



Designing Love (Bluewater Cove #2)

Author: *Tina Cyr*

Category: Romance

Description: A beach-town escape. A crumbling mansion. One impulsive project that rewrites their futures.

Interior designer Sophia Carter bolts to tiny Bluewater Cove after signing her divorce papers, craving solitude, strong coffee, and the company of her favorite Aunt Sage.

Ethan has just bought the town's infamous Miller House—a raccoon-infested, possibly-haunted fixer-upper—hoping to flip it and maybe impress the captivating newcomer who makes his quiet life feel electric.

But Sophia's ex-husband—and former business partner—arrives with lucrative contracts and pointed reminders of the glittering career she's walking away from. With renovation deadlines, meddling small-town gossip, and a raccoon that refuses eviction, Sophia must choose: return to the polished life she built or risk everything on an unfinished house and the man who believes in her unpolished dreams.

As lake breezes mingle with sawdust and shy, slow-burn kisses, Sophia and Ethan learn that true design begins with an open heart. Will they walk away before the last coat of paint dries or build a love sturdy enough to weather any storm? Filled with witty banter, small-town charm, and zero-spice intimacy, *Designing Love* is a feel-good, later-in-life romance about tearing down the walls that hold us back—and finding home in the most unexpected places. For Clean-Romance Readers: Closed-door kisses, no swearing, lots of laughter, and one very judgmental raccoon.

Total Pages (Source): 29

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

SURPRISE ARRIVAL

Sophia

The bell above the gallery door jingles brightly, startlingly loud in the otherwise peaceful space. I pause mid-step, wince, and shoot the offending bell an accusing glare. Sage never bothered with subtleties; I shouldn't expect her doorbells to be any different.

"Sage? Sage, are you here?" My voice echoes slightly, ricocheting off walls painted with every color imaginable. A sculpture in the corner — metallic arms and legs sprouting feathers — staring at me judgmentally. Great, even the artwork's giving me side-eye. It's definitely a Sage original.

A rustle comes from behind a beaded curtain. Sage appears, all billowy skirts and bangles jingling like wind chimes. Her silver curls are piled high, held by chopsticks that I'm pretty sure she stole from our favorite sushi place.

"Sophia!" Sage throws her arms open, bracelets clinking. "My lovely, favorite niece. What a surprise!"

I sigh, dropping my purse by a wooden sculpture that vaguely resembles a moose... or a giraffe?

Sage beams. "That bag looks heavy."

"Just my hopes, dreams, and possibly some regret."

She laughs, guiding me toward the small counter cluttered with paintbrushes, crystals, and an alarming number of mismatched teacups. “Tea first, existential crisis second.”

“How about coffee?” I counter, hopefully.

She frowns as if I’ve suggested we sacrifice a small animal. “Soph, how many times do I have to tell you? Caffeine’s an anxiety amplifier.”

“And exactly what I need right now.” I pull up a stool, my fingertips grazing a sticky spot on the counter. “Is this honey or —?”

“Oh! Resin!” she chirps, busying herself with tea bags. “Art waits for no one. Neither does sticky resin.”

I grin despite myself. Sage’s chaotic charm feels oddly comforting after years away.

She hands me a cup covered in tiny daisies. I sniff cautiously. “Chamomile?”

“Lavender and sage, obviously. A soothing concoction.”

“Subtle,” I say, taking a hesitant sip. Not bad, but coffee would’ve soothed better.

She leans forward, eyes sparkling mischievously. “So, spill it. Why the sudden visit?”

I stare into my tea, swirling it like it holds answers. “We signed the divorce papers yesterday, and I needed breathing room. Needed to be in a different city. Different province.”

Her eyebrows shoot upward. “So... he finally accepted the divorce.”

“Yup. After that, I packed a suitcase, got on a plane to Toronto, and then drove here.”

“Oh, honey,” she breathes softly, resting her hand gently over mine. Rings sparkle on every finger, some I remember twisting around as a kid, imagining they held magical powers. “Are you alright?”

“I’m... not — not alright,” I admit slowly, voice softer now. “It’s been over for ages. I just... was he always such a douchebag?”

Sage laughs, making her crow’s feet even more evident. There is an undeniable glimmer that says she knew. Did the entire world know?

“I woke up and realized I’d been chasing something. But then I didn’t know what the something was anymore. It was just... gone. I wasn’t happy with him anymore, and I wonder if I ever was.”

She squeezes my hand tighter. “That’s life, sweetheart. One day you wake up, and your GPS is screaming ‘recalculating,’ and then suddenly you realize you’ve been headed to Florida when you really wanted Quebec.”

“Quebec?” I wrinkle my nose.

“Maple syrup, quaint towns — “

“Cold winters,” I interrupt, grimacing.

“Fine, metaphorically speaking,” she huffs playfully. “So, what now?”

“Honestly? I have no idea. I want a break. I was between clients anyways, so I thought I’d surprise you and reconnect with myself...”

She smiles, wrinkles deepening around her eyes. “I’m glad you picked me and this place to reconnect with yourself.”

The gentle clink of mismatched china fills the quiet lull between Sage and me as we sip our tea in comfortable silence.

Her gallery is a delightful chaos — half art studio, half eclectic tea shop — with canvases stacked precariously and brushes scattered like forgotten toys.

The soothing aroma of lavender and sage floats gently in the air, blending with hints of turpentine and something suspiciously like cinnamon.

I run my thumb along the delicate rim of my cup, tracing tiny painted daisies that seem to dance beneath my touch. “You know, Sage,” I begin carefully, eyeing her over the edge of the teacup, “I didn’t exactly plan this out. Leaving Daniel, coming straight here... It’s a bit impulsive, even for me.”

She smiles knowingly, her fingers absently tapping rhythmically against the ceramic cup. “Soph, life’s best decisions are rarely planned. Especially the big ones. They’re usually spontaneous — like ordering dessert first or dyeing your hair neon pink.”

I chuckle softly, shaking my head. “Neon pink hair? Really?”

“Just a suggestion,” she shrugs, her silver curls bouncing playfully. “But speaking of unplanned spontaneity, what’s your next move?”

“Well,” I pause, biting my lower lip thoughtfully, “I was actually hoping I could crash at your beach house for a while. Just until I figure things out.”

Sage’s face lights up instantly, as though this is precisely the plan she’d hoped I’d propose. “Of course! I’ve been craving company... this is perfect.”

I laugh more openly this time, feeling warmth bloom comfortably in my chest. It’s been too long since I laughed like this — freely, easily, without trying. “Thanks,

Sage. Seriously. You have no idea how much this means.”

“Oh, I think I do,” she says, winking conspiratorially. “But first, we need the key.”

Her expression shifts instantly from serene to dramatically frantic.

“Now, where did I put that blasted thing?” she mutters, patting herself down, skirts fluttering like the colorful sails of a ship caught in a storm.

Bracelets jingle musically as she checks pockets and hidden folds, increasingly agitated.

I watch in fascination as she moves around the gallery, opening and shutting drawers noisily, her skirts swirling around her feet. “Sage, maybe check near the teacups?” I suggest helpfully, grinning into my tea.

She pauses, hands on her hips. “Very funny, Soph. Although...” she squints suspiciously at the tea set as though the cups might conspire against her.

“Oh, come on,” I tease, barely stifling a laugh. “You know you’re secretly thinking I might be right.”

“Hardly,” she mutters, moving determinedly toward her painting station. Her hands dive into an apron pocket splattered with an explosion of teal, crimson, and gold, and she shouts triumphantly. “Aha! Found it!”

She brandishes the key victoriously, holding it aloft like a hard-earned trophy. “Your beach house key, my dear niece,” she announces, striding back over to me with regal flair. “The perfect place for self-reflection, soul-searching, and any other existential activity you might have planned.”

I take the key gratefully. Its metal is cool and solid in my palm, grounding me somehow. “Thank you, Sage. Truly.”

“Anytime, sweetheart,” she says, gently squeezing my hand. “Just don’t lock yourself out. I’m terrible at finding things twice.”

“Clearly,” I say, smiling fondly.

Sage pats my hand affectionately before pulling back, eyes twinkling mischievously. “Now, go settle in. Let the lake soothe your weary soul and all that poetic nonsense.”

I rise, grabbing my bag and hesitating briefly at the door. “Wait — do you have coffee at the beach house?”

Sage’s eyes widened, her hand fluttering to her chest as though scandalized. “Coffee? Sophia, caffeine is — “

“An anxiety amplifier, yes, I know,” I sigh, rolling my eyes but unable to suppress a smile.

She grins wickedly, clearly pleased with herself. “Lucas’ coffee shop – Beans & Brew, two doors down. Tell him I sent you. He makes an incredible latte when the machine isn’t broken.”

“Already outsourcing my caffeine needs,” I mutter with mock indignation, smiling as I shake my head. “Great start.”

Sage laughs, waving cheerfully as I step back into the sunshine. “Welcome home, sweetheart.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

MORNING RUN AND COFFEE

Ethan

Sunlight drifts lazily across Bluewater Cove, turning Main Street into a scene from a postcard.

My sneakers crunch rhythmically against gravel, and I breathe deeply, savoring the crisp morning air.

Without the summer tourists crowding the sidewalks, I feel like I have the whole town open for my daily run again.

I push myself, relishing the quiet hum of the town waking up. Passing by Tom's Flower Shop, I spot him struggling valiantly with an enormous fern, its fronds flapping wildly as if in rebellion.

"Need a hand, Tom?" I slow my jog, unable to suppress a grin at his losing battle.

"Absolutely not," Tom insists stubbornly, wrestling to regain control. "Completely under control."

The fern promptly spills dirt all over his feet. Tom sighs, throwing me a helpless look.

"Under control, huh?" I tease.

“You know how I love a challenge,” Tom mutters dryly, brushing dirt from his apron.

Laughing, I pick up speed again, nearing Lucas’ Coffee Shop. A familiar sense of comfort spreads through me. As I enter, the bell above the door rings, and I’m immediately enveloped by the rich scent of brewing coffee.

“Ethan! Right on schedule,” Lucas greets from behind the counter, already reaching for my favorite mug — a chipped black one with a questionable caffeine slogan.

“Am I really that predictable?” I joke, sliding onto a barstool and savoring the warmth radiating from the cup Lucas places before me.

“If you ever miss your morning coffee, we’ll call a search party,” Lucas says dryly, wiping down the counter swiftly.

I chuckle, taking a deep, satisfying sip. “Quiet today, huh?”

“Just the way we like it,” Lucas replies, leaning casually against the espresso machine. “No complaints about almond milk shortages or gluten-free muffins.”

“Exactly. No chaos, just us.”

As if summoned by the mention of chaos, the bell rings again and Claire bursts in, her yoga mat poking comically from her bag, knocking into chairs as she navigates clumsily through the café.

“Sorry... sorry,” she whispers, wincing each time she collides with furniture.

“Morning, Claire.” Lucas laughs. “Usual?”

“Double espresso,” she groans, collapsing onto the stool beside me. “Yoga’s

supposed to calm you, right? I feel like I was attacked by a pretzel monster.”

“Sounds incredibly relaxing,” I say, trying to hide my amusement.

“You mock now, Ethan,” Claire warns, wagging a finger playfully, “but someday you’ll embrace the zen.”

“He’s allergic to zen,” Lucas interjects, placing Claire’s espresso in front of her.

“Exactly,” I agree emphatically. “Running is my meditation.”

Claire rolls her eyes, sipping her espresso cautiously. “Honestly, Ethan, you might benefit from something new. Like pottery. Or knitting.”

Lucas nods sagely. “Yes, I can see Ethan knitting scarves for all of us and wrapping them up for Christmas.”

“Thanks, but I’ll stick to coffee and mocking yoga from afar,” I reply dryly.

The shop’s phone rings loudly before Claire can launch another persuasive argument. Lucas sighs, throwing us a mock-weary glance as he moves to answer it.

“Seriously, Ethan,” Claire starts again, leaning in conspiratorially. “Have you ever wondered if maybe all this running...”

The door opens abruptly, the bell ringing brightly, cutting Claire off mid-sentence. Mia? * steps into the coffee shop.

“Morning, Mia,” Lucas calls, glancing up from the phone and giving her a decently welcoming smile.

Mia looks up, returning Lucas' greeting before her eyes drift over to where Claire and I are seated. She offers a big wave, her smile reaching her eyes. "Morning guys. Back from your run, Ethan? Enjoying the quiet, post-tourist season?"

"It's heaven!"

"What brings you out so early?" Claire asks, curiosity practically glowing in her voice.

Mia holds up the bag sheepishly. "Just grabbing pastries before opening the bookstore."

"Can't go wrong starting your day with pastries," Lucas confirms, returning from the phone call and moving swiftly behind the counter. "But I'm biased."

Claire chuckles softly. "You can trust Lucas on cinnamon rolls. It's the only thing he gets right!"

Lucas scoffs and tries to deflect. "How's the bookstore doing now that tourist season is over?"

"I can't complain. Locals are avid readers. And I've been sneaking in some writing here and there in lull times." Mia's smile lights up the room, the same way it always does when she talks about her bookstore.

"Sounds exciting," I say, enjoying Mia's enthusiasm.

"It's as if you love unboxing endless stacks of fantasy novels. Or if you have an unhealthy relationship with packing tape."

"Well," Lucas says theatrically, sliding Mia her coffee across the counter. "May your

coffee be strong and your tape cooperative.”

“Thanks, Lucas,” Mia says, turning towards the door. “See you around, Claire?”

“Sure thing!” Claire replies, waving.

“Say hi to Oliver? * for me,” I add.

As I’m about to finish my coffee and leave, the door swings open with a gentle chime and my eyes reflexively glance upward. A woman I’ve never seen before steps inside, pausing briefly as if deciding whether she belongs. Immediately, all coherent thought evaporates.

She’s striking in an effortless way. A low, treacherous thrum kicks in behind my ribs — the same flutter I get right before the starting gun of a race. My hand tightens around the mug, heat biting my palm, but I can’t force myself to look away.

Her auburn hair falls in loose waves, shining like threads of copper in the afternoon sun.

And then there are those hips. They sway gently when she moves, a natural rhythm that makes it impossible for me to look away.

There’s a confidence about her, a quiet self-assurance that radiates from across the room.

She’s strikingly voluptuous, all soft curves and gentle lines.

Something magnetic in that poised grace leaves me a little spellbound, wondering what it might be like to share a conversation — or even a moment — caught in her orbit.

She surveys the coffee shop with curious eyes. Her lips part slightly as she reads the chalkboard menu behind Lucas, unaware of how she instantly captures my attention.

I grip my mug tightly, suddenly feeling foolishly self-conscious. Claire says something to Lucas, but their words blur into white noise as my focus remains firmly on the new arrival. She's wearing a loose sweater, sleeves pushed casually up to her elbows.

I'm unreasonably intrigued.

She moves gracefully to the counter, and Lucas offers her a friendly smile. "Morning! Welcome."

"Good morning," she replies, her voice smooth yet filled with subtle humor. "My Aunt Sage sent me. She cannot be bothered to have coffee on hand."

Lucas chuckles, nodding knowingly. "Ah, yes, Sage and her aversion to coffee – what does she say?"

"That it enhances anxiety!"

They both laugh.

"That's it! Any preference?"

She tilts her head thoughtfully, studying the options as if each drink holds profound life implications. "Something strong enough to survive existential crisis?"

"Coming right up," Lucas laughs, already busy preparing her coffee. "Take a seat and I'll deliver your lifeline shortly."

She nods appreciatively, turning slightly toward the seating area and scanning for an open table. From the corner of my eye, I watch as she settles into a table by the window.

“Earth to Ethan,” Claire whispers loudly, nudging my shoulder with exaggerated amusement. “Do we need to reboot your system or something?”

“What?” I startle slightly, nearly spilling my coffee. Claire laughs, shaking her head knowingly.

“Looks like Bluewater Cove just got a little more interesting.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I mumble unconvincingly, stealing another glance at the woman by the window. Her brow is furrowed lightly as she scribbles into her notebook, completely absorbed. My unbidden curiosity grows, and my stubborn gaze stays fixed on her, completely intrigued.

“Sure you don’t,” Claire says slyly, clearly unconvinced. “Maybe you should introduce yourself.”

“And say what exactly?” I reply, my voice low and skeptical.

Claire shrugs nonchalantly. “How about ‘Hi, welcome to Bluewater Cove, please never leave.’ Too forward?”

“Just a bit,” I mutter, rolling my eyes, though part of me wonders if Claire is right. Maybe saying hello wouldn’t hurt.

Before I can gather my courage, Lucas approaches the woman’s table, delivering her coffee with his usual charm he reserves for strangers and special occasions.

She thanks him softly, her smile lighting up her face in a way that makes my breath hitch.

I realize with a sinking feeling that I'm completely out of my depth.

“Definitely more interesting,” Claire whispers smugly beside me.

I can't argue with her. Somehow, Bluewater Cove feels a whole lot brighter this morning.

* ? Meet Mia in Love Notes in the Margins

* ? Meet Oliver in Love Notes in the Margins

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

STUMBLE WITH FLAIR

Sophia

I wrap my hands around the warm coffee cup, taking a slow, deliberate sip.

The rich, bittersweet taste dances across my tongue, waking me up in ways that Sage's herbal tea definitely couldn't.

I inhale deeply, savoring the rich aroma, feeling the caffeine gently nudge away the lingering fatigue from my spontaneous escape.

My eyes drift lazily around the coffee shop, absorbing the quaint charm. It's exactly what I need right now: caffeine to recharge before heading to Sage's beach house. As I lift my cup again, I gaze at a tall figure leaning casually against the counter.

My breath hitches slightly. How did I miss him earlier?

He's tall and lean but athletic, dressed in understated running clothes. Tousled brown hair catches the early sunlight streaming through the windows, highlighting streaks of honey gold. He must be in his late thirties, at most.

How unfortunate for me.

He's holding a coffee mug but definitely not paying attention to his drink. Instead, his eyes — clear, focused, and unnervingly attractive — are fixed directly on me.

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I quickly glance away, my heart suddenly thumping loud enough I'm convinced the entire café can hear it.

"Subtle, Sophia," I mumble quietly into my coffee.

I see him straighten from the corner of my eye. Suddenly, he moves toward me, confident at first but abruptly stumbling as his sneaker catches on a loose tile. His arms flail wildly as he tries to catch himself, eyes wide in shock and embarrassment.

"Oh my gosh!"

I instinctively jump up, arms outstretched, but he regains balance at the last second, narrowly avoiding a catastrophic collision. Instead, he lands awkwardly beside my table, cheeks flushed bright red. The entire coffee shop goes suspiciously quiet.

"Are you —?"

"I'm fine! Totally fine!" he blurts quickly, laughing awkwardly. "Nothing bruised but my ego. And possibly my knee."

I laugh softly, instantly relaxing at his easy charm despite the chaos of his arrival. "Well, if you need ice, I imagine there should be some in the back."

He smells of early fall and coffee; the combination closes the distance faster than his apology, and for one dizzy second, I wonder whether he can hear my pulse banging in my ears.

He shakes his head, grinning sheepishly. "I'm Ethan. Clearly, gracefulness is my superpower."

I smile. "Sophia. Professional coffee drinker, and apparently a magnet for dramatic

entrances.”

He laughs again, tension melting from his shoulders. He glances toward the empty chair across from me, hesitating.

“Would you like to sit?” I offer, waving toward the seat invitingly.

“Yes, thanks,” he says gratefully, settling across from me with a relieved sigh. “Standing seems to be risky business for me today.”

“Maybe you should stick to safer hobbies.”

He chuckles softly, running a hand through his hair. “Good advice. Though usually I’m less clumsy, I promise.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I joke, taking another slow sip of coffee. The ease between us surprises me — pleasant, comfortable, and thrilling. Certainly unexpected.

“So, you’re Sage’s niece?” He lifts an eyebrow curiously.

“Wait, how did you —?”

“Oh,” he interrupts quickly, his cheeks flushing slightly. “I overheard you telling Lucas when you ordered. But just so you know, small-town gossip travels faster than Wi-Fi.”

I laugh openly at that. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Sage always warned me that there are no secrets here.”

“None at all. But it’s not all bad. Sometimes, people knowing your business means

they actually care.”

“Speaking from experience?”

He shrugs, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Let’s just say I’ve had plenty of dramatic entrances.”

“More dramatic than today’s?”

“Oh, today’s performance definitely ranks in my top three,” he admits with an exaggerated grimace.

I giggle softly, a fluttering warmth spreading through me. It’s easy with him — easy to laugh, easy to talk.

He leans forward slightly and gazes thoughtfully yet playfully. “So, Sophia, what brings you to our little corner? And out of tourist season, no less!”

I grin, shaking my head lightly. “I’m on a bit of a spontaneous journey. You know, soul-searching, existential crises — the usual.”

“Ah. The classic mid-life adventure. But you seem too young for that!”

Our eyes meet again, lingering this time. His gaze feels inviting and curious, stirring something unexpected in my chest. What can I say to that? I’m too old for you?

He notices my hesitation. “Ok, what do you do when you’re not rescuing strangers from embarrassing falls in coffee shops?”

“I’m an interior designer,” I reply, tracing the rim of my mug thoughtfully. “Currently between contracts, though. Hence the trip to Bluewater Cove out of

season.”

“Interior designer? That’s impressive,” Ethan nods appreciatively, genuine curiosity lighting his eyes. “So, you make rooms pretty, or is there more to it?”

I laugh softly.

“I used to breathe life into forgotten houses — peel away decades of bad decisions and find original moldings hiding underneath. It felt like rescuing history.”

Across from me, Ethan’s brows lift. “You flipped old houses? That’s incredible. Ever think about doing it again?”

I give a small laugh. “Honestly? Every time I walk past a boarded-up Victorian. I’m just waiting for the right opportunity to land in my lap.

” I swirl the foam in my cappuccino, remembering the thrill of those first projects.

“Things started simple — make a room beautiful and move on. Now it’s spreadsheets, budget battles, convincing clients that neon-green wallpaper is a crime against humanity, and assuring them their house isn’t haunted, it’s just terrible lighting.

I miss the creativity from the beginning. ”

Ethan chuckles, knocking lightly against the sugar jar as he leans closer. “What felt different back then?”

“The blank slate,” I say, feeling the old excitement flicker. “No committees, no stakeholders — just me, a toolbox, and pure vision. Every creak in the floorboards sounded like a secret begging to be told.”

He nudges my saucer with a fingertip. “Sounds like you’re one sagging porch away from diving back in.”

“Maybe,” I tease, tapping his knuckle with my stir stick. “Find me that porch and we’ll talk.”

His grin spreads, just as the espresso machine lets out a triumphant squeal. “Challenge accepted. You deserve a project that lights that spark again.”

I meet his gaze over a swirl of latte foam, warmth settling in my chest. “Careful, Ethan. I might actually hold you to that.”

“That’s the plan,” he says, eyes twinkling. “I’m counting on it.”

I chuckle. Wouldn’t it be nice to find a project like this in Bluewater Cove?

“What about you? Any special talents besides stumbling gracefully into coffee shops?”

“Software engineer. Mostly freelance, which is a fancy way of saying I spend far too much time in sweatpants arguing with my laptop.”

I grin, imagining Ethan at home, hair messy, in front of a fancy computer set-up. “So, the glamorous pajama life, huh?”

“Exactly,” he laughs, leaning back in his chair. “Though sometimes, it’s nice to escape the computer screen and interact with actual humans.”

“Actual humans? Bold choice. We’re complicated creatures, you know. Full of questionable decisions and unpredictable coffee shop tumbles.”

Ethan raises an eyebrow, amused. “Speaking from recent experience?”

I gasp, placing a hand dramatically over my chest. “Are you accusing me of attracting drama? I saved you, remember? I’m practically a hero.”

He nods solemnly, lips twitching into a smile. “Oh, absolutely. I’m eternally in your debt. Should I get a cape made for you, or do heroes prefer crowns?”

“Definitely a cape. Crowns tend to slip, and we can’t have more accidents.”

Ethan’s eyes linger on mine, the playful spark softening into something sweeter, deeper.

Why is this so easy?

“So, interior designer-slash-hero, how long do you plan to grace our little town with your presence?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure yet. Long enough to figure out what’s next, or at least until the town runs out of coffee.”

He chuckles, shaking his head lightly. “Well, we have plenty of coffee here, so you might have to stay a while.”

“Careful. That sounds suspiciously like an invitation.”

His eyes sparkle with humor, but there’s a sincerity beneath it. “Maybe it is.”

I take the last sip of my coffee, noticing it’s grown lukewarm. Ethan watches with quiet amusement as I set my cup down. “Well, I should probably let you get back to your pajama-clad negotiations,” I tease lightly.

He chuckles. “And I wouldn’t want to interrupt your existential crisis.” He pauses, considering something. “But maybe we could continue this conversation sometime?”

“I’d like that,” I say softly, standing and gathering my things. “Thanks for the company, Ethan.”

“Anytime,” he replies, genuine warmth in his eyes. “See you around, Sophia.”

“Count on it,” I say, leaving the coffee shop with a smile that stays long after the door closes.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

PLAN IN MOTION

Ethan

I watch Sophia's graceful retreat through the coffee shop door, the soft bell echoing as she exits to the sunlit street.

For a moment, my thoughts linger on how her laughter filled the small space, brightening every corner effortlessly.

My heart continues an uneven rhythm, a mix of embarrassment from my earlier near-faceplant and the unfamiliar warmth spreading through my chest.

"Earth to Ethan."

I startle slightly, blinking rapidly as Claire slides into the seat across from me, smirking knowingly.

"What?" I ask defensively, trying to hide my flush behind my coffee mug.

"Oh, nothing," she drawls sarcastically. Her eyes dance mischievously as she rests her elbows on the table, chin in hand. "Just watching you stare at the door like a puppy whose owner left them alone for the first time."

I groan softly, dropping my head onto my folded arms. "Is it that obvious?"

"Painfully." Claire chuckles, nudging my elbow. "So, spill. Who was that?"

“Sophia,” I mumble into my sleeve, lifting my head just enough to meet Claire’s amused gaze. “She’s Sage’s niece. Just got into town.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Sage’s niece? Oh, this just got interesting. Do you think she’s as quirky as Sage?”

“I don’t know!” I protest weakly, wishing I could have had more time with her. “We just... talked. And I nearly knocked myself unconscious trying to impress her, so I doubt she’ll want to see me again.”

“Oh, I saw that show!” Claire laughs openly. “But you underestimate how charming your klutziness can be. It’s practically your trademark.”

I roll my eyes, sighing heavily. “Thanks for the pep talk, Claire.”

“Anytime,” she says sweetly, patting my hand sympathetically.

I grimace slightly, sipping my coffee to hide my expression.

“So,” Claire continues smoothly, mercifully shifting gears. “Beers tonight? It’s been forever since we caught up properly. And I need the lowdown on why this passerby has seduced my friend.”

