Authorised extract

Day 2 – The Beach Walk

It was mid-afternoon when I saw her.

She was sitting alone on the low stone wall where the sand gave way to concrete, her feet swinging slightly—not enough to be restless, just that slow movement of someone who had decided to wait.

I had noticed her before—a white shirt in an airport crowd, sunglasses on a bus, a presence at the edge of a table. Always at a distance.

Never close.

Until now.

This was the first time there was space around her.

The first time she was on her own.

The breeze caught her hair and lifted it, then let it fall again. She wore no sunglasses. I had not properly seen her eyes before. Grey, perhaps. Or blue. They changed with the light.

She did not look posed. She did not look aware of being looked at.

She just looked… there.

I had a small paper bag of currants in my hand—something I had bought without thinking. I did not really want them. They had become something to do with my fingers.

I walked over.

“Hey,” I said. “You waiting for the others?”

She turned, studied me for a fraction longer than politeness required.

And then she smiled.

“Mike, right? You’re with Sam and Alex?”

I felt it—quick and bright. She knew my name.

I smiled, nodded, tried to act normal. “Yeah. That’s right.”

She looked at me then, held my gaze a fraction longer than necessary—calm, unhurried.

“I’m Anna,” she said, and offered her hand like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I took it. Warm, light grip. No rush to let go.

“You want to walk?” she asked. “I don’t feel like sitting anymore.”

That was it. No invitation, no setup. Just a simple choice: move forward, or not.

And somehow, before I had properly thought about it, I said, “Yeah. Sure.”

I tossed the currants in a nearby bin, and we started down the beach together.

We crossed the road in silence, the kind that did not feel awkward. Just light, easy. The sun had dipped slightly, giving the afternoon a soft warmth, the shadows just a little longer than before. Our feet crunched on gravel before spilling into sand.

About halfway down the path towards the beach, I spotted a small ice cream kiosk tucked between two leaning palms. It had a crooked umbrella and a faded hand-painted sign with prices that looked more hopeful than accurate.

I slowed a little. “Ice cream?”

She turned to me, considering. “Is this a bribe or a gesture?”

I smiled. “Clearly a gesture. I don’t have enough charm for bribes.”

She grinned at that—the wide, unfiltered kind that landed squarely under my ribs.

“Not so sure about that.” There was a moment’s pause before she continued: “Alright, but I pick the flavour.”

I nodded and stepped up to the counter.

Inside, an older woman looked at me like she had seen every kind of tourist. Twice. I glanced over the tubs. “What are you having?” I asked, turning slightly.

“Something citrus,” Anna said. “Lemon or lime. Sharp and clean.”

I looked back at the display. “No lime. But there’s lemon… or blood orange.”

“Ooh. Blood orange,” she said, pleased. “That’s perfect.”

“You like the tart ones.”

“I like things that wake you up,” she replied, already slipping off her sandals and letting her toes sink into the warm sand.

I ordered one blood orange for her, then hesitated.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I was thinking blackcurrant. Or raspberry.”

She wrinkled her nose, mock-disapproving. “Too sweet, soft, not a clean flavour.” She looked at me like she was deciding something. “…but okay, I will let you off, this once.”

“Says the woman eating blood orange.”

“That has teeth,” she said with a warm smile. “Raspberry’s just sweet pretending to be grown-up.”

I raised an eyebrow. “So what does that make me?”

She tilted her head, the corners of her mouth twitching.

“I think that is… still to be determined,” she said, the smile still radiating.

I ordered a raspberry anyway.

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