a chance to make any reservations yet.”

“Oh,” he said, leaning in and kissing her neck. “I’m going there tomorrow, maybe we can get you on the boat,” he said into her ear.

“Maybe,” she said.

Her heart was pounding; she had not expected this, although she didn’t know why she was surprised.

“Ian,” she said, barely able to say his name before his mouth was on hers kissing her deeply.

She kissed him back unable to object even though she knew she should. Fighting her feelings for him was incredibly difficult, especially considering her

current emotional state. But she had made her choice; she didn't want to make it any harder on any of them.

After a moment he pulled away, looking into her eyes shyly.

"Sorry," he said. "I seem to have a little trouble controlling myself around you."

She laughed; a sound that put him at ease.

"It's okay," she said. "I could say the same thing."

"I will try harder though," he said. "I know you're going to go home soon...I know you're going to pick Scott."

That took her by complete surprise; she hadn't thought she gave hint to her decision at all. But it was probably for the best that it came out now; she was slightly relieved she wasn't going to have to be the one that brought it up.

"What makes you say that?" she said, completely out of curiosity rather than disagreement. Although the decision had been a fast one for her, that had more to do with how she had left things with Scott, rather than the feelings she had for either of them – which in all honesty were hard to differentiate.

"I don't know. I just find it hard to believe you would choose me over him," he said, something in his eyes making her feel a pang of guilt at the doubt he had in himself.

"Well...", she said, touching his face and looking into his eyes. "You're right, but not for the reasons you think. I told you when we met my life was complicated. I'm sorry that your heart has been dragged into the mess, the last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you."

She kissed him softly before standing up and walking over to the window. Holding herself in her own arms she looked out at the night sky.

"I do plan on trying to patch things up with him, though I don't know if he will forgive me."

She felt suddenly alone again in that instant, even though Ian wasn't far, a shiver ran through her body even though it wasn't cold.

He heard the sadness in her voice and walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her for comfort.

"I understand, Ethne," he said, trying to make her feel better, though feeling sadness in his own heart knowing he would have to let her go.

"Can we spend a little time together before you leave?" he asked. "As friends? I promise to behave myself," he said, poking her in the side, tickling her, trying to break the seriousness of the moment.

She giggled, relieved to know that her decision hadn't completely cut him off from her. "I'd like that," she said.

CHAPTER 27

They stood standing in the moonlight for a while before making their way to her bedroom. An unspoken rule between them, they both knew the night would be spent innocently.

She appreciated Ian's respect for her boundaries, even if they were hard to keep, but she didn't want to betray Scott anymore than she already had. As it were she had more to confess than she was comfortable with, she had no designs to add anything else to the list. Even so, she hadn't wanted to spend the night alone, and knowing she had only a few more days with Ian, she wanted to spend as much time as she could with him.

They spent the night sleeping next to each other, her hand resting in his. They got up just a few hours later to see if there would be room on the boat for her, there wasn't, so he opted not to go. Instead, they

made reservations to go the next day and returned to the warmth of the bed, spending the morning talking rather than sleeping.

After having breakfast together they spent the rest of the day wandering around town and lounging on the beach, making plans for an early night since it would be an early morning, and neither had gotten much sleep the night before.

Ethne checked her messages frequently; there was still no word from Scott. She thought maybe she should call him – he still had no idea where she was, but she honestly didn't know what to say to him over the phone. She figured the conversation needed to be in person. He was likely to be very angry with her and that kind of conversation is never handled well when someone can just simply hang up, refusing to hear your apology.

While she was enjoying her time with Ian, she couldn't help but feel that the time was going by very slowly. She was conflicted, not wanting to end her time with Ian, but not wanting to make Scott suffer anymore. She wanted to set things right, if that were even possible.

When they woke up bright and early to leave for the Blue Hole, Ethne was excited; excited to return to the place where she felt most at peace.

That had ultimately been the reason she had returned to Belize. Her growing sense of dread since the accident simply overshadowed her life; she couldn't seem to find peace. Nothing she did could bring her that feeling of calm that she had felt the day she had seen the Blue Hole. She hoped to feel that calm again today.

When she saw the boat at the pier she suddenly remembered how long a trip it actually was to get there, she was feeling impatient, but Ian took her hand and smiled at her. She was thankful at least that this time she would have some company.

Ian planned on diving while they were there, she of course couldn't but had no qualms with snorkeling again and just simply being there; she actually couldn't wait to hear his stories after he returned.

She was a bit jealous that she couldn't go below the depths. But it was also a slightly terrifying thought so she was almost glad she had an excuse – she knew if she didn't Ian or Scott would have managed to convince her.

With his company, the trip had seemed much shorter and before long they were there, once again in her favorite place. Some people might complain that the location wasn't as rich in marine life, making the snorkeling not as memorable as one of the other stops. But the sight of it even above the water line for her was magnificent and not something she could describe to anyone with sufficient words.

This was Ian's first time here, she could tell by his eyes that he felt the same way she did, how you couldn't was beyond her. The deep hue of the water instantly brought her peace; she was smiling the moment they arrived.

Ian noticed the change in her as well, squeezing her hand and smiling back at her. It was almost a shame they would be separating for most of the time they would be here, but she knew that time would go by quickly and she was excited for him at what he was about to do.

“Have fun, Ian, but be careful,” Ethne warned, giving him a hug before they went their separate ways.

He didn’t let her go when she had tried to step away; instead he hugged her tight and whispered in her ear for her to do the same.

Feeling his breath on her neck made her tingle; when he finally let her go he gave her a wink before heading off with his group; they were in the water and sinking into the depths before she had even taken another breath.

Looking down at the water where he had just been, all she could see were a few bubbles, it was as if the water had swallowed them whole.

Having him vanish so quickly made her suddenly very anxious, she knew how deep the dive was, and that people had actually died. Although they would only be gone for about a half hour...that suddenly felt like an eternity.

Luckily, her turn in the water was next and would serve as a great distraction from the wait. Stepping into the water she was consumed by the sudden rush of calm that this magical water seemed to bring her.

The moment her body was in the water she was instantly reminded, once again experiencing the overwhelming feeling of peace. It was almost like she ceased to be her and was instead a piece of something bigger than herself.

She felt whole, resigned to what was and no longer at odds with circumstance. She wished she could bottle this feeling and take it with her, but she knew once she emerged the sensation would fade, overshadowed and forgotten by reality.

For the time being she didn’t care, her anxiety faded and she was carefree. Following her guide, she

let her mind escape simply soaked in the beauty that surrounded her.

She couldn't resist returning to the place where she had found her pearl, seeing the shelf where it had been sitting, now empty; she felt a moment of sadness remembering how far away it was from her.

Seeing no hidden treasures this time she stayed only a moment before returning to the group. Time moved quickly and they were heading back to the boat long before she was ready. With only one incentive to get out of the water – Ian – she reluctantly took the hand of one of the crew members and let him pull her out of the water, back to reality.

It wasn't long before she saw heads popping up above the surface, returning from a place she would never see. She scanned their faces, searching for Ian, but didn't see him.

Her heart started pounding wondering why he hadn't surfaced yet, minutes passed; all of the others had gotten back on the boat before she finally saw a few more heads appear and someone waving at her.

She let out the air she had been holding in, smiled with relief and waved back. When he was back on board he was beaming.

"That was incredible!" he said, forgetting himself and grabbing her face in his hands and kissing her. She didn't care; to feel the energy coming from him, coming from what he'd experienced in the deep waters beneath her was amazing, absolutely nothing could compare.

After he had given her back her lips, she helped him remove some of his gear so they could sit and talk about what he'd seen.

His description of the cave below them and massive stalactites that cover the ceiling of the cave was so vivid she could almost imagine it.

"You would have loved it," he said. "The light on the walls above you was just amazing."

She couldn't help but grin with him. Even though she would never see it for herself, seeing the pure joy on his face was more than enough for her.

"What took you so long to come up?" she asked.

"Oh...one of the divers ran into a little trouble, I stayed back with one of the instructors to help," he said, as if it were no big deal.

"What kind of trouble?" she asked, suddenly very happy to have him sitting next to her again.

"She panicked when she saw a group of sharks swimming next to us; we had to try to keep her calm...."

"What?!" she said, suddenly *very* happy to have him sitting next to her. "There are sharks down there?!"

He laughed at her reaction. "Yeah, but it's really not a big deal, Ethne, it was actually really cool."

"Are you crazy?" she asked.

"No," he replied, winking at her. "I'm a marine biologist."

She couldn't help but smile at his reply, even though the news he had just given her wasn't exactly something she had needed to know.

"Surely you knew that?" he asked. "You were here before, and the other locations have them too, didn't you see any?"

She tried to think back to the year before, recalling asking Peter about sharks. She realized now

he hadn't actually answered her question with a yes or a no.

"I didn't," she confessed. "I guess my mind was on other things. I must not have been paying attention, and I didn't see any, thank goodness."

"Well, if you do, don't worry about it, they aren't as bad as people make them out to be," he said.

"Yeah right," she said; she would be hard pressed to ever believe that.

Taking his hand she laid her head on his shoulder and watched the scenery go by as they made their way to the next location.

"How was your snorkeling?" he asked, making her suddenly feel silly to tell her story.

"It was wonderful," she sighed. No words could describe what she felt, so she didn't even want to try. "Not nearly as exciting as your trip, but still wonderful."

They rode in silence the rest of the way there, simply enjoying the memories of what they had already done that day. When they arrived at the next dive location Ethne was once again saddened that they would be separated.

She wouldn't dream of keeping him from diving, but she *couldn't* join him, her limitations suddenly frustrated her beyond words.

"Have a good time, Ian," she said, giving him a smile before he left. "I wish I could go with you."

"I do too, Ethne," he said, hugging her before joining the rest of the group in the water.

As she had remembered it Half Moon Caye was beautiful, with many fish to see. But for some reason it just wasn't the same kind of experience and she

actually couldn't wait to get back to meet up with Ian again.

That thought made her feel a hint of guilt when Scott suddenly wandered into her thoughts. It was here that she had found the note from him, although at the time it had simply been from an anonymous person, someone who had yet to have a face in her mind and a place in her heart.

That face was prominent in her mind now though and feelings of horrible remorse began to surface. Panicking while wearing a snorkel mask was not recommended though, so she did her best to hold the feelings at bay until they had returned to the boat. The last time she had been here she had felt exhilaration and joy, this was a completely different feeling, and not one she was happy to be experiencing.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise to her; she was after all in the place he had sent her, that was her doing, but she couldn't deny the things that had happened.

The complete dumb luck of running into Ian again – was the universe trying to tell her something? Did the universe even care about her, who was she anyway? Just a tiny speck she thought, nothing worth worrying about.

The two people in her life seemed to feel otherwise though, and since they meant so much to her she could see their side, she supposed. But still, having people care about her was still a very new feeling, and obviously not one she was well equipped to handle.

She was lost in thought when one of the guides tugged on her arm and pointed in front of them. She looked up and stopped breathing.

In the distance, not as distant as she would have liked, there was a shark. It wasn't a 'jaws' shark, but it was a shark. Her heart started to pound, but before she completely panicked she tried to remember what Ian had said and did her best to stay calm. The people around her seemed excited rather than scared, and after a moment she realized she felt the same way.

Watching it swimming not far from them, she was amazed that her "flight" response had not kicked in. Instead she was in awe.

Had it not been for Ian, that experience would have ended in a completely different way. He had somehow managed to keep her from being afraid...of a shark.

When she was back on the boat waiting for Ian to appear, she stared out at the water thinking of Scott...and Ian, wondering if she'd made the right choice. She was starting to wonder if she even could.

She was still staring out at the water when Ian touched her shoulder; she hadn't even seen him surface.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Startled, she turned to see a concerned Ian looking at her.

"Yeah I'm fine, why?" she asked.

"You didn't wave back at me, that's all, you seemed to be somewhere else."

"Oh...", she said. "I suppose I was, sorry."

"It's alright, as long as you are?" he asked, looking into her eyes, searching for an answer she wouldn't give.