“Definitely. Let’s grab a beer,” I agree eagerly, already formulating an idea.

Claire laughs, knowing I’ll try deflecting her upcoming inquisition. But instead, I head in a completely different direction.

“Actually, remember my plan to buy the Miller house and flip it?”

She narrows her eyes suspiciously. “Kind of. Where are you going with this?”

I chuckle, standing up and tossing some bills on the counter. “I’ll tell you tonight. Meet at The Old Oak?”

“Deal. Can’t wait to see what disaster you’re planning next.”

I roll my eyes, pretending annoyance even as laughter escapes me. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

She waves me off casually. “It’s what friends are for.”

Stepping out into the fresh air of Main Street, I inhale deeply, my pulse quickening at the thought of my impulsive plan. Maybe Claire’s right — and maybe a little disaster is exactly what I need.

* * *

The bell over the realtor’s office door jingles harshly as I step inside, instantly assaulted by the overpowering smell of cheap cologne and stale coffee.

Simon Baxter — town realtor, notorious gossip, and my personal headache — leans back in his chair, grinning like a Cheshire cat who just caught a mouse.

“Ethan! To what do I owe this unexpected yet delightful interruption of my afternoon nap — I mean, workday?” Simon’s voice drips with slick charm, matched only by his over-the-top glamorous three-piece suit. Who wears a three-piece suit to work in a quaint, charming small town?

“Simon,” I greet cautiously, reluctantly shaking his overly enthusiastic hand. “I’m here to inquire about a house.”

“A house, you say?” Simon beams, leaning forward so eagerly his chair creaks

dangerously. “Don’t tell me you’re considering putting your gem of a beach house up for sale? I’d be happy to take that on, you know... “

I sigh, already regretting my decision. “Just looking at an investment opportunity. The old Miller House — what can you tell me about it?”

Simon’s eyes widen, almost cartoonishly. “The Miller House? That quirky disaster waiting to happen?”

“It’s not that bad,” I protest, trying not to sound defensive. “It’s got potential. Charm, character —”

“Raccoons,” Simon interjects, holding up a finger solemnly. “Charm, character, and raccoons. Possibly ghosts.”

I roll my eyes, refusing to be deterred. “I still want to see it.”

“You realize you’ll be singlehandedly funding my retirement, right?” Simon smirks, digging through his desk drawers noisily, papers flying everywhere.

“That bad, huh?”

“Let’s just say my commission could fund a nice little trip to Bora Bora,” Simon grins wickedly, finally producing a dusty file folder labeled in faded marker: MILLER HOUSE. “This place has been sitting untouched for years, Ethan. What’s the sudden interest?”

I hesitate, knowing full well Simon’s penchant for spreading rumors faster than wildfire. “Investment, mostly. Freelance life’s been good lately.”

“Oh right, your mysterious tech money,” Simon muses, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Something like that,” I reply vaguely, feeling a blush creep up my neck.

Simon smirks, seemingly unsatisfied with my answer.

“So, when shall we tour this haunted treasure of yours?”

“Today,” I decide impulsively. “Let’s get it done.”

“Excellent,” Simon practically chirps, standing abruptly and nearly knocking over his chair. “But first, coffee — strong coffee. You’re going to need it.”

I sigh dramatically but follow him out anyway, strangely excited despite Simon’s gloomy warnings. If it gives me a reason to spend time with Sophia and get to know her — even just a little — it’ll be worth battling raccoons, ghosts, and Simon’s relentless teasing.

* * *

The Old Oak glows softly in the amber hue of vintage sconces, filled with the low hum of laughter and glasses clinking in celebration. The cozy warmth seeps into my bones as I slide into a booth across from Claire, who eyes me suspiciously over her beer.

“Okay, Ethan, what’s going on? I heard you visited Simon Baxter’s earlier. Did I accidentally wander into an alternate universe?”

I chuckle, signaling the bartender for my usual IPA. “Relax. I’m still sane — mostly.”

Claire arches an eyebrow skeptically. “Debatable. But seriously, Simon? The town’s most notorious hustler of real estate disasters? Why are you even talking to him?”

I hesitate, swirling the coaster on the polished table, suddenly unsure how to phrase this without sounding completely ridiculous. “Correction, the town’s only real estate agent. But that’s kind of beside the point. I... bought the old Miller House.”

Claire nearly spits out her drink, covering her mouth. “Excuse me? You, Ethan Reed, buying that falling-down wreck? Have you finally snapped?”

“It’s not a wreck,” I protest defensively, though her skeptical look tells me she disagrees vehemently.

“Okay, maybe it needs a bit of... work. But you know I’ve been intrigued with that house all my life.

As a kid, I’d invent stories about it. And I’ve been thinking about buying it to flip it, I’ve just been too busy. ”

“A bit of work?” Claire laughs, incredulous. “The last time I checked, it needed an exorcism.”

“It’s quirky,” I insist stubbornly, tapping my fingers nervously against the tabletop. “And it’s a great opportunity.”

Claire narrows her eyes suspiciously. “Hold on. You love your place, Ethan. You’ve spent years making it perfect. Making it you. Why would you even consider selling it?”

I hesitate, a flush creeping up my neck. “You know me, I’ve been wanting another project like that. Money burning my pockets and all that.”

Claire’s eyes widen slowly with realization, and then she breaks into an enormous grin, leaning forward eagerly. “Oh my gosh. It’s about the new girl, Sophia, isn’t it? I

heard she's a designer. Ethan Reed, you're buying a house just to impress a girl?"

"NO! Well, not just to impress her. It's a good investment. Simon even agreed, despite his usual dramatics."

"Ah, sure," Claire teases, delighting far too much in my discomfort. "So, you're buying the creepiest property in town to spend time with the cute new designer. That's one way to catch someone's attention."

I roll my eyes. "When you say it like that, it makes me sound crazy."

She snorts.

"It could become something neat. Plus, Sophia said she used to flip old houses, and she misses doing it..."

Claire studies me carefully, her playful expression slowly turning more thoughtful. "So, the knight in shining armor comes swooping in? Ethan, are you sure about this? You're jumping quickly into something for someone you don't know."

I nod slowly, dropping all pretense of humor. "Claire, I can flip the Miller House as a rental or something else. It's a sound investment and you know it. Besides, thanks to the Bitcoin craze, you know I can afford it. I'm careful, but sometimes it's worth taking a risk."

She smiles. Not her usual smile, but her I'm worried about my friend look .

"Well, if anyone deserves a bit of romance and adventure, it's you, Ethan. Just promise me you won't let Simon scam you into buying any swampland while you're at it."

Laughing softly, I clink my glass against hers. “Deal.”

Just then, the door swings open with a dramatic flourish, and Simon himself strides in, immediately starting a loud conversation about another questionable property deal. Claire rolls her eyes.

“Speaking of swampland...”

We exchange an amused glance.

I bought the house. Now for the next step of my plan... Sophia.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

UNPACKING THE PAST

Sophia

Sage's beach house always smells like rosemary, driftwood, and mischief.

Tonight, it's also garlic, butter, and something spicy that turned out to be — in her words — “a bold amount of cayenne.” We're sitting across from each other at her kitchen table, which is half reclaimed wood and half chaotic altar.

The table legs don't quite match, and neither do the plates, but it feels. .. good. Comfortable. Familiar.

Sage twirls linguine on her fork like she's preparing for a pasta commercial and tilts her head at me. “So,” she says, voice light but clearly hunting for depth, “you going to tell me what's really going on, or am I going to have to break out my tarot deck and incense?”

I poke at a cherry tomato, watching it roll listlessly across my plate. “It was over with Daniel long before we signed the papers. I think I just didn't want to admit it.”

Sage hums softly. “It's always easier to stay on the train than jump onto the tracks.”

I set my fork down. “He made me feel like I was... too much. Too loud. Too opinionated. Too curvy, too bold, too... something. I started editing myself — shrinking a little each day just to fit his version of what I was supposed to be.”

Sage's expression sharpens. "Let me guess: that version was beige?"

I huff a laugh, low and bitter. "With a splash of greige for excitement."

She shakes her head, curls bouncing with defiance. "Sophia, I've said it before, and I'll say it again — you're not a feature wall. You're the whole damn gallery."

I smile, surprised by the sting in my eyes. "Thanks, Sage."

She pins me with a laser-sharp gaze. "He tried to design you like a minimalist condo. But you're a cathedral. You echo. You shimmer. You have details. He just didn't know how to live in something so full of wonder."

My throat tightens, but the knot in my chest loosens a little. I sip my wine and let the silence settle. There's comfort in Sage's presence — like her chaos is a shield from the outside world. She's always been my safe place, even when I didn't know I needed one.

"Was he ever..." Sage sits back, an uncomfortable expression on her face.

"Never. He's a jerk, yes... but not a violent one."

She nods.

After a few quiet bites, she nudges me with her foot under the table. "So... what were you up to today?"

I try to keep my face neutral, but I already know I've failed when her eyes narrow like a hawk spotting prey. "What?" she demands, grinning now.

"Nothing," I lie badly, stabbing another tomato. "I just... bumped into someone."

Her entire face lights up. “Someone?”

“His name’s Ethan,” I admit, pretending to focus on the garlic bread. “He literally ran into me — well, my table — at the coffee shop.”

Sage sets her fork down with a flourish. “Oh, I see. And did this Ethan happen to have charming grey eyes, unruly hair, and a quiet-but-noticeable awkward streak?”

I blink. “How do you?—?”

“Bluewater Cove isn’t Vancouver, sweetheart. Ethan is loved by everyone, and known for his runs every morning like the lake owes him something.”

I laugh, then falter. “Wait. You know him?”

“Of course I do. He fixed my Wi-Fi when it exploded last fall. Didn’t ask for anything but coffee — and even then, he apologized like he was demanding my inheritance. Total sweetheart. Quiet. Hasn’t dated seriously in, oh, forever.”

I try to look unimpressed, but Sage can see through me with one glance.

“He’s cute. In a ‘he might accidentally trip over his own kindness’ sort of way.”

Sage grins, satisfied. “And?”

“And young,” I say firmly. “Too young. This isn’t a rom-com.”

She shrugs, sipping her wine. “So are you, my dear niece, 46 years young if my math is good?”

“Forty-seven,” I wink, raising my glass.

“And you’re not marrying him. It’s okay to let someone be nice to you, Sophia. Especially someone who doesn’t flinch at your shine.”

I sigh, leaning back in my chair. “It’s just... I’m not looking for anything. I came here to unplug. Rethink things. Reconnect with my love of interior design.”

“Exactly,” she says, voice softer now. “And maybe you were meant to connect with him, too.”

I roll my eyes. “You sound like one of your tarot cards.”

“Those tarot cards have more relationship wisdom than most men I’ve met.”

We both laugh, and the air between us shifts — lighter, more playful. But then Sage fixes me with a look that means she’s about to drop something weighty.

“You know,” she says, reaching for the salad bowl, “Ethan’s the kind of man who doesn’t talk much, but when he does, it means something. He listens more than he speaks. And when he does speak, it’s with care. With purpose.”

I nod slowly. “He didn’t even flirt. Not really. He was just... there.”

“Exactly. And after what you’ve been through, that’s not nothing.”

We lapse into silence again, our forks scraping softly against ceramic plates. The lake outside shimmers in the moonlight, and a gentle breeze lifts the linen curtains.

After a while, Sage clears her throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“What are you planning to do with the business?”

I freeze. The question lands with more weight than expected. “Honestly? I don’t know.”

She waits. Patient. Calm.

“I came here for space. Not just from Daniel, but from the hustle. The pressure. I haven’t looked at a contract in weeks. Haven’t opened my business email since I landed. My phone’s basically in witness protection.”

Sage raises an eyebrow. “So... you’re on vacation?”

“Exactly,” I say, grateful for the out. “It’s a future-me problem.”

She nods. “Fair. But just so you know, future you is allowed to build something new, too. Maybe even something that doesn’t involve Daniel or deadlines or proving anything to anyone.”

I smile faintly. “We’ll see.”

“You’ll know when you’re ready. And until then — eat your pasta and flirt with Ethan a little.”

I throw a crouton at her.

She dodges it expertly and lifts her glass. “To vacation, flirtation, and future Sophia. May she be fierce, free, and only slightly overwhelmed.”

I clink my glass against hers. “And may she avoid cayenne overdoses.”

Sage winks. “No promises.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

ALL WORK, NO CHILL

Ethan

My laptop glows with graphs and code I've rewritten twice and still can't seem to finish. A site integration that should've taken me an hour has now stretched into a third of the evening of trying to work. Because the truth is, I haven't stopped thinking about Sophia.

About how she looked in the coffee shop light. About the ease of her laugh. About how she made a Tuesday morning feel like a turning point.

I'm still sitting in that daze, staring at a blinking cursor, when the front door swings open.

"I brought salt, hops, and wisdom," Claire calls out, holding up a six-pack and a bag of chips as she breezes in.

I glance at the clock. "You do know it's Wednesday, right?"

"Exactly why this calls for an intervention," she says, kicking off her boots and plopping down on the couch like she owns the place. "Also, I figured I deserved a reward for resisting the urge to call you three times today."

I shut the laptop and move to join her. She tosses me a beer and I catch it mid-air.

"You didn't think I was going to just not follow up after that stunt you pulled at the

Old Oak, did you?

” she says, cracking hers open. “So? Spill. What’s happened since your ‘I might hire a woman I just met because she smiled at me’ epiphany? ”

I groan. “You make it sound ridiculous.”

“Because it is,” she replies cheerfully. “But also kind of adorable. And so much like you to use your money to make other people happy. It’s like the time you made a big donation to the fire station when they needed a new firetruck.

I shrug. What else am I going to do with my money? I don’t need much to be happy.

“So, have you seen her again?”

I hesitate. “No. It’s been 24 hours since I saw you, and I’ve been busy all day with Simon and trying to wrap up this contract.” I pause to exhale. “I’ve been meaning to reach out, but... I don’t want to come on too strong.”

Claire narrows her eyes. “You bought a house, Ethan.”

“For reasons!” I defend, holding up a hand. “Good reasons. It’s a smart investment.”

“Sure. But also, reasons with cheekbones and maybe a brilliant mind for spatial flow.”

I grin despite myself. “Okay, yeah. She’s... something else.”

Claire pops open the chips and crunches thoughtfully. “You’ve never lit up like this over anyone. Not even when you thought you were in love with that grad student who wrote her thesis on minimalism and gave you panic attacks with her white walls.”

“That was a phase,” I mutter.

“It was a design trauma.”

We both laugh. The kind that comes from history — from having been through enough awkward milestones together that you can’t help but know each other’s cringe points.

After a few quiet moments, Claire glances sideways at me, her tone shifting. “You know... it’s wild, isn’t it? To think five years ago we thought we might have been something.”

I chuckle, surprised. “You mean our three-month test run of romantic compatibility?”

She raises her beer in a mock toast. “To the world’s most amicable breakup.”

“I still maintain our biggest issue was dueling thermostats.”

She laughs. “That and your irrational fear of brunch lines.”

“You tried to get us into that place with the lavender foam. I still have trauma.”

“Okay, valid.” Claire leans back into the couch cushion. “But seriously, I’m glad we figured it out early. That we’re better like this.”

I nod, my smile softening. “Me too. I think I knew it the first time you suggested we co-buy a kayak but then immediately followed it with ‘no pressure — I already have a backup paddling partner.’”

“Hey, I like to be efficient.”

“And honest. You’ve always been honest with me. That’s rare.”

“That’s what friends are for. Especially the ones you’ve tried to kiss and failed to set fireworks with.”

We sit in that small pocket of memory for a moment, filled with gratitude rather than regret. It’s one of the rare things I’m proud of — not just that we tried, but that we knew when to pivot without losing each other.

“So,” she says, bringing us back to the present, “when do you plan on telling Sophia about the house?”

“I don’t know yet. Everything’s moving fast. And I don’t want her to think I’m trying to leverage the situation or make her feel obligated to see me again.”

Claire gives me a look. “You mean like buying a haunted house just to start a project with someone random you met once?”

“She’s Sage’s niece. It’s not that random.”

“The whole thing is completely random.” She grins. “But it’s also very you. And I think she’ll be flattered. Just maybe... lead with the job, not the emotional declaration.”

I nod slowly. “You think she’ll say yes?”

“She smiled at you like you were the first cup of coffee after a red-eye flight. That’s a yes smile.”

My heart stutters at the memory. “I might need her phone number first.”

Claire blinks. “You don’t have it?”

I shake my head. “Didn’t ask. Felt weird.”

“Ask Sage.”

“That also feels weird.”

Claire smirks. “Then embrace the weird, my friend. You’re already halfway to rom-com territory — haunted house, accidental meet-cute, a meddling best friend.”

“I better get a soundtrack.”

We share a knowing smirk.

The wind rattles the porch chimes. The lake breathes against the shore. There’s a kind of quiet that only happens here — not silence, just stillness. Possibility.

Claire leans forward, brushing chip crumbs off her jeans. “So, what are you actually afraid of, Ethan?”

I’m quiet for a long moment. “That I’ll scare her off. I. Bought. A. House!”

We both laugh.

“I’m scared that she’s here to catch her breath and I’m trying to give her roots when she’s not even looking for ground.”

She nods thoughtfully. “Then don’t offer roots. Just offer a seed. Something small. A walk-through. A conversation. Let her decide if she wants more.”

“You’re really good at this,” I murmur.

Claire grins. “Trial and error, babe. Mostly error. But I’ve seen you build things from nothing. Give yourself the same chance.”

“Well, before I do anything, I need to make sure Simon doesn’t tell the whole town first.”

Claire snorts. “Too late. He cornered me in the produce aisle this morning, asking if your Miller House ‘redesign’ meant Bluewater Cove was finally getting its own ‘boutique experience.’”

I groan. “What does that even mean?”

“No one knows. But it probably involves shiplap and oat milk.”

I shake my head, chuckling. “I’ll talk to Sage tomorrow. See if she’ll share Sophia’s contact info.”

“Good.” Claire stands and grabs her coat. “And if Sophia says yes, I expect updates. And wine. Possibly a tour.”

“Deal.”

The door clicks behind her. I sit for a long moment, staring at the closed laptop.

Not heavy. Not stuck.

Hopeful.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

Sophia

S and crunches softly beneath my sandals, tiny grains slipping between my toes as I meander aimlessly along Bluewater Cove's tranquil shoreline. The beach is mostly deserted today, save for a few gulls squabbling over what looks suspiciously like someone's abandoned sandwich.

"I'm just saying, Sophia, this is the kind of contract you used to kill for," my best friend Jenna insists through the phone. Her voice is a mix of confusion and disbelief, like I've just announced I've taken up professional clowning.

"I know, Jenna. Trust me, I'm painfully aware of that.

" I sigh, watching a tiny crab scuttle away from my shadow.

"It's just, maybe I'm... reevaluating things?"

I wish I could do something that feels good, like flip an old house, like in the good old days.

Something that reminds me of who I was. Does that make sense?"

"No, it doesn't," she retorts bluntly. "You, Sophia Carter, the woman who color-codes her sock drawer, are reevaluating? Are you running a fever?"

“Very funny,” I deadpan, rolling my eyes even though she can’t see. “Look, I know this is a bit out of character, but maybe that’s exactly why I need to do it.”

There’s a long pause punctuated by the gentle rhythm of waves breaking against the shore.

“Okay,” Jenna says cautiously. “Let’s pretend I buy this existential-crisis Sophia. What exactly are you doing instead? Meditating? Painting? Joining Sage in crystal therapy sessions?”

I laugh softly despite myself, bending down to pick up a perfectly smooth stone and turning it over thoughtfully in my palm. “Maybe all three. But mostly, I’m just trying to breathe. I haven’t done that in a long time, Jen.”

“Breathing?” Her voice softens slightly. “Soph, breathing won’t pay your bills or support your obsessive shoe-buying habit.”

I smile faintly. She isn’t wrong. “I’ll manage. I’ve got some savings. Plus, Sage is — well, you know Sage. If I ever run out of money, she’ll pay me to feng shui her entire gallery. Again.”

Jenna groans playfully. “Oh gosh. Anything but that. Remember when she insisted on hanging that twelve-foot abstract sculpture upside down because it ‘channeled the energies better’?”

I chuckle, shaking my head at the memory. “You have to admit, it was a conversation starter.”

“Yeah, if the conversation was ‘Did an earthquake hit?’”

I laugh openly this time, feeling lighter than I have in weeks. “Thanks, Jenna. Really.

I needed this.”

Her voice softens again, tinged with genuine concern. “Soph, just promise me you’re okay.”

“I promise. Or at least, I’m on my way there.”

We say our goodbyes and I tuck my phone into my pocket, taking a deep breath of salty air. The breeze plays with my hair, teasing loose strands around my face. Closing my eyes briefly, I let the rhythm of the waves settle something restless inside me.

Tranquility envelopes me, and as I turn to go, my sandal suddenly hits something solid and unyielding. My eyes fly open as I stumble forward, arms windmilling gracelessly before strong hands grab my shoulders, steadying me firmly.

“Careful there.” A familiar voice chuckles. “We really have to stop meeting like this.”

Heat immediately floods my cheeks as I meet Ethan’s amused gaze. “Oh gosh, Ethan. Seems your clumsiness is contagious!”

“Hey, not fair. I tend to resemble that remark.” He grins, gently releasing me. He nods toward the phone poking out of my pocket. “Important call?”

“Sort of.” I shrug, sighing lightly. “A job offer. A big one, actually.”

His brows furrow slightly, something flickering in his expression. “Congratulations?”

“Thanks,” I laugh softly, “but I haven’t accepted it. Not sure if I want to.”

He raises an eyebrow, genuinely intrigued. “Why not?”

“Because...” I pause, chewing my lower lip uncertainly, “I’m trying to figure out if that life still fits me. Or if maybe... maybe something else does.”

He nods slowly, understanding dawning in his eyes. “Well, speaking from experience, sometimes the unexpected path is exactly what you need. Maybe what you’re searching for is right here.”

Our gazes hold a second longer than they should, the silence thickening between us. His eyes are warm, inviting, and dangerously distracting. Were they always this moody grey?

“So, speaking of dreams,” he begins carefully, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Remember I said I accepted the challenge to find you an old house to flip...”

“You didn’t!”

He nods, an almost boyish grin sneaking across his lips. “There’s an old house on the outskirts of town. From the 1800s.”

“I think Sage might have mentioned it. Called it a death trap,” I say dryly, smiling a little. “Apparently haunted by rats and ghosts, right?”

“Ah, she undersold it.” Ethan laughs, his tone playful. “There are probably raccoons, too.”

“Wow. Now, you’ve piqued my interest. It’s for sale?”

“It was. I just bought it.”

“You... what?” My eyebrows shoot up, astonished. “Why?”

“Investment,” he replies immediately, then shrugs, looking away. “I was thinking it could be a good investment, since I knew someone looking for a renovation challenge. It’s a quirky place, tons of potential. And, uh, I figured...” he hesitates again, shifting on his feet.

“Figured?” I gently prompt, enjoying the sight of Ethan looking genuinely flustered as the redness in his cheeks betrays him.

He rubs his chin, avoiding eye contact. “Okay, hear me out. I thought maybe you could come take a look and give me your professional opinion.”

“You mean — my professional interior designer’s opinion?”

“Yes, exactly,” he says enthusiastically, relief evident on his face. “You used to flip old houses. This could be perfect. Fresh perspective, all that. Maybe tell me if I’ve lost my mind or if the raccoons should stay.”

I laugh despite myself, folding my arms across my chest and giving him a teasing look. “Hmm, let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’ve impulsively bought a dilapidated, critter-infested old house, and now you’d like me to come inspect your new kingdom and possibly confirm your madness?”

“Exactly.” Ethan’s eyes crinkle with humor, though there’s genuine hopefulness behind his smile. “Interested?”

“I’m intrigued, that’s for sure,” I admit softly, heartbeat quickening at how he gazes at me — openly, earnestly. I bite my lip, hesitating. “But are you sure? I’m not really looking for work right now...”

“Hey,” he interrupts gently, his voice reassuring. “No pressure. It can just be a walk-through, a casual consultation between friends. Friends can critique questionable real estate decisions, right?”

“Friends already, huh?” I tease, punching his shoulder lightly.

Ethan reels back a full step, one palm pressed dramatically to his chest while the other swoops to his forehead like a fainting Victorian. “Friendly acquaintances, who share an affinity for good coffee and impulsive decisions?”

“Better.” I grin, nodding decisively. “Okay, I’ll look at your raccoon palace.”

“Great!” Ethan’s face lights up immediately, relief washing over his features. “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow works,” I confirm, surprised by how easy it feels to agree. How easy it feels to imagine spending time with Ethan, wandering through a broken-down house and dreaming together. I shake off the thought quickly, clearing my throat.

“I can’t promise miracles, though,” I add with mock severity. “There’s only so much even I can do about ghosts.”

Ethan chuckles, his eyes catching the fading sunlight, reflecting warmth and laughter. “As long as the ghosts pay rent, we’re good.”

I shake my head, amused. “Deal.”

We pause, standing together in the gentle hush of the waves, the quiet space filled with an unspoken understanding.

He shifts his weight slightly, moving closer.

A soft gust of wind brushes hair across my face, and instinctively, Ethan reaches out to tuck the stray lock gently behind my ear, his fingertips lingering just a heartbeat longer than necessary.

The brief brush scorches hotter than the July sun; every reasonable thought tumbles straight into the lake.

My breath catches, skin tingling beneath his brief, gentle touch. I stare up at him, heart thumping loudly in my chest, suddenly very aware of how close he's standing.

Before either of us can speak, a distant shout echoes from the direction of Ethan's house.

"Ethan! Did you forget we have paperwork to finish?" A figure waves exaggeratedly from the porch.

Ethan sighs, stepping back and shaking his head ruefully. "Apparently, my real estate agent needs me to dot the i's and cross the t's. Duty calls."

"Clearly." I smile, grateful and slightly relieved for the interruption. What am I doing? "I'll let you go then."

He steps backward slowly, reluctance visible in every small movement. "Tomorrow, then? I'll pick you up?"

"Tomorrow," I confirm softly, warmth blooming gently within me.

"Perfect." He flashes me another charming grin before turning and jogging up the steps toward his visitor.

I watch him go, a smile lingering on my lips, heart fluttering gently. Tomorrow,

indeed.

THE MILLER HOUSE

Ethan

I tap my fingers nervously against the steering wheel of my truck, waiting outside Sage's colorful beach house.

The morning sun warms my arm through the open window, and I glance at my reflection in the rearview mirror, attempting to smooth down my perpetually rebellious hair.

It refuses, sticking up stubbornly in all directions.

Great. Bedhead chic. Exactly the look I'm going for.

The passenger-side door swings open and Sophia slides into the seat, sunglasses perched on her head, a fresh, citrusy scent filling the cab. My heart immediately leaps into a frantic rhythm, betraying any semblance of calm I might have tried to project.

