

The Beach Escape

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Molly pulled the mask over her head and secured it on her face, the way she'd practiced last night. "Like dis?" Her voice had the nasal sound of her nose being plugged.

"Perfect."

"More importantly, dough, how do I look?" She gritted her teeth together and gave her best attempt at an exaggerated toothy smile with the mask pressing down on her top lip and scrunching her face.

Grant's eyes widened in a look of mock fear. "Don't do that underwater. You'll scare away all the fish."

Molly giggled, dissipating whatever nerves were left. "All right, here goes nofing." She drew in a deep breath and held it as she pushed herself off the last step into the water. Between the extra force of the fins and her lifejacket, the only part of her face that got wet was her chin. She let out her breath as she adjusted to the water. "This isn't so bad," she said, feeling far more confident than she thought she would when floating in the middle of the ocean. "Now, where are these fish you keep talking about?"

Grant jerked his thumb in the direction where several people were sprinkled throughout the water. "This way. Follow me." In one smooth motion, he pulled his mask over his eyes and kicked off toward the reef.

Molly kicked after him. The world seemed to fade away as the underwater sanctuary came into focus, and a sort of calm swept over her.

It was different than she'd thought it would be. Quieter. More peaceful. The only sounds were the slight crackle of the water and her own rhythmic breathing. Even floating on the surface seemed effortless.

She followed the trail of bubbles caused by Grant's fins moving through the water. At first, there wasn't much to look at except the sandy bottom. But after a few kicks, she spotted a crab.

Well, to be honest, she wasn't sure it was a crab. It didn't look anything like Sebastian from *The Little Mermaid* or those things they pulled out of the water on *Deadliest Catch*. But this little guy was definitely a crustacean of some sort, scuttering across the bottom with his antennae going every which direction.

It was fascinating to watch. She could've floated right there for a while, quietly spying on this creature in his natural habitat, but in order to keep up with her snorkel buddy, she had to keep swimming. And she was glad she did, because as fascinating as the crab was, what came into focus in front of her was breathtaking.

"Oh, wow," she breathed out through her snorkel, releasing a round of bubbles around her.

A large structure rose out of the sand. Grant had told her these artificial reefs were made up of a series of towers made from recycled concrete and limestone. While that might've been a technical definition, it didn't do justice to the beauty in front of her.

The tiered stone structure was covered in colorful coral and purple sea fans that swayed in the ocean's current. Hundreds of fish of all shapes, sizes, and colors darted in and out, like a group of kids at a playground. Watching the underwater world was fascinating, calming, and inspiring all at the same time. As she slowly kicked around, taking it in from every angle, she couldn't help but think of Grant learning about each one of these creatures from his dad. She took mental pictures of her favorites so she could ask him about them when they got back on the boat.

Molly wasn't sure how much time had passed when she felt Grant gently tug on her hand. She lifted her head up, reentering the noise and brightness of the above-water world.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I think there's definitely going to be a next time."

"So you like it?"

"It's like nothing I've ever experienced before."

"This is only the first tower. You know, there are about thirty more." He motioned to the sprawling space dotted with other snorkelers. It had to be a hundred yards wide.

At the moment, Molly couldn't imagine swimming that far, let alone taking in all the underwater towers. "That's a lot of ground to cover."

“How about one more for today? My favorite’s over here. There’s usually an octopus who hangs out there.”

Molly raised an eyebrow. “An octopus, huh?” It wasn’t exactly on her list of adorable sea creatures she wanted to encounter, but perhaps, like the rest of her time here, it would surprise her.

“They tend to be shy, but today might be our lucky day.” He held out his hand. “Shall we?”

She stared at it for a second, not sure if she wanted to take it again. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to follow him. So far, she’d loved every place they’d gone together. Grant was easily her favorite person in Emerald Cove. Their friendship was natural.

But a friendship was all it could be.

There were a million reasons why there could never be anything more than a simple friendship between her and Grant, starting with the fact that serious relationships were strictly out of the question for her and ending with the fact that they’d both be going their separate ways in two months.

Was he the kind of guy she might’ve been interested in if things were different? Maybe. But that didn’t matter. Things weren’t different, and as it stood, any sort of a romantic relationship simply didn’t make sense. He knew it, she knew it, everyone knew it. She didn’t need tingles from her hand, which didn’t get the friend-only memo, messing up her vibe every time they touched.

But that problem had been fixed, right? Memo received?

“Let’s do it.” She hesitantly reached out to take his hand again. As a friend. Completely neutral. Ready to follow her *tour guide* to their next destination.

But apparently her hand didn’t read memos.