"I'm good," she said, smiling. "How was your dive?"

"It was great," he replied. "How was yours?"

"Good," she said. "I saw a shark."

"Really? And?...Did you freak out?"

"No," she replied, still surprised by the fact.

"Cool," he said, smiling. "See I told you."

"Yeah, I suppose you did," she said, finally looking up at him and smiling.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked, still puzzled by the look in her eyes, aware that the look on her face had to do with something more than seeing a shark.

"Nope," she said, wiping clean the expression that had made him ask that. "Just hungry...I'm starving!"

He smiled and took her hand, joining the rest of the group for the picnic on the beach. With everyone sharing stories of their adventures thus far, Ethne was able to allow the distractions to keep her mind from wandering, if only partially.

The woman Ian had helped told her tale of complete and utter panic that had initiated her "flight" mode while swimming in the great depths. She was however the first one who raised their hand about whether or not they would ever do the dive again.

Most people who had done that dive described it as 'heavenly', life changing, even as far to say, a religious experience. While Ethne hadn't been with them, she had to agree. Above or below the surface the rich blue waters of that place seemed to draw people in and never let them go.

People shared pictures of the colorful fish and other marine life they had seen, eventually Ian and Ethne stole away for a private walk along the beach.

After the noises of everyone chattering had died down, it was the noises in her own head that could be heard again.

It seemed no matter what was going on, the nagging question of what to do was always at the back of her mind, when all she really wanted to do right then was enjoy her limited time with Ian.

No matter what she decided it seemed her time with Ian would probably be short. She remembered what he had said, that it was either Scott or him, that there was no third option, but the third option of neither, albeit it painful, seemed the safer route...for everyone involved.

Ian stopped and looked at her. "I know what you're thinking, Ethne," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked, wondering if her face was really that transparent of her plans.

"I can see it in your face," he said, touching her cheek softly. "That you plan on retreating."

"Oh," she said, turning her eyes down toward the sand.

"Where did you go when you went snorkeling?" he asked, and by that she knew he meant in her mind rather than a destination.

She didn't want to talk about it; discussing Scott with Ian was just about the last thing she wanted to do. To do so felt like a consultation with a friend when she knew they were much more.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said. "Let's just enjoy our day together, okay?"

“I won’t let you, you know?” he said, lifting her chin up so she was forced to look him in the eye again.

“Won’t let me what?” she asked.

“Crawl back in that shell of yours,” he said.

She sighed, unsure of how to reply to him. Before she had to give it much thought they were interrupted with the call to return to the boat.

Thankful for the stay that was given her, they walked silently back to the boat, his hand holding hers firmly, a symbol of his conviction.

Their last stop for the day was spent at the Aquarium; Ian had left her side reluctantly to join the dive group. He had almost stayed behind had she not insisted that he go.

Even though half of her was ready to return to San Pedro, this place was a marvel as well, a drop off teeming with some of the most beautiful creatures of the sea – she would not be party to him missing out on it. While snorkeling allowed you sights you would typically miss, she couldn’t even imagine how much more rewarding the experience would be submerged completely below the brim of the water, at one with the creatures you swam beside.

And while she would miss him again, she was a bit relieved the conversation had been postponed. She would prefer not having to revisit it at all, though she knew the odds of that were slim.

She sank into the water with the rest of the group and set out to see the sights, this time not allowing her mind to wander to unwanted destinations. Instead she focused on the brilliant colors in front of her, taking it all in, knowing it would be a long time before she returned to paradise.

CHAPTER 28

By the end of the day they were all wearing tired smiles and were ready to make the long boat ride home. After Ian changed out of his wetsuit he sat down next to her and took her hand.

“Well...that was fun,” he said, yawning.

“Yeah, it was,” she agreed, both were almost too exhausted to say more.

They rode the rest of the way back in silence, watching the water zip by, nearly falling asleep. It had been a long day.

When the boat finally docked at the pier everyone was eager to get off, as amazing as it had been, the memories at this point were more than enough for Ethne; she was ready to have her feet firmly planted on the ground again.

It was nice that neither of them had any trouble with the trip. Some of the passengers had gotten sick;

Ethne could only imagine how much fun a three hour boat ride would be feeling nauseous.

Ian helped her off the boat and they walked back to her hotel room. The sunlight was slowly dissipating into night, although it was still warm she was ready to get out of her swimsuit.

After they had both changed into *real* clothes Ian ordered some room service, neither of them having energy for anything else. While they waited they plopped down on the couch, exhausted and happy and talked about all the things they'd seen that day.

Ian's stories of the scuba diving were almost impossible to believe, she could only imagine what it would have been like to see all of the things he had seen. Snorkeling was fun, but she could tell it obviously didn't compare.

She was fairly certain he was holding back some of his enthusiasm. Obviously he didn't want to flaunt an experience she could never have, but she insisted he tell her, living vicariously can sometimes be just as good.

When it seemed they had said all there was to say, there was a knock at the door.

"Oh thank god!" Ian said. "I'm starving!"

He went to answer the door and brought back the most delicious food she had ever seen, perhaps it was because she was famished; she didn't care. They devoured it quickly and sat contently on the couch, Ethne lying with her head in his lap staring up at the ceiling.

Ian stroked her hair and after a few moments of silence finally spoke.

"Did you want to tell me what was wrong earlier today?" he asked.

She had really hoped the topic would not be brought up again, wishful thinking on her part she knew.

“Not really,” she said, enjoying the small caresses of her hair; she was too relaxed to want to think.

“I think we should talk about it,” he said.

Ian obviously wasn’t going to back down as easily as she’d hoped.

“Well, say what you must then I guess,” she said, having no intention of being swayed in the slightest.

“I’d hoped we could have a discussion about it, rather than a one-sided appeal,” he said, ending the caressing and looking down at her with a serious expression.

“I’m tired, Ian, do we have to talk about it now?” she asked.

“Well...since we don’t have much time left together, I’d say we probably should. You looked very distant today, and sad, during something that should have only brought a smile to your face. Tell me why?”

“I was thinking about Scott, and you, and how I feel,” she said, too tired to try to mask anything. She decided the truth would have to do.

“What do you mean, ‘how you feel?’” he asked, his interest suddenly piqued even though she was quite sure he had already known the reason for her earlier mood.

“I mean my confusion; how I feel for the both of you and how I feel about having these feelings in general...I personally think it’s for the best if I don’t see either one of you.”

“Well, as I’ve already stated, that’s not an option, Ethne,” he said, with an unwavering conviction.

"I don't see how you really have any say in it," Ethne said, finally sitting up. The relaxing moment was obviously over.

"Of course I do," he said. "I care about you and I'm not going to let you disappear into your shell again – life is too short and too important to hide from it."

"Well, I know it's short...I suppose that's why I'm going to disappear into my shell," she said, picking up their plates and taking them to the kitchen.

He followed behind her knowing that the sudden domestic show was a tactic to flee the scene.

"That's absurd, Ethne, and makes absolutely no sense."

"It makes perfect sense to me," she replied.

When her hands were empty and there was nothing further to feign distraction she tried to leave the kitchen. He blocked her way.

She stood her ground looking him in the eye with a cautioning glare that insisted he move. He didn't.

"Tan...", she started, quite sick of trying to explain her motives to people. "I can't take any more. It hurts too much to lose people, it hurts too much to hurt people, and it is too frightening to live with the constant question hanging over your head of when the next pain will strike. While it is hard being lonely I would choose that over the crushing pain I experienced when I lost my parents, when Scott was hit by the car and nearly died, and even this, knowing I've already hurt him and am now hurting you. I'm not made for this."

His face softened at her confession, he must have already known her reasoning, but to hear her say it so matter-of-factly obviously had an impact.

"I don't think any of us are, Ethne," he said softly. "It's hard for anyone to lose someone, and yes the pain is extreme, but we aren't meant to live in this world alone. Surely you can agree with that?" he asked, still standing only inches away, blocking her path.

She wasn't trying very hard to escape, but she still didn't like his line of questioning.

At a loss for words Ethne simply stood there, she felt like a lawyer with a winning case but with absolutely no defense. Her reasons were sound, she believed, there simply was no way to convince any one else of the fact.

After several minutes of silence she leaned against the kitchen counter and crossed her arms.

"You have no answer to that?" he asked, confused by her silence.

"No, I suppose I don't," she said, resigning to the fact that there was no way he would ever see her side.

"You think you deserve to be alone?" he asked.

She thought only for a second before answering, "I don't think it's up to me."

Suddenly feeling the activities of the day, Ethne slowly slid down the side of the counter and sat down, her tired legs forcing her to rest them.

Ian joined her, facing her, their knees touching.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I tried to let go of my fear, I gave into the belief you speak of and everything was nearly ripped away from me. Call it luck if you want that it wasn't, call it the way it's supposed to be, but the way I see it, setting yourself up with things you love only makes you a target to lose them."

“That may be so, but you can’t live your life in fear, Ethne.”

“But that’s what I’m trying not to do,” she said, confused at the fact they had come to the same conclusion but with a completely different outcome.

“Well, you’ll have to explain that one to me,” he said, almost laughing.

“I’m less afraid when I don’t have things to lose,” she said.

“Ahhh, I see...,” he said, with a partial understanding of her logic. “But don’t you see that even that is still living in fear?”

He took her hand then, trying to get her to look at him. She wouldn’t.

“I suppose,” she said. “But it’s a fear that results in less pain.”

“Does it though?” he asked.

She thought about his question for a long time, finally she looked up at him.

All of her years of loneliness came back to her in a cascading flood of memories. She realized he was right. Although the pain took on a different façade, she had simply become numb to it, like one would a fragrance you’re constantly surrounded by.

It takes stepping out into untainted air for you to realize the change. Without something to compare it to you simply live in ignorance, not knowing anything else exists until someone has shown you otherwise.

He could see it in her eyes that he had finally gotten through to her. He smiled a warm smile of understanding.

While her logic had been sound, in a way, she finally saw the absurdity of it the way he had. Pain is

pain, the severity of it only a matter of perspective and timing.

She never subscribed to the belief that time healed all. In her experience she felt the sting of losing her parents nearly everyday, but she did have to admit that the sting had lost some of its bite over the years.

Even though she realized part of her thinking had been flawed, it didn't change the fact that she still felt like a ticking time bomb as far as her seizures were concerned.

True, one could get hit by a car at any time, but that was just a possibility, and statistically a fairly unlikely one. She on the other hand had a bomb built right inside her, almost mocking her desire to live normally. It had gone off for her father without warning and had consumed her mother in the process; it was too frightening for her to think that it could do the same to her.

She sighed; feeling like the recent progress Ian had just made was now slipping away.

"I can agree with you about part of it Ian, but it is harder to subscribe to your belief on the matter when I consider my seizures. I feel like a burden, and one that can only cause the people I love pain."

Feeling the need to run away she got up and moved to the far corner of the kitchen.

He got up and followed her, a shadow that obviously wasn't going to disappear no matter how much she wanted it to.

"I can understand how you feel, Ethne, but I think if you asked the people in your life how they felt about it, you would find that they are willing to take the risk....that you're worth it."

She looked up at him but found his gaze was directed at the floor, she knew he was talking about himself.

“If I choose to let someone in,” she said weakly, “it still means I have to hurt someone...I don’t want to do that. It seems no matter what I do I will be living in fear, and causing someone pain.”

He looked up at her then, having heard the sadness in her voice.

“Pain and fear are a part of life,” he said. “It reminds us we’re human and can help us to be stronger.”

She didn’t feel stronger though, she felt weak and pathetic.

“What did you feel when you saw the shark?” he asked.

She thought for a moment, recalling how terrified she had been in the first instant of seeing it. “I was scared, at first...but then I remembered what you said and I let it go. After that I was just in awe – I felt both humbled and empowered to be so close. I was still scared, but...not to the same degree. It surprised me to feel that way about something that used to terrify me.”

“Though,” she added with a grin. “I still don’t really feel like swimming with more sharks and testing my luck.”