"Morning," she greets, fastening her seatbelt. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Sage insisted I try her special 'energy tea' blend before leaving." Her voice drops conspiratorially. "I'm pretty sure it's just lemon water."

I chuckle, pulling onto Main Street. "You got off lucky. Once, she convinced me to drink some mysterious purple liquid. I'm still not sure I didn't hallucinate afterward."

Sophia laughs — a melody that sets something fluttering in my chest. "That might

explain your decision to buy a haunted fixer-upper.”

“I maintain it’s not haunted. Just... misunderstood.”

She raises an eyebrow playfully. “I thought that was my line.”

Her presence next to me feels effortlessly comfortable, as if we’ve shared easy banter for years, not days. Yet beneath the ease, there’s a pulse of electricity, almost tangible.

We turn onto the coastal road toward the Miller House, winding past cottages painted cheerful blues, yellows, and greens. Sophia gazes out the window, the lake sparkling beside us.

“I’d forgotten how peaceful this place is. One moment, you’re immersed in city chaos; next, it’s birds, water, and raccoons.”

“Don’t forget the ghosts,” I remind her solemnly.

She turns back, studying me with mock seriousness. “Right, of course. Ghosts, raccoons, and Ethan — the trifecta of mystery.”

“I aim to intrigue. Speaking of intrigue, have you decided on that job offer?”

Her smile fades a little, and her gaze falls to her hands. “Honestly? I’m still not sure. I haven’t taken a vacation in forever...”

My stomach twists nervously. “But it’s a good opportunity, right?”

“Maybe too good. Too predictable. Too... everything I’m supposed to want...” She trails off, uncertain.

“Sometimes unexpected, impulsive decisions are exactly what we need.”

She glances up, eyes hopeful. “Like buying an old house filled with furry tenants?”

“Exactly. Who wouldn’t find raccoons appealing?”

She laughs, tension easing again, her eyes lighting up as she turns to me. “Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

Heart quickening beneath her gaze, I chuckle. “Something you don’t know... I used to play drums in a terrible garage band called ‘The Loud Llamas’ in high school.”

She bursts into laughter, delighted. “Loud Llamas? Seriously?”

“Sadly, yes. Mostly off-key covers. Somehow, we convinced ourselves we’d be famous.”

“Tragic.” She sighs. “Maybe you missed your true calling.”

“No one missed out on our musical greatness,” I assure her.

Our laughter fades into a comfortable silence, broken only by the tires humming against the road. I glance sideways. “Your turn. Embarrassing teenage dreams?”

She gives a solemn shake of her head. “None. Absolutely perfect adolescence.”

“Really?” I challenge, skeptical.

She sighs theatrically. “Fine. I might’ve briefly dabbled in interpretive dance — ribbons included.”

I grin, raising an eyebrow. “Ribbon-dancer extraordinaire. Interesting.”

She punches my arm lightly, laughing.

Feigning pain, I rub my arm exaggeratedly.

“Seriously?”

“Careful — your dance strength is intimidating.” I wink at her.

“Oh, please,” she scoffs, cheeks flushing. “I barely tapped you.”

We both laugh, settling into easy silence until the Miller House comes into view, perched with quiet authority on its hill. Sophia gasps softly.

“Wow.”

“Good wow, or ‘run away’ wow?”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Both. But I see your point. There’s something... special about it.”

I park, shutting off the engine. For a moment, we sit quietly, staring at the house.

“You ready?” she finally asks.

I smile, heart fluttering. “With you here? Absolutely.”

Heat rises to my cheeks immediately at my unintended honesty, and Sophia notices, smiling shyly.

“Then let’s meet your ghosts.”

We step out, and she stumbles slightly on an uneven stone. Instinctively, I catch her elbow gently.

“Careful,” I murmur, my hand lingering a heartbeat too long.

She looks up at me with grateful eyes, our gazes catching for a breath.

A loud squawk interrupts sharply as a crow flaps noisily from a tree. Sophia jumps back, hand pressed to her chest.

“Definitely haunted,” she whispers breathlessly.

“Clearly,” I agree with exaggerated seriousness. “Ghost birds are the worst.”

We share a shaky laugh before stepping onto the porch. Sophia touches the brass handle, running fingers gently along the carved trim.

“See?” I nudge her elbow lightly. “There IS something special here, like you said.”

She bites her lip, fighting a smile. “I know, and I haven’t even stepped inside yet.”

I push the door open. Dusty, stale air greets us. Sophia coughs lightly, and I swear the tiny puff of cinnamon gum breath curls straight up my spine. The hallway is suddenly too narrow, the distance between her shoulder and mine criminally small.

“You might consider air freshener. Or an exorcism. It could go either way.”

I chuckle, watching as she steps further inside, eyes wide with wonder. “It’s beautiful,” she whispers, fingertips tracing the elegant banister.

“I told you. Imagine it fully restored. Fresh paint, polished floors, sunlight streaming through windows. Admit it, you’re tempted.”

She raises a skeptical eyebrow, but a smile dances in her eyes. “You’re really selling this. But tell me, what’s your vision for this? You already have a beach house. You want another house?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure. I thought about flipping it into an Airbnb, or maybe an office. I’m waiting to see what your thoughts and vision are.”

She laughs. “So, now I’m an accomplice.”

I grin playfully. “Your fingerprints are already everywhere.”

She pulls back, feigning innocence. “You’re trouble.”

“I prefer persuasive visionary.”

Sophia rolls her eyes, still smiling. “Show me the rest.”

We enter the front room, sunlight illuminating dust motes dancing lazily. Sophia twirls slowly, her eyes mapping imaginary furniture placements.

“You know, working here could be a perfect distraction. Might help you avoid calls about dream contracts you don’t really want.”

She pauses mid-spin, eyes narrowing playfully, though uncertainty flickers beneath. “Who says I want distractions?”

“Everyone needs them,” I say, stepping closer cautiously. “Especially when they’re figuring out what they really want.”

Her eyes soften, voice quieter. “And you think renovating this beautiful disaster is the answer?”

“Maybe,” I say carefully, stepping closer still. “Or maybe it’s just an excuse to see you more often. Professionally speaking, of course.”

“Professionally speaking,” she echoes, eyes twinkling mischievously.

I hold her gaze, feeling gravity pull us subtly closer, my pulse racing.

“Ethan,” she whispers gently. “Are you sure this isn’t too big a project? You barely know me. What if my taste is terrible?”

I feign seriousness. “There’s the interpretive dance thing. That’s concerning.”

She punches my arm again lightly, laughing. “Be serious.”

“Alright,” I concede, voice sincere now. “I trust my instincts about you. Maybe it’s reckless, but I’m optimistic.”

She tilts her head, gaze flickering briefly to my lips. “Optimistic. Is that what we’re calling it?”

Heart racing, I lean slightly closer, breath catching as her lips part slightly. The moment hangs, suspended delicately between us, until a sudden loud crash from upstairs shatters the tension.

Sophia jumps back, startled. “What was that?”

I sigh, reluctantly stepping back. “Probably the raccoons welcoming us.”

She exhales, smiling sheepishly. “Right. Raccoons. Or ghosts of raccoons, since we have yet to see one.”

“Already getting distracted. Clearly, this place is working.”

She laughs softly, shaking her head. “If this is your charm, your strategy needs work.”

“I have no strategy,” I admit, relaxing again. “Just questionable optimism, apparently.”

She grins, nodding toward the hallway. “Well, lead the way.”

And as we explore further, laughter echoing off creaking floors, I realize that each dusty corner and noisy interruption only increases the odds Sophia will stick around.

Exactly as I’d hoped.

* * *

Downstairs again, I pause by the front door and flip through my notes. “So, floors, paint, roof repairs, kitchen gutting —”

“Don’t forget exorcism,” she teases.

I chuckle. “Of course. Raccoon relocation specialist, paranormal expert, contractor — we’ll need them all.”

She laughs softly, and I can’t help but grin at her playful sense of humor. “Sounds like you have a busy afternoon ahead,” she says.

I rub the back of my neck. “Actually, yeah, I should start calling around.”

She hesitates momentarily, then asks lightly, “Do you need help? I’m not sure I can help with ghost removal, but...”

“You want to handle the infamous realtor or contractors?” he asks with a smirk.

“Are you implying I’m not local enough?” she chuckles.

“Are you sure you want to make calls and not dive into research? I’m happy to let you make them...” I say, putting my hands up in surrender.

“Maybe you’re right...”

I wink. “I’ll handle the calls, and you can do your magic.”

She bites her lip thoughtfully. “No pressure, eh!”

“None whatsoever,” I say, trying to sound confident. Then I tilt my head, a small smile tugging at my lips. “You can focus on sketching some designs? Something tells me you’re already mentally redecorating.”

“You caught me,” she admits, cheeks flushing the faintest shade of pink. “I might already have a few ideas.”

I nod, feeling a surge of excitement. “Perfect.”

A gentle pause settles between us, a hint of comfortable tension in the air.

“Oh!” I snap my fingers suddenly. “You should check out the Purring Page. It might inspire your creative juices.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Good idea. Do they have coffee?”

“Best cappuccino. And two lovely cats.”

We head outside into the sunshine, and I feel lighter — her enthusiasm making me hopeful despite the ridiculous scale of this project.

“I’ll drop you off at the Purring Page then. It’s not far from Sage’s art gallery.”

“It’s a plan!” She glances back at the house, then meets my gaze with a smile.

I’m in so much trouble.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

THE PURRING PAGE

Sophia

Stepping into the Purring Page is like falling through a gentle portal into another world. The air smells like books and coffee. A sleepy Siamese cat eyes me lazily from atop a vintage wingback chair, clearly judging my presence in its territory.

I glance around the cozy bookstore, soaking in the whimsical clutter: shelves crammed with colorful spines, mismatched armchairs with crocheted throws, and little wooden signs promising sage advice such as “Life is short, read faster.”

A woman smiles curiously from behind a counter overflowing with paperbacks and porcelain cat figurines. “Hello there! Welcome to the Purring Page. Need help finding anything?”

“Actually, yes!” I step forward. “Ethan recommended this place for inspiration and cappuccino.”

“Ethan, huh?” Her smile widens knowingly, eyes sparkling with immediate curiosity. “Are you the designer helping out with the Miller House? Sage’s niece?”

“Wow,” I say, startled. “News really does travel fast!”

“Small-town grapevine,” she shrugs apologetically. “I’m Mia, by the way. Bookshop owner and part-time cat wrangler.”

“I’m Sophia,” I reply, shaking her outstretched hand. “New town refugee and, apparently, Ethan’s latest recruit for a questionable renovation project.”

Her laugh is melodic and instantly disarming. “Running from or to something?”

“A bit of both, maybe!” I shrug. What am I really doing here?

I settle onto a stool that Mia quickly cleared by shooing away the plump, disgruntled Siamese cat, who will dislike me after this. “I’m here for design inspiration and possibly moral support.”

Mia nods knowingly, then scratches the back of her neck before heading to a dusty, remote corner of the bookstore. She returns moments later, sliding an enormous, leather-bound volume across the counter. “Architectural Digest meets Haunted Houses Weekly. Guaranteed inspiration.”

I chuckle, flipping open the book. Elegant Victorian interiors, beautifully photographed rooms of rich textures, ornate moldings, and timeless charm fill the pages. My heart beats a bit faster. This could work.

I hesitate. “Ethan said you serve delicious cappuccino here. Is that true, or am I a victim of false advertising?”

She chuckles. “No lies on that front! I brew a mean cappuccino.”

I laugh, instantly warming to her easy humor. Mia hands me a steaming mug moments later, the rich scent of coffee wafting deliciously through the shop.

“Your cappuccino,” she whispers conspiratorially. “Just don’t tell Sage. She’ll never forgive me.”

“My lips are sealed,” I promise gratefully, taking a sip and sighing contentedly. “You’re officially my favorite person in Bluewater Cove.”

“Careful. Ethan might get jealous.”

I glance up sharply, heart fluttering unexpectedly at her teasing grin. “Oh, no — it’s strictly professional,” I say quickly. Too quickly, maybe.

She raises an eyebrow knowingly. “Of course. Professional.” She winks at me.

I clear my throat, still flustered. “Is he always so... easygoing? Or is that just with new people?”

Mia’s smile softens. “That’s pretty much Ethan.

Easygoing, steady as bedrock. He’s the guy who’ll help you move furniture at midnight and never make it weird.

But when it comes to romance?” She gives a playful shrug.

“He’s never been a serial dater. Not brooding or anything, just picky.

I think he’s been waiting for someone who fits. ”

I swallow, fingers brushing the edge of a gilded photo. “Waiting, huh?”

Mia chuckles. “Waiting, yes. And not great at admitting it. So, if a certain interior designer finds him interesting, she might have to make the first move.”

I feel my cheeks heat, but I can’t stop the smile that forms. “Noted.”

I pause, fingertips brushing over a photograph of a warmly lit reading nook. “He’s lived here a while?”

“Born and raised,” she confirms with a nod. “Went off for university for a bit, had a couple flings but never brought anyone serious back. And once he settled in, started his freelance work... that was it. He just sort of made a life for himself, solo.”

There’s something quietly admirable about that — a man who built his life intentionally, not just waiting around for something to fall into place.

Before I can probe some more, the bell over the door jingles.

“Morning, Mia! Tell me you can fill my caffeine need. Lucas’ steamer is still out of business,” a woman calls, breezing inside in running tights and a bright fleece. She spots me, slows, then grins. “Well, hey. I don’t know you. So I guess you must be Sophia — Ethan’s partner in renovation crime?”

I straighten, suddenly aware I’m still clutching the giant design tome. “Guilty.?You’re...?”

“Claire.” She offers a firm handshake, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Campground manager, occasional life coach, and long-suffering best friend to that tall goof you keep running into.”

I laugh, nerves loosening. “Nice to meet you. Long-suffering, huh?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Claire leans an elbow on the counter. “He buys a haunted house on a whim, ropes you in, and still thinks it’s a flawless plan. Classic Ethan.” She winks, but there’s warmth beneath the teasing.

“Flawless plan?” I joke, playing along.

Mia shoots a look at Claire. “Don’t mind her, she likes to romanticize everything that happens in this town. Ethan is known for being a bit extravagant.”

“You afraid I’ll steal you or Oliver’s place as resident authors?” Claire shoots back without hesitation.

I watch the banter between these two friends, not quite sure what to make of it and of Claire’s relationship with Ethan.

“Need any tips to survive said tall goof?” Claire asks, suddenly turning to face me.

“Sure,” I reply hesitantly, caught off guard.

“Coffee first, optimism second, headlamp third — that house must have the world’s worst wiring.” She flashes a grin, then nods toward Mia. “Caffeine emergency solved?”

Mia produces a to-go cup. “Here you go.”

Claire accepts it triumphantly. “You’re a lifesaver. Nice meeting you, Sophia. And welcome to the circus. I’m sure we’ll be good friends. I have a sixth sense about these things.” With a friendly salute she’s gone, the bell chiming in her wake.

I watch her disappear, a flutter of something — nerves? — twisting in my stomach.

Mia sighs, shaking her head. “Sorry about that. The life of a bookstore owner!”

I smile. “You seem to enjoy it.”

“Love it!” Mia chuckles softly. “So, back to Ethan — sorry, your ‘professional arrangement.’”

Mia must notice my nervousness, because she nudges the cappuccino toward me. “Don’t overthink it. Claire teases everyone, especially people Ethan actually likes.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks. “He hardly knows me.”

“True,” Mia says, eyes kind.

“There’s nothing between them?”

“There were rumors about them for years. But they’re more like siblings. They’d rather tease each other to death than date.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Ah.”

Mia glances up, a hint of amusement in her eyes. “Why do I get the feeling I’ve just confirmed that you were totally off-base on a theory?”

I laugh, flustered. “Busted.”

She winks, then returns to her stack of books. “Well, if there’s more to the story now, I don’t think anyone in town would mind a new, ‘purely professional’ chapter.”

“Exactly,” I murmur weakly, unable to meet her teasing eyes. “Purely professional.”

“Sure,” Mia replies, lips curling upward. “Well, whatever it is, I’m glad you’re here. Ethan deserves someone good in his life, personally or professionally.”

I bite my lip, gaze dropping again to the book’s open pages. A beautifully restored living room catches my eye, sunlight spilling across polished hardwood floors and furniture perfectly placed. It’s precisely what I envisioned, and my pulse quickens with excitement.

Mia notices my expression softening and smiles gently. “Looks like you’re already falling in love.”

I snap my gaze upward sharply. “With the house. Definitely the house.”

“Of course.” Mia’s eyes twinkle knowingly. “Just the house.”

I close the book decisively with a little flourish and I stand, clutching it to my chest like a shield. “I think I should go do some research — alone. Preferably without any more romantic conspiracy theories.”

Mia grins unapologetically. “In that case, I’d avoid Main Street entirely. Too many romantics with excellent eyesight.”

I let out a mock groan. “Noted. Any quiet corners you recommend for research?”

Her eyes brighten with mischief. “The beach?”

I narrow mine. “I sense a trap.”

She laughs, raising her hands innocently. “Hey, I’m just a helpful librarian. Any romantic coincidences are purely accidental.”

“I’ll take my chances at the art gallery. But I might come back later if you promise fewer matchmaking attempts.”

“No promises,” she says cheerfully while we walk to the cash register.

Once I’ve paid and I’m walking out the door, I hear her say, “Good luck, Sophia. You might need it.”

I laugh, the door jingling behind me as I step out, feeling just a little lighter than when I'd walked in.

I step back onto the sunny sidewalk, Mia's words ringing softly in my ears. Ethan Reed, stubbornly single. Interesting.

As I clutch the heavy book tighter against my chest, heading back toward the art gallery, I realize I'm not just renovating rooms and choosing paint colors.

I'm tiptoeing carefully into Ethan's mysterious, independent life, and I'm worried about the impact I'll have on it, especially since I'm unsure whether I'll stay long.

DUST AND DETAILS

Ethan

I 'm barely out of my truck before Sophia waves from the front steps of the Miller House, coffee cups raised victoriously.

“I come bearing caffeine and bribery,” she announces, smiling brightly enough to make my pulse stumble.

“Is the bribery in muffin form?” I ask, eyeing the paper bag in her hand as I approach.

“Freshly baked and still warm,” she confirms with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“Consider it an apology for mocking your raccoon hotel.”

“You’re forgiven,” I say solemnly, accepting my coffee. Our fingers brush for just a fraction of a second, and warmth rushes up my arm. “Though, just for the record, raccoons pay rent in snacks. It’s a solid business model.”

She laughs, a carefree sound that echoes through the porch and into places inside me I didn’t even know needed laughter. “I’ll keep that in mind for my next project. Maybe a raccoon Airbnb?”

“Careful, that’s dangerously close to Simon’s latest pitch,” I warn, unlocking the front door. It opens reluctantly, hinges groaning. “And thus begins the chaos.”

Sophia steps inside, eyes immediately scanning the space.

“Ready to tackle the parlor first?”

“I was born ready,” she says, pushing the sleeves of her sweater up playfully and making a show of preparing for battle. “Lead the way.”

The next hour melts away as we sort through boxes stacked haphazardly, our easy rhythm punctuated by laughter and occasional teasing. Sophia holds up a tarnished brass candlestick, wiggling her eyebrows. “Vintage charm or cursed relic?”

“Definitely cursed,” I reply dryly, earning another infectious laugh.

“Perfect, let’s put it in the ‘definitely keep’ pile,” she says without hesitation, causing me to snort softly. Her humor is effortless, her presence comforting in a way that feels oddly natural despite how new it is.

From a corner, she lifts a dusty, carved wooden bench, running a finger thoughtfully over the worn details. Her eyes sparkle with inspiration. “This would be perfect near the front entryway. Imagine it sanded down, refinished... a welcoming place to pause and take off muddy boots.”

“You’ve spent enough time in Bluewater Cove to appreciate good mudroom aesthetics?” I tease gently.

“It’s a universal truth,” she insists playfully. “Every house deserves a good entryway — mud optional.”

I nod thoughtfully. “I could sand and repair it,” I offer casually. Her surprised, pleased expression makes me instantly grateful I spoke up. “It’d be easy.”

She smiles softly. “You can build websites and furniture? That’s unfairly impressive.”

I shrug, suddenly self-conscious. “We all have our hidden talents.”

Sophia tilts her head, eyes sparkling. “Now I’m curious about your other secret skills.”

“Mostly raccoon negotiations and terrible puns,” I admit, enjoying the laughter bubbling up again.

As we work deeper into the clutter, we uncover an odd assortment of treasures — a velvet hatbox filled with faded postcards, a cracked mantel clock forever frozen at three fifteen, and stacks of yellowed sheet music.

Sophia leafs through the postcards, reading aloud dramatically. “‘Wish you were here, Myrtle. The clam chowder is divine.’” She smirks at me. “A romantic correspondence for the ages.”

“I’m feeling inspired already,” I say with mock seriousness. “Maybe we should frame it.”

“Absolutely,” she agrees, eyes crinkling with amusement. “Nothing says romance like clam chowder.”

We move steadily through the room until sunlight slants golden through the dusty windows, highlighting swirling motes in the quiet air. Without realizing it, we’ve created piles of organized chaos — ‘keep’, ‘donate’, ‘absolutely haunted’.

I stretch, rubbing the back of my neck as Sophia sets down another box. “Break?” I suggest, nodding toward the porch.

“Thought you’d never ask,” she sighs, stepping outside and sinking onto the steps with an exhausted flourish. I join her, handing her a water bottle.

We sit quietly, listening to the rhythmic rush of distant waves and the rustle of leaves overhead. After a moment, Sophia speaks softly, eyes thoughtful. “It’s strange, isn’t it? How satisfying it feels to clear away someone else’s clutter?”

“Feels like making room for something new,” I reply, watching her carefully. “Or reclaiming something that got lost along the way.”

She glances at me, curiosity gentle in her expression. “Is that how it feels for you? Reclaiming something?”

I shrug lightly, suddenly feeling vulnerable. “Maybe. I’ve lived here my whole life, but this — this project feels different. Like the first real step forward I’ve taken in a long time.”

Sophia nods slowly, understanding softening her features. “I get that. After my divorce, I wasn’t sure I’d feel excited about anything creative again. But being here, imagining possibilities... it feels hopeful. Thank you for this opportunity.”

She's divorced. That explains her escape. “Hopeful,” I echo quietly, warmth filling my chest at the honesty in her eyes. “Yeah.”

Silence settles again. I watch as she absently sketches something with her finger on the dusty porch rail, brow furrowed slightly in thought. “Got an idea?” I finally ask.

“A million,” she admits with a shy smile. “This house has stories. It deserves a second chance.”

She reaches into her pocket and produces a small stub of pencil. Grabbing a piece of cardboard from the pile near the door, she starts sketching, lines confident and graceful.

“What are you designing?” I ask, fascinated as the image emerges.

“The entryway,” she explains, biting her lower lip in concentration. “Warm lighting here, the refinished bench there, maybe an antique coat rack in the corner.”

“So, have you decided if this will be office space or a rental?”

“Not sure yet. Either way, it’ll need an entry, something beautiful, like it deserves.”

I can’t argue with that. I watch her quietly, pulse picking up slightly at the way her face lights with excitement, hair falling gently into her eyes. Without thinking, I reach forward, lightly brushing the loose strands behind her ear.

She freezes, pencil hovering over the cardboard, eyes wide as they meet mine.

“Sorry,” I murmur quickly, pulling my hand back. “Habit.”

She relaxes, a slow smile tugging at her lips. “You have a habit of tucking hair behind ears?”

“Apparently,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat slightly. “Newly discovered skill.”

She laughs softly, nudging my shoulder gently with hers. “Good to know.”

The silence returns, but it’s charged now, filled with unspoken questions and gentle possibilities. I clear my throat, heart racing. “Think you’ll stick around Bluewater Cove for a while?”

She tilts her head thoughtfully. “I didn’t plan to, but lately it’s becoming harder to think about leaving.”

I swallow, nodding slowly. “Good. Because I might need your expertise around here for a while.”

She arches a brow, playful again. “Strictly professional?”

I smile, warmth spreading through me. “Absolutely.”

She leans slightly closer, voice a conspiratorial whisper. “Then I’ll have my rates ready by morning.”

Laughing, I shake my head, feeling lighter than I have in years. “Worth every penny.”

Her smile softens, eyes lingering on mine. “You know, Ethan, beneath your tech genius and raccoon-whisperer exterior, you’re secretly quite charming.”

“Careful. That almost sounded like flirting.”

“Almost?” she asks innocently, standing and stretching lazily in the afternoon sun. “I’ll have to work on my delivery.”

A grin tugs at my lips before I can stop it — too wide, too telling — so I scrub a hand through my hair, pretending to smooth an unruly strand while I steal a breath.

“Practice makes perfect,” I reply smoothly, standing beside her, both of us reluctant to end the moment.

“I suppose it does,” she murmurs, eyes shining.

As we stand in the fading sunlight, surrounded by dust and possibilities, I realize something unexpected: clearing clutter isn’t just about reclaiming space — it’s about making room for something new.

Something hopeful. And suddenly, the Miller House feels less like an impulsive investment and more like the beginning of something I've been waiting for all along.

AVOIDING REALITY

Sophia

The sky above Sage's beach house fades softly from gold to lavender as evening slips into dusk. I climb the steps to her porch, a satisfied fatigue settling over me after the day's work at the Miller House. My bag is overflowing with sketches and notes, evidence of a productive day.

"Looks like someone's inspired," Sage calls out from her comfortable perch, surrounded by candles and cozy blankets.

I smile, setting down my things and sinking gratefully into a cushioned chair. "It was amazing, Sage. Ethan and I got so much done today."

Sage lifts an eyebrow knowingly, handing me a steaming mug of tea. "I bet you did."

"Don't start," I warn, laughing softly.

"Start what?" she replies innocently, eyes sparkling mischievously. "I'm just glad to see you so animated. Ethan seems to bring that out in you."

I sip the tea, warmth seeping through my tired muscles. "Maybe he does. It's nice, working with someone who listens and values my opinions. He actually likes my ideas."

"Why wouldn't he? You're incredibly talented, Sophia. It's about time you started

believing it.”

Her words linger gently in the quiet evening air. I exhale softly, grateful for her unwavering belief. “It’s different, being here. With Ethan, and with you. It feels... uncomplicated.”

“And yet, something’s still bothering you,” she observes gently. I glance away, my peace momentarily disturbed. Sage never misses a beat. “It’s Daniel, right?”

Just as she says his name, my phone vibrates sharply again from inside my bag. I close my eyes briefly, sighing in frustration.

“How often has he been calling?” she asks, her tone gentle but direct.

“Too often,” I admit quietly. “He keeps insisting we have unfinished business — my clients, finalizing the accounts. Honestly, I think he’s using it as an excuse just to maintain contact.”

Sage regards me thoughtfully. “Have you spoken to him at all?”