He laughed, the mood finally lifting a bit from the serious haze that had blanketed the room for what seemed like hours.

“So you see my point then?” he asked.

She thought for a moment trying to connect the two situations together. “I guess,” she said.

“There is a comfort in the knowledge that you can deal with something head on, and to know that you often don’t have to deal with it by yourself. Everyone gets their heart broken in life at some point, Ethne, typically more than once. But we learn from it and it makes us stronger, and when you think back on things you often find that those moments helped get you to where you are. I guess what I’m saying is...,” he paused, a vulnerable look in his eyes. “I care about you...and even though I’d like you to be with me, I would survive any decision you made...eventually. I just want you to be happy. I think you deserve nothing less.”

She thought about what he said for only a moment before she made her way slowly over to him and looked into his sweet eyes. Balancing on her tippy toes she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

She could no longer argue with him on the subject, they were both right in their own way, she could now see his logic and that it made some sense. Although she wasn’t entirely convinced, she couldn’t deny how she felt.

It seemed one possibility meant she hurt three people, while the other possibility meant two could try to be happy, Ian’s logic made it sound like the choice was up to her – except perhaps the option to choose neither.

She didn’t think so highly of herself to completely dismiss the option of allowing both of them to find someone else and forget about the ticking time bomb. Surely that choice was also hers to make?

She honestly was still dumbfounded that there were two people who cared about her so much; it was both cruel and amazing.

As she lost herself in Ian's kiss, she concentrated only on how wonderful it felt to be in his arms.

CHAPTER 29

When Ethne woke up she was lying naked next to Ian. Flashes of their long conversation the night before and what happened after were coming back to her like a dream; how they had stayed up half the night was beyond her, both had already been utterly exhausted.

Ian was still asleep next to her, the blanket barely covering his bare skin. She tried to cover him up but didn't want to wake him yet, she was still trying to process what she had done.

She had wanted to be with Ian, but had tried so hard to fight her feelings; last night it seems her reserves were too low to win that battle. It wasn't his fault though; she had made no attempts to stop her actions. She was happy. Being with Ian had been amazing, the electricity between them finally having a

chance to ignite. But she was also terrified knowing she had just complicated things further.

Listening to Ian the night before had made her think long and hard about what she should do, but now she was more confused than ever. She missed Scott.

Even if he forgave her and took her back she knew she would miss Ian too. It didn't seem to matter who she chose, there was no answer that felt like the right one. She loved them both.

Regardless of her feelings for them, she couldn't escape the nagging reminder that either choice could end badly. Her seizures or something unforeseen could ultimately end whatever happiness she may have found. She really had no say in the matter. While both Scott and Ian had tried to convince her otherwise, or at the very least that she shouldn't worry about such things, they hadn't been successful. She couldn't get passed her fears, although he had tried to compare the two, seeing the shark and calming herself in that moment was simply not the same.

She turned to face Ian; he was still sleeping soundly with one arm draped over her. Today was her last day in Belize, tomorrow she would return home and face Scott. No matter what she decided, or what he decided, she would at the very least apologize for being so cruel.

It seemed like it had been ages since she was home, though less than a week it felt more like a month. Her job was no doubt probably no longer waiting for her, she felt like she was going to have to start all over again.

She stroked Ian's face gently, tracing the line of his jaw; she leaned over and kissed his lips eager to see his eyes looking back at her.

It took him a while to finally wake up, the day and night before obviously had taken its toll. "Sometimes vacations just aren't as relaxing as they should be", she thought, smiling at him as his eyes focused on her.

"Good morning," he said, smiling back and drawing her to him. He held her a moment before releasing her and kissing her back.

"Have you been awake long?" he asked. "I wasn't talking in my sleep was I?"

She laughed. "No, you weren't, and I haven't been awake that long."

He looked around the room for a second before looking back at her, the realization of what had happened the night before flooding his memory the way it had hers.

"So...", he said. "Last night was...ummm... unexpected."

"Yeah," she said.

"I hope you don't feel...badly about it?" he asked. The line they had both agreed not to cross was no longer even in the room.

"Well...badly isn't the word I would use...exactly," she said, this was the reason she hadn't been very eager to wake him up. Better to relish in the magic a bit longer before extinguishing it with awkwardness.

"Guilty, maybe," she said, not wanting to ruin the moment but not knowing what else to say...the truth was the truth.

"Well, I can understand that. I'm sorry, Ethne," he said, withdrawing his arm.

"Don't be sorry, Ian. I wanted to be with you just as much, and while things are complicated, I'm not sorry. Last night was amazing and I won't ever forget it, no matter what happens," she leaned in and kissed him.

When she pulled away he was smiling at her.

"I feel the same way, Ethne, I am sorry though if it puts you in a rough spot with Scott, I never wanted to do that."

"I know that, Ian," she said.

"And don't think that I believe this means I lay claim to you, I know last night had nothing to do with any decisions that you've made."

"Thank you, that means a lot to me," she said.

"I will respect whatever you decide, Ethne," he said. "Unless of course you decide to be alone; that I'm afraid is not an option on the ballot, and this particular decision does not allow for any write-ins."

He was grinning at her thinking he was being adorably funny, she just rolled her eyes; it was only partially amusing.

She had no desire to get back into a long discussion that would ultimately end up unresolved, she was starving.

"Want to have them bring some breakfast up?" she asked, snuggling back under the covers; awake didn't mean up.

He laughed at her laziness. "Sure," he said, reaching over and calling down to the front desk.

After he called he snuggled under the blankets with her and wrapped his arms around her front, her head resting on his chest.

“You know this means one of us is going to have to go to the door when it’s here, right?” she asked, smiling up at him and batting her eyes.

“Yeah, and I know which ‘one’ of us it’s going to be too,” he said, laughing. “It’s alright; I’m not ready for you to put clothes on yet anyway.”

She whacked his arm, though honestly neither was she. This was her last day, and possibly her last with Ian; she wanted to spend it in bed, relaxing alone with him.

When the knock finally came, Ian got up and slipped on his pants. She heard him open the door, but the voice she heard next was one that she had not expected to hear.

“Oh, I’m sorry I must have the wrong room,” Scott said, with a questioning look of recognition on his face. “I was looking for Ethne?”

Ethne’s heart began to race. *Scott is here!* She thought. *What on earth is Scott doing here?!*

She quickly jumped out of bed and threw on her clothes trying to get out there before Ian said too much, although she figured his bare chest was probably saying enough.

When she emerged from the room she saw Scott, his eyes looked at her with stunned disbelief and a sadness she would never forget.

In that instant everything flooded back to her. It was as if the memory of him had been put on ice, denied access and locked away far in her mind, in a place where she could somehow manage to live without him. In that moment though, it had been freed and everything she felt for him had returned to her.

Ian looked incredibly relieved to see her, obviously having absolutely no idea what to say, his face had gone pale; with no introductions he too knew who it was at their door.

Ian stepped back letting Ethne take point. Half wanting to disappear from the room completely to allow the two of them to be alone, but not wanting to leave her alone – he had created this mess too.

“Scott,” Ethne said, breathless from rushing to get there before Ian made a bigger mess – not that that was possible. “What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” he asked, looking over at Ian.

“Umm...yeah, this is Ian,” she said, barely able to find her voice. “Ian, this is Scott.”

“Ian,” he said, matching the name to a face while letting the scene digest, it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Even so he reached over to shake his hand. Ethne’s mouth dropped, that had not been what she expected.

“Nice to meet you, Ian,” he said, his face not betraying his true feelings. “I’ve heard...so much about you.”

The cliché of his comment did not go unnoticed, Ethne really hadn’t told him that much about Ian; if it hadn’t been for the day he had seen him, she wouldn’t have ever spoken of him.

“Likewise,” Ian said.

They were being far too polite she decided. This was an awkward moment; they all knew it, why didn’t these *boys* act like it?

If she hadn't felt so bad about how Scott must be feeling she would have said something, clearly they all knew how...uncomfortable this was, for all of them. She supposed it was good they were being courteous, even though it was clearly insincere, it was probably better than the alternative.

The last thing she wanted was an argument between the two of them, the one she was probably about to have with Scott was going to be more than enough.

With the looks going on between Ian and Scott she barely felt like she was even in the room. She stepped between them, forcing an end to the uncomfortable handshake.

Instead of letting his gaze linger on Ian a moment longer, she hugged Scott, so tightly she didn't think she would ever let go. Had he not forced her to, she probably wouldn't have.

He hugged her back only for a moment before pulling himself away, forcing her arms to let go.

Ian watched them, an ache forming in his heart, a feeling he didn't particularly care for.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

Before he could answer, Ian interrupted. "Ethne, I'm going to go, let you two talk."

She felt horrible, she knew he should, but it felt terrible knowing he would be leaving. This was not at all the day she had pictured only moments before.

"Oh, no...you stay," Scott said. "I was just leaving."

Ethne turned to see him start to leave, confusion and panic hitting her when she realized he might actually leave before she could explain.

Explain.

Explain what? She thought. She realized there may be nothing she could say that would make any of this any better for him; still she had to try.

“Scott, wait!” she said, heading for the door to follow him.

“Ian,” she said. “Please don’t leave; I’ll be back later, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

She could see the hurt in his eyes; this was an even bigger mess than she had ever anticipated. Half of her just wanted to scream “I told you so!” at both of them and disappear.

But she remembered her feelings for Scott now, and they were stronger than ever. She felt like she had finally woken up – she could slap herself for having walked out on him.

She ran down the stairs and caught up to him. She grabbed his wrist to try and make him stop, but he was determined to be on his way, shaking her off like she was a frail leaf in the fall.

“Scott...please!” She pleaded again, this time running ahead of him and standing in his way.

He went around her.

This obviously wasn’t working; she tried a different tactic.

“Fine...,” she said, stopping in her tracks and calling behind him. “Leave me.”

He stopped; she could almost see the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He turned to face her.

“Excuse me?” he said. “Leave you? I believe you beat me to that.”

She knew she had hit a nerve. That had been her intention; anything to make him stop.

"I deserved that," she said, walking towards him, closing the gap between them quickly. "Will you at least let me try to explain?" she said. "To apologize?"

He didn't answer, but his lack of movement was enough of one for her.

She gestured for him to follow her as she led him to a private table where they could talk.

After they sat down she took a deep breath.

"First, tell me how you found me."

He shrugged, not making eye contact. "I don't know, you'd been gone so long, I was worried. I couldn't think of anywhere else you would go, so I called here to check and they confirmed you were here."

"Why did you wait so long?" she asked.

"I've been in the hospital," he said.

"What?! Why?!" she asked, suddenly feeling like she deserved a title that was worse than the 'worst person in the world' – if such a thing existed. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," he said, finally looking up at her. "I had some severe headaches; they were concerned so they made me check in for a few days just as a precaution."

She felt like climbing into his lap and hugging him, but she knew he wouldn't allow it; she didn't deserve such a thing.

"I'm glad you're okay, Scott," she said, trying to take his hand, but he wouldn't let her. "I'm so sorry."

"Why did you do it?" he asked, his gaze once again looking anywhere but at her. "Why did you leave?"

"I think you know why I left," she said. "I got scared, of losing you, or that something would

happen to me. I know it doesn't make any sense to you, that to you leaving the way I did was the same thing, maybe it was...I don't know, I got scared. I wasn't thinking clearly when I left that day; I've been down here ever since trying to come to a decision. I had planned on going home tomorrow and begging you to forgive me."

"Oh, yeah," he said, gesturing upstairs to Ian. "I can see that."

"I didn't meet Ian here on purpose," she said, anger suddenly flooding in at the accusation. "He was just here when I got here, pure coincidence, believe me or don't, I'm telling you the truth."

He looked at her only for a second to know that she was; he knew her.

"But you spent the night with him?" he asked, again the look of hurt returned to his eyes, this look was almost more than she could bear.

She looked down at the table, ashamed.

"Yes...I did," she said, there was no use in denying it, he knew her, and she wouldn't have lied to him anyway. She respected him far too much to do that.

"You know I like him," she said, looking up at him again. "I've been very confused, Scott. When I first got here I wasn't even sure if I'd ever go home again. I hated that I hurt you that way; I didn't see how you'd ever forgive me. I ran into Ian on my fourth day here, I had spent the first three in bed completely shut off from the world."

She paused a moment, the silence between them palpable.

"I checked my messages, you never called...I couldn't bring myself to call you. Now I guess I know

why you didn't call," she said. "If I had known you were in the hospital I would have come home in a heartbeat, I'm so sorry, Scott."

Up until this point she had been able to keep herself fairly calm, but the tears were forming now. How she could have doubted him cut her to the core.

He took her hand then, warming only slightly.

"I know you would have, Ethne," he said.

After sitting in silence a moment, feeling his warm hand holding hers she looked up at him. "So now what?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, where do we go from here?" she asked, terrified of his answer.

"I suppose that's up to you," he said.

"Me?" she asked. "How so?"

"Well it seems you have a decision to make."

"You mean you forgive me?" she asked, completely in shock at the idea that he could be so forgiving after what she had done.

"Of course I forgive you," he said, smiling at her warmly. "I love you, Ethne. It broke my heart when you left, I won't lie about that. I was so angry I swore I didn't care that you had gone. But that was a lie to myself that quickly faded. As soon as I left your house and returned to my empty one, I knew I would try to find you."

"I'm sorry I didn't call that night. The headaches started right after you left, I couldn't do anything, they were excruciating. As soon as they had stopped and I had a moment to think...I thought about Belize. I didn't actually think you would come all the way here though; I was surprised when they told me

that you were. So tell me, why did you come here?" he asked.

"I wanted to feel safe," she said. "After your accident I just felt so afraid. Everyday it grew until I couldn't take it anymore; I was terrified that something else was going to happen to separate us. I guess I should have been afraid of myself," she said, realizing for the first time that she was really the one standing in her own way more than anything else that had ever happened to her.

She had let fear win.

"I came back here because it was the one place I had felt safe, when you sent me here it changed me; I wanted to get back the sense of calm that I had experienced a year ago."

"And did you?" he asked.

"Partially," she said. "But honestly I have mostly been conflicted, especially after running into Ian."

"Ahh, yes...Ian," he said. "We are back to the decision you have to make."

"Decision?" she asked, although she knew exactly what he meant.

CHAPTER 30

It felt like they had been talking for hours, although it probably had been less than one; the subject matter was heavy and exhausting. Unfortunately, it had only just begun.

“Decision...about Ian, and me,” she heard him say again, her mind had wandered briefly; she felt like she had just *had* this conversation.

“Oh, yeah...that,” she said.

“You clearly have feelings for him, Ethne, anyone could see that,” he said.

“I do,” she confessed, for the second time.

“So...?” he asked again.

“Well you see, the thing is, he hates chicken aprons, and well, I’ve grown to love them, so I really don’t think it’s going to work out.”

Of course she was joking, the mood was way too heavy and she couldn’t take it anymore. She knew that

the minor diversion wasn't going to veer them off course enough though, she was getting sick of talking about this, she didn't want to choose – neither of them was going to be happy with the decision she was leaning towards.

He laughed, only a little, had it been any other time she knew he would have had a gigantic smile on his face. She missed that smile.

"Please don't try to dodge the question, Ethne – I think we both have a right to know."

"I'm sorry, Scott, you should know I was up half the night having this exact discussion with Ian, frankly I'm exhausted of it."

"I can understand that, Ethne, and honestly I don't want to think of what you were doing the other half of the night. I think I'm being very understanding here."

She saw that her joke hadn't taken them very far; the serious grey cloud was hovering and not going away.

"I know you have, I'm sorry," she said. "In all honesty, if I were going to pick between you, I would pick you, Scott. Although the feelings you both have for me are making things very difficult."

"What do you mean *if* you were going to pick between us?" he asked, the subtlety of her response not slipping past him as she had hoped.

She couldn't answer him; instead she just looked at him and stayed silent.

"Don't tell me you are honestly considering..." he couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Ethne, are you mad?" he asked. "You have two people who want to be with you, and you would choose neither of us?"

"I don't appreciate being called mad, thank you, you of all people know why I might have my reservations here," she said, feeling angry for the first time that day.

"I'm sorry, yes I understand where you are coming from, but we have talked about this at length. I thought you had come around," he said.

"Well I *had* come around, until you had to go and get hit by a car," she said, smiling, wishing for a reprieve from the third degree.

"Very funny," he said, pausing a moment before adding, "I would do it again too, if it meant saving your life."

She didn't know what to say to that, his sentiment echoing one that Ian had said to her only hours before. Her thoughts suddenly went to Ian, thinking of him sitting alone in her room, waiting...for her. This day was proving to be quite the opposite of what it had promised to be.

"Well...please don't," she finally said in reply to his far too sweet of comment. "I'd rather you not be jumping in front of any more cars."

"I won't if you won't," he said.

She glanced up at her room then, wondering how long Ian would possibly wait for her. At least he was probably eating breakfast.

The glance hadn't gone unnoticed. "You really love him don't you?" he asked.

Her attention shot back to his face at once at that question; things really were getting far too complicated for her taste. She may have been bored and lonely last year, but this was an extreme in the opposite direction she really didn't care for.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just find it peculiar since you barely know the guy."

"Well, I'm afraid that's not something I can explain," she said. "I care for him deeply yes, love him? possibly...probably, all I know is, I don't care to hurt either one of you."

"I'm sorry, Ethne," he said. He could see in her eyes how much this was tearing her up inside. For a girl who did her best to avoid heartache and loss she had somehow managed to find herself in one of the worst possible places.

"Well, it is what it is," she said, sighing. Her stomach was growing tired of the conversation as well and growled at her fiercely not to be ignored.

"I'm starving, Scott, have you eaten breakfast?" she asked.

"Not really," he replied.

"I'll be right back; I'm going to go get us some food."

Ethne returned with the food and some coffee and set everything down. She had consumed every bite of her own before he had time to thank her and was starting to nibble on his.

"You were room service by the way," she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"When you knocked, we thought you were breakfast."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry."

"It's alright," she said. "I was shocked to see you."

She paused a moment, looking into his eyes, trying to figure out what he was thinking.

"I'm really glad you came," she added.

He smiled. "I don't think your boyfriend feels the same way."

She kicked him under the table.

He laughed. "Sorry. I know this can't be easy for you, Ethne."

She looked at him, puzzled. She seriously couldn't figure out how he had forgiven her so easily.

"Why are you so understanding?" she asked. "Surely you're upset...angry with me?"

"I'm not going to lie; when I saw you with Ian I was probably angrier than I've ever been in my life. But honestly, you had already told me how you felt about him, so that was no surprise, and you had technically left me, Ethne. As much as it hurts, what's done is done, and I love you – you didn't ask for this, I know that, and I know that the position you're in isn't something you would have chosen."

Hearing him say those words should have made her feel better, and in a small way they did, but ultimately it pained her to know she had hurt him.

"Try not to beat yourself up too much, Ethne – I think you have enough bruises already."

The tears she had been holding onto ran down her cheeks freely after that. He got up and moved over to her and wrapped his arms around her, letting her cry until the tears were done.

"So what do you want to do now?" he asked.

"I need to speak to Ian," she said. "I leave tomorrow, and I have a lot I need to say."

"When are you going home?" she asked.

"My flight is bright and early in the morning tomorrow," he said, returning to his seat. "I just came to talk to you, but I couldn't miss anymore work to stay longer."

The mention of work suddenly brought her farther back to reality.

"My job?" she asked.

"It's safe," he said.

She smiled at him silently thanking him.

"I won't pressure you anymore, Ethne, about an answer. You know how I feel about you choosing solitude; I would be hard pressed to allow that."

You and Ian both. She thought.

Somehow she was going to have to come to grips with the worry she was inevitably going to feel; apparently she would have stalkers at her door otherwise.

"I just want you to be happy," he said.

Another sentiment that seemed unanimous.

"I want that for you too, Scott."

She wasn't sure if she was the one that was going to bring the happiness, but she had a second chance with him now it seemed, if she wanted to take it. How these men were as understanding as they were was completely escaping her.

It felt like she was in a dream, where for the first time in her life she was being put first. Having spent it alone and fending for herself in every way, this was a strange feeling, and not one she felt she entirely deserved.

"Well, I suppose I should go, and let you have the rest of the day," he said, the words there, but the action missing.

She hadn't wanted him to leave anymore than he did, but she certainly couldn't talk to Ian with him around, she had had enough awkward for one day.

"I don't really want you to leave, Scott. I've really missed you," she said. "But I appreciate the space you offer, it is more than I... ever expected."

She had meant to say deserved, but she knew he wouldn't want to hear how much she still hated herself for her actions.

"I know," he said. "I've missed you too. But we can talk more when you get home."

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

"Oh, I just booked a hotel by the airport. The flight leaves pretty early, I didn't want to be far," he said.

"Oh," she said, disappointed that he was leaving so soon; time by herself just meant more time for her to think – that wasn't necessarily a good thing. "I'll miss you," she said, trying her best not to cry again.

"I'll miss you too," he said, standing and pulling her to her feet so he could hug her.

"I'm really glad you're okay, Scott," she said, thinking again about the fact that he hadn't been, and she hadn't been there. "Please call me if you need me, okay?" she asked, not sure if she deserved such a courtesy.

"I will," he said. "You do the same?"

"Of course," she said. "Thank you."

"For?" he asked.

"For fighting for me," she said, remembering how disappointed she had been when she thought he no longer cared about her. It may have been an irrational thought, but the lack of communication had been enough reason for her to think so.

He leaned down and kissed her, a long and sweet tender kiss. One he hoped would be enough to

remind her of him, one that would hopefully bring her home.

As she watched the car pull away, her fingertips touched her lips. She was going to miss that man.

CHAPTER 31

When she opened the door to her room she half expected Ian to be gone – but instead he was there, sitting on the couch, waiting for her.

“I can’t believe you waited for me,” she said, taking a seat next to him.

“Are you kidding?” he asked. “Where would I have gone? My mind would have been on you the whole time anyway.”

“I suppose,” she said, looking down at the floor. “Though I feel awful that you’re wasting your vacation in here.”

“Well, what’s done is done, so tell me...what happened?”

Ethne recounted most of the last few hours, summarizing in a nut shell that the other man in her life was completely crazy and had forgiven her rather easily. She left out the details she didn’t think Ian

would want to hear and put his mind at ease that they hadn't created as much of a mess as they had thought.

"See," he said. "I told you he would forgive you."

"Yeah, for leaving...not for...", she said, waving her hand towards the bedroom.

"I will admit that surprised me too, but I suppose you shouldn't question a good show of faith when you get one," he chuckled.

She laughed too. "No, I suppose not...but still, it was far more than I expected."

They were quiet for a moment before she finally looked up into his eyes that had been watching her the whole time. His face, though he tried to hide it with humor, was showing obvious signs of thoughtfulness and sadness.

"So, I suppose I better get going then...leave you two be," he said quietly, making a move to get up.

"What?" she asked. "No...he left."

"He left?!" he asked. "What do you mean he left...I thought..."

"He had to fly back early tomorrow, get back to work...he hadn't planned to stay long," she said, pausing for a moment. "He also knew I'd want a little more time with you before I leave too."

Normally knowing he had a few more moments with her would have brought a smile to his face, and hers for that matter, but the 'leave too' that they both knew was coming seemed to dampen the effect.

"So...I guess that's it then?" he asked. "You've made your choice? Don't get me wrong, I knew you'd pick him, and after what you've told me about him I can't blame you. He seems like a good guy – he obviously loves you, and I can't argue with a guy who

agrees with me on the solitude matter,” he said, trying to smile.

She got up then and walked toward the balcony, taking a deep breath.

“I was going to be leaving tomorrow anyway; you knew that,” she said. “That had nothing to do with my decision. Although now I suppose I will no longer need to go home and beg his forgiveness, I know I have that and a second chance if I want it.”

He had gotten up and was slowly making his way over to her, as though she were a frightened deer he didn’t want to scare away.