“Not since I got here. Every time his name pops up, I freeze. I’m not ready for whatever guilt trip he’s prepared.”

Sage shifts closer, her expression understanding but firm. “I get that, Sophia, but avoidance won’t make it easier. Eventually, you’ll need to address this.”

“I know,” I whisper, looking out over the lake. The fading sunlight dances on the water, painting gentle, shimmering patterns. “I’m just afraid that answering his calls will bring everything crashing down again. I’ve finally started feeling like myself again.”

“You’re stronger now. Stronger than you realize. And facing Daniel doesn’t mean giving him power — it means reclaiming your own.”

I look down into my tea, considering her words. Sage reaches out, gently squeezing my hand. “But do it on your terms. Answer when you’re ready, and not a second before.”

“I wish it felt that simple.”

“Feelings rarely are,” Sage smiles softly. “But clarity helps. Is the unfinished business truly urgent, or just Daniel’s way of holding on?”

“Maybe it’s actually a bit of both. The business is winding down, and there are loose ends. But Daniel always finds a way to blur lines. I can’t trust his intentions.”

“Trust your own instead. You don’t owe Daniel emotional bandwidth. Handle the practicalities without letting him into your head.”

I breathe out slowly, her advice grounding me. “You’re right. I know you are. I just need time.”

“Then take it,” she says, squeezing my hand again. “And meanwhile, keep leaning into what makes you happy — like this project with Ethan.”

I smile softly. “He makes it easy to feel creative again.”

“That’s because he sees you,” Sage says, warmth in her voice. “Not the version Daniel wanted you to be, but exactly who you are. That’s powerful.”

The truth of her words settles deeply, comfortingly. Ethan’s sincerity is so refreshingly different. Uncomplicated .

“I never imagined Bluewater Cove could feel like this. I came here to hide, to pause. But now... I’m not sure I want to leave.”

Sage smiles knowingly. “Funny how life sometimes pushes us exactly where we need to be.”

We sit in peaceful silence, the soft night wrapping around us, stars beginning to wink into existence overhead. Eventually, Sage breaks the silence again, her voice gentle but curious. “What are you planning next for the Miller House?”

“I’m not sure yet. Today was about clearing space — physical and mental. But tomorrow, I want to start filling that space with fresh ideas.”

“Sounds promising,” Sage says encouragingly. “What’s your first stop?”

“I’m thinking the Purring Page. Mia’s shop feels inspiring. Maybe I’ll find something unexpected.”

Sage grins. “You mean besides the handsome tech guy who’s already making unexpected waves?”

I laugh softly, rolling my eyes affectionately. “Yes, besides Ethan.”

“Just checking,” she replies, eyes twinkling with delight.

We linger on the porch until darkness fully settles. When I finally stand to go in, the weight in my chest has eased considerably.

“You’re going to be okay, Sophia,” Sage says, hugging me. “Better than okay.”

“I believe you,” I whisper, hugging her back tightly.

As we walk inside, I feel lighter — resolved, hopeful. Tomorrow, I'll visit the Purring Page. Tomorrow, I'll keep building this new chapter of mine, one choice at a time.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

GHOST FROM VANCOUVER

Ethan

I rehearse a final possible greeting in my head — maybe something nonchalant like, “You busy? Need an extra measuring tape?” as I step up to Sage’s gallery.

I’m definitely overthinking this. We planned to meet today after she did some more research at the Purring Page, so I have no reason to be nervous. Right?

The space smells like a strange combination of lavender, fresh paint, and something distinctly burnt — toast, maybe?

My gaze sweeps across the scattered sculptures, half-finished canvases, and dozens of paintbrushes soaking in color-stained jars.

A swirl of Sage’s distinct energy. It’s both comforting and slightly chaotic, and usually, I enjoy it.

Usually.

I’m taking one step forward when raised voices drift from the back room, freezing me mid-stride. My spine goes rigid. That voice — sharp, entitled — makes me instantly alert. If it involves Sophia, I need to know what’s going on.

“You could’ve told her I’ve been calling!”

That's a male voice — low, tense, and not friendly. My pulse ratchets up another notch. Without meaning to, I slip further into the gallery, my footsteps muffled by a worn Persian rug. The sense of intrusion tightens in my gut, but curiosity nudges me forward.

“Daniel, you’ve been calling and texting her constantly. She knows you’re trying to reach her...” Sage’s voice is tighter than usual, with a brittle edge that immediately raises my guard.

“She needs to stop ignoring potential clients. She’s not thinking straight,” the man retorts, voice clipped.

Clients. My heart clenches. This is about Sophia, then. My mind’s already leaping to conclusions. She mentioned turning down some big contract, wanting space. Could this guy be a pushy former boss? Or maybe a clingy manager?

I sidle closer, feeling like a spy in a bad detective movie. The man stands by a half-open bead curtain, wearing a fitted suit so completely out of place among Sage’s bohemian chaos that it’s almost comedic. His posture is rigid, and his expression is darker than storm clouds.

Sage stands with her arms crossed tightly, her silver bracelets clinking softly as she shifts her weight. She doesn’t say anything, just watches this man, whose lips are pressed into a thin line.

“Daniel, she wants space... she needs space...” Sage insists.

Daniel? .

“Excuse me,” he interrupts curtly, voice spiking with frustration. “I don’t need relationship advice from someone whose longest commitment is teaching a pottery

class.”

My jaw tightens. “You don’t talk to her like that,” I say, stepping forward just enough for him to notice. “Sage deserves respect — something you clearly struggle with.”

“Who are you?” Daniel’s furious gaze locks onto me the second he steps around the beaded curtain, and my carefully planned, casual greeting vanishes like morning fog.

“A friend. And you?”

Sage turns toward me, eyebrows lifting. “Ethan,” she breathes, her shoulders relaxing slightly. Her gaze darts between me and Daniel as if trying to decide what comes next.

Daniel eyes me up and down, brow furrowed like he can’t decide if I’m a threat or just an inconvenience. “Another artsy stray?”

Sage quickly corrects him. “Friend. A good friend.”

Daniel just scoffs. “Great. Another nosy, small-town expert.” His tone is thick with condescension, fueling my irritation.

“Expert? Wow — promotion accepted. I was just here to catch up with a friend, but hey, if you want free consulting, let me grab my clipboard.” My humor earns a fleeting grin from Sage, but Daniel looks supremely unimpressed.

“Funny,” he mutters sourly, rolling his eyes.

Sage sighs, stepping between us with a forced calm. “Daniel, please. Don’t drag Ethan into this.”

But it's too late. "Well, Ethan... My wife needs to come back to Vancouver..."

"Ex-wife," Sage interjects.

Heat flares in my cheeks. So this is Sophia's ex. I grind my teeth, mustering a calm front.

"Semantics!" Daniel's tone is pointed, nearly accusatory. "Sophia's future is on the line. She needs to work"

My jaw tightens. "She is working. We're renovating a property," I shoot back, forcing my voice to stay even.

Daniel scoffs, "She doesn't have time to play house. She has clients waiting for her in Vancouver."

"Sophia doesn't need anyone managing her. She's helping me with the house because she wants to. You calling that a distraction says more about your priorities than hers."

Daniel shakes his head dismissively. "Don't pretend you know what's best for her."

"Maybe I don't, but what exactly do you know about what Sophia really wants or needs?"

Daniel looks at me like he can't believe my audacity. I can't believe it either, but there's a protective instinct snapping inside me. If this is the man who cast such a long shadow over Sophia's life, I really hate the idea that he's here to claim her again.

Behind me, Sage's bracelets clang warningly. "Both of you, enough."

Daniel glances at his watch, glowering. "Fine. But Sophia and I aren't finished."

With that, he pushes past me roughly, his shoulder knocking mine, and a painting standing nearby tips precariously toward the floor. The bell above the door jangles again, an ironic chime punctuating his exit.

A charged silence falls. I exhale, shoulders knotting with tension I didn't realize I was holding. I feel the old painting pressed under my fingertips — my attempt to rescue it from total annihilation. Carefully, I prop it upright.

“Sorry, I didn't realize you had company,” I say quietly, my concern for Sage evident.

She rubs her temples. “Don't apologize. You might've saved me from a meltdown.”

An unexpected burst of laughter escapes me. “He does seem like the paintbrush-to-the-face type.”

She almost smiles, but there's obvious worry behind her eyes. “He's... Sophia's ex-husband. But they're still in business together...”

The bottom drops out of my stomach at that confirmation. “He came all this way?”

Sage heaves a sigh, fiddling with paintbrushes on the cluttered table. “Seems like it.”

The words resonate like a threat. Is he planning to take her back with him? Does she even want that? My thoughts churn, my stomach twisting uncomfortably. The possibility of Sophia leaving — of this new connection evaporating — suddenly feels all too real.

I swallow, forcing steadiness into my voice. “Does she know he's here?”

Sage hesitates, shaking her head. “I doubt it. He stormed in, demanding to see her. I

tried to explain she's not around."

"She's stronger than she thinks," I say quietly, recalling her quick wit and fearless laugh when we discovered raccoons in the Miller House. But a knot of doubt coils inside me. Is she strong enough to resist him if he pushes hard?

Sage's eyes soften, reading the concern on my face. "You're worried, aren't you?"

I blow out a frustrated breath. "I guess. It's just... stuff like this rarely ends well. I don't want her cornered into going back because he's persuasive."

Or because I haven't known her long enough to be a reason for her to stay .

That silent admission burns in my chest. My guard's been down with her since day one — her quick humor, warmth, the quiet spark of something beyond friendship.

Now I'm wondering if I'm being naïve and if Daniel's hold on her is deeper than I realized.

"Anyway," Sage says gently, "I can tell her you dropped by if I see her first."

"Please do. We were supposed to meet up but, uh... I should go. Need to follow up with the local contractors."

Sage nods, and I turn to leave, the gallery's clutter suddenly feeling claustrophobic.

Outside, the sunlight hits me like a spotlight.

I whip out my phone, thumbs hovering over the screen.

Maybe I can't control how Sophia handles Daniel, but I can at least get the Miller

House on track — show her there are opportunities for her here.

One text to the roofing contractor, another to an electrician. My mind reels with to-do lists. Even if, in the back of my mind, doubt whispers that she might choose something simpler — a life away from Bluewater Cove and me.

Pocketing my phone, I exhale shakily. “Stay optimistic,” I mutter under my breath, glancing toward the direction of the beach.

For now, though, I’ll keep texting contractors, scheduling inspections, and forging ahead. Because if there’s any chance Sophia might stay, I’ll do my best to give her a reason to.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

CAFFEINE, CONFESSIONS, AND CHAOS

Sophia

I 'm so lost in my thoughts I almost miss seeing him.

Almost. But it's hard to overlook Ethan's tall frame — broad-shouldered, effortlessly put-together in that quiet, unintentional way especially when standing in the middle of Main Street as if waiting for a bus that never comes.

One hand is raking through his hair, the other clutching his phone as though it's about to burst into flames.

There's a restless energy in him, like he's trying to solve something with sheer focus.

He doesn't see me at all, which is surprising — my bright teal coat and size usually make me impossible to miss.

"Ethan!" I call, weaving around a local couple who wave politely but give me a strange look, probably wondering why I'm yelling in the middle of the sidewalk.

Ethan jolts in surprise, nearly dropping his phone. "Sophia?" He blinks at me in confusion, like he's half-expecting an entirely different person to appear.

I slow as I approach him, tilting my head. "Are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

He forces a small smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Uh, yeah. Fine. Just... a lot on my mind."

I press my lips together, noticing how tense his shoulders are beneath his navy hoodie. The corners of his mouth keep twitching like he can't decide whether to grin or grimace.

"Hmm, something tells me you're not fine." I place a gentle hand on his arm, half-expecting him to deny it all. Instead, he lets out a heavy sigh that seems to carry the weight of a thousand undone tasks — possibly a personal crisis.

"Let's just say it's been a weird day." He tries for a playful tone, but the effort falls flat.

I readjust the stack of heavy books I'm carrying, suddenly self-conscious about the enthusiasm I'd planned to unleash on him.

I want to show him all these historical design references and color swatches.

Maybe now isn't the best time, but I can't bear the idea of letting him walk away like this, obviously troubled.

"Hey, I, um, got these books..." I heft the stack awkwardly, "from The Purring Page. Some great stuff on early twentieth-century architecture. Thought we could check them out together."

He forces another half-smile, eyes lingering on the spines of the oversized tomes. "Right. For the Miller House. Give me those. They look heavy!"

I pass the stack and his gaze flicks away again, scanning the street like he's searching for something — or someone. My stomach twists uncomfortably.

“Ethan.” I nudge him gently. “If something’s wrong... I mean, you can tell me.”

He meets my eyes then, a mix of gratitude and hesitance swirling in his expression.

“It’s just... complicated.”

“Is it about that call you were expecting? Or something else?” I ask quietly, fighting to grab his phone and see what’s happening. Not exactly the pinnacle of boundaries, but my anxiety climbs with every twitch of his jaw.

“The call?”

“You were looking at the phone as if it was about to self-combust!”

He hesitates, pressing his lips together. “I ran into someone...”

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask softly, feeling a sudden wave of protectiveness surge inside me. I may not be the best at dealing with my baggage, but I hate the idea of Ethan stewing in negativity.

His shoulders relax fractionally, but the tension in his jaw remains. “Could we — maybe not here? I’m really not in the mood to stage a personal drama in front of half of Bluewater Cove.”

Relief floods me. At least he’s not shutting me out. “Yeah, definitely. Let’s go somewhere. I’d suggest my aunt’s beach house, but that’s about as private as a theme park.”

Ethan’s lips quirk into something resembling an actual smile. “We could, uh... go back to my place. Check out these books in a somewhat quieter environment?”

“Sounds good. Quiet. Minimal raccoon interference, hopefully.”

He nods, and we head down Main Street side by side, silent but strangely comfortable. A gentle breeze lifts the scent of coffee from Lucas' shop.

"Do you mind if we pop in to grab coffees to go?" I ask.

"Of course not." Ethan grins and reaches for the door.

We grab our coffees to go and climb into his truck.

When we reach his place, Ethan fumbles for his keys, expression sheepish. "Sorry. My head's all over the place."

"Hey, no rush." I take the books from him, giving him space to unlock the door.

The interior of his house is neat, if a little sparse.

A living room extends before us, furnished with a cozy couch, a coffee table scattered with code-laden printouts, and a large TV angled near an older gaming console.

It's not fancy or meticulously designed, but it feels...

well, like Ethan — comfortable, unpretentious, and welcoming in a subdued way.

He gestures toward the couch, exhaling softly. "Make yourself at home. Want something to drink? Tea, water... leftover pizza?"

"Leftover pizza? Tempting," I tease, setting my books down on the coffee table with a satisfying thump. "I've got my coffee! I'm fine. Thanks."

I settle onto the couch, flipping open one of the volumes. Beautifully restored Victorian rooms fill the pages, each more breathtaking than the last. My mind races

with design concepts — textured wallpapers, salvage wood, maybe even a reading nook.

But even as excitement bubbles up, I can't ignore Ethan's earlier distress.

He joins me on the couch, our knees nearly touching, sending a flicker of warmth up my leg. And just like that, I forget what I was about to say. Who knew knees could short-circuit brain function?

"So..." I clear my throat, testing the waters. "Want to share what happened that has you looking like you picked a fight with a ghost?"

He sets his glass on a coaster, brows knitting together. "Daniel is in town. He was at the art gallery, looking for you."

My heart nearly skips a beat. Daniel, ex-husband, unexpected Vancouver wildcard. "Oh." I clear my throat, trying to sound casual. "Did he, uh, say something about me?"

Ethan offers a tight, humorless laugh. "He said a few things, yeah. Enough to get my head spinning."

"Damn him. I thought this would be over when we signed the divorce papers. We've been done for months, years! And now... now... he's here! What does he expect?!"

Ethan chuckles, seemingly relaxing for the first time. "Apparently, I'm the reckless local flavor distracting you from your high-powered city life. The horror."

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "He thinks you're ignoring real opportunities in Vancouver. And that you might... eventually go back."

“Well, I guess that’s Daniel’s perspective.”

Ethan sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I just... It’d be unfortunate if you went away. What would I do with all the raccoons?” He forces a chuckle.

My chest tightens. “Please. Bluewater Cove runs on raccoons. They’re practically on the town council.” I bump my shoulder with his.

He nods, eyes downcast. “Yeah — I guess. But it wouldn’t be the same.”

We fall silent.

I inch closer on the couch, touching his forearm tentatively. “Hey, can we just... I don’t know. Keep building the Miller House dream for a bit? Even if it’s uncertain? Sometimes uncertain is good.”

He looks up, meeting my gaze. His expression softens noticeably, as though my words are an unexpected lifeline. “Yeah. I like uncertainty. Especially if it means we’re in this together.”

A wave of relief washes through me, joined by an undeniable flutter in my stomach at the thought of being “in this” with him. My eyes fall on the open book, a full-page illustration of a Victorian parlor with deep green walls and wood detailing.

“Okay,” I say with a breathy laugh, picking up the book and turning it to show him. “Let’s dive back into uncharted territory. I have so many ideas. Imagine incorporating this kind of built-in shelving along one wall, and maybe...”

He leans in, brushing my shoulder in the process.

The contact is tiny, accidental — and ridiculously electric.

My pen stalls mid-sketch, heartbeat stuttering like I've hit a live wire.

My heart thumps, but I focus on the pages, pointing out the details.

With each passing second, the tension around him melts a little more.

“You still haven't told me if you envision this as a rental or office space. But I guess you'll say it'd work for both,” he murmurs, peeking at the open page in front of me. “We can salvage the wood from the old barn I saw for sale outside of town. It'd be perfect — rustic but sturdy.”

“Look at you, full of solutions. Don't get cocky, Mr. Reed, or I'll start calling you my contractor.”

Ethan grins. “Only if I get a tool belt and a nickname. Something rugged. Like... Chip.”

“More like Moose,” I shoot back, laughing. “Ooh, and maybe a little reading nook near the window. You know, for lazy mornings.”

He chuckles softly, nodding. “Absolutely. Lazy mornings with good coffee.”

His voice dips a little, and for a second, I wonder if he means just coffee. But I don't ask. Not yet.

I smirk, flipping another page, but the atmosphere between us shifts again — this time more hopeful. Our shoulders bump as we lean in to admire a photo of a gracefully curved staircase, and I feel the gentle press of his arm against mine.

We sit like that momentarily, lost in possibilities and each other's presence.

The doubt still simmers, unspoken, on the edges of my consciousness — Daniel's reemergence, my unresolved future, Ethan's openness.

But for now, the future feels wide open, teeming with color and promise, like a half-renovated house waiting for a new coat of paint.

And maybe... that's enough. For now.

Especially when his arm stays against mine longer than it needs to — and neither of us moves.

LAST CALL FOR TROUBLE

Ethan

I park in front of the Old Oak. We spent the afternoon bent over books and decided to have a bite to eat.

“I think this was a good idea,” Sophia says opening her door. “We’ve worked hard today. A drink sounds great!”

I love her enthusiasm.

Inside, the familiar scent of fried food and draft beer swirls around me, along with a faint, sweet smell I can’t place. Sophia and I are seated at a small table near the back. With an amused head tilt, she’s contemplating the tavern’s kitschy décor — Canadian paraphernalia covering the walls.

She has not mentioned Daniel since our earlier conversation.

Neither have I.

She gives a dramatic sigh, which breaks me out of my reverie. “Anything you would recommend from the menu for a newbie like me?”

“The fish tacos are pretty great!”

Her easy smile settles my pulse. A waitress named Becca approaches, all smiles, and

we order two beers. Sophia leans in, resting her elbows on the table.

“So, tell me, what do people actually do for fun around here? Is there, like, a secret underground knitting club? Bonfires with ghost stories? Raccoon races?”

I laugh, the tension easing from my shoulders. “Yes to bonfires. No to raccoon races... yet. But I do know where to find the best pie within a twenty-mile radius.”

“Well then,” she says, eyes lighting up, “why are we still sitting here?”

“Waiting for food!”

“Right, food first, pie later!” she winks.

When the waitress returns with our beers, Sophia orders the fish tacos and I order the fish and chips. Our conversation drifts back to our project — paint colors, salvage wood, and how to diplomatically relocate wildlife.

Suddenly, the door swings open. I glance over as Daniel steps inside, scanning the crowd with hawk-like intensity. My stomach lurches. Talk about terrible timing. The low buzz of conversation hushes, as if the tavern collectively senses trouble.

He spots us, zeroing in on Sophia. Every muscle in my body tenses.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, leaning in.

I lift my chin, pointing to the door behind her. My jaw clenches instinctively.

Sophia looks over her shoulder. She stiffens, eyes flashing warily. Daniel strides forward, ignoring the hush of onlookers.

“Sophia,” he says, voice low but loud enough to hush neighboring tables.

She sets her beer down, jaw tight. “Daniel. What are you doing here? What do you want?”

He exhales sharply, frustration etched on his face. “I’ve been calling and emailing you, but there has been no response. You’re ignoring your clients... my friends...”

“Ah... I see! I thought something smelled fishy, Daniel. That new client, out of the blue... it was you!”

“What does it matter if it was? We may be divorced, but I won’t stop looking out for you.”

Sophia scoffs. “Right... looking out for me. I’m taking a break. Which you refuse to respect.”

“A break from the business? Your responsibilities?”

“You’re out of line, Daniel,” she grits through her teeth.

Daniel’s gaze flickers to me, eyes narrowing. “And you — did you conveniently forget to mention I was looking for her?”

My chest tightens, anger stirring. “You threatened me at Sage’s. Not exactly a polite request.”

“Oh, come on,” Daniel scoffs. “You’re playing the lap dog.”

I don’t take the bait. “I respect Sophia. That includes respecting her boundaries. You might want to try it.”

He steps forward slightly, puffing himself up like I'm supposed to back down. "You think you know her? You've known her what — five minutes? I spent years with her. I know what she needs."

Sophia pushes her chair back, rising to face him. Though he's taller, she doesn't flinch. "You don't get to barge in and make demands," she snaps, voice crackling with suppressed anger. "We're done, Daniel."

He scowls. "I'm trying to help you see reason. You have real opportunities back in Vancouver — serious contracts. This place? This... distraction? It's not you."

Sophia crosses her arms, chin lifted. "We'll talk tomorrow at Sage's. Ten in the morning. You've got five seconds to order a drink or get out, because I'm two seconds away from letting my purse meet your face."

He opens his mouth, shuts it, and then glances around, noting the tavern's silent attention. Even the bartender looks ready to intervene. With a final grimace, Daniel storms out, letting the door slam behind him. A moment of stunned silence passes. Then voices cautiously resume.

Sophia exhales a shaky breath, sinking back into her chair. I cover her hand with mine, heart racing. "You okay?" My thumb strokes the inside of her wrist—steady, calming — and the absurd thought pops up that I've never felt so close to being a part of a bar fight.

She nods stiffly, eyes still bright with leftover adrenaline. "That was... not how I pictured tonight."

"You did nothing wrong," I say quietly, reassuringly squeezing her fingers. "You handled it."

Her gaze lingers on me, gratitude and frustration mingling. “I just hate that he followed me here. That he’s still trying to orchestrate my life. But I’m not letting him control my life anymore.”

My chest fills with admiration for her. A thread of tension still laces the air, but she’s calmer now, leaning back in her seat as though deflating from battle mode. Our waitress returns, looking apprehensive.

“You two still want dinner?” she asks hesitantly.

We exchange glances. Then Sophia sets her jaw. “Definitely. With extra hot sauce for the tacos.”

I grin, nodding at the waitress, who hurries off. Sophia rubs her temples, a wry smile inching onto her face.

“Guess the rumor mill will be churning tonight, huh?”

I shrug. “Eh, it’s a small town. We’re used to drama. At least we gave them a show.”

She laughs softly, the tension draining from her shoulders. Our food arrives and we focus on eating for a while, letting the normalcy of battered fish and cold beer settle our rattled nerves. I watch her drizzle hot sauce onto her tacos until she’s gasping from the spice.

“Too much?” I ask, fighting back a laugh as she fans her mouth.

“No regrets,” she chokes out, eyes watering. “It’s a good kind of burn.”

I pass her my untouched water, and she drinks it gratefully. Despite everything, we settle into a companionable rhythm again — stealing each other’s fries, exchanging

witty remarks about the questionable décor. The hush that followed Daniel's exit is gone, replaced by the ordinary buzz of the pub.

After we finish, I grab the bill, ignoring a few curious glances from nearby tables. Outside, the night air bristles with lingering tension and a faint scent of the lake.

Sophia folds her arms, hugging herself for warmth, even as her gaze returns to me. "Thanks for... putting up with that."

I step closer, the cool air pushing us together. "You did most of the heavy lifting. I just tried not to let him ruin our dinner."

She snorts. "Well, you succeeded." A pause settles, and her eyes slip down toward my mouth.

My breath hitches, the air crackling with a sudden awareness.

My heart drums in anticipation. I can almost feel her lips before we've even closed the distance.

My pulse races, urging me forward — I tilt just enough to catch the faint citrus scent of her shampoo.

But then a pair of rowdy customers burst out behind us, nearly colliding with Sophia.

We jolt apart, tension snapping like a rubber band. The strangers stumble off, unaware of the moment they just shattered.

I rub the back of my neck while mumbling under my breath. "The universe has a weird sense of humor."

She smiles faintly. “At least it keeps things interesting.” She drops her gaze, toes scuffing the sidewalk. “I’m meeting Daniel at Sage’s tomorrow... but maybe I could meet you at the Miller house after that? We can finalize some measurements.”

My spirits lift. “Absolutely. The contractors might appreciate actual numbers instead of my random estimates.”

Her soft laugh enchants me. “Then it’s a date — of sorts.”

I nod, heart thudding at the idea. “Definitely of sorts. Shall I drive you home?”

“Since I came with you, I kind of expected it!” She laughs and I smile sheepishly.

We get into the truck and pull away from the pub, windows rolled down, letting the cool night air carry the tension out with it. It’s quiet but not uncomfortable — like the kind of silence that knows it’s earned.

I park in Sage’s driveway. We hover in a charged quiet.

The streetlights cast her face in a gentle glow, and I can’t help noticing how her hair catches the light or how her eyes flick to my lips.

Then, in a sudden burst of confidence, she leans toward me and kisses my cheek, lips brushing softly against my skin. My pulse skyrockets.

“Good night, Ethan,” she murmurs, getting out of my truck.

“Night,” I manage, feeling heat creep across my face. I watch her walk away, her silhouette climbing the stairs to the house. Only when she’s gone do I finally move, heading home with my head buzzing like I’m floating.

Yeah, the town's rumor mill will be spinning, but as far as I'm concerned, let them talk. The only conversation that matters is between Sophia and me — every stolen glance, tense heartbeat, and whispered promise suggesting that we might be more than just a passing renovation project.

brEAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

Sophia

“I know, I know,” I whisper to the frog. “I’ve made better decisions.”