Ian touched her elbow lightly and tried to get her to turn toward him, but she wouldn’t. Her feet were planted solidly on the ground, her arms crossed in front of her.

“What do you mean ‘if you want it?’” he asked, quietly.

She rolled her eyes up to the blue sky for a moment before finally turning toward him; her resolve on the matter was wearing thin.

“I mean I have a lot to think about and I don’t feel like I can make a decision yet, about anything. I need some time alone to think.”

With a hope in his eyes that pained her to see, he nodded. “I can understand that,” he said.

What he didn’t know and wouldn’t understand was that the options she was weighing still had to do with choosing to be alone. After all of the craziness of the past week while it pained her to admit it, she felt like she was doing more harm than good to the people she cared about.

It had only been one year since she was shown a different path that was possible for her life. While

choosing to continue on the path she had been on would be a difficult one, it certainly wasn't out of the question. She had lived that life a long time, she could do it again – what she didn't know was, if she wanted to.

“Do you want me to leave you alone now,” he asked, looking into her eyes sadly.

“No, I don't,” she said. “Either way, I'm leaving tomorrow and I will miss you. I think we should spend the rest of the day together...if you want to?”

He smiled, the sadness washing away, even if temporarily. “Of course I want to,” he said, hugging her tightly.

Though most of the day was over, spent partially in a sleepy haze wrapped up in Ian's arms, the other part spent explaining herself and apologizing to Scott; it was only late afternoon, there was still an evening that awaited them.

Although she wasn't leaving until midday the following day, she knew the dark cloud of her departure would likely mean the day wouldn't necessarily be a pleasant one.

“So what do you want to do?” he asked, letting her go finally.

“I don't know, you?” she asked, her body and mind actually quite exhausted from everything already.

“Let's just go hang out on the beach for a while and then I'll take you to dinner,” he said. “How does that sound?”

“Perfect,” she said.

They spent the rest of the day doing their best to forget the first half of the day and completely ignoring what was to come tomorrow; lost in the

paradise of San Pedro, they felt the sand between their toes, watched the day turn into night and enjoyed a romantic dinner alone.

Ian kept his distance from her a bit more than he had. The line they hadn't wanted to cross had returned and they knew the one night they had shared would be their last.

Although she had yet to make up her mind, she figured the understanding nature of both men could only go so far. She wished though that she could feel a little more freedom with Ian, since tonight was likely going to be their last together.

During dinner she reached across the table and took his hand. "Ian," she said, her tone more serious than either of them wanted it to be.

"Yeah?"

"I think we should talk...before I leave tomorrow," she said.

"Oh," he said, his gaze dropping to the table.

She kept a firm grasp on his hand, not wanting to let him go, not wanting to end the connection they had with each other.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I thought you wanted time to think...before you decided anything?"

She kept her eyes on him, not shying away from the difficult topic at hand.

"Yes, that's true," she said. "But you need to know something before I leave tomorrow."

"Oh?" he asked, looking up at her slowly, afraid to hear the next words from her mouth. "And what's that?"

"Regardless of what comes of my thinking," she said. "I don't want you waiting around for me. You have to admit that a relationship between us would be

rather difficult, given the fact that we live on opposites sides of the country, for one.”

He looked at her, the fear and sadness fading replaced by a stern and determined look.

“True,” he said. “But don’t you think if we both wanted it that we wouldn’t let distance get in the way.”

After hearing himself say the words out loud they seemed to sink in as well.

“You’re just using that as an excuse, Ethne,” he said, pulling his hand away. “If you don’t want to be with me, just say it, you don’t have to sugar-coat or make things up for my benefit.”

She had expected his anger, which was why she had postponed this discussion as long as she could.

The back and forth arguments with both Ian and Scott had tired her. Neither of them would listen to her reasoning, she knew that was a battle she couldn’t win and she no longer cared to discuss it.

“Ian,” she said, keeping her hand where she had left it. “You know how much you mean to me, that’s part of the reason I’m asking you to let me go. I care about you too much to make you wait for an answer you probably aren’t going to like anyway. You have a life in Miami, I would never ask you to leave it.”

The waiter had returned and was refilling their water glasses, looking from Ethne’s face to Ian’s and thinking better of asking if they needed anything else; he left as quickly as he had appeared.

“Don’t you see, Ethne?” he asked. “You wouldn’t have had to ask.”

Those words. She wished he hadn’t said those words. She pulled her hand back and set it in her lap, looking down and feeling completely lost.

She closed her eyes for a moment trying to think of what to say, and trying to keep her tears from falling, they'd be doing plenty of that tomorrow.

"Ian," she whispered. "I wish you hadn't said that."

"Why not?" he asked. "It's the truth."

She took a deep breath and looked up again. "How can you know that?" she asked. "You barely know me."

"I know enough," he said. "And as I've said, if I thought you were going to leave to be with Scott I could accept that, it would be hard, but I could accept it. But I can tell you aren't quite sure of that decision either, and I'm not pleased with what that means, Ethne."

"This is too hard, Ian," she said, taking another deep breath, doing her best to stay calm, but not having much luck.

She saw him soften. "I'm sorry, Ethne," he said, feeling slightly ashamed. "I just really care about you, I can't stand the thought of you being alone."

"I know, Ian," she said. "I care about you too, I can't stand that I'm hurting you."

He smiled, reached across the table and offered his hand again, she took it gladly, feeling his warmth spread to all of her fingers.

"I'm stronger than I look," he said. "And you are too."

She smiled back at him. "So can we call a truce for now and just enjoy the rest of the night?"

"Absolutely," he said. "What did you have in mind?"

Before she had a chance to answer the whole room started to shake. She looked over at Ian, his

eyes widening as he jumped up and ran to her side and got them both under the table.

She didn't know if under the table was the best location to be anymore, but figured it was probably the safest place they could get to at the moment. He held her close and waited for it to end. She was fairly used to earthquakes, though one never truly got comfortable with them. It seemed to go on forever.

When it finally stopped, they peeked out from under the table and saw all of the other people doing the same, everyone tentatively emerging from where they had ducked for cover. They all looked like frightened little creatures appearing from the shadows, a far cry from the relaxed diners they had been only moments before.

She looked around the room and saw that damage had been minimal, and no one had been hurt.

Just when she was starting to relax a little again, although she knew an aftershock was likely imminent, sirens started going off outside.

"What is that?" Ethne asked, looking to Ian for an answer to what was making everyone panic.

"I think it's a tsunami warning," he said, getting to his feet and helping her up.

"You have got to be kidding me," she said, wondering what exactly they were supposed to do now. "Are you sure?" she asked, it didn't sound like anything she'd ever heard before.

"I think so," he said. "Never a dull day with you around, eh?" he said, jabbing her in her side and smiling a ridiculously calm smile.

"Hey!" she said back with a glare. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He laughed. "Oh nothing."

“Why are you so calm anyway, isn’t this serious?” she asked, as everyone else around them was headed quickly for the door.

“I suppose it could be, or it could be just a precaution, either way we better get out of here,” he said, taking her by the arm and helping her navigate through all of the people.

“Where are we supposed to go?” she asked.

“Wherever they are, I guess,” he said.

“Oh you’re really invoking some confidence here,” she said, suddenly feeling like cattle.

When they made it outside, the driver who had brought them to the restaurant from the resort was waiting for them. He quickly ushered them into the car and started driving them inland.

Ethne was beginning to wonder if there would be an “inland” enough if a tsunami actually hit San Pedro. When they were slowly on their way to...somewhere, her phone rang.

“Hello?” she said. “Scott? ...Yeah, I’m fine. We are headed inland, I guess. Are you okay...will you be okay where you are?” she asked.

“Okay, yeah I will call you later when things calm down.” She paused, looking over at Ian, who was watching her. She added quietly, “Love you too, be safe.”

“Never a dull moment,” Ian said, giving her a reassuring smile.

CHAPTER 32

The sirens were strange, not quite like what she had heard in San Francisco when they had tested their system. The driver seemed unfazed, perhaps used to practice drills, although given the earthquake they had just felt she doubted this was a drill. Today was sure turning out to be an interesting day.

Driving was slow; walking may have been a better plan, though they didn't really know where they should be going. She didn't know how long it had taken them, but after a while they were with a group of other people in their cars, now they were simply waiting to find out if there was a true threat. Ian was holding her hand and was staying quiet; the driver was listening to the radio.

"So....," Ian finally said. "Was Scott okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so," she said, her mind and insides a mess, all she could think about was what was going

to happen. She was worried about Scott and worried about the two of them; paradise had suddenly turned into a confusing nightmare.

They sat there in silence waiting for something to happen, neither of them knowing what to say or how to feel. Fear was only marginally gripping her. For some reason she felt comforted having Ian nearby, his relaxed and reassuring smile keeping her calm when normally she probably would have been having a panic attack.

They heard the person on the radio say that there had been a 7.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Honduras and that a tsunami warning was in effect until further notice.

It was only about 8 p.m., she wondered how long the warning would last. For some stupid reason she thought of her medication, and that she may miss the dose, the ridiculousness of that thought struck her as funny.

There could be a gigantic wave about to flatten where they were and her first thought was of her medicine. She didn't even know how important the timing was on her medication. Missing one dose was probably not even a big deal and it certainly wouldn't be if a tsunami was going to take them out.

Before that moment nothing could have stopped her from getting back to her hotel to take it on time. She realized she had become almost neurotically obsessed about it, as though it was the only control she had over whether or not she had another seizure. The irony was, it was probably a false sense of control, and most likely made very little difference.

She hadn't had any seizures for months. They had become a past thought to her, something that kept

her from embracing her future, not necessarily because of their imminent threat, but simply because they were a possibility.

The earthquake and tsunami warning were opening her eyes to the fact that anything could happen, even in paradise.

Although it was stupid and they were probably going to be fine, she simply couldn't stop herself. In that moment of realizing how clouded her judgment had been, she leaned over and ran her hands through Ian's hair before pulling his lips to hers and kissing him deeply.

She didn't even care if the driver was watching them.

Ian didn't fight her, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back, the two of them feeling like in that moment they were the only ones on the planet.

After a while they slowly pulled away and looked into each others eyes. He smiled at her and pulled her tightly into him as they waited to hear more news.

About twenty minutes later they were told it was safe to return to their hotel. The driver drove them back and dropped them off giving them a smile before driving away.

The hotel showed only minor signs that there had been an earthquake; the staff welcomed them back warmly asking if they were alright and if they needed anything.

Within minutes they were making their way back to her room like nothing had even happened.

She called Scott when they were back inside to make sure he was still okay, and joined Ian on the couch, falling into it heavily with an exhausted body.

“Not quite like your last trip, huh?” he asked with a laugh.

“No, not quite,” she said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

“So what was the kiss for?” he asked. “Did you think we were going to die?”

She laughed. “Maybe,” she said. “I figured even if we didn’t I still wanted to kiss you again before I leave, no real point in waiting.”

“Sound logic,” he said. “Can’t argue with it, though I still want another one tomorrow.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at him, even though the topic of leaving was still not something she wanted to think about, the ordeal they had just been through certainly put things into perspective.

“Aren’t your friends going to worry about you?” she asked. “You’ve been with me for days!”

“Oh yeah...my friends,” he said. “I should probably check on them, though they obviously aren’t worried about me, I’ve been with you for days! And not a word – you could have killed me and no one even cares!”

“Very funny,” she said, handing him the phone.

When he got off the phone he handed it back to her.

“Are they alright?” she asked.

“Yeah, they’re fine, though Samantha is ready to go home.”

“When are you going home?” Ethne asked, realizing the topic of his departure had never come up. She had been here for about a week, he must have been here longer.

“Well, funny thing, I’m set to leave tomorrow too,” he said, putting his feet up and stretching his arms up before resting his hands behind his head.

“You are?!” she asked. “When were you going to tell me that?”

“Well, you never asked,” he said. “You do have a tendency to be wrapped up in your own drama now don’t you?”

“Again, very funny,” she said. “Seriously though, you could have mentioned it...,” she thought for a moment about what that meant. “What time are you leaving?”

“Well my flight from Belize leaves at 3:15 I think, the other flight at noon I believe.”

She was quiet for a moment; he looked at her wondering what had caused her silence.

“Why?” he asked. “When are you leaving?”

“Same time,” she said.

He smiled. “Well, that’s quite the coincidence eh?”

“What are you, Canadian?” she asked, whacking his arm with a small grin.

“Are you returning through Miami?” he asked, wondering how far the coincidence would go.

“Yes,” she said, realizing the goodbye just got extended, and more complicated.

“So we get to be travel buddies again, what fun,” he said. “I do hope your flying abilities have improved though, you were quite the nervous wreck last time. I don’t particularly want to be sitting next to that again.”

She couldn’t resist hitting him again; the “near death” experience had certainly made him cheeky.

“And what makes you think I’m going to sit next to you?” she asked, returning the gunfire.

He laughed, obviously quite amused with himself.

“Well, I suppose if you can refrain from passing out or puking all over me, I could be talked into it,” he said.

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence and obvious charity,” she replied.

“Anything for you my dear,” he said, before getting up and heading into the kitchen. “Want something to drink?” he called from the other room.

It had been about two hours since the beginning of the ordeal had interrupted their dinner. Things could have been worse, all the same she was already hungry again – the excitement seemed to have burned through all of her dinner calories.

“I’m hungry actually,” she said. “Is there anything to eat in there?”

He peeked his head back into the room. “You’re hungry?” he asked in disbelief. “How can you possibly be hungry after the dinner I just bought you?”

“Speaking of which,” she said. “Did you actually pay for that?”

He thought for a moment and laughed. “Oops, I guess not. It seems an earthquake makes the perfect cover for a dine and dash,” he said, tossing her a banana. “I’ll take care of that tomorrow before we go.”

“A banana?” she asked. “Seriously? There’s nothing else in there.”

“Nope, ‘fraid not my little piranha. Want me to call down and see if they can bring you something?”

“No,” she said, peeling the banana and reluctantly eating it, wishing instead that it was a burger and fries – tonight had made her *really* hungry.

“You sure?” he asked again. “You don’t seem terribly happy about the banana.”

“Well, I’m not a monkey,” she said. “And I’m hungry.”

He laughed, picking up the phone and calling the front desk to see if they could do anything for them this late.

Surprisingly they responded by bringing her up a nice plate of food, it wasn’t a burger and fries, but it was better than a banana. She ate it with a huge grin on her face.

“I honestly don’t know how you fit that much food in you, you’re tiny,” he said laughing. “I swear you eat more than I do.”

She shrugged. “Beats me.”

When her stomach was once again satisfied, she realized it was time for her medication. Her thoughts flashed back to the car they’d been in just an hour or so ago, and how for a moment taking it hadn’t seemed as important.

Still, even after everything that had happened and the new thoughts that ran through her head, she didn’t feel like tempting fate. She excused herself and went to the bathroom, looking at herself in the mirror she swallowed her pill, wondering if things would ever be different from this.

She felt tethered to the pills, like without them she would fall into an abyss, a life full of seizures or the possibility of them. There was a chance she could eventually go off the medication, though with a risk,

and considering how she felt she didn't particularly feel like encouraging the odds for reoccurrence.

One thing tonight had taught her though was that she couldn't look so far into her future that she could no longer see the present. For all she knew the world could end tomorrow, or at least her world, with or without seizures – there wasn't much point in worrying so much about it.

As she twisted the lid back onto the bottle she slipped it in her bag and left the bathroom smiling.

Ian was well aware of her mood when she stepped into the room. "Why the big smile?" he asked.

"I don't know, guess I'm just happy to be alive," she said, strolling over to the window and looking out at the calm ocean.

They had felt a couple of small aftershocks after the bigger earthquake, but they hadn't been that bad. One bonus about being from California, you got pretty used to the feeling of an earthquake.

Ian on the other hand wasn't accustomed to earthquakes and yet had stayed fairly calm during it, though his grip on her had tightened; she knew a lot of his calmness was an act.

"Have you ever experienced an earthquake before?" she asked.

He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, letting her lean into him as they both looked out at the night sky.

"Nope, I haven't," he said. "And I can't say I care to again."

She laughed. "Aww, they're not that bad, you get used to them after a while – unless they are really big anyway."

"Yeah, sure you do," he said, squeezing her a little tighter.

"You must be used to hurricanes," she added. "I don't think I'd care for those."

He laughed. "I'd take wind and rain over the ground shaking any day."

She smiled, half-heartedly. "So...I guess that means you'd be hard pressed to leave Miami then," she said, remembering the words he had said to her during dinner. "Not that I'm asking you to."

He let go of her then and walked in front of her blocking her view of the sea.

"Would you want me to?" he asked, his eyes penetrating hers, his gaze unwavering from her face.

She hadn't meant to stir up this conversation, she hadn't meant to make it seem like that's what she wanted; the question had simply slipped out. Now she was left not knowing what to say, she honestly wasn't sure what she wanted. She dropped her gaze no longer being able to take the intensity of his.

"I don't know, Ian," she said. "I don't know."

He lifted her chin gently, not allowing her to shy away from giving him a real answer.

She couldn't speak, tears started to form in her eyes, the confusion of her feelings for both of them rushing back to her. She knew she was going to have to decide soon; tomorrow morning would be here in only a few hours – her time with Ian was quickly coming to an end.

The thought of never seeing him again made her heart ache, but it did the same when she thought of Scott. After the earthquake it had occurred to her it wasn't her fear of losing them that kept her from choosing, it wasn't that she would prefer to be alone,

it was simply that she couldn't decide; she didn't know how. She hated the thought of hurting either of them so much, it seemed only fair that she didn't choose; that was why she would opt to be alone, the only reason.

Scott had opened her eyes to life again; Ian had been there while they were opening. They had both had a hand in her feeling human again. How could she say goodbye to either one of them?

They had been standing there for what seemed like an hour, her silence holding them in a state of suspension. He was waiting for an answer and seemed would not be giving up that right.

A tear slid down her cheek and he wiped it away almost instantly.

"Don't cry, Ethne," he said. "And don't be afraid of hurting me; just tell me what you want."

She took a deep breath before answering; it felt as if she had stopped breathing during that moment.

"I would like to go to bed," she said, knowing it wasn't what he wanted to hear, but the day had been long, very long and she was too exhausted to give any of this another thought.

"Okay," he said, leading her into the bedroom.

He helped her get under the covers and lay down next to her, wrapping his arms around her possibly for the last time.

Ian drifted off to sleep quickly, within minutes she could hear his soft breaths and felt the warmth from them on her neck.

She was exhausted, but she would not be sleeping that night. Instead she felt Ian's arms around her, safe and warm in his embrace she closed her eyes and tried to think of what she was going to do.

CHAPTER 33

In the morning she felt him stir, his arms tightening around her as his eyes opened to the light pouring in from the window.

She turned to face him and smiled, his arm still draped over her waist.

“Morning,” he said, yawning. “Did you sleep well?”

She hadn’t, and she knew the day was going to be a challenge given that fact.

“Yeah,” she said. “I did...you?”

“Like a baby,” he said, rolling onto his back and stretching the sleep away. “What time is it?”

“About 9,” she said, not having to look.

He got up and went to the bathroom, leaving her alone in the bed; they only had a couple more hours before they had to go.

When he got back she was lying in bed facing the window, he crawled back into the covers and started rubbing her back.

“Want me to call down for some breakfast?” he asked, laughing, “who am I talking to, of course you do!”

“Ha ha,” she said, her mind only partially there in the room with him. All night she had been thinking about today, and now it was here, she was no more prepared for it than she had been yesterday.

Ian didn’t seem to notice, but instead dialed for breakfast, seeming blissfully unaware of the fact that they would be going home today, and parting ways.

“Don’t you need to go get all of your stuff – say goodbye to your friends?” she asked. “Or are they flying back with you?”

“Well, actually, most of my stuff is here now, in case you hadn’t noticed,” he said, smiling – a fact he seemed proud of. “And yeah some of them will be flying back with me today.”

“Oh,” she said, unsure of how the intrusion of others made her feel.

That seemed to not go unnoticed; Ian moved closer to her and stroked her hair. “But don’t worry, they won’t bother you.”

She smiled at him. “I wasn’t worried about that, exactly,” she said. “Though it will feel strange having your friends around.” She paused a moment before adding, “For our goodbye.”

At the mention of the dreaded moment she could see the sadness in his face. “You wouldn’t answer me last night,” he said, his gaze settling on the covers below him rather than on her. “I guess you just did.”

He got up from the bed and started getting dressed, she had obviously just torn his heart in two; hers had already been in that state all night when she had made her decision about how today was going to go.

She got up and walked over to him quickly before he had a chance to flee the room. "Ian," she said, putting her body in the way of him and the door. "Wait."

"For what?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Ian," she said. "I don't know what else to do, I can't ask you to change your entire life for me...not yet anyway."

"What do you mean not yet?" he asked, backing up and sitting on the bed.

Just then they both heard a knock at the door. They looked at each other, the morning of the day before coming back to both of them.

"Let's hope that's breakfast," Ian said, only half joking.

He got up, threw his shirt on this time and answered the door. He returned to the bedroom holding the tray of food and set it down on the night stand.

Even with the sadness she had brought to the room a moment ago, she was still really hungry, he didn't appear to be.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked.

"Not until you answer my question," he said, sitting back down on the bed.

"Okay," she said, sitting down next to him.

She sighed, folded her hands in her lap and turned to face him.

"I didn't sleep last night," she confessed, seeing his face turn from disappointment to worry. "I was up all night thinking.

"And what I decided was that I don't think we can be rash about this decision. Being here with you in Belize, both times, has felt so...separated from reality, and even though I felt the same way when I saw you in San Francisco, I'm not sure I can be impartial about it, until I'm no longer here, alone with you in Belize; I need time to think.

"What I don't want is for you to put your life on hold for me...I cannot guarantee anything about what I decide. I only know how I feel about you, about Scott, and right now I'm just confused."

He took her hand and held it palm up, tracing the inside of it lightly with his fingertip.

"I understand, Ethne, I really do," he said. "And honestly if you had asked me to leave Miami, I probably would have said yes. But it would have been an answer out of the passion I feel for you, I can't say whether it would be the right decision or not. I stand by what I said all along, that I support whatever you decide, whoever you choose. All I ask is that you tell me someday – don't leave me wondering day after day whether you might call and tell me that it is me you want."

His hand on hers felt like magic, his fingertip stroking her palm almost putting her in a trance, and his words filling her with happiness.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly and whispered "thank you" in his ear.

When she pulled away a tear was running down her cheek even though she had a smile on her face. He wiped it away and smiled back at her.

"Can we eat now?" she asked.

He laughed really hard and shook his head. "Yes, we can eat now," he said, handing her the plate he had held for ransom.

For some reason even though they would still be saying goodbye, having the difficult words already spoken had left the atmosphere around them lighter. They enjoyed their breakfast together before packing up and leaving the hotel room for the last time.

Their home away from home, for the second time, proving to be a place unlike any other; even with the excitement of the night before, San Pedro was a paradise that would always be in her mind and her heart.

Ian stopped by his own room and gathered the few items he had left behind; he briefly introduced her to his friends, all of them smiling at the person who had stolen him away for practically their entire vacation.

She wondered if they would still be smiling when she and Ian said their final goodbyes. Despite his brave words, she wondered how he would truly fare after all was said and done.

On their way to the airport Ian held her hand as she looked out the window at the beautiful blue waters one last time. The trip had seemed far longer than a week, but all the same she didn't want to leave.

She thought of Scott then, wondered how his night had been and where he was on his trip home. Her heart it seemed was never in the same place at the same time, she wondered if it ever would be.

When they arrived at the airport she was actually quite relieved that Ian would be traveling along with her for most of the trip. When he had first told her that they had the same flight plan she had had mixed feelings, thinking perhaps the goodbye would have been better early on – like ripping off a Band-Aid.