The knock on the door comes precisely at ten. Daniel — predictable as ever. I hesitate a few seconds longer than necessary before yanking the door open, hoping my expression comes off somewhere between politely detached and not remotely interested.

“Hi, Sophia.” Daniel’s voice is carefully neutral, but the way his eyes flick anxiously behind me suggests he might fear a paintbrush-wielding Sage staging an ambush.

“Come in,” I say, stepping aside. “Sage isn’t home, in case you’re worried.”

“Actually, yes,” Daniel says dryly, stepping in and glancing around the cluttered room. “She and I don’t exactly mesh.”

I smile thinly. “You don’t say.”

He’s dressed casually, or at least Daniel-casual: pressed jeans, a tailored sweater, and leather loafers that have never touched sand. As he moves further into the living room, he eyes a wall-mounted sculpture suspiciously — a half-man, half-raccoon figure made entirely of driftwood.

“What is this supposed to represent?” he asks cautiously.

I shrug. “Sage says it symbolizes the duality of nature. Personally, I think she ran out of ideas and just started hot-gluing stuff together.”

Daniel chuckles briefly, but his face quickly returns to seriousness. “Can we sit down and talk?”

“I’d offer you the couch, but...” I glance apologetically toward a faded velvet sofa covered in sketches and pastel dust. “It’s currently a work in progress.”

“Seems fitting,” he mutters, clearly uncomfortable.

He follows me toward the tiny breakfast nook, where two mismatched chairs flank a small table covered in paint splatter. We sit awkwardly, the silence between us filled only by the distant murmur of the lake and a gentle breeze that rustles the sheer curtains.

“I...” Daniel clears his throat, fumbling for words. “I guess you expect me to apologize for last night.”

“Really? You guess? You storming into a small-town pub yelling about my career and accusing Ethan of I don’t know what?”

He grimaces. “It sounded better in my head.”

“Most of your ideas usually do.”

Daniel sighs, running a hand through his meticulously styled hair. “Sophia, please. I’ve been trying to contact you for days. You completely disappeared.”

“I didn’t disappear. We’ve been living apart for months. The marriage has been over for years. We’ve signed the divorce papers. I’m free to do as I please.” I tap my

fingers impatiently on the tabletop, feeling a flicker of old irritation.

“You can’t blame me for being worried,” he insists, his voice softer now. “I mean, leaving the business we built together. That’s not like you.”

“Maybe I’ve changed. It’s been known to happen. I’m not 30 years old anymore.”

“You sure? Because you’re hanging out with a 30-something...”

I glower at him.

Daniel leans back, exhaling slowly, his eyes narrowing slightly. “We have a business. You have responsibilities.”

I laugh humorlessly. “Yeah, you definitely rode my coattails on that, Daniel. I built my design business. You ran along, making contacts and building a client list of your own.”

“That’s not true...”

“Isn’t it?” My voice rises, a spark of anger heating my words. “Did you even realize that I didn’t feel at home in our house? Or that you insisted on picking my assistant, and she ended up spending most of her time running your errands? I barely recognized myself in that life.”

“I was trying to help you!” Daniel protests, hands raised defensively. “I saw potential in you that you didn’t see in yourself.”

“Potential?” I lean forward, incredulous. “Daniel, you didn’t see potential. You saw someone you could benefit from. You never cared about what I wanted.”

He fidgets uncomfortably, eyeing a bizarre, brightly colored painting of a seagull riding a bicycle. “Well, what do you want, then? Living in this...” He waves vaguely around the room. “...chaos? A random renovation project with that guy — Ethan?”

I bristle instantly, my heart beating faster at Ethan’s mention. “‘That guy’ has nothing to do with this conversation. He’s a friend. That’s it.”

“Just a friend?” Daniel scoffs quietly. “He looks at you like he’s ready to fight dragons to keep you around.”

A sudden warmth rushes to my face, but I recover quickly. “Maybe he is. Maybe he isn’t. Doesn’t matter. Not relevant to our conversation.”

Daniel blinks, momentarily speechless. “You’ve changed.”

“Finally noticed, huh?”

The tension between us thickens, an unspoken challenge hanging heavily in the air. Daniel’s expression shifts, becoming strangely earnest.

“Look, Sophia. I miss you. Vancouver isn’t the same without you. My life isn’t the same without you.”

His words pierce a tender place inside me, a familiar ache I’d almost forgotten. But it no longer consumes me.

“Maybe you think you’ve changed, Daniel. Or maybe you think you want to change. But I’m not going back.”

He laughs weakly, gesturing toward the disarray. “Why?”

“Because I want to be here,” I say firmly, nodding at Sage’s clutter. “Because it’s real and messy and full of possibilities that don’t revolve around pleasing someone else.”

Daniel pushes back his chair so abruptly it scrapes loudly against the wooden floor, startling Mr. Darcy — Sage’s resident stray cat — who hisses in protest and darts beneath Sage’s overstuffed armchair.

“You’re making a huge mistake, Sophia,” Daniel says sharply, his voice tight with frustration.

I cross my arms, heart pounding but determined not to give an inch. “Maybe I am, but it’s mine to make. You have to accept that.”

His eyes narrow, the muscles in his jaw twitching. “Accept it? You think I can just walk away knowing you’re throwing your life away on some fantasy? What will people think?”

“AH! There it is! You’re worried about your image. I don’t care about your image, Daniel. You do you.”

“This isn’t like you!” he spits.

“You have no idea who I am anymore!” I shoot back, my voice shaking slightly. “And I don’t owe you explanations, and I sure don’t need your permission. I’ve moved on, Daniel. You need to move on, too.”

He takes a deep, angry breath, eyes flicking briefly toward the window and the serene shoreline he probably despises.

When his gaze snaps back, it’s cold and resentful.

“You might think you’ve moved on, but you’re fooling yourself.

Eventually, you’ll wake up and realize you’ve settled.

And when that happens, don’t expect me to be waiting for you. ”

“I won’t. Believe me.”

Daniel straightens his sweater roughly, heading toward the door with heavy, purposeful strides. He pauses, one hand gripping the doorknob, and glares back at me. “This isn’t over, Sophia. I’m not letting it end like this.”

Before I can respond, the door slams shut behind him, shaking the walls just enough to send a precariously placed ceramic bowl toppling off a shelf. I wince as it shatters on the hardwood floor.

Mr. Darcy eyes me judgmentally from beneath the chair. “Not my fault,” I mutter defensively. He remains unconvinced.

My hands tremble slightly as I sink onto the arm of the sofa, suddenly exhausted.

Daniel’s words echo harshly in my mind and a shiver runs down my spine.

He’s angry, furious even, and determined not to accept reality.

My stomach twists with unease, but I force myself to breathe slowly. Classic Daniel.

GRUNGE THERAPY

Sophia

I shove another pile of Sage's colorful fabrics into the wicker basket beside the fireplace, muttering furiously.

Our Lady Peace's 'Superman's Dead' blasts through my noise-canceling headphones, fueling my angry tidying session.

Apparently, rage-cleaning is now my favorite sport, and Daniel is my most effective motivator.

"He thinks he knows what's best for me," I growl toward Mr. Darcy, who lounges lazily on the couch, watching me through half-closed eyes. "Can you believe the nerve? 'Sophia, you're throwing your life away!' Ha! Like he knows anything about?—"

I pause to wave a duster dramatically in the air. Mr. Darcy flicks his tail dismissively.

"You're not helping," I scold him, pointing the duster in his direction. "At least look sympathetic!"

He yawns elaborately and turns over, uninterested in my drama. Typical cat.

The music surges again, guitars screaming through my head, and I match its intensity by scrubbing fiercely at a spot of dried paint on the coffee table. Soundgarden's

‘Black Hole Sun’ fills my ears, and I belt along badly, off-key and unapologetic. Rage therapy at its finest.

I’m so deeply entrenched in my grunge-fueled cleaning marathon that when a hand taps my shoulder, I jump a mile, shrieking as I whirl around and hurl the first thing I can grab — an offensively bright sunflower-patterned couch cushion — straight into Ethan’s bewildered face.

He stumbles back, eyes wide with surprise, and the cushion bounces harmlessly to the floor. My heart rockets into my throat, embarrassment and shock coloring my face.

“Oh my gosh! Ethan!” I rip off my headphones, panting as if I’ve run a marathon. “I — I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I noticed,” Ethan says dryly, rubbing his face but grinning. “Nice throw. You ever consider pitching professionally?”

I let out a shaky laugh, mortified. “Sorry. Self-defense reflex. Or, you know, just regular old insanity.”

His expression softens, eyes searching mine carefully. “I was walking along the beach and heard... well, let’s just say I was concerned Chris Cornell was murdering you.”

“Just my dignity dying a little,” I mutter, unable to suppress a smirk.

He steps closer, gently brushing a strand of hair away from my flushed face. His eyes flicker briefly over me, and his expression shifts from amused to concerned.

“Hey — are you okay?”

The tenderness in his voice cracks my fragile composure. The laughter fades, replaced by a sudden tightening in my throat. I blink rapidly, horrified when my eyes fill with tears.

“I’m fine,” I say weakly, betraying myself immediately as a tear spills down my cheek.

Without hesitation, Ethan pulls me into his arms. My resistance crumbles instantly, and I bury my face against his chest, absorbing his comforting warmth. He holds me securely, not saying anything, just letting the steady rhythm of his heartbeat soothe away my anxiety.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble after a moment, reluctantly pulling back and wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “I guess I’m still a little on edge after meeting with Daniel earlier.”

Ethan’s eyes darken slightly. “You don’t need to apologize, Sophia. Honestly, throwing a cushion at my face was probably therapeutic.”

“It was, actually,” I confess sheepishly. “Highly recommend.”

He chuckles softly, rubbing my arm in gentle reassurance. “How about I make us some coffee?”

“Coffee?” I raise an eyebrow skeptically. “In Sage’s house? You do realize whose kitchen you’re in, right?”

He groans lightly, realization dawning. “Right. The great caffeine embargo. I blocked that trauma from my memory.”

I laugh, tension draining further. “There’s lemonade in the fridge. It’s the best

comfort drink I could manage in this caffeine-free zone.”

“Perfect.” He smiles. “I’ll pour us a glass.”

Watching Ethan navigate Sage’s kitchen is equally adorable and comedic. He opens one cabinet after another, each revealing increasingly bizarre items — teacups, paint tubes, crystals, something that looks suspiciously like a dried starfish — before finally discovering the lemonade pitcher.

“You know,” he announces seriously, pouring two glasses, “Sage might actually be a wizard.”

“You’re just realizing this now?” I tease, accepting my drink and following him out onto the porch. We sink into two rocking chairs overlooking the lake, the morning sun shimmering across the water, the air fresh and calming.

Silence settles between us, comfortable and peaceful, until Daniel’s lingering words begin gnawing at my thoughts again. I set down my lemonade, turning hesitantly toward Ethan.

“So... how old are you?” I ask bluntly, instantly cringing at how abrupt it sounds.

He nearly chokes on his lemonade, coughing lightly and glancing at me in surprise. “Uh, how is that... relevant?”

I flush, feeling suddenly awkward. “Just trying to get to know the man with whom I’m partnering.”

Ethan’s lips quirk upward. “What did Daniel say? Let me guess. He implied I’m too young and entirely untrustworthy?”

“Something like that,” I admit sheepishly, fiddling with my glass. “He made me second-guess a lot of things.”

He’s quiet for a moment, gazing thoughtfully toward the water. Eventually, he sighs softly. “I’m thirty-six, Sophia. It’s just a number, you know.”

“Thirty-six. Wow.” That makes him 11 years younger than me. Am I a cradle robber?

He shakes his head. “Glad you approve,” he teases.

“It’s not that...” I trail off.

“How old are you?” he quips.

I exhale loudly. “It’s not important.”

“I’m just trying to get to know the woman I roped into helping me with my crazy project...” he retaliates with a smirk.

“I’m a forty-seven-year-old divorcee...” I bury my face in my hands.

He leans in and whispers, “You don’t look a day over thirty-six. Must be because of what you were able to leave behind.”

I laugh and bite my lip, still unsure about my growing feelings.

“But what about the house? I mean, you didn’t exactly strike me as the ‘fixer-upper’ type when I first met you.”

Ethan’s eyes flicker briefly away, a blush creeping up his neck.

I take a breath before continuing. “Honestly? I didn’t buy it because I needed another property.

You mentioned loving restoring old houses.

I thought it would be something you enjoyed, and that it would give you a reason to stick around so I could get to know you. ”

His admission catches me off guard. I stare, momentarily speechless, heart fluttering wildly.

“Oh,” is all I manage at first. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” he says, a nervous laugh escaping him. “I know, it’s ridiculous. Believe me, Claire won’t let me forget it.”

“I met Claire at the Purring Page the other day. Quite the exuberant personality!” I chuckle nervously and swallow hard, my pulse racing. “Please tell me this isn’t something you did on a whim? An impulse buy?”

“Claire is something, isn’t she?” he says softly, eyes holding mine steadily.

“Ethan!”

He sighs, reluctantly. “Yes and no. I’ve been meaning to buy and flip the Miller House for a while, just didn’t have the vision of what to do with it. I thought you could help, so I fast forwarded my plan.”

My breath catches, an electric tension pulsing between us. Ethan’s gaze dips briefly to my lips before snapping back to my eyes, uncertain. I tilt my head slightly toward him, daring to close the distance...

But then a loud crash sounds from inside the house, followed by the frantic scrambling of claws.

We both jump, the moment shattered.

“What on earth?” Ethan asks, startled.

“It’s Mr. Darcy,” I sigh, standing quickly and moving toward the door. “He probably decided the frog sculpture offended him. He’s picky like that.”

We find Mr. Darcy calmly perched atop the couch, utterly unbothered by the broken remnants of the driftwood raccoon-man scattered across the floor. Ethan chuckles, surveying the mess.

“Guess he didn’t appreciate the symbolism.”

“Or the craftsmanship,” I agree wryly. “He’s a harsh critic.”

We clean up quickly, sharing quiet laughter as we piece together driftwood limbs and broken raccoon ears. When we finish, Ethan meets my gaze again, tenderness replacing the earlier tension.

“You okay now?” he asks gently, nudging my shoulder.

I nod slowly, genuinely grateful. “Yeah. I’m okay. Thanks for checking on me and surviving my accidental assault.”

He grins playfully. “Anytime. Just maybe warn me next time before you throw furniture.”

“No promises,” I reply with a smirk, my heart lighter than it’s felt all day.

Ethan smiles, reaching up and brushing another stray lock of hair behind my ear. His fingers linger briefly, sending sparks dancing across my skin.

“Well, I should probably let you finish your therapeutic grunge session,” he says reluctantly, stepping toward the door.

“Or...” I hesitate, pulse suddenly racing again. “You could stay. I’ve got plenty more cushions to throw, and I could really use the company.”

His eyes soften, warmth spreading through them. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” I whisper, surprised by my boldness. “Stay.”

He steps closer, his gaze earnest. “In that case, we better find something other than lemonade to drink.”

“Let me guess,” I tease gently, taking his hand and tugging him back toward the porch. “You secretly hope to find coffee hidden somewhere in Sage’s magical kitchen?”

“I’m an optimist,” he says with mock seriousness, settling comfortably beside me on the rocking chair. “And if we don’t find coffee, at least we have lemonade and questionable sculptures to keep us company.”

I lean my head lightly against his shoulder, letting myself relax fully for the first time since Daniel left. Mr. Darcy hops gracefully onto Ethan’s lap, eyeing us both smugly as if he planned this all along.

“See?” Ethan whispers, laughing softly. “Even the cat approves.”

I smile, warmth flooding through me. Rage-cleaning therapy might’ve helped

temporarily, but sitting here, sharing lemonade and laughter with Ethan — this is exactly the comfort I needed.

The grunge music can wait until later.

WHEN PLANS COLLAPSE

Ethan

S unlight spills through the cracked windows of the Miller House, illuminating dust motes swirling lazily in the air.

Sophia stands beside me, notebook in hand, nodding enthusiastically as Mr. Turner — the town’s most patient and least skeptical contractor — points out details that make my wallet quietly weep.

But it’s for a good cause... to help jump-start Sophia’s creativity.

“So, you sure you want to preserve the crown molding?” Turner asks, pencil poised mid-air as though the answer might make or break his entire week.

“Yes, definitely,” Sophia insists, excitement brightening her face. “Original details matter.”

“Of course they do,” I agree quickly, ignoring the rising estimate of zeros this project might tally up.

Sophia smiles, brushing my arm lightly, sending a ripple through me that makes my next conversation with my accountant seem bearable. I return her smile, feeling more confident by the second.

“Now,” Turner continues, glancing dubiously at the ceiling, “we’ll need to discuss...”

The door crashes open, sending all three of us spinning toward the noise. Simon, our town's most arrogant and perpetually inconvenienced realtor, storms in like a hurricane wearing expensive loafers.

"Ethan Reed," he snaps, pointing accusingly at me as he catches his breath. "You're impossible to track down. I shouldn't have to chase clients around town like an unpaid intern."

"You know, you're allowed to call before barging in, right?" I mutter dryly.

Simon narrows his eyes and then huffs. "I did call. Multiple times. Check your phone occasionally, Ethan."

I frown, patting my pockets and realizing — too late — I don't have my phone. Fantastic.

"Sorry. Must've left it in my truck. What's the big emergency?"

Simon sighs theatrically, rolling his eyes skyward as though personally affronted by my very existence. "The city has been trying to reach you all morning. There's an appeal against the sale. Something about questionable paperwork."

Sophia stiffens beside me, confusion crossing her features. "What appeal?"

"Hey there, you're new in town. I'm Simon," Simon says, walking closer to Sophia while extending his hand. I don't like the way he's looking at her. "Maybe we should grab a drink sometime?"

"Maybe not." Sophia replied flatly.

He shrugs. "Let me know if you change your mind." He finally turns back to me. "So,

the city says everything stops until further notice. And guess who had to drop everything to deliver that news?" He points dramatically at his chest. "Me. Like I don't have important things to do."

"Questionable paperwork?" I glare at him, irritation bubbling up fast. "Wasn't checking the paperwork your entire job, Simon?"

He sputters indignantly, waving his arms. "Everything was approved. I can't control every nosy busybody in town, Ethan."

Sophia steps closer, a calming hand on my arm, voice gentle. "It's fine. Let's just find your phone and figure it out."

I exhale slowly, nodding. "Simon, you're coming with me to city hall. If there's paperwork trouble, you're explaining it."

Simon scowls, lips pursed like he's tasted something sour. "Oh, wonderful. This is exactly how I planned my afternoon."

Sophia glances at Turner apologetically. "Can we reschedule? Apparently, Ethan needs to yell at Simon for a while."

Turner chuckles sympathetically, scribbling in his notes. "Take your time. I'll double-check the foundation. Again."

We step outside, and Sophia gives my arm a reassuring squeeze. "It'll be fine, Ethan. I'll wait at Sage's gallery. Call me?"

"Promise," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. She smiles softly, walking down the path as Simon opens the door to his car to get in.

“Let’s get this over with. I’ve already wasted half my morning.”

“Poor you,” I mutter dryly, climbing in my truck.

* * *

City hall smells like stale coffee and institutional boredom. Simon trails reluctantly behind me, occasionally sighing loudly to remind everyone of his suffering. We step into the cramped office of Mr. Edwards, the permits clerk, who looks instantly nervous at our arrival.

“Ah, Ethan, finally,” Edwards greets cautiously. “We’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I heard. Simon here delivered your message with all the charm of a grumpy toddler.”

Simon rolls his eyes, collapsing into a chair with a disgusted sigh. “Can we hurry this along? My afternoon’s imploding as we speak.”

Edwards shifts uncomfortably, glancing at the door as if considering an escape route. “Someone has filed an appeal against your purchase. They claim we failed to check for surviving heirs to the Miller estate thoroughly.”

Simon immediately throws up his hands, exasperated. “That’s ridiculous! The Millers have been gone for ages. Everyone knows there are no heirs.”

Edwards clears his throat nervously. “Nonetheless, the city has paused all renovation permits until further investigation.”

“Who filed this?” I ask sharply, irritation rising.

“I can’t say,” Edwards mumbles, avoiding eye contact. “They requested

confidentiality.”

Simon groans loudly, tipping his head back. “So now we’re stuck in bureaucratic limbo. Marvelous.”

I turn toward Simon, my voice tightening. “You sure you didn’t miss something, Simon? You did actually check the paperwork?”

“Of course I did. I’ve sold half of this town without problems. Clearly, someone’s messing with you.”

Messing with me? That doesn’t make any sense. I don’t have any enemies.

I sigh, rubbing my temples. “Can we fight it?”

Edwards shifts uneasily. “Only the mayor can override this decision now. I’m sorry, but the earliest we can arrange a meeting is Thursday.”

“Thursday?” Simon gasps as if he’s just received tragic news. “That’s three days of constant phone calls I’ll have to endure from Ethan.”

“You’ll survive. You’re tougher than you look,” I deadpan.

Simon shoots me an offended glare as we leave Edwards’ office. Outside, he crosses his arms, shaking his head bitterly. “If you’d just answered your phone, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

I glare right back. “Or if you’d done your job properly, we wouldn’t have a paperwork problem.”

He scowls, turning away. “Whatever. Call me Thursday when you’re ready to drag

me into the next bureaucratic nightmare.”

I watch him stomp off toward his office, feeling more helpless than angry. Climbing into my truck, I pull out my phone, hesitating briefly before dialing Sophia.

I decide to go to the art gallery. This isn’t a phone conversation.

I drive up Main Street and park in front of the gallery. I spot Sophia through the window, thoughtfully rearranging a display of brightly colored pottery. The sight of her instantly lifts my spirits.

She looks up, eyes softening as she spots me stepping onto the sidewalk. “So, how bad is it?”

“Pretty bad,” I admit, frustration evident in my voice. “Someone’s challenged ownership. The city froze everything.”

Her brow furrows, concern shadowing her eyes. “Do you know who did it?”

“I wish I knew,” I sigh heavily, rubbing the back of my neck. “Confidential informant! The worst part is we might lose Turner if this drags out too long. Contractors aren’t exactly patient.”

Sophia winces sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Ethan. When will we know more?”

“Thursday,” I groan. “Until then, we’re stuck.”

She hesitantly reaches out, gently brushing her fingertips against mine, a quiet reassurance that settles my nerves. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.”

I nod slowly, my heart warming despite the bureaucratic mess. “Speaking of which,

do you want to pick paint colors or something? We could pretend everything's fine for a bit."

Her lips quirk into a gentle smile. "First, we definitely need coffee."

"Definitely," I echo, a genuine grin breaking through my irritation. "Shall we head to Lucas'?"

"We absolutely should."

We walk side by side down Main Street, the familiar sights and sounds of Bluewater Cove wrapping around us comfortingly. Sophia elbows me lightly as we pass Simon's office, mischief flickering in her eyes.

"Hey, Ethan?"

"Hmm?"

"You think Simon will ever forgive you for ruining his morning?"

I snort, rolling my eyes. "He'll probably send me his therapist's bill."

Sophia laughs softly, the sound immediately easing the tension in my chest. "I'll pay half."

"Deal," I chuckle, feeling a weight lift slightly from my shoulders.

We turn the corner toward Lucas' café, and the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee welcomes us. I open the door for her. She walks by so closely, her perfume makes my heart race.

Bureaucratic nightmares aside, this moment — with Sophia by my side, laughter and hope lingering in the air — feels perfect.

Maybe the Miller House isn't going smoothly yet. But as long as Sophia's here, I have a feeling everything eventually will.

WAITING GAME

Sophia

The sunlight paints the porch in gentle strokes of gold, warming the weathered wood and softening even the most eccentric of Sage's decorative choices. I curl up in my chair after dinner, balancing a blueberry muffin on my knee and breathing in the salty breeze drifting lazily from Lake Huron.

Sage sits opposite, oversized sunglasses perched on her head, hands curled comfortably around her ever-present mug of herbal tea. Mr. Darcy sprawls dramatically beside her chair, eyeing my muffin.

"So," Sage begins, lifting her eyebrows in playful curiosity, "how are we feeling this evening? Calm and confident? Mildly panicked? Full-blown spiritual unraveling?"

I chuckle softly, picking crumbs from the muffin top. "Hovering somewhere between mildly panicked and DEFCON-1 panic mode."

She tilts her head sympathetically. "Because of Ethan's meeting tomorrow?"

"Exactly. That and..." I sigh, watching a sailboat drift lazily across the lake. "I know Ethan's trying not to show it, but the Miller House fiasco worries him. And now I feel responsible."

Sage waves dismissively. "Please, you didn't create this problem. Don't blame yourself."

“Didn’t I? What if this is all Daniel? It’s too coincidental that suddenly there’s a ‘confidential informant’!” I admit reluctantly. “Ethan bought the house to get me to stick around, and now it’s turning into a problem. He deserves better.”

Sage gives me a knowing look, sipping her tea carefully. “You’re forgetting Ethan chose this chaos. Chose you.”

My heart lifts slightly at the thought, a quiet smile appearing despite myself.

“I guess he did. And — well, I can’t deny it feels...

nice. It’s really nice, actually. Spending time with Ethan is as easy and natural as breathing.

Like someone finally hit the pause button on my life, and I didn’t even realize how badly I needed that. But still...”

Sage nods encouragingly. “Slow pace suits you. You’re happier. You’re even enjoying design again — no frantic deadlines, no demanding clients. Just you, your ideas, and endless Pinterest rabbit holes.”

I laugh softly, warmth filling me at her insight. “Exactly. I’d forgotten how much I love researching old houses and choosing paint colors without someone breathing down my neck. It’s freeing, even if it is just temporary.”

Sage leans forward slightly, raising one elegantly skeptical eyebrow. “Who says it’s temporary?”

“Reality,” I reply dryly. “Leisurely research and design don’t exactly pay the bills.”

Sage gives a gentle snort, leaning back in her chair. “And what bills, exactly, are we

worrying about?”

I blink, momentarily speechless. “You know, life bills? Rent, groceries, retirement...”

She gestures toward the house around us, filled with mismatched furniture, brightly colored fabrics, and collections of whimsical art pieces.

“Rent’s free — beach house is family property.

Groceries? We grow vegetables, I have the art gallery for income, and maybe we spend too much on takeout sushi. Retirement is for boring people. Next?”

I roll my eyes, laughing despite myself. “OK, fair. But I can’t freeload off you forever. At some point, I have to be responsible.”

“You have always been responsible. Maybe too responsible.”

“What’s wrong with responsibility?” I ask defensively, setting down my muffin.

“Nothing if it’s balanced. But your whole life, Sophia, you’ve made cautious choices. Good school, steady career, safe relationships. Isn’t it possible you’ve earned the right to be less careful now? And...”

Sage starts playing with the edge of her tunic.

“And what?”

“You have an inheritance from your parents... There’s a cushion for you to fall back on.”

I scrunch my eyebrows. “What inheritance?”

“They didn’t like Daniel,” she says, gently but with a firmness that makes it clear this isn’t news.

“That was never a secret. But what you didn’t know is.

.. they had excellent insurance policies.

Quiet, long-term planning types. When they passed, they left everything in a trust. They asked me to manage it, to keep it safe in case you ever really needed it. ”

My jaw drops. “Sage...”

“They were afraid Daniel would convince you to invest in something risky or bleed you dry in a breakup. So they came to me. And I’ve kept it tucked away all this time, just like they asked.”

I lean back in my chair, stunned. “You created a trust fund... for me?”

“For you. For rainy days. For new beginnings. For moments when you might need to take a leap without knowing where you’ll land.”

“But why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“I don’t know,” she interrupts gently. “They were proud of your independence. But Sophia, this wasn’t about money. It was about protection. They wanted to give you freedom without strings. They just didn’t think you’d have it while Daniel was in the picture.”

The silence between us stretches, weighty but not uncomfortable.

Then I exhale a shaky breath. “So what you’re saying is... I’m not broke if I walk away from the business, I’m just emotionally frugal?”

Sage snorts. “Exactly.”

I sigh heavily. “OK... I need a minute to process all of this, Sage. But what if this — being here, this easy pace — is just running away from reality? What if it’s not sustainable?”

Sage shrugs lightly, smiling. “Or what if this is your reality? Maybe Vancouver was the illusion — stress, competition, constantly chasing something that didn’t really matter. Why can’t this be real?”

I sit quietly, watching a seagull hop across the sand below, absorbing her words. My heartbeat slows slightly, a strange weight lifting off my shoulders at the idea of accepting happiness without guilt.

“Do you really think Ethan fits into that reality?” I ask softly, the question slipping out before I can censor myself.

Sage chuckles. “I think Ethan’s practically built for your new reality, Sophia. He’s patient, kind, funny. And he makes you smile like I haven’t seen you smile in years. Isn’t that reason enough?”

I blush, smiling shyly into my lap. “He is pretty great.”

She lifts her tea smugly. “Pretty great, indeed.”

We momentarily fall into a comfortable silence, the lake breeze gently ruffling our hair. It’s peaceful — perfect, even. Until the shrill ring of my phone cuts through the quiet.

I reach for it distractedly, answering before checking the screen. “Hello?”

“Sophia,” Daniel’s smooth voice cuts in sharply, instantly shattering my calm. “Ready to end this little vacation and come back to work?”

Anger floods me immediately, and I stand abruptly, knocking crumbs onto the floor. Mr. Darcy startles awake, eyeing me reproachfully. “Daniel. What do you want?”

“To discuss the inevitable. Your Miller House project fell apart, as I knew it would. There’s nothing left holding you there. Come back to Vancouver and our design company.”

I feel heat burning my cheeks. “You did this, didn’t you? You sabotaged Ethan’s project just to punish me. I thought it could be you, but I didn’t want to accept that you’d stoop so low.”

He sighs condescendingly. “You’re being dramatic. I simply pointed out legal oversights. A favor, really.”

“Favor? You’re trying to ruin Ethan’s investment, ruin his project. This is beneath even you.”

“It’s reality,” Daniel replies, chillingly calm. “And the reality is you belong back here, in Vancouver. This little small-town fantasy isn’t you. You have responsibilities. Enough with this adolescent escapade.”

“You have no idea who I am anymore,” I retort sharply, my voice trembling. “I’m not your puppet. Leave me — and Ethan — alone.”

“Fine,” he says dismissively, “but eventually, you’ll realize I’m right.”

I hang up abruptly, chest heaving, pulse pounding through my temples. My vision blurs slightly as frustration and anger mingle with a quieter, colder dread.

Sage sits in stunned silence, her mug of tea frozen mid-air, observing me.

“Daniel strikes again?” she asks gently, slowly setting her tea down.

“Of course,” I mutter bitterly, running a shaky hand through my hair. “He’s decided this is all just some... whim. That I’ll run back as soon as things get tough.”

Sage leans forward, eyebrows raised in concern. “And what do you think?”

“I think...” My voice trails off, and I stare at the lake, the glistening waves deceptively calm and inviting. “I think he will keep causing trouble unless I do something.”

Sage frowns, worry edging into her usually serene expression. “Define ‘something,’ Sophia. Because Daniel’s form of something usually involves unnecessary drama.”

I swallow tightly, my pulse racing faster. The decision forming in my mind isn’t one I’m taking lightly, but the ache in my chest feels heavy enough that I know avoiding it is no longer an option. My fingers move quickly, pulling up the airline’s website on my phone and tapping hurriedly.

“What are you doing?” Sage asks carefully, suspicion creeping into her voice.

“Taking control,” I say quietly, without looking up, my thumb hovering over the confirmation button.

She watches me for a long moment, eyes narrowed. “Texting Ethan?”

I shake my head. My voice is oddly steady, considering how my heart races. “No. I’m booking a flight.”

Sage’s mug clinks against the table, tea sloshing over the rim as she sits forward suddenly. “Sophia, wait — are you sure that’s the right choice?”

I meet her worried gaze, the anxiety twisting inside me, gradually fading into certainty. It isn’t the easy choice or even the choice I want, but it’s the only one I can think of that might finally stop Daniel. For Ethan’s sake, at least.

“Yes,” I whisper, finger pressing firmly against the screen. “I’m sure it’s got to be done.”

The confirmation email pops up, flight details neatly summarizing my decision in stark, impersonal letters. I exhale heavily, pocketing my phone as if hiding evidence.

Sage gives me a playful nudge before lacing her fingers through mine, her smile is enough to chase away the last of my nerves.

“I just hope you’re doing this because it’s truly what you think is right — not because Daniel’s backed you into a corner,” she says, lifting an eyebrow in mock sternness.

The tease earns a laugh from me, and the knot in my throat eases. Her confidence is contagious, and suddenly the whole situation feels a shade less daunting.

“I wish I could say I’m sure,” I finally admit, my voice barely audible. “But right now, it’s the only way I can see forward without dragging Ethan into more trouble.”

Sage squeezes my hand reassuringly, though her eyes remain worried. We both fall silent, watching the peaceful waves crashing gently against the sand below.

“No time to lose. I’ve got to go pack.”

“Wait, WHAT?”

I jump, startled by the man’s voice. Ethan’s voice.

WALK ON THE BEACH

Ethan

“I ‘ll leave you two to talk,” Sage says, her voice gentle, but there’s a spark of something knowing in her eyes. She squeezes Sophia’s hand as she stands, then pats my arm as she brushes past me on her way into the house.

I linger. Sophia’s eyes flick to me, surprise softening into something unreadable. Maybe a little of both.

“Hey, I would have gotten here earlier if I’d known you needed a caffeine fix before making big decisions, like going to Vancouver.”

She gives me a tired smile, but it’s real. “Your timing is good. It’s something I’ve got to do.”

She takes one of the cups and nods toward the back porch. We don’t speak as we’re following the familiar path down toward the beach, side by side, the wind tugging at our sleeves like it knows we both need something to shake loose.

The silence between us stretches — I don’t want to pry, but I can’t just let her leave like that. The sun’s dipping lower now, casting the sky in soft blush and amber tones, the kind of light that makes everything look like it belongs in a photograph. Or a memory.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” I say eventually. “I was just dropping by. Thought you

might want coffee.”

Sophia tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, eyes still on the path ahead. “Honestly, I’m glad you did.”

I nod. “You’re going back?”

She stops walking. I do too. Her gaze is out over the horizon, somewhere between the line of the water and whatever’s still unfinished in her past.

“I have to. Just for a little while. There’s still stuff to close out at the firm. People I need to speak with in person. Contracts, assets, all the things that come with walking away from something you built. I don’t want to leave anything hanging.”

I swallow and take a deep breath while squeezing my coffee cup tighter. “That makes sense.”

She turns then, really looks at me. Her expression isn’t torn — it’s resolved. “But I’m not going back to stay. That life... it’s over. I just need to end it on my terms.”

The tightness in my chest releases a little. “You’re sure?”

She nods.

I reach for her hand. Hesitant. Like checking that the space between us means the same thing to her that it does to me. She meets me halfway.

“I’ve never been more sure. I need to deal with it. Deal with him and his shenanigans. And then I’m coming back. No Daniel. No business strings. No Vancouver. Just... me.”

The simplicity of it hits harder than anything else. Just her.

I reach out and squeeze her hand gently. “I’ve gotten used to having you here.”

Her smile is softer this time. “I’ve gotten used to being here. Hanging out with you.”

“I mean it. I didn’t expect you. But now? I don’t really want to imagine this place without you.”

Her fingers tighten around mine. “I’m not done here. I think I’ve barely started.”

We walk again, slower now, our feet shifting through the sand. Every so often, our arms bump, and neither of us pulls away.

We reach a driftwood log, weathered by years of wind and salt. We sit. Our coffees are left cooling in the sand. I don’t think either of us really wants them anymore.

For a while, we just listen. The waves roll in and out. Gulls cry somewhere up the shore. The air smells like sea and something green from the forest behind the dunes.

“I want you to go. Tie up the loose ends. Do what you need to do. But come back knowing there’s something here. Something you want. Not out of guilt. Not because I’m waiting. But because it’s yours to choose.”

She’s quiet a moment, eyes still on the ocean. “I do want it. And I want to choose it. Freely.”

Another beat passes. “What would that even look like? This life... with space to breathe?”

I smile. “Lazy mornings. Too much coffee. Maybe bad Wi-Fi, and a front porch.”

She laughs — really laughs — and the sound of it wraps around something fragile inside me and makes it stronger.

“I want that,” she says, voice quieter again. “Slower days. More evenings where the only decision I have to make is red or white wine.”

“Red,” I say, like it’s obvious.

“See? Already compatible.”

She leans her head against my shoulder, and I exhale like I’ve been holding my breath since the day she walked into that coffee shop.

I stare at the ocean, not trying to fill the quiet, just trying to commit to memory what it feels like to sit beside someone who fits this easily into the rhythm of your life.

“Ethan...” she starts playing with the edge of her shirt. “You know the injunction against the house... It’s Daniel...”

“WHAT?”

“I’m sorry I brought this trouble into your life...”

She buries her face in her hands.

I pull her closer to me. “I used to think maybe I was just better off alone. That I liked the quiet too much. But then you showed up, and now...”

She lifts her head, waiting.

“And now, the quiet feels different when you’re not in it.”

She doesn't answer right away, just looks at me like she's memorizing the moment.

"When I come back, I want to do it right. I want real."

"I like real," I say. "Real lasts."

She slips her fingers through mine.

We sit like that for a while, watching the tide creep closer to the line of our footprints. The waves roll in and soften the edges, but I don't mind.

Some things don't need to be written in the sand to be real.

Eventually, we stand. The last of the sun is slipping beneath the horizon, and the wind's picked up just enough to make us walk closer to each other.

We don't say much on the way back. But we don't need to.

She's leaving soon. And still — I know.

She'll come back.

Not just to the town.

But to me.

QUICK TRIP

Sophia

I'm picturing last night, with Ethan. I should have kissed him. He was giving me all the cues, right?

Halfway to Pearson Airport, my stomach is knotted tight.

This trip back to Vancouver is essential: sever my business ties with Daniel, tie up loose ends with my clients and employees, and end the sabotage he's waging from afar.

If I get through this quickly, I can return to Bluewater Cove — and Ethan — free and clear, soon.

And yet, every mile feels heavier, dragging me deeper into uncertainty.

My phone buzzes from the dashboard, interrupting the music. My attorney's nickname appears on-screen: SAM (LEGAL EAGLE) . I roll my eyes, remembering how that silly nickname stuck after a night of wine-induced brainstorming. I press the answer button, switching to speakerphone.

"Sam, your timing is impeccable," I tease, carefully navigating through merging traffic.

Sam chuckles. "Sophia, if you think this is inconvenient, try my midnight contract

negotiation clients.”

“That’s what you get for being annoyingly talented.”

“Flattery won’t lower my fees,” he retorts playfully, keys tapping rapidly in the background. “So, you’re airport-bound, right?”

“Yep,” I confirm, forcing breezy confidence into my voice. “I’ll land in Vancouver this afternoon, and we’ll end this nightmare swiftly.”

Sam’s typing pauses. “Nightmare’s about right. Are you absolutely sure you’re ready to push the big red ‘dissolve the business’ button?”

I grip the wheel tighter, and my knuckles turn white. “More than ready. We both know it’s overdue.”

“True,” Sam agrees gently. “But remember, your design business is legally entangled with Daniel. If you’re going to relocate or restructure, we need a strategy.”

A rush of annoyance prickles beneath my skin. “I don’t want anything co-owned with him anymore. No lingering connections.”

He sighs softly. “Understood. But these negotiations get ugly fast, and this one definitely could, especially when Daniel’s ego gets involved. You sure you’re willing to walk away from the brand?”

The highway widens again and I accelerate slightly, shifting lanes. “Absolutely. He can have the brand. I’ll start over... Sam, Sage told me my parents left me a hefty inheritance — I won’t starve.”

Sam replies gently. “But you earned your share of the company, Sophia. Don’t

undervalue that. And we'll circle back to that inheritance."

A lump forms in my throat as memories of my parents surface — how proud they were when I graduated, and how proud they were of my business. But they never hid their sentiments about Daniel. If only you could see me now, I think wistfully, blinking away sudden moisture.

"Look, Sam," I say firmly, refocusing. "I just want out. Business dissolved. Clean break."

He pauses, concern audible. "All right. I'll draft the initial settlement. But brace yourself. Daniel won't be pleasant."

I laugh bitterly. "He's never pleasant unless he's controlling everything around him."

Sam snorts knowingly. "Believe me, I'm aware."

"It's enough dealing with his sabotage of the Miller House. For what? Having me under his thumb in Vancouver?"

A brief pause, then cautiously, Sam asks, "So this Vancouver trip — it's just to wrestle Daniel into signing, right? Then straight back to Bluewater Cove, to Ethan?"

My heart skips at the mention of Ethan's name, my cheeks blushing instantly. "Yeah, back home..." I admit softly. "That's the plan."

"That Ethan guy is something special! I knew it!" Sam's voice brightens with satisfaction. "Your voice never sounded this dreamy when Daniel's name came up."

"Daniel and I were always more... practical," I say, smiling despite myself. "This feels different. Ethan is different."

“Different is good. You deserve someone who sees your worth. Once you’re free from this legal nightmare, what happens next?”

Before I can respond, the phone interrupts again, Ethan’s name flashing insistently. My pulse quickens, hand hovering uncertainly over the call. Traffic suddenly thickens around me, brake lights flashing ahead.

“Sophia? Still there?” Sam asks.

“Yeah. Sorry, another call just came in.”

He waits for a beat. “Ethan?”

“Yes,” I say, voice tight with anxiety. “But I can’t talk now. Traffic’s a mess. My head’s spinning.”

“I understand. Just one last thing — are you absolutely sure about all this?”

I exhale shakily, eyes fixed forward. “Yes. I need this settled — I need to be free.”

“OK. Call me when you land. Safe travels.”

“Thanks, Sam.” I disconnect and glance at Ethan’s missed call, guilt squeezing my chest.

I debate whether to call Ethan or send him a text.

But another horn blares sharply as a truck crowds my lane, forcing my attention back to the road.

Sunlight streams through the windshield, forcing me to squint. Just a few days.

Handle Daniel and return home free. Home. Bluewater Cove is now my home.

I want to give Ethan the strongest version of myself — someone ready for a new beginning, not someone dragging a trail of unfinished mess behind her.

As Toronto Pearson finally comes into view, traffic thickens to an excruciating crawl. Memories of Bluewater Cove flood my thoughts — the Miller house, quirky raccoon antics, Ethan's soft laughter. The longing strikes painfully, threatening tears.

“Pull yourself together, Sophia,” I whisper sharply. “Almost there.”

Navigating airport roads, I return the rental, grabbing my suitcase hastily. Inside, the bustling terminal envelops me with noise and movement. My phone vibrates again.

Sam : Draft ready — brace yourself.

Another from the airline.

I click on Ethan's name.

Me: Sorry I missed your call, was on with my attorney. At security. Will text when I land.

Security crawls forward slowly, each step echoing memories: arriving uncertainly in Bluewater Cove, discovering Ethan, and finding unexpected happiness.

Finally, the agent waves me through. Another step closer to severing ties with Daniel. I move toward the gate, blending into the crowded walkway.

“Flight to Vancouver now boarding,” a voice announces overhead. Pulse quickening, I join the line, clutching my carry-on tightly.

Settling into my seat, engine noise building, my thoughts blur. Just a flight, a final confrontation, and a chance to reclaim the future I've chosen.

Closing my eyes briefly, I picture Ethan's face, gentle smile, the quiet strength that grounds me. This isn't running away; it's moving forward toward him.

Soon enough, I'll be back in Bluewater Cove.

MOVIE NIGHT

Ethan

When I finally shoulder the back door open, I'm balancing an unwieldy box of soft-close cabinet hinges and a guilty suspicion that Claire has already let herself in.

The suspicion proves correct: she's perched at my kitchen island like a queen on her throne — ankles crossed on the stool's lower rung, half-devoured chips spread before her, and a look that says she's been plotting for at least twenty minutes.

"About time," she calls, tapping a chip against the rim of a jarred salsa she must've pilfered from my pantry. "Bluewater Cove's most elusive handyman finally returns."

I drop the hinges with a thunk. "Pretty sure I texted you I was at Jenkins."

"Text received. I still reserve the right to complain." She gestures grandly to the other stool. "Plant yourself. We have matters of the heart and hinges to discuss."

I raise a brow. "Those are normally separate meetings."

"Tonight, they're a combo platter." Claire waves the chip bowl in my direction. "Dinner?"

"Kevin at Jenkins gave me a stale protein bar when the registers crashed. Chips are a clear upgrade." I grab a handful and sit.

“So. Vancouver Girl. Status report.”

I try not to smile too broadly, which clearly fails because Claire’s grin widens. “Sophia’s good,” I say, aiming for casual. “She’s knee-deep in closing meetings, but we text often.”

“And?” Claire stretches the word like taffy.

“And...” I twist the cap off my water bottle, stalling. “I’m kind of... smitten.”

Her chip pauses midair; her mouth forms an exaggerated O. “Smitten? As in birds-singing, heart-skipping, can’t-focus-on-your-coding smitten?”

“Birds no, coding yes. It’s suffered terribly.” I rub the back of my neck. Saying it out loud feels weirdly vulnerable. “She’s the first woman I’ve ever been this easy around — like I can breathe normally, even in silence.”

Claire slaps the counter in mock offense. “Excuse me. We’ve cultivated a decade of top-tier comfortable silences. You wound me.”

“Claire, you’re my buddy.” I laugh, reaching for another chip. “Entirely different category.”

“Buddy.” She plants both elbows on the island, eyes wide with theatrical hurt. “Friend-zoned in my own kitchen. The betrayal.”

“My kitchen,” I remind her. “And, for the record, you kicked me to the friendship curb five years ago.”

She snorts, a sound somewhere between a laugh and a dolphin squeak. “Oh please. On our only date, you ordered water and spent twenty minutes explaining server

uptimes. He waxed poetic about redundancy clusters.”

I throw my hands up. “I was nervous. Meanwhile, you rocked up with anchovy pizza. That’s a dealbreaker.”

“Anchovies are sophisticated,” she protests.

“Anchovies are sentient salt.”

Claire laughs so hard she snorts again. “Point is, we dodged a very fishy bullet.”

“Agreed.” I tap my chest. “Crewmates forever.”

She salutes with her chip. “So, this Sophia situation... It’s real?”

“It feels real.” I toy with the torn hinge box. “I don’t overthink with her. That’s... new.”

Claire’s expression softens, the teasing dialed down. “Smitten looks good on you, Reed.”

“Maybe. Still early.” I drain half my water. “She has to untangle that business with her ex. Sell her half, or dissolve the business or something like sign stuff, whatever. I’m sure he won’t make this easy.”

Claire pops a chip, chewing thoughtfully. “But she said she’s coming back?”

“Yeah.” The memory warms me from the ribs out. “She wants a clean slate — then back here on her terms.”

She raises her soda can. “To clean slates and smitten developers.”

I clink my bottle to hers. “And to buddies who raid my pantry.”

She grins. “Anytime, Coding Ethan.”

“Anchovy Queen.”

Claire reaches for another chip. “So, what exactly did you text today? I require details.”

I shrug. “Nothing crazy. She sent a photo of a Vancouver screamer — traffic backed up on Granville. I replied with a picture of the Miller House covered in scaffolding and said, ‘Wish you were here to supervise my questionable ladder decisions.’ She sent a laughing emoji and told me not to staplegun my foot.”

Claire sighs contentedly. “Adorable. You realize you’re building inside jokes already.”

“It’s... nice.” I allow myself a small smile. “I don’t feel like I have to translate myself.”

“Which is why you ordered water with me and ranted about uptime?” Claire teases.

“Exactly. You’re tech-fluent. Different rules.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m honored my friendship inspired rants about load balancing.”

I flick a chip crumb at her. “And you rattled off bird species for twenty minutes.”

“I was nervous, too!” She points a chip at me in accusation. “Besides, birds are majestic.”

“Birds scream at sunrise. At least servers are quiet.”

We fall into an easy silence, munching. I realize how content it feels to have someone here, filling the house with conversation.

Claire leans back, crossing her arms. “Be honest — how freaked are you?”

I consider. “On a scale of one to touching live wires? Maybe a six. I’m excited more than scared. She makes leaving sound temporary, like an intermission.”

“Good.” Claire’s grin softens into something proud. “Because you deserve a real shot.”

I swallow a lump of gratitude. “Thanks.”

She looks down, almost shy. “I’m happy for you. Even if it means my pantry raids might decrease when she’s back.”

I snort. “Promises, promises!”

She taps the hinge box. “By the way — when are you going back to work on the house?”

“We’re meeting with the mayor tomorrow. I’ll know then what’s happening with the plan to move forward.”

“Good. And hopefully Sophia will be back soon to supervise. Someone has to keep you from nailing your sweatshirt to the stud wall.”

“That was one time!”

A comfortable lull settles. Claire stares at her chip bag, then sets it aside, expression turning reflective. “You know, when we almost dated, I worried we’d wreck the friendship.”

“Same. Turns out we’re better at sibling snark than romance.”

“And now you’re smitten with someone who gets your weird quiet. That’s kind of perfect.”

I exhale, something loosening in my chest. “Yeah. Perfectly terrifying.”

She raises her soda. “To terrifyingly perfect.”

We toast again.

I swipe my phone from the counter and open my messages. A new text from Sophia flashes:

Sophia: Daniel is being an arrogant fool. Back at the negotiating table tomorrow. Hope you had a better day than me.

I frown unconsciously. Claire notices, nudging me. “Well?”

“Looks like she’s not coming back just yet.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It is what it is.”

I hesitate, then type:

Me: Rest well. You've got this. Bring back chips, Claire is emptying my pantry! ;)

Three dots bubble almost immediately.

Sophia: Will do! Say hi to Claire for me .

Claire whoops softly. "That grin could blind satellites."

I pocket the phone, cheeks aching. "Guess we're watching a movie tonight."

She hops off the stool, brushing chip dust from her jeans.

I follow her into the living room. "Fine. Something light — maybe The Wedding Singer?"

Claire's groan could register on the Richter scale. "An Adam Sandler romcom? Ethan, I just ate. My stomach cannot handle that much meet-cute."

I cross my arms. "Think about the fantastic soundtrack."

"John Wick. Now THIS is art."

"Bullets and brooding?" I shake my head. "Too bleak for a Tuesday."

"Okay, compromise: Murder Mystery? Explosions for me, banter and kissing for you."

I consider. "I do admire a healthy work-life balance."

She flops onto the couch, victorious. "Grab the popcorn, Smitten Boy."

I start to head for the kitchen.

She leans back and props her feet on the ottoman. “And if you quote too many scenes, I’m replacing your popcorn butter with anchovy oil.”

I stick my head around the doorway. “You threaten anchovies way too often for a normal human.”

She points an accusing finger, grinning. “That’s what happens when your ‘buddy’ calls you buddy in public when you’re supposed to be on a date.”

“Touché.” I disappear long enough to microwave popcorn, then return with the bowl. She snatches it like a dragon claiming treasure, but I scoop a handful first and hit PLAY.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:59 am

RISK the clock hurts him more than us”).

By the time plates are scraped clean, my nerves have settled into something that feels a lot like confidence.

Sam signals for espresso and folds his hands. “One more thing. After this is done, don’t second guess the peace. Use it.”

“I plan to.” An image flickers — lake water, sun-bleached porch boards, Ethan’s lopsided grin. My chest tightens in a good way. “There’s... someone worth returning to.”

Sam gives me a knowing smile. “Ah yes. The fixer-upper tech guy.”

“Ethan.”

“Sage sent a three-page email titled ‘Why Ethan Is a Cinnamon Roll.’ I skimmed.” He smirks. “You like him.”

I swirl what’s left of my wine. “I’m smitten, apparently.”

Sam offers his cup in a mock toast. “To closing chapters and opening new ones.”

We clink. The wine is rich and deep, exactly what I need before tomorrow’s final round.

* * *

Back in my hotel room, the city hum feels sterile after Bluewater Cove's quiet nights. I change into leggings, scrub off meeting makeup, and flop onto the bed, ready to review notes — when my phone pings.

Claire : Yo, cabinet king just fell asleep with his phone on his face. Ring him before he drools on it.

I laugh out loud. Leave it to Claire to be the unofficial Ethan whisperer. I tap the video icon.

The screen fills with a dark room, ceiling fan spinning lazily. Then Ethan's face appears, pillow-creased and adorably disoriented. "Sophia?"

"Surprise," I whisper. "Didn't mean to wake you."

He fumbles upright, hair everywhere. "I was... uh... meditating."

"Snoring is a bold new mantra."

He chuckles, eyes crinkling. "Claire ratted me out, didn't she?"

"Like a proud sister." I tuck my knees up, camera propped against a pillow. "How's Bluewater Cove?"

"Missing its interior-designer-in-residence." He rubs sleep from his eyes, and the sincerity in his smile twists something sweet inside me. "Things okay there?"

"We've got a plan. Tomorrow should end it." I fill him in — skipping the dollar amounts but highlighting the strategy. "If all goes well, papers get signed by Friday."

"And then you're free." His voice is soft, hopeful.

“And then I’m on the first flight east.” I hesitate, then add, “Assuming you still need shelf-installation help.”

He grins sleepily. “The raccoons demanded proof of your return. I promised them your cinnamon-scented measuring tape.”

I snort. “Tell them it’s lavender.”

A comfortable silence settles; the distance feels smaller when he’s blinking at me through the phone like I’m sitting on his couch.