She had already said what she wanted to say, so maybe the hardest part was over, though she doubted that very much.

His friends were on the shorter flight as well, though he must have said something to them because they didn't say a word to him the entire time, leaving the moments in the air completely to him and to her. She held his hand as the airplane took flight, held it for the few moments they were in the air, and held it as they touched down in Belize City.

They didn't talk.

They didn't need to.

Their flight to Miami would be considerably longer. Conversation was more likely during that flight, though she had no idea what the topic would be, she didn't care; she was simply trying to enjoy her last few moments with Ian.

They had a couple of hours of waiting in Belize before the flight would leave; they spent their time talking with his friends about their trip and about the earthquake the night before.

Ian managed yet again to get his seat changed so that he could sit with her, his friends were seated far away, for which they were both grateful. They would for just a little longer feel like it was just the two of them before returning to reality, returning to their lives, though she couldn't even imagine that at the moment.

The two hours sailed by and anxiety over the flight never once entered her mind. She was instead lost in Ian, feeling his hand holding hers and seeing him smile at her. She did her best to soak it into her memory.

During the flight he gave her his address and phone number, making her promise that she would contact him and let him know, someday, what she had decided.

When they finally touched down in Miami she felt his grasp on her hand tighten, she looked up into his eyes to see that they were glistening.

She had never seen Ian cry before and the sight was more than she could take. Her tears started to flow freely even though she was trying her best to hold them back.

She tried to give him a strong and reassuring smile that this was for the best, though she still wasn't completely convinced herself.

When they had gotten off the plane it was time for them to part ways, she would be continuing on and he would be going home.

"Do you want me to wait with you," he asked, his last effort, not wanting to say goodbye.

She wiped her tears away. "No," she said, her voice weak and shaky. "I think it's best you don't."

They were standing just inches from one another, holding each other's hands. His friends were waiting for him, she could feel their eyes on them – she wished they would disappear.

"Are you sure?" he asked, one last time.

"Yes," she said. "I'm sure."

He pulled her to him then, hugging her tighter than he ever had, almost as a threat that he wouldn't ever let go.

"I'll always be here for you, Ethne," he said, she could tell he could barely get the words out. "If you ever need me...know that."

When he finally did let go she felt her breath return to her, she had almost wished it hadn't. Her heart was beating fast, the moment she had been dreading was here; this was the goodbye.

She almost couldn't bare it.

They looked into each other's eyes knowing it would likely be the last time they ever did. He kissed her softly, lingering sweetly only for a minute, he was about to pull away and leave when she grabbed his hair and pulled him back to her. She kissed him deeply almost uncontrollably forgetting herself, forgetting time.

When she stopped they looked at each other one last time before he turned and walked away. Goodbye was never spoken; he didn't look back.

He was gone so quickly it was almost like he had never been there; she was standing alone in the airport, tears streaming down her face, her heart felt as if it had shattered into a million pieces.

CHAPTER 34

Scott was pacing back and forth waiting for Ethne's plane to arrive; it had seemed like forever since he had seen her, even though it hadn't been that long.

When the earthquake hit he had been terrified something had happened to her, when the tsunami warning was in effect he was terrified something was about to.

The relief he felt when she picked up the phone and told him she was fine was indescribable, and when she returned his words of love...well that was...completely unexpected.

Even though she had been with Ian, and that was a fact he wasn't all that pleased about, he was glad she was safe and that she was soon going to be back in his arms...he hoped.

The anxiety he felt took him back to the year before when he had been waiting for word on her

progress during his ridiculous scavenger hunt, he still couldn't believe she had gone through with that.

Where was the damn plane? He thought. His impatience was obviously starting to make everyone else nervous, people were starting to stare.

As he watched the screen waiting for her flight to come up he thought about the saying of the watched pot never boiling, so instead he turned his attention to the bags making their way around in circles.

It didn't quite have the same feeling when you weren't searching for your own, that hope that it would arrive like a friend you were separated from. But being transfixed on the bags did its trick, pretty soon the screen changed and her flight was showing that it had arrived. It wouldn't be long now; he resumed his pacing.

When people started filing in and surrounding him he hadn't realized how hard it might be to see her in the crowd, he scanned everyone as they entered and thought he had been thorough...but there was no sign of Ethne. He waited, hoping he'd just missed her, but soon everyone had claimed their bags and had left.

His heart was in his throat, he didn't know if she had decided not to come home or if something had happened to her.

He checked his phone, there were no messages. Frantic, he asked a ticket agent if she could check to see if Ethne had even been on the plane, she declined.

"Please?" he said. "She's my girlfriend, and she has epilepsy. I just need to know if something happened to her."

"I'm sorry sir," she said. "I wish I could help, but I'm not allowed to give out that information."

She could see how distraught he was, her hands were tied as far as the name was concerned. "But I can tell you we had no passengers with that particular problem, so perhaps it was the wrong flight?" she asked, offering him hope that it was a simple misunderstanding.

He was almost positive that she had said she would be in on this flight though, and he didn't typically get such details mixed up. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Even though the ticket agent had tried to put his mind at ease, the only thing that would do that would be seeing Ethne's face again.

"Thank you," he said to the ticket agent, even though she hadn't been all that helpful. *Damn rules*, he thought, before asking her if there were any other flights coming in from Miami.

"Not tonight," she said, clicking keys quickly and scanning the screen in front of her. "But there is a flight coming in tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay," he said. "Thanks."

Since it seemed no one was going to give him any answers beyond that, he saw no reason to stay.

Still feeling worried that it was possible something had happened to her he walked out into the night air and made his way to his car, alone.

He checked his phone one last time before getting in his car, there were still no messages, he dialed her number and waited.

The phone rang a few times before a recorded version of Ethne answered; he wished more than anything that it had been her.

He left her a short message still hoping somehow maybe there had just been a mix up, something deep

down in his gut kept gnawing at the possibility that there hadn't been.

After sitting in silence, he started his car and drove home.

Driving home alone in silence had been the last thing he'd expected; after their last conversation he was almost sure she would have been sitting next to him in the car right now.

But she wasn't. The car was empty.

As he made his way home, the lights on the highway reflected off the road and blurred in his dazed vision. It was one of those drives that you can barely recall once you've made it to your destination.

He pulled into his driveway almost loathing the look of his own house and made his way inside. He hadn't planned on coming back here tonight, he thought he would have been spending it with Ethne.

Instead he walked into a cold and dark room, flipped on the light and sat down on his couch. It was late; he would have still been at work right now, but he had taken the night off to pick her up. Another missed work day...for nothing.

A year ago nothing could have kept him from his job; it was all he thought about. His own past had made it a priority for him, keeping him from the messiness of people. In a way he was a lot like Ethne, though he would never admit it to her.

In his early 20's he had fallen in love, but life had other plans and that love had been taken away from him. It was never a story he shared with anyone, it wasn't something he cared to recollect.

Finding a rhythm in his work had been the only thing that had kept him sane at the time and until Ethne had literally crashed into him, or rather he into

her, he had absolutely no interest in ever going down that path again.

Now he was beginning to wonder if he had made a huge mistake. His focus was gone, he was angry, hurt and confused, and the worst part was he had caused this problem himself.

He didn't want to be a hypocrite though, everything he had told Ethne had been true. Even if he hadn't been living that way himself, he did actually believe it, he just assumed that choosing work was still choosing life, didn't see the need for romance.

Ethne on the other hand had barely been choosing anything. He could tell her work gave her no real reward, his at least did, but that was still a pretty lame excuse.

The last year with Ethne had been the single best year of his life since his life had been so drastically changed nearly ten years before – *that couldn't have been a mistake*, he thought, looking around at his home that now seemed so foreign.

He hoped she was okay, the worried pit in his stomach made it awfully hard to think of anything else. It was 3 a.m. and he was exhausted. He glanced at his phone again wishing it would just fucking ring.

It didn't.

Still no messages. He threw his phone across the room letting it get lost in the couch. He was exhausted and his hands were tied.

With nothing left to do he got up and made his way into his dark and lonely room and crawled into a bed he hadn't slept in for months.

In his dreams he dreamt of the night they had spent together on the boat. He dreamt of her blue

nightgown and her soft skin, her smile and laugh and the way she had felt lying in his arms.

When he woke up he half expected her to be there, lying with him in his bed. It had felt so real that when he realized it had only been a dream, he looked around the room stunned at the reality and felt the worry return immediately.

He rolled over and checked the time, it was nearly noon. The other flight that was set to come in would be landing soon. After last night though, he couldn't bring himself to return to the airport. Instead he needed to get to her house and retrieve the box he had left there before she had a chance to see it.

Quickly throwing on a change of clothes he rushed out the door, he wanted to pick up the box before she got home...if she was coming home; he was kicking himself for having forgotten that it was there.

After all of the things that had happened he was no longer sure he should give it to her.

On the way to her house the traffic was gridlocked. He could have run there faster than he was moving and his panic was growing by the minute, he checked his watch and wondered if he should do just that. He couldn't let her open the box, not now.

CHAPTER 35

When Ethne stepped off the plane the tears had finally dried. They had certainly had plenty of time to; the twelve hour wait in Dallas had been sheer torture. Had she known at the time it would have gone like that she never would have voluntarily switched flights.

At the time though she thought the extra time alone to think would have been a good thing. But it turned out to be the opposite.

She had felt torn between two worlds there, half of her wanting to return to Miami, the other half just wanting to go home.

Now that she was finally there she let out a deep breath and made her way to baggage claim.

She had half hoped to see Scott waiting for her; though she hadn't ever really expected that he would be. It had been a work night the night before and considering the change, it was not at all surprising he

wasn't there now. Her phone battery had died a long time ago and she hadn't cared to recharge it. It would have been far too tempting to make a call in either direction. Though Dallas had been a long wait, it was still time she had needed in order to decide.

Even though she was sure in the change up that her bag would not have made the switch successfully, it was waiting for her nonetheless. She picked it up and headed for the door, hailed a cab and made her way home. It was a strange feeling being back home after all of the things that had happened, when she left she hadn't been sure she would ever come back.

Her heart started to beat faster when the cab driver pulled onto her street, her house came into view and before she knew it she was once again standing on her doorstep.

She watched the driver disappear; looking at the street again she saw no sign of Scott's car. Her heart sank at the thought that he wasn't here either.

Reluctantly, she dug out her keys and opened her door and stepped inside. Everything was as she had left it, why she expected anything different she didn't know; although he had been angry it would have been very unlike Scott to damage the place.

Still, the note she had left was crumpled up and left on the table; she recoiled at the thought that she had made him do that. She set down her bag and was about to head to the bedroom when she noticed the box on the counter.

Her fingers trembling, she picked it up, wondering if he'd left this recently or before their encounter in Belize. She was about to lift the lid when she heard Scott's voice.

"Don't open that," he said.

She gasped and looked up nearly dropping the box; she hadn't heard him come in.

"Scott?!" she said, half wanting to run into his arms, but instead she stayed where she was.

The look on his face told her nothing. She couldn't tell if he was happy to see her or not. He was out of breath and walked over and took the box from her hands before she could protest.

"Why not?" she finally asked, her curiosity at this strange homecoming getting the better of her – this hadn't been how she had anticipated their next meeting. "Wasn't it for me?" she asked, gesturing to the box he had slipped into his pocket out of sight.

"Welcome home," he said.

"Thanks," she said, walking over to him so she could attempt a robbery. "Don't change the subject," she said, smiling at him and closing the gap between them.

He darted quickly into the kitchen to escape her advances.

"Why are you out of breath anyway," she asked. "What did you do, run here?"

He turned to face her, confident that her attempts to snag his hidden treasure would be unsuccessful. "As a matter of fact, I did," he said, side stepping out of her reach again.

She laughed. "You can't be serious?" she asked. "From where? You're hardly dressed for running."

She made one last futile attempt before resigning her efforts. "Did you come to get that?" she asked, pointing to his pocket that was now hiding something she was dying to see.