“Hey, Ethan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for... everything.”

He leans back against his headboard, expression earnest. “My pleasure to involve you in this monster-sized project.”

I roll my eyes affectionately. “You’re meeting with the mayor tomorrow?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Keep me posted.”

“You too!” he replies, yawning.

“Sleep,” I order. “Big day of diplomacy tomorrow.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He lifts two fingers in a sleepy salute. “Night, Sophia.”

“Night, Ethan.”

The call ends and I stare at the dark screen, pulse steady, mind clearer than it’s been in months. Tomorrow I’ll face Daniel, armed with numbers, resolve, and the quiet certainty that a different life is waiting—one I actually chose.

I set an alarm, slide the inheritance envelope under my laptop, and turn off the lamp. Beneath the city’s distant traffic, I swear I can hear waves. And I fall asleep smiling for the first time since arriving in Vancouver.

SIMON SAYS TROUBLE

Ethan

My phone mocks me from the passenger seat, stubbornly silent. Still no news from Sophia, but it's still early in Vancouver. I can't dwell on that now — I've got an appointment with the mayor and a stubborn realtor waiting to ruin my morning.

Pulling into City Hall's cramped parking lot, I glance at my reflection in the rearview mirror. Tired eyes stare back, and I run my fingers through my hair, hoping it looks somewhat presentable. Instead, I manage to achieve a disheveled surfer look. Perfect.

I spot Simon standing outside the entrance, scrolling absently on his phone. His slicked-back hair shines obnoxiously in the sunlight, his designer suit at odds with Bluewater Cove's casual vibe.

"Morning, Ethan," Simon drawls, pocketing his phone when he sees me approaching. "I thought maybe you'd bailed on this little fiasco."

"Not a chance," I reply flatly, forcing myself not to roll my eyes. "This should be quick. I'm still surprised we need to meet about this."

"Let's face it: this town lives for gossip. Could be anyone wanting to throw a wrench in your little fixer-upper fantasy."

"Let's just get this over with," I say, pushing past him toward the doors.

Simon quickly catches up, matching my stride. “So, tell me, where’s your lovely new designer? Sophia, wasn’t it? Wouldn’t mind doing business with her.”

My jaw tightens slightly, but I shrug, pretending disinterest. “In Vancouver.”

His eyebrows lift, an irritating smirk spreading across his face. “Oh? Trouble in paradise already?”

I refuse to look at him, pushing open the heavy wooden door into the foyer. “She had business to attend too.”

Simon chuckles smugly. “Ah! She’s got that mysterious, sexy, unattainable vibe, doesn’t she? Can’t blame you for trying. Frankly, I’ve had my eye on her too. Thought about giving her a call myself.”

My fists clench instinctively, but I force calmness into my voice. “Pretty sure you’re not her type.”

“Oh? And you think you are?” Simon snorts, clearly enjoying himself. “Let me guess: You played the sensitive card? Women love a good sob story, Ethan. But face it, Vancouver suits her better than your quirky, small-town project.”

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that punching Simon wouldn’t solve anything, no matter how tempting.

Before I can respond, the mayor’s assistant, Janice, waves us toward the mayor’s office door. “Gentlemen, the mayor’s ready for you now.”

“Saved by bureaucracy,” Simon mutters, still smirking as we enter the office.

Mayor Campbell sits behind his cluttered desk, phone pressed between his shoulder

and ear as he gestures for us to take seats. Papers scatter as he hangs up abruptly.

“Ethan, Simon, sorry about that,” he says, adjusting his glasses. “Busy morning.”

“No problem. So, what’s going on with this appeal?”

The mayor sighs heavily, shaking his head. “Honestly, I’m baffled. This appeal came out of nowhere — someone claiming the city didn’t thoroughly track down any relatives who might want the Miller house.”

Simon shifts impatiently. “Which is absurd, considering we did a proper search and followed protocol to the letter.”

“For once, Simon and I agree,” I add dryly.

Mayor Campbell leans forward, steepling his fingers. “Exactly. Legally speaking, it doesn’t have a leg to stand on. It’s likely just someone stirring trouble — maybe hoping you’d back down if things got complicated.”

I glance sharply at Simon, but he looks genuinely confused. I keep my face neutral — no one needs to know .

“So, what does this mean?” I ask carefully.

“It means you’re free to resume work immediately. I’ll sign whatever paperwork you need. Honestly, I’m sorry you got caught up in this mess.”

Relief floods through me, washing away some of the lingering anxiety. “Thanks, Mayor. Really appreciate your help.”

Simon scoffs. “So, this whole meeting could’ve been an email? Fantastic.”

The mayor shoots Simon an irritated glance. “Better safe than sorry, Mr. Reynolds.”

Outside the mayor’s office, Simon straightens his suit jacket with exaggerated flair. “Well, crisis averted, Ethan. Maybe your runaway designer will actually return once you’ve got things moving again.”

Ignoring him, I step outside, pulling out my phone and Sophia’s number. But I stop myself. I wouldn’t want to hurt her negotiations by distracting her.

Simon chuckles softly behind me. “Still no luck, huh?”

I whirl around sharply. “You know, Simon, one of these days, you’re going to say the wrong thing at exactly the wrong moment.”

“Relax, Ethan. I’m just pointing out the obvious: maybe Sophia isn’t as invested in this little fantasy as you are. Women like her — big city, successful — they don’t stick around.”

“And you’d know this because?” I snap defensively.

He shrugs casually. “Experience. Women who breeze into small towns for ‘soul-searching’ rarely stick it out. They leave, and men like you are left holding the bag.”

I glare at him, frustration boiling just beneath the surface. “Simon, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe,” he concedes lightly, clearly unbothered by my anger. “But when she gets bored with your rustic charm and simple living, send her my way. I’ve got contacts in Vancouver. Could help her out — professionally, of course.”

My fists clench again, but he walks off, laughing softly. Alone on the sidewalk, my

stomach churns uncomfortably. Is Simon right? Am I kidding myself, falling for someone who sees Bluewater Cove as a temporary escape?

Pushing the thought away, I stride toward my truck, heart racing. She wouldn't just leave — not like this. Not without telling me.

I dial Turner's number to let him know of these developments.

"Hello?" Turner's voice crackles.

"Mr. Turner, Ethan here. Good news: the mayor cleared everything. We can resume work immediately."

He exhales audibly. "That was one strange hiccup."

"Agreed. Meet me at the Miller house in an hour? We need to pick up where we left off."

"Absolutely," Turner confirms eagerly. "See you then."

Starting my engine, I focus on the road ahead. The truck rumbles toward the Miller house, each mile firming my resolve. I'll get the renovations back on track and go from there.

Because despite everything, and my self-doubt, I'm sure of one thing: Sophia's worth believing in.

BOARDROOM BANTER

Sophia

Sam's downtown office is bright and minimalist, with walls painted in varying shades of tasteful grey and ivory.

It is designed to soothe clients' frazzled nerves — or at least lull them into complacency before their next hefty bill.

A potted fern sits in the corner, valiantly clinging to life beneath the artificial office lights.

I drum my fingertips against the polished conference table, adjusting my blazer sleeves for what must be the twentieth time.

A bold-color blazer has always been my go-to power outfit.

I remember Daniel always saying I should wear black.

"More business-like," he would say. But I knew he thought bold colors attracted too much attention — it was a distraction.

Nervous energy flutters beneath my ribs, mixing awkwardly with anticipation. Sam shuffles his papers into neat stacks at my side, every gesture annoyingly calm.

"Sam," I whisper impatiently. "Stop that. You're stressing me out."

His eyes sparkle mischievously behind his tortoiseshell glasses. “Sophia, it’s my solemn duty, as your legal representative, to ensure you always suffer maximum stress.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re terrible.”

“And yet, you keep me around.” He grins reassuringly, gently nudging my elbow. “Relax. You’ve got this.”

Before I can respond, the door swings open abruptly.

Day three of these board-room marathons, and Daniel still enters like he owns the oxygen. I straighten instinctively, chin lifting slightly in defiance. His expression hardens briefly before melting into that practiced smile I’ve grown to loathe.

“Sophia,” Daniel greets smoothly, his voice a practiced, neutral tone.

I nod briefly, forcing calm neutrality into my voice. “Daniel.”

“Daniel,” Sam replies.

Daniel claims the seat opposite me, sharply adjusting his tie, his gaze flicking briefly toward Sam. “Samuel.”

Sam’s eyes twinkle with barely restrained amusement.

Daniel turns back to me. “I hope you’re ready to talk reasonably today, Sophia.”

Yesterday’s session ended when you flung the term ‘art school hobbyist’ across the table... Wonder who’s not reasonable.

“I’m always reasonable, Daniel. You’re usually the one trying to set things on fire.”

He smirks, feigning amusement. “Funny.”

Sam clears his throat pointedly. “Alright, everyone. Let’s keep the insults minimal today. I’ve got lunch plans.”

Daniel narrows his eyes at Sam, who just smiles innocently, flipping open a leather portfolio.

“Sophia’s settlement offer is clear: she’s proposing a full dissolution of your joint business holdings.

She’s offering you a generous payout in exchange for complete dissolution.

We’re willing to increase by 10% the buyout. ”

Daniel leans back, arms crossed arrogantly. “Generous is subjective.”

“You know exactly how fair that offer is,” I interject evenly, my voice firm but calm. “Frankly, I’m surprised you’re even hesitating. It’s more than you should be getting.”

He eyes me skeptically, his fingers tapping rhythmically against his arm. “Why the sudden hurry, Sophia? Why is running back to your beach house fantasy that important?”

My fingers tighten around the edge of the table. “What I choose to do after our partnership ends is none of your business.”

“You’re blowing up years of hard work over what, a midlife crisis in some backwater town?”

My pulse quickens, irritation prickling beneath my skin. “Better that than spending another second playing second fiddle in your ego-driven circus. I’ve had enough. We’ve been growing apart for a decade.”

Sam chuckles, flipping through documents. “I warned you, Daniel. Behave and be reasonable.”

I shoot Sam a half-amused glare, grateful despite myself for his humor.

Daniel’s jaw clenches tightly, irritation clearly mounting. “All jokes aside, Sophia, your so-called fresh start won’t erase what you’ve built here — with me. You’re walking away from something valuable.”

“I built it despite you, Daniel,” I remind him softly. “Not because of you. And yet, you’ll be reaping the rewards of my hard work.”

He leans forward, tone turning patronizingly gentle. “Soph, come on. I know you’re angry, but let’s be realistic... we were good business partners. We can still be even if we couldn’t make our marriage work.”

A sudden sharp knock at the door interrupts his attempt at condescension, making us all jump slightly. An intern peers nervously inside, clutching a stack of papers. “Sorry, Mr. Green, your signature?”

Sam smiles patiently, nodding. “Be right there, thanks.”

Daniel sighs irritably. “What’s with the interruption? That’s no way to run a business. This would not happen at my firm.”

Sam rolls his eyes before glancing between us. “If you two set another pen on fire like you did yesterday, billable hours triple.” He pauses, eyes twinkling.

As the door clicks shut behind him, tension fills the room, thickening uncomfortably. Daniel taps his pen against the glossy table, eyeing me intently. “Our VC backers will sue both of us if you gut the firm.”

“Then you’d better warn them to join the queue, Daniel — because once this agreement is signed, every liability still sitting on the books has your name on it, not mine. I’m taking the assets I built; you can keep the skeletons you hid in the closet.”

He scoffs.

“So, it’s really this Ethan guy?”

My stomach tightens, but I manage to keep my voice neutral. “I’m not having this conversation.”

He smiles, the edges brittle. “That’s a yes.”

“That’s a ‘none of your business.’”

His eyebrows shoot upward, momentarily startled before settling back into arrogant indifference. “Funny, I never saw you as the small-town romance type.”

“And I never thought you’d stoop to sabotaging a small-town renovation project,” I fire back, eyes narrowing.

He leans forward, voice low and sharp. “I had to get your attention somehow.”

“Congratulations. You have it. But you’re not getting anything else.”

“Sophia...”

“No, Daniel.” My voice remains steady, and my confidence is surprising even to me. “No more negotiating, no more waiting. Take the settlement.”

He hesitates, frustration evident. “You really think paying me off fixes everything?”

“Of course not. But it fixes you. I’m buying you out of my life.”

The words echo powerfully between us, reverberating through the silence. Daniel’s jaw twitches, pride visibly bruised. He exhales slowly, running a tense hand through his carefully styled hair.

Before he can reply, Sam returns, slipping quickly back into his chair and shuffling papers. “All right, folks. Any progress? Or should I have lunch delivered?”

I lean back, not breaking eye contact with Daniel. “Ask Daniel if he’s ready to accept the offer.”

Daniel sighs dramatically, shaking his head as if in defeat. “You know, Sophia, you’re making a huge mistake.”

“Maybe. But at least it’s mine. Not yours.”

He pauses, clearly assessing me with frustration. Finally, he sighs, shoulders slumping fractionally. “Fine. Increase my payout by another 10% and I’ll accept.”

Relief floods through me so powerfully that I nearly sag in my chair.

Sam gives me a side look. I nod, indicating that I’m accepting Daniel’s terms.

“Give me 15 minutes to print a new version.” Sam gets up and leaves the office.

I sneak a peek at my phone. 17 missed texts from Ethan, two from Claire.

“Somewhere you have to be?”

“Hoping to swing by the office and thank everyone for their years of dedication.”

Daniel shakes his head.

“I hope he’s worth it when you’re living in a dilapidated house, no clients, no career...”

“Daniel, just don’t...”

Sam comes back in, unfazed as always, drops into his chair and puts the papers in front of me. My hand trembles as I sign the final page.

Sam slides the papers neatly in Daniel’s direction, tapping them pointedly. “You know how it works, Mr. Big Shot Lawyer. Signatures here and here, and there, please.”

As Daniel signs, Sam’s eyes sparkle at me. “See, Sophia? Easy.”

I laugh weakly, adrenaline finally easing. “Oh yes, completely painless.”

Daniel straightens, pushing the papers toward Sam. “Satisfied?”

I meet his gaze steadily. “Immensely.”

He rises stiffly, adjusting his jacket. “Good luck with your fixer-upper fantasy. Don’t come crying to me when it falls apart.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I say coolly, watching him stride briskly from the room.

Sam waits until the door closes behind him before exhaling. “Well, that was entertaining.”

I slump slightly in my seat, tension finally loosening. “Entertaining isn’t exactly the word I’d use.”

“You look peeled.”

“I feel peeled.”

He grins broadly, nudging my elbow playfully. “Admit it. You enjoyed it just a little.”

“Maybe a tiny bit,” I admit grudgingly. “But only because I had a front-row seat to Daniel’s ego imploding.”

“Spectacular, wasn’t it?” Sam teases, eyes softening. “Seriously, Soph, you handled that beautifully.”

I smile faintly, fiddling nervously with the edge of my jacket. “Thank you. For everything.”

He winks gently. “My pleasure. You’re worth it.”

I reach for my phone, my heart suddenly fluttering. “You mind if I…”

“Go. Tell Ethan you’re officially a free agent.”

I grin gratefully, pushing my chair back hurriedly. “I owe you dinner.”

“I’ll accept margaritas instead,” he calls after me as I hurry out, dialing Ethan’s number eagerly. “Call me with good news!”

I pause in the quiet hallway, phone ringing softly in my ear, heartbeat racing with anticipation. Please pick up, Ethan.

His voicemail kicks in, and my stomach twists nervously. I hesitate.

I hang up, breathing shakily. Despite the lingering anxiety, relief surges through me powerfully.

It’s finally done — no more Daniel, no more Vancouver, just Bluewater Cove and Ethan.

I need to share the news with him. In person.

I pick up my phone and book the next flight back to Pearson. I’ll arrange for someone to clear out my office and things from the condo.

There’s a place on the midnight flight. That gives me enough time to swing by the office and say my goodbyes.

I text Sage.

Me : I’ll be on the Midnight Flight out of Vancouver. Landing in Toronto around 7:40am your time.

Sage: All done?

Me : All free.

Sage: Be safe. I'll see you mid-morning then.

Me: Will do.

Goodbyes to my team. Uber to the airport. I'll text Ethan once I pass security.

MISREAD BLUEPRINTS

Ethan

The Miller House is laughing at me.

Or at least, that's how it feels as I stand at the center of the living room, gripping Sophia's carefully written notes like they're some sort of foreign code.

She's mapped everything out in elegant handwriting.

And yet, here I am, squinting at it, turning the paper sideways like that might magically decode its meaning.

Claire lounges against the wall, tapping her sneakers impatiently against the dusty hardwood. "You realize it works better if you actually read it upright."

I glance down, grimace, and slowly rotate the page around. "Funny. I thought I'd try architectural interpretation through abstract expressionism."

Claire's eyebrow arches sharply. "That's just a fancy way of saying you're clueless, right?"

I sigh heavily, dropping the paper onto the table. "Pretty much."

Claire steps closer, looking at the notes and sketches with exaggerated focus. She points at a particular scribble. "What does 'MC-KH-living?' even mean?"

“McKitchen?” I guess lamely.

She snorts, her laughter echoing mockingly around the bare walls. “Someone help us. Ethan Reed, handyman extraordinaire, brought down by Sophia’s mysterious shorthand.”

I cross my arms defensively. “I’m doing my best.”

“Your best involves staring at these same notes for the past week without making any progress,” Claire retorts dryly, eyes narrowing. “Face it — you’re lost without her. Maybe you should try that fancy gadget called a phone.”

“It’s only 8am in Vancouver.”

“Then text. Like any rational adult in this century would.”

I hesitate, rubbing the back of my neck. “What if I wake her up?”

Claire groans theatrically, rolling her eyes skyward as if asking for divine patience. “Good grief, Ethan. Either text her or hand over your phone and I’ll do it — and trust me, it won’t be subtle.”

She holds out her hand impatiently, wagging her fingers. I huff and pull out my phone, glaring half-heartedly. “Fine.”

Fingers hesitating, I finally type out a careful message.

Me: Hey. Let me know when we can talk about your notes for the Miller House? I’m not exactly sure how to proceed.

Claire scoffs, leaning over to read. “Very romantic. Maybe add a nice ‘sincerely’ at

the end?”

Before I can reconsider, my phone chirps immediately.

Sophia: Is now good for you?

My heart practically stops. I stare dumbly at the screen, speechless.

Claire pokes my shoulder impatiently. “Well?”

I slowly turn the phone around. Claire reads, grins wickedly, and smacks my shoulder. “Tell her yes, you idiot!”

I quickly type back.

Me: Yeah, now’s perfect.

“See?” Claire says smugly. “Not so complicated.”

Before I can reply, there’s a confident knock at the front door, and Sophia walks in, radiant as ever, holding a beautifully wrapped envelope tied neatly with a pale blue ribbon. Her smile is warm but tentative. “Hi, strangers! Didn’t know we were having a party!”

I stare at her, mouth dry. “Sophia. You’re... here?”

She tilts her head, amusement flickering. “I just got in from Pearson, made good time. I wanted to surprise you. Surprise!”

Claire coughs conspicuously behind us. “Well, I see my work here is done. I’ll leave you two to your Hallmark moment.”

She exits, leaving us alone. Sophia steps inside, pushing the envelope toward me. “I brought you something.”

My eyebrows arch.

“Just read,” she urges softly, unfolding a crisp page and laying it on the table. She points firmly to a brightly highlighted line.

My eyes scan quickly:

Herein, Daniel Butler formally withdraws his appeal regarding the Miller House property and irrevocably agrees to cease and desist from any further interference, claims, or actions pertaining thereto.

I frown deeply, confusion settling uneasily in my chest. “What — what exactly does this mean?”

Her smile brightens confidently. “It means I fixed it. Daniel’s appeal is officially gone now. And the business is dissolved. We can finally get back on track with the remodeling.”

“That’s fantastic for your business. We also got the go-ahead for the house yesterday when we met the mayor.”

Sophia’s smile widens. “That’s excellent news.”

She steps closer. Her hand brushes mine cautiously, sending sparks racing up my arm. “Ethan, listen. I — I’m free.”

My breath catches sharply. “Free?”

She nods softly, eyes shimmering with emotion. “It’s done. No strings, no drama. Just me.”

I can’t move, my entire body frozen. Sophia inches closer, hesitant yet determined.

Heart pounding, I lift my hand slowly, cupping her cheek tenderly. Her skin is warm beneath my palm, her breath hitching slightly.

“You really do love dramatic reveals,” I say softly, voice unsteady.

Her lips twitch playfully. “Maybe I learned from an impulsive guy who buys rundown houses on a whim.”

And then, slowly, softly, I kiss her. My lips brush against hers, gentle at first, careful — almost hesitant — as if asking permission. She responds instinctively, tilting her head to meet mine, deepening our connection. My hand rests lightly on her hips.

The kiss grows, lingering with the promise of more to come, yet still sweetly restrained. My thumb gently brushes her cheek as our lips part slowly, reluctantly.

We remain standing close, our foreheads touching, breath mingling softly, caught in the comforting, electrifying silence. It feels like we’ve just crossed a beautiful boundary, neither of us eager to break the spell.

“So,” she murmurs, glancing up at me shyly. “Am I forgiven for not getting in touch yesterday? I passed through security just in time and had to run to the gate to make my flight.”

I chuckle softly, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “I suppose. But next time, let’s avoid radio silence? My nerves were a mess.”

“Deal,” she agrees, nestling closer.

Together, we look around the cluttered, dusty space. The morning sun streams through the windows, casting a hopeful glow across everything — the cracked plaster walls, the scattered notes, the dusty blueprints still laughing at my cluelessness.

“Sophia,” I say quietly, brushing my thumb against her cheek. “Are you sure you’re ready for all this mess?”

She smiles softly. “More than ready. As long as it’s our mess.”

Warmth blooms in my chest, a deep-seated contentment I haven’t felt in years. I hold her tighter, the chaos around us fading into insignificance.

Because standing here now, amid the ruins and dreams, the plans and blueprints, Sophia in my arms — I realize there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Some messes are definitely worth it.

RENOVATING THE FUTURE

Sophia

I stand in the middle of the Miller House, clipboard in hand, trying desperately not to laugh. Ethan stands before me, safety goggles perched atop his head like he's auditioning for a handyman reality show.

"Remind me again," I tease lightly, tapping my pen against the clipboard, "exactly why you decided this wall had to go today?"

Ethan squints at the cracked plaster. "Sophia, it offended me personally. Look at it. Smug, cracked, mocking me. It had it coming."

I press my lips together, barely holding back my laugh. "Ah, yes. Walls famous for their terrible attitude problems."

He flashes a charmingly defensive smile. "You're the designer. You tell me — doesn't it look structurally suspicious?"

I shake my head, amused, and take a step closer to examine the ancient wallpaper. "It looks vintage to me. Like early Victorian meets desperate 1970s homeowner. Perfectly harmless."

Ethan eyes the wall suspiciously, reaching out and tapping it lightly with his knuckles. A dull thud echoes ominously.

I pause, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe less harmless.”

“Ha! See?” Ethan says triumphantly. “It’s clearly mocking both of us now.”

Before I can protest, he hefts the sledgehammer, testing its weight. My heart quickens, a rush of excitement mixing with nerves. I glance down at the clipboard, faking serious consideration. “Well, according to our plans...”

“I have your blessing then,” Ethan interrupts, eyes bright with boyish mischief, already swinging.

“Wait — Ethan!” I shriek, jumping back just in time as the sledgehammer crashes spectacularly through the plaster. Dust billows everywhere, coating us both in white powder.

We stare blankly at each other through the haze, Ethan coughing slightly, his face sheepish beneath the dust. “That... seemed easier on TV.”

“Did you just base our entire renovation strategy on reality TV? Just wait for the construction crew, will ya?!” I sputter through laughter, brushing plaster dust from my eyelashes.

“Possibly,” he admits, wiping his face and blinking. “Wasn’t my best move.”

I chuckle helplessly, reaching over to gently dust his shoulders. “It’s OK. It’s fixable.”

He smiles softly, eyes meeting mine. “It’s good that you’re here to supervise.”

My pulse quickens. I clear my throat, suddenly shy. “You clearly need supervision.”

He laughs, stepping closer, fingers brushing my cheek gently. “That’s why you’re here, right? Keep me from wrecking everything?”

My breath catches as his thumb lingers softly against my skin. “Exactly.”

A scratching noise suddenly breaks the intimate moment. Ethan steps back, raising an eyebrow warily toward the gaping hole he just created.

“Did you hear that?” he asks, suspicious.

I edge closer, squinting through the plaster dust. “Maybe it’s...”

Without warning, a furry face pops through the hole, eyes wide with startled indignation.

Ethan jumps back a good foot, nearly colliding with me. “Oh my gosh! It’s — it’s a raccoon!”

I laugh, clutching my stomach, tears streaming down my cheeks. “I think he’s saying we owe him rent now.”

Ethan groans, shaking his head, chuckling despite himself. “This house is a literal zoo.”

The raccoon, deciding we’re beneath his dignity, vanishes back into the wall.

We exchange an amused glance. “Maybe we’ll leave this particular wall alone for now,” Ethan mutters.

“Agreed,” I grin, jotting a sarcastic note onto the clipboard. “Raccoon residence: Do not disturb.”

We move on to safer tasks, my heart feeling lighter with every passing hour spent beside Ethan. Gradually, laughter fills the once-empty rooms, our easy banter a comforting backdrop to the chaos.

Later, as Ethan rolls out fresh blueprints on the makeshift plywood table, he nudges me gently. “So, since my wall demolition skills clearly need refining, tell me more about your vision. What’s next?”

I glance down at the plans, suddenly thoughtful. “I guess I’ve been wondering — what we should do with this space. We’ve never settled on rental? Office space?”

He clears his throat awkwardly, suddenly very interested in the edge of the blueprint. “No. I, uh... I suppose we haven’t.” He tilts his head, observing me, eyes sparkling. “But I think you already have a plan cooking in that talented head of yours.”

I blush, suddenly shy. “Maybe a small one.”

He leans closer, eyes bright with curiosity. “Care to share?”

I bite my lip nervously, excitement bubbling.

“Well... what if we turned this into an office?” I respond quickly, cheeks burning.

“My office. I could rent space for my office, I mean! Maybe it could even be our offices, if you want. A place I can design, research, and meet clients. A home base. Somewhere that feels creative and... mine. Ours.”

For a moment, Ethan doesn’t speak. My heart sinks slightly. Did I push too far?

Then, a slow, warm smile spreads across his face. “Sophia, that’s perfect. Actually, that’s brilliant. We could also rent out space, for out-of-towners that want to do some

work.”

My shoulders relax, relief flooding through me. “Really?”

“Absolutely. You’re a designer. You need your own space. And I... I would make a more professional impression if I had a formal office, plus separating work and home sounds great. Honestly, I like the idea of this place having a new life. A second chance.”

My pulse quickens, excitement mounting. “We could open the main floor and keep it welcoming and cozy for client meetings. Upstairs would be workspaces, maybe a drafting area, mood boards everywhere...”