Her curiosity over the object was suddenly replaced with the knowledge that he hadn't come to see her.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

"Oh," she said, her smile faded and she walked over to the table and sat down, no longer looking at him.

"Ethne?" he asked, joining her at the table and looking at her sad face. "What's wrong?"

"I thought you had come to see me," she said, staring out the window.

He took her hand. "I did," he said, suddenly feeling incredibly stupid about how this had gone.

Yesterday all he had wanted to do if he had gotten to see her was sweep her into his arms and hug her tighter than he ever had.

"You did?" she asked, doubt still clearly marked on her face.

He smiled at her trying to reassure her that the last few minutes of foolishness were not the only reason he was there.

"Of course I did," he said. "I was actually at the airport last night."

He looked down at the table feeling like an idiot for his confession.

"You were?" she asked, her face suddenly beaming again with the radiance he had seen in her eyes when he had first walked in, though he had nearly missed it since he had been immediately focused and panicked that she was about to open the box.

"Yeah," he said. "I was."

She looked at him and saw sadness in his downturned eyes, realizing how hurt he must have been when she hadn't gotten off the plane.

"Oh my god," she said. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there." She reached over and took his face in her hands forcing him to look at her.

"I thought you had changed your mind," he said.

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "No," she said. "I took a different flight, that's all."

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know, someone needed to get here sooner so I gave them my seat. I was stuck in Dallas for 12 hours – which I don't recommend by the way," she said, releasing him slowly and sneakily moving her hand down to his pocket, not fast enough though.

He caught her hand just as she was about to make away with the box.

"Nice try," he said, keeping her hand in his.

"Oh come on!" she said. "If it was for me why can't I open it?"

He didn't answer.

"I said I was sorry for not being here yesterday, would you have let me open it then if I had been?" she asked.

He looked up at her with a coy smile. "Maybe," he said.

"Well that's not fair, I was being kind to a stranger," she said. "That should count for something, right? If I had known you were going to be there, I never would have switched," she said. "I really am sorry, I can imagine how you must have felt – I feel terrible about it, Scott, I really do."

"You didn't call," he said. "I left you a message."

She looked into his eyes almost able to see the evening play out in them; she felt so selfish for keeping him waiting, for making him wonder.

"My...battery was dead," she said, knowing how incredibly lame that excuse sounded, though it was true.

"Oh come on, Ethne," he said, releasing her hands and quickly getting up from the table. "You could have charged it or used a payphone."

"Yes, I could have..." she said, pausing to try and come up with a plausible excuse. "I thought you were working, I didn't think you'd be there."

While that too was the truth, she knew she still should have called him. The other truth that she was recovering from, the goodbye in Miami was not something she wanted to discuss, especially with Scott; the wound from last night was bad enough.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I needed some time to think, and it was late...I didn't think..." she took a deep breath not knowing what else to say that would suffice for what she had done...any of it. "I'm sorry."

"And what did you decide?" he asked, softening only a little in regard to her obvious blunder.

She shrugged, looking around the room. "Well I'm here aren't I?" she asked, wondering if that would be enough for him to accept her apology.

"Yes...you are," he said, smiling. Even though he wasn't sure what "here" meant, he was quite sick of words and questions and misconceptions, he just wanted to hold her.

He walked back over to her and lifted her up from the chair and pulled her into his arms. It seemed like forever since he had held her, truly held her. He pulled away only far enough to lean down and kiss

her. They melted together like they had never been apart.

Ethne reached into his pocket and got the box before he realized it, interrupting the kiss she ran off to the bedroom.

“Hey!” he said, running quickly after her.

When he made it past the door he saw her on the far side of the bed, the box open in her hands.

She was simply staring at it, like it had hypnotized her from looking away.

“Ethne,” he said, walking over to her to try and take it away. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

She looked up at him finally, clearly with no intention of letting him have it back.

What she had found when she had opened the box was her blue pearl, her “find” from Belize, set simply and stunningly onto a platinum band.

“What is this, Scott?” she asked, a pained look on her face. “What did you do?”

The look on her face confused him; he thought she would have been happy, pleased, instead he couldn’t tell if he had perhaps done something terribly wrong.

“Umm...I,” he said, nervously running his hands through his hair. “I...thought...I was...going to...ask you to marry me.”

She sat down on the bed, the white box delicately balanced on her lap. “Oh,” she said, finally.

“Oh?” he asked. “Is that all you have to say? – I’m sorry...did I do something wrong?”

She looked up at him, her eyes glistening. “No...I just, I didn’t expect...this.”

He sat down next to her taking the box from her hands. "I know...I'm sorry, that's why I didn't want you to open it."

"Oh?" she asked, realizing the offer had possibly just been rescinded. "Are you...not asking me...anymore?"

"Well...that depends," he asked, looking down at the pearl he had secretly stolen from her.

"On?" she asked, her heart beating faster than she thought was humanly possible.

"On...what the answer would be," he said.

She reached over and took the ring out of the box and slipped it on her finger, instantly she felt a rush of warmth as the heat from the pearl radiated throughout her body. In a flash it felt like she was swimming in the waters of the Blue Hole, like the magic and calm from that place was now permanently surrounding her.

She felt safe.

When she had placed the ring on her finger she realized she had closed her eyes, feeling it more than seeing it. She opened her eyes and looked over at Scott, a questioning anticipating look on his face.

She smiled at him, reached over and held his cheek in her hand.

"The answer would be yes," she said.

Scott smiled and took her in his arms so fast he nearly knocked the wind out of her. She laughed as he held her tightly, feeling his relief and her own escape together, the question no longer lingering uncomfortably in the room.

The moment she had placed the ring on her finger everything had felt right, everything had melted away. All of her fears and reservations were gone, a

distant memory that no longer plagued her mind. Maybe things were easier with Ian miles away, but regardless of her feelings for him she knew she loved Scott and knew that she was happy.

Scott released the hold on her finally, but only enough so that he could see her face. He smiled again as he looked into her eyes, eyes that no longer held the sadness that had drawn him to her, but eyes that were brilliantly full of life and with a new spark he hadn't seen until today.

Seeing the happiness in his eyes Ethne smiled back before pulling him to her and kissing his soft lips. With her tightly wrapped up in his arms Scott knew he would never have to let her go.

CHAPTER 36

The weeks had gone by fairly quickly after Ethne had returned home, the first night with Scott still felt like a dream in her mind. The ring still held the same warmth it had when she had first placed it on her finger. Every moment she looked at it she was reminded of Belize and the comfort she felt there.

Though there was sadness when she looked at it too, since the location was so intricately connected with Ian and it was hard not to think of him. But she was happy; she had made her choice and all the days since had been nothing short of a fairy tale.

Although her fairy tale included going to work and paying bills rather than crystal balls and glass slippers, it suited her just fine. Scott was his typical bouncy and hilarious self, something she had greatly missed during their days apart. It still amazed her that

he had forgiven her, but she supposed they were even since he had stolen her pearl.

When she had first seen the ring she had almost wanted to kill him for taking the pearl without her permission and having it “altered” for the ring, but now that it was permanently with her she was actually quite pleased that he had.

Things had pretty much gone back to the way they had been before the accident, if not better. Scott was no longer having any headaches and she still kept her fingers crossed that her seizures had made their last appearance.

She had hoped the chicken apron had made its last appearance too but Scott still insisted that she was going to wear it for him, she had absolutely no idea why this was a lifelong goal of his. She hid it far back in one of her closets one night he was at work and instructed him she would wear it when pigs could cook waffles.

Probably not the best choice of words since it set him up perfectly for a fairly rude joke at her expense, though calling her a pig was rather ridiculous in itself.

There was only one thing that still needed tending to, and this was something she had been putting off. She wasn't even sure she wanted to do it, but she had learned her lesson with Scott when she hadn't called him, she would not be cruel a second time in the same manner.

The house was quiet, Scott was at work when Ethne picked up her phone and unfolded the piece of paper that held Ian's number. Her hands were shaking and she had a knot in her stomach.

When he had asked her to do this she knew at the time she wouldn't want to, but she had made a promise all the same. The last moment at the airport with Ian came flooding back into her mind; her entire body could feel the anguish she had felt that day. She really didn't want to do this.

Before she could talk herself out of it she heard the phone ringing, she had barely been aware that she had dialed.

"Hello?" she heard Ian ask. She had missed his voice so much; suddenly she wondered if this had been such a good idea; she almost hung up.

"Hi...Ian?" she asked, though she knew it was him.

"Yeah?" he said. "Who's this?"

"It's Ethne," she said; why she had thought he would know her voice she didn't know, but she was slightly disappointed that he hadn't.

"Ethne?!" he said, sounding like he had gone from a slightly tired state to a now electrocuted one. "How are you?"

"I'm good," she said, pausing, reluctant to carry the conversation further. "How are you?"

"I'm good too," he said. "...I didn't think you were going to call," he confessed finally.

"I didn't know if I would, honestly," she said, wanting to slap herself on the forehead for being so rude.

"Oh?" he said, the enthusiasm from the shock had obviously worn off. "Really...why?"

The silence now was even more uncomfortable than the moment Scott had showed up at her door in Belize.

“Well, it isn’t exactly easy...hurting you...again, Ian,” she said, as tears started to rise.

She really hadn’t wanted to make this call. She had finally started to feel relief about knowing what she wanted, or at least thinking she knew what she wanted. The last three weeks had been perfect, now she was almost back to that feeling she had in Dallas. Split in the middle.

“Oh,” he said. “Well...I know it probably wasn’t easy to call me...but I’m glad you did.”

“Really?” she asked. “Even if I don’t have the news you want to hear?”

“I knew the consequences when I asked the favor,” he said.

“I suppose,” she said, not entirely convinced.

“And like I said, as long as you aren’t alone.” He paused. “I’ll be okay – though I will admit it was rather difficult saying goodbye to you.”

“Yes...it was,” she agreed.

“So?” he asked. “What’s the verdict?”

“Oh,” she said, rolling her eyes. “That’s a great way of putting it.”

He laughed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I guess.”

She paused again a moment before she told Ian what had happened, leaving out the details he didn’t need to know. She hadn’t said she “chose” Scott in those terms, but rather that she was with him and that she was happy.

He paused before responding to the answer she had given. “I’m happy for you, Ethne...I really am.”

“Thank you, Ian,” she said; she didn’t know what else she could say.

After a moment she added, "I really am sorry if I hurt you, it was really difficult for me...to leave you that day. I almost changed my mind when I was waiting for the next plane."

"Really?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "That was part of the reason I had told you to leave when you did...it was too hard. I've really missed you, Ian."

"I know what you mean, Ethne," he said. "I've been thinking about you pretty much everyday since...it's probably a good thing I didn't have your phone number," he laughed.

She would have tried to laugh, but she couldn't, she didn't find any of this funny.

"Sorry," he said, after a moment. "I didn't mean to make this any harder on you."

"No," she said. "You didn't – you've actually been far too kind."

"Well...," he said. "I don't know about that, but I am glad you are happy."

Hearing his voice and his laugh again was tugging at her, the thought that this could be the last time she might ever talk to him just seemed impossible to believe. She didn't want the call to end.

"I have to go, Ethne, I'm sorry...," he said.

She could hear voices in the background trying to pull him away, a tear ran down her cheek before she answered him.

"Oh," she said. "Okay..."

It was so quiet for a moment she thought he had already hung up.

"Sorry about that, my friends are here to pick me up," he said. "I've postponed them a second."

“Oh,” she said, again. She felt like she had a guillotine hanging above her neck and that in a second it would fall, and she had no control over it.

“So...,” she said. “I guess this is goodbye then?”

“I guess so...,” he replied. “But you do have my number...”

“Yeah...,” she said, holding the paper in her hands, though she actually didn’t need it anymore; she had memorized the number a long time ago.

“Be happy, Ethne...,” he said. “I love you.”

Hearing him say the words she knew he felt was almost more than she could take. She looked down at the pearl wrapped in the ring sitting upon her finger and remembered the day he had held it in his hands.

“I love you too, Ian.”

The line went dead before either of them could say another word.

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