“Neighboring offices?” Ethan adds hopefully, a playful gleam in his eyes.

I laugh softly, nudging his shoulder. “I think I can accommodate that.”

Suddenly, we’re both leaning over the plans, rapidly sketching ideas, and notes fly between us. Ethan points enthusiastically at the small front room. “What if this is your client lounge? Comfortable chairs, bookshelves filled with design inspiration, great coffee...”

I grin knowingly. “Coffee is essential. You’ve clearly learned well.”

He smiles triumphantly, sliding closer until our shoulders press together. “I had a good teacher.”

“Clearly,” I murmur, suddenly intensely aware of his closeness. My heart skips gently.

Ethan glances sideways, catching my gaze. His voice is gentle but serious. “I love

this idea, Sophia.”

My cheeks heat, and my breath hitches slightly. “Good, because I’m already attached to it.”

He moves closer, turning toward me. His hands gently grip my waist, pulling me to him.

I feel my heart skip a frantic beat, warmth rushing to my cheeks.

I realize with a rush of surprise and delight that I’ve never felt self-conscious around him.

My body naturally fits against his, like we’ve been holding each other this way for years, not mere seconds.

He leans in closer, and my breath catches softly. I close my eyes as our foreheads gently touch, sharing anticipation, our breathing softly synchronized.

“Consider me fully on board,” he whispers, his voice low and tender, the closeness sending shivers down my spine.

Before I can reply, he closes the space between us, his lips pressing gently against mine. My heart explodes into an erratic rhythm, emotions spilling over as I lean into him, deepening the kiss. His fingers tangle gently in my hair, his scent enveloping me.

Eventually, Ethan squeezes my hand gently, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he breaks into a playful smile. “OK, boss. What’s first?”

I grin back at him, my heart swelling with happiness and new possibilities. “Paint

swatches, floor samples, and officially evicting our furry houseguest.”

Ethan laughs, shaking his head fondly. “Perfect. Let’s do this.”

HIDDEN LAYERS

Ethan

The cozy hum of chatter and laughter wraps around us as Sophia and I step inside the Old Oak.

The place is packed tonight, full of familiar faces and the mouthwatering scent of greasy comfort food and freshly poured pints.

Sophia brushes a strand of hair behind her ear, her eyes sparkling beneath the warm glow of vintage Edison bulbs.

“Wow,” Sophia murmurs, taking in the noisy scene. “Is it trivia night or something?”

“No,” I chuckle, gently steering her toward an empty booth in the back. “Trivia nights involve much more yelling — and, sadly, fewer right answers.”

She laughs, sliding into the booth and scooting over to make room for me. Her knee brushes mine beneath the table, and my pulse jumps. The simplest touch from her sends electricity racing through my veins.

“So,” Sophia begins, her smile teasing as she picks up the menu, “are we celebrating the official eviction of our furry tenant or that we didn’t accidentally demolish the Miller House today?”

“Both. Honestly, though, I’m still shocked that the raccoon didn’t put up a fight. He

seemed scrappy.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh, he’ll be back. That was far too easy.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

I feign a dramatic sigh. “I’ll have to beef up security.”

She leans closer, mock-serious. “You mean like putting up posters of Simon’s face? That would scare off anything with eyes.”

I laugh out loud, almost choking on air. “Now that’s just cruel. Poor raccoon.”

She giggles softly, cheeks flushed, eyes dancing. Her laughter trails into a thoughtful pause as she studies me curiously. “Ethan, can I... ask you something?”

“Shoot,” I say lightly, though her sudden seriousness sends a nervous ripple down my spine.

She hesitates, fingertips absently tracing the rim of her water glass. “Things between us — they’ve happened pretty fast. And I realize I still don’t know much about you. Like your work. Your life before this.”

“Oh.” I clear my throat awkwardly, feeling suddenly self-conscious, mesmerized by her delicate fingers circling the rim of the glass. I can’t look away. “Yeah, I suppose we kind of skipped over some details, didn’t we?”

She smiles softly, reassuringly. “Maybe just a few.”

I run my fingers through my hair, searching for the right words. “Well, for starters... I do freelance IT work. Coding, software solutions, that kind of thing.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “With all the time you’ve been investing the in the Miller House, you haven’t been doing much work it seems.”

“True.”

She smirks. “No contracts? No deliverables?”

I shrug. “I got lucky. Jumped on the Bitcoin bandwagon pretty early, invested wisely, and now... well, let’s just say Simon wasn’t wrong about me having questionable real estate taste.”

Sophia’s lips twitch into an amused smile, but her expression grows thoughtful. “That’s impressive. I mean, not the Simon part. Just... being able to do whatever you want, whenever.”

“Yeah. I guess I’m lucky. But money only solves so many problems.”

Her eyes soften as she reaches for my hand, gently tracing circles on the back of my knuckles. “What problems can’t you solve?”

I exhale slowly. “Loneliness.”

Sophia laughs softly, “Unless you can buy a house to get someone to help you fix it up?”

I laugh.

She nods slowly, eyes focused on our entwined fingers. “My parents died when I was

in my early thirties. They didn't like Daniel, and Sage just told me they left my inheritance with her."

I squeeze her hand gently. "That must have been a surprise?"

She smiles faintly, her gaze meeting mine. "Exactly. Leaving Vancouver was impulsive. It's the first thing I did entirely for myself in years. I was worried about money, then suddenly, I didn't have to worry about it anymore."

"So, you're saying we're both secretly wealthy loners looking for something real?" I joke softly, but there's a pull now, subtle, electric, something we both feel.

Her laugh breaks the tension, eyes shining brightly. "Seems that way."

Our server appears, sliding two steaming burgers and crispy fries in front of us. Sophia digs in enthusiastically, groaning in satisfaction at the first bite, and it's a sound I'd like to hear again. "How does this pub make a burger taste like heaven?"

"It's probably the heart-clogging amount of butter," I grin, taking a huge bite of my own. "Delicious, artery-clogging butter."

She giggles, nudging my shoulder playfully. "Worth every bite."

We linger over our meal, comfortable silence broken by easy banter and quiet laughter. When the check arrives, I reach for it automatically, but she stops me with a playful glare.

"You paid last time. Let me handle this one."

I raise my hands in mock surrender. "Yes, boss. Or should I call you my sugar mama?"

Her smile turns mischievous. “Please don’t. You’ll remind me that I’m robbing the cradle.”

“Stop it...” I shake my head. “Does my age bother you that much?”

She looks down. “Maybe not THAT much... but...”

I stand up, take her hand, and invite her to stand up. “Age is just a number, and I’m mature for my age!” I wink at her, leaning in and kissing her cheek.

She chuckles, shaking her head.

After settling up, we step outside into the crisp night air, the faint glow of streetlights casting gentle shadows on the sidewalk. Sophia shivers slightly, pulling her cardigan closer.

I instinctively wrap an arm around her shoulders, pulling her gently into my chest. “Better?”

She nods, leaning comfortably against me. “Much.”

We stroll down Main Street. Sophia grows quiet again, chewing her lip thoughtfully.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I ask cautiously, sensing hesitation.

“Sorry, I just — I’m still thinking about the Miller house. Our office. Your office. What kind of space would we need to set up for you?”

“I don’t need much. A small space for coding. Good internet. And maybe enough room for a ridiculously expensive espresso machine.”

She laughs, bumping my hip playfully. “Priorities.”

“Exactly.”

We arrive at my truck, and I open her door. Once I climb into the driver’s seat, the comfortable silence settles again, filled with unspoken possibilities.

“So...” I start softly, nerves building in my chest. “Should I drop you off at Sage’s tonight? Or...?”

Sophia hesitates, glancing shyly at me, her cheeks flushed pink beneath the dim glow of streetlights. “Actually... Ethan, can I — can I come home with you?”

My heart nearly stops. “Yes. Absolutely. Of course... wait, really?”

She laughs softly, nudging me gently. “Yes, really. Unless... you don’t want...”

“No, no — I want!” I stammer quickly, face reddening. “I mean... yes. You’re welcome. More than welcome. Always.”

“Good,” she whispers, eyes sparkling with amusement.

I start the truck, pulse kicking as I try to keep my cool. The Tragically Hip’s Bobcaygeon is playing.

“Nice to know you have good taste in music,” Sophia teases me.

“Of course, they’re a Canadian legend.”

We drive quietly toward my beach house, comfortable silence filling the cab. Sophia’s gaze drifts thoughtfully out the window toward the moonlit shore, fingers

gently tangled with mine. I steal glances at her, my heart hammering with anticipation.

Finally home, we step onto the porch, the distant waves whispering soothingly beneath the stars. Sophia leans into me, head gently resting against my shoulder, exhaling softly.

“I think I’m starting to love this town,” she whispers, gaze thoughtful. “It feels more like home than Vancouver ever did.”

“It does that,” I murmur gently, wrapping an arm around her waist. “I’m glad you stayed.”

She tilts her face to mine, moonlight dancing softly across her skin. “I’m glad you gave me a reason to.”

My chest tightens, emotions flooding me as I brush my fingertips softly against her cheek. Sophia leans into my touch, eyes fluttering closed briefly.

“I can’t promise things will always be this calm. Life tends to surprise us.”

She smiles gently. “I know. I just...” Sophia whispers hesitantly, eyes searching mine again. “I’m serious about this — about us.”

“So am I. No matter what surprises life throws, Sophia, I’m not going anywhere.”

She exhales shakily, visibly relieved. Her fingertips graze my cheek softly, her eyes vulnerable and tender. “Good. Because neither am I.”

I gently tip her chin upward, kissing her softly, sweetly. Her lips part gently beneath mine, warmth blooming between us. We linger quietly, breathing mingled softly

beneath the stars, the waves a quiet, steady rhythm beside us.

Standing beneath the quiet stars, holding Sophia close, I finally feel entirely sure.
Sure of her, of us — of the hidden layers we've revealed tonight.

LAST MARKET

Sophia

S unlight filters softly through Ethan's bedroom curtains, bathing the room in a golden glow that feels like a scene from one of Sage's romantic paintings.

I slowly blink awake, disoriented at first, but the warmth beside me quickly grounds me.

I turn slightly, my heart fluttering as I see Ethan awake, lying on his side and studying me with his playful, crooked smile.

I blush, instinctively pulling the sheet higher. "Good morning."

Ethan chuckles, the sound gentle, sending tiny butterflies scattering through my stomach. He reaches out slowly, brushing a rebellious curl away from my face. "Morning. I didn't want to wake you — you looked peaceful."

"Were you just lying there watching me?" I tease softly.

He shrugs, but his eyes stay pinned to my mouth. His grin deepens, eyes twinkling. "Only for the past twenty minutes or so."

"Creepy," I accuse playfully, rolling onto my side to face him. Our noses nearly touch, and I can feel the warmth radiating from his skin, tempting me to close the remaining distance.

“You say creepy. I prefer ‘adorably attentive,’” Ethan whispers, voice low and teasing.

I bite my lip, suppressing a smile. “Fine. It’s a thin line, though.”

We laugh softly together, the morning intimacy easing the last remnants of sleep from my mind. Ethan runs his fingertips gently down my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. “So,” he murmurs, leaning closer, his breath tickling my cheek. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“You’re cooking?” I raise an eyebrow skeptically, mock-serious. “Can you cook?”

He feigns offense, placing a hand dramatically over his heart. “Excuse me — I’ll have you know my French toast is legendary in Bluewater Cove.”

I smirk, eyebrow raised in challenge. “Legendary, huh?”

He nods solemnly, eyes sparkling. “Award-winning. Well, nearly award-winning. Fine, Claire complimented it once.”

I laugh lightly, nudging him playfully. “Then who am I to refuse legendary, almost-award-winning, Claire-approved French toast?”

He leans in quickly, softly kissing my lips, warm and lingering. “You stay here. Relax. Let me prove my culinary prowess.”

He pulls away gently, standing up, and for a brief moment, I’m distracted by how perfectly he fits into his pajama pants. As he turns toward the door, he catches me staring, giving a playful smirk.

“Enjoying the view?”

I toss a pillow at him, cheeks flushed. “Go. Before I reconsider breakfast entirely.”

Laughing, Ethan disappears toward the kitchen, his quiet humming floating back to me. Alone in his bed, I roll onto my back, staring up at the ceiling, heart pounding in a rhythm I’m not quite used to. I’m giddy, silly, and a little terrified — but mostly, I’m delighted.

I slide out of bed, putting on yesterday’s clothes.

I find Ethan’s sweatshirt and drape it over my shoulders, inhaling the faint scent of his cologne clinging to the fabric.

As I wander quietly through his bedroom, I find myself smiling at the small details: his neatly stacked books, the coffee mug half-full from yesterday, and the slightly askew photo of Ethan with Claire, both laughing at some forgotten joke.

It feels wonderful, relaxed and comfortable. .. just like Ethan himself.

The sound of Ethan humming a classic rock song off-key makes me grin as I step toward the kitchen, leaning against the doorframe, silently watching him beat eggs and cinnamon together with an expression of fierce concentration.

“You take this legendary business seriously, huh?” I tease.

Ethan glances over, pretending to scowl. “French toast is an art form, Sophia. Please respect the craft.”

I laugh, sliding onto a barstool, propping my chin in my hand as I watch him work. He dips the bread into the egg mixture, carefully placing each slice onto the sizzling pan, then flips them with exaggerated flair.

“Impressive technique,” I remark lightly.

He winks. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

We eat on the porch, our plates balanced precariously on our laps, and the gentle crash of morning waves serves as our background music. Ethan’s French toast truly is delicious, but I can’t resist teasing him just a little.

“It’s decent,” I say casually, feigning indifference.

He raises an eyebrow. “Decent?”

I shrug playfully. “Might need another taste test tomorrow, just to be sure.”

He chuckles, eyes shining. “Deal.”

As we finish eating, Ethan leans back, “It’s the last weekend of the farmer’s market. Want to go?”

“Sounds perfect. But first, I need to shower and get a fresh change of clothes. I should probably head to Sage’s and...”

“I’ll come with you,” he interrupts quickly, eyes widening slightly at his eagerness. He clears his throat, feigning nonchalance. “I mean, if you want company for the walk over there.”

I grin, feeling a blush creep onto my cheeks. “Company sounds great.”

He smiles, satisfied, squeezing my hand gently. “Good.”

We head to Sage’s. Outside, we stroll on the beach, fingers intertwined comfortably.

The early autumn air is crisp, filled with the scent of salt and distant woodsmoke. Ethan glances at me thoughtfully, his thumb gently brushing my knuckles.

We arrive back at the eclectic beach house, and Ethan opens the door to let me step inside, instantly surrounded by the lived-in warmth of Sage's creative clutter.

"Make yourself comfortable," I say, nodding toward the mismatched armchair near the window. "I'll just be a few minutes."

He settles in, looking strangely at ease amidst the vibrant disorder. "Take your time."

After a quick shower, I dress comfortably in jeans and a soft sweater, feeling refreshed and buoyant. As I step back into the living room, my heart jumps slightly at the sight of Ethan casually flipping through one of Sage's books on abstract art.

"Find anything good?" I ask, moving toward him.

He looks up, smiling gently. "Mostly confusion and mild anxiety. But I'm trying."

I laugh softly, extending my hand. "Come on, let's hit the market. I imagine Sage is already there."

* * *

Heading to the market grounds, Ethan leans into me. "Hey," he starts hesitantly. "I just wanted to say — last night, this morning... it's been perfect."

My cheeks blush, and I duck my head slightly, smiling shyly. "It really has."

He pauses, tugging me gently to a stop on the sidewalk, his expression suddenly vulnerable. "You know, about everything moving quickly... I don't want you to think

it's just impulse or convenience. I'm falling for you."

My heartbeat quickens, a smile breaking across my face, equal parts relief and joy. "I'm falling for you too, Ethan."

His shoulders visibly relax, tension leaving him instantly. He grins crookedly, squeezing my hand. "Good. Because honestly, I'm way too far gone already."

I laugh softly, nudging his shoulder playfully. "Me too."

"Hey, Ethan!" Claire's voice breaks through our moment, and we glance toward her as she crosses the street, waving energetically. Her gaze flickers knowingly between us, a playful smirk tugging at her lips. "Aw, look at you two. Already adorable this early. I might gag."

Ethan rolls his eyes, but he's smiling. "Jealousy doesn't suit you, Claire."

She scoffs, grinning wickedly. "Please. I'm just glad Sophia's here to improve your social standing."

"I do what I can," I tease lightly.

Claire laughs, nudging Ethan. "So, taking advantage of the beautiful day to enjoy the market?"

He nods. "Yep. Last weekend, figured we'd enjoy it."

"Well, then I'll leave you to it. Try not to cause too much gossip, kids." She winks exaggeratedly at me. "Sophia, good luck handling this one. He's a handful."

"Believe me, I'm finding that out." I laugh.

Claire waves cheerfully, continuing down the sidewalk. Ethan sighs, shaking his head fondly. “You see what I deal with?”

“Poor you,” I tease gently, squeezing his hand again.

He chuckles, guiding me toward the bustling farmer’s market. The lively atmosphere, colorful stalls filled with fresh produce, baked goods, and local crafts immediately energize us.

As we wander, Ethan points out familiar faces, introducing me to various vendors and friends. We stop frequently, sampling homemade jams, debating apple varieties, and laughing over kitschy souvenirs.

Eventually, we pause near a stall selling fresh bouquets. Ethan eyes them thoughtfully, glancing toward me shyly.

“What’s your favorite?”

I smile warmly, touched. “Sunflowers.”

He buys a bouquet without hesitation, presenting them with an exaggerated flourish. “For you, my lady.”

I laugh, accepting them with playful reverence. “Such a gentleman.”

His eyes soften, hand cupping my cheek gently. “Chivalry’s my baseline — but you get the deluxe package.”

My breath catches. My heart pounds happily. He leans in softly, dropping a tender kiss on my lips — brief but full of promise.

As we walk back toward the street, our fingers intertwined again, I realize how fully, completely happy I am here with him.

“So,” Ethan murmurs gently, breaking the comfortable silence. “What’s next?”

I glance sideways, eyes sparkling. “I’m not entirely sure. But I know I want to figure it out — with you.”

His smile brightens, warmth filling his gaze. “Then that’s exactly what we’ll do.”

Hand in hand, flowers tucked gently under my arm, we stroll back toward Ethan’s truck. Each step feels easy and natural — like I’m exactly where I was always meant to be.

Sophia

I take a step back, my arms crossed loosely as I tilt my head thoughtfully, savoring how spring sunlight filters gently through the Miller House windows.

Outside, daffodils and tulips burst vibrantly from window boxes, bright reminders that we've emerged from a long winter into a season of joyful beginnings.

It's finally done.

Well, mostly. I glance sideways at Ethan, who's stubbornly wrestling with a curtain rod. His expression is pure determination, tongue poking slightly out of his mouth as he twists and nudges the rod, which rebelliously refuses to cooperate.

"You know," I say teasingly, suppressing a smile, "it's still not too late to hire someone."

Ethan shoots me a dramatically wounded look as though I've questioned his honor. "Sophia, have some faith. I'm a professional. Sort of."

The rod slips suddenly from his grasp, hitting the windowsill with an echoing clang. Ethan mutters something colorful under his breath, quickly casting me a sheepish glance.

I stifle my laughter, hands raised innocently. "You were saying, Mr. Professional?"

He chuckles softly, brushing hair out of his eyes. "Just give me ten more minutes and

an online tutorial. Expert craftsmanship takes time.”

“Ah, of course. Yesterday it was just two minutes and confidence.”

He shrugs playfully, eyes twinkling. “Strategy adjustment. Happens all the time in IT.”

Shaking my head, I cross our bright new office space, pausing by my desk.

My half of this floor is a comfortable swirl of colorful textiles, art prints, and scattered sketches — the organized chaos that helps me think.

Ethan’s side reflects him just as clearly: sleek, modern furniture mixed with quirky collectibles and hidden cords carefully taped along the back of the desk.

A sense of pride and quiet contentment swells inside me. This is ours. Not just the house — the life we’ve built together. The town, our new business, even our exuberant puppy snoring quietly on the plush sofa between our offices. Somehow, improbably, everything turned out right.

Tomorrow is the grand opening, our moment to officially share this new chapter with Bluewater Cove.

Lucas volunteered coffee service with an enthusiasm that suggested he might’ve been sampling too many espressos.

Even Simon — who’s made it his life’s mission to annoy Ethan — has been invited.

However, Ethan did threaten to revoke his invitation twice.

Possibly three times, can’t remember anymore.

A sharp knock at the door jolts me from my daydreams. Ethan and I exchange curious looks, and he drops the curtain rod, conceding defeat as he follows me to the door.

Swinging it open, I see Sage on the porch, her arms wrapped around a massive, mysterious object draped in vibrant paisley fabric.

“Sage!” Ethan calls affectionately, quickly stepping forward to help. “What on earth?”

“Office-warming gift!” she proclaims, beaming triumphantly as Ethan takes most of the weight from her.

Ethan groans theatrically. “Didn’t we agree on a particular aesthetic for the office?”

“That giraffe-hat-rack thing traumatized Mr. Darcy,” I remind her, laughter bubbling in my chest.

She waves away the complaint. “I stand by my vision. And this time, you’ll absolutely adore it.”

Sage whips away the fabric, revealing a stunning abstract painting. Blues, greens, and subtle golden hues simultaneously dance across the canvas, vibrant and calm. My breath catches.

“Oh, Sage, it’s gorgeous,” I murmur sincerely.

Ethan nods, clearly impressed. “It really is. You’ve outdone yourself.”

“I thought you might need a reminder,” Sage says softly, eyes twinkling, “for being open to find the unexpected in the chaos.”

“Consider it etched into our souls,” Ethan jokes, nudging my shoulder gently.

Sage eyes us both with mock seriousness. “Speaking of chaos, where’s Biscuit?”

I glance around, suddenly suspicious. “Sleeping... hopefully?”

Right on cue, a burst of golden fluff charges through the door, tail wagging furiously, paws skidding on polished floors. Biscuit barks joyfully, tongue lolling as Ethan catches him mid-leap.

“Oh boy, nap officially over,” Ethan laughs, cradling the puppy as it squirms excitedly.

I groan dramatically, turning to Sage. “Biscuit, destroyer of shoes, slayer of naps.”

Sage scratches Biscuit affectionately behind the ears. “Adorable menace. And totally worth the mayhem.”

She helps us hang the painting over the sofa, stepping back proudly once it’s positioned perfectly. “There,” she declares, nodding with satisfaction. “My masterpiece has found its home.”

After Sage leaves, Biscuit bolts toward a basket of fabric swatches, pawing gleefully as he digs for treasure.

“Oh no!” I groan, rushing after him. Ethan laughs, rescuing a fabric roll from the puppy’s enthusiastic jaws.

“Reconsidering pet ownership?” Ethan teases.

“No,” I admit, scooping Biscuit into my arms and kissing his head. “But ask me again after he eats the couch cushions.”

Ethan guides me gently toward the sofa, Biscuit settling between us, utterly content.

Comfortable silence fills the room, and sunlight warms our shoulders.

“You know,” Ethan says softly after a while, “it’s kind of amazing, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“This place. Us.” He hesitates, voice tender. “Everything.”

I lift my head, meeting his gaze. “Did you ever doubt we’d get here?”

Ethan chuckles gently, shaking his head. “No. But if you’d told me a year ago, I’d buy a haunted fixer-upper to impress an interior designer... well, I’d have laughed.”

“To be fair, it does sound absurd.”

He grins. “But here we are. Raccoons, puppies, and Sage’s art. The whirlwind suits us.”

My breath catches, happiness bubbling up inside me. “It really does.”

“I meant what I said,” Ethan murmurs thoughtfully, eyes gentle. “This is just the start.”

I lean against him, sighing contentedly. “Good. I’m holding you to it.”

“Good,” he echoes softly.

We sit quietly for a moment, absorbed in the tranquility of our completed vision, the subtle scent of fresh paint blending harmoniously with lilacs from the open windows.

Ethan’s voice eventually breaks the silence, gentle yet thoughtful. “Ready for tomorrow’s grand opening?”

I glance up at him. “Honestly? Yes. I’m excited.”

He smiles, thumb brushing over my knuckles. “You really belong here, Sophia. You’re part of Bluewater Cove now.”

“I never imagined finding peace like this, a place to call home,” I whisper, emotion thickening my voice. “Somewhere so effortlessly mine.”

“Or someone as perfect for me as you,” Ethan replies tenderly, color rising slightly to his cheeks.

I laugh softly, my heart fluttering. “You sure know how to flatter.”

“Only with the truth,” he says softly.

We both smile, basking in comfortable quiet. After a moment, Ethan’s expression shifts to thoughtful curiosity. “Hey, did we ever solve the mystery of possible new raccoons in the attic?”

I glance up sharply, eyes wide. “Don’t even joke.”

He grins wickedly. “Guess I’ll have to check tonight.”

“Oh, no, if you get trapped up there again, I’m leaving you overnight.”

“Fair. But if I survive, promise me breakfast in bed?”

“Deal,” I concede, grinning despite myself.

Biscuit snorts softly, stretching out between us. Ethan gently threads his fingers through mine, sighing deeply.

“Sophia,” he whispers after a long pause, “thank you.”

“For what?”

He smiles faintly, his gaze sincere. “For taking a risk on this house, on me... on us.”

Warmth rushes through my chest. “Best risk I ever took.”

He gently tilts my chin upward, capturing my lips in a soft, lingering kiss. It’s tender and sweet, filled with quiet promises of tomorrow.

Biscuit yawns lazily, breaking the moment. We laugh gently, and I rest my head against Ethan’s shoulder, deeply content.

After a moment, I clear my throat quietly. “Hey, Ethan?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you,” I murmur, voice steady with certainty. “I really do.”

His expression softens immediately, surprise giving way to pure joy. He cups my cheek gently. “Sophia, I’ve loved you since I almost flattened you at Lucas’.”

“Romantic,” I tease, smiling.

He grins gently. “I try.”

Comfortable silence settles once more, broken only by Biscuit’s sleepy snores.

A faint sound outside — the crunch of tires on gravel — pulls our attention toward the window. A blue truck parks and Claire emerges, waving enthusiastically, holding a large bouquet of fresh-cut flowers.

“Our helping committee is early,” Ethan murmurs.

I laugh softly, rising to my feet, Biscuit bounding after me. “I’ll start coffee?”

“Perfect,” Ethan agrees, standing beside me. He slips his arm around my waist, pulling me gently close. “But first, let’s go greet her together.”

“Together,” I echo, and we step onto the porch into the gentle warmth of early evening.

I lean into Ethan’s side, inhaling deeply. This right here is the life I never knew I needed. And as the laughter fills the evening air, I know we’ve finally found our place — not just in the Miller House, but in Bluewater Cove, in the warmth of this community, and most of all, in each other.