



Love in Full Bloom (Zaftig Ever After #2)

Author: Jane Fox

Category: Romance

Description: Where Art Blooms Hearts Unfold

Jasmine Carter: A whimsical artist with a brush full of color and a heart weighed down by self-doubt.

Ben Thompson: A grounded landscape architect whose designs are flawless, but whose romantic life is a patchwork of missed connections.

When a community arts festival becomes the backdrop for an unexpected encounter, Jasmine's vibrant spirit captures Ben's attention like a sunflower reaching for the sun. Their initial mishap ignites laughter and sparks an attraction that neither expected. He sees the beauty in her artistry, while she learns to trust her blooming heart.

As their connection deepens amidst the petals and paint, Jasmine's insecurities threaten to pull her back into the shadows. Just when their love begins to flourish, a rumor stirs doubt, forcing Jasmine to question whether Ben can truly see her for who she is or just as an ephemeral muse.

Now, she must choose: retreat into her colorful canvas or step into a world where love blossoms fully. Will Jasmine risk it all for the chance at a masterpiece of the heart?

Total Pages (Source): 13

CHAPTER ONE

MATCHMAKERS' LOG

I adjust my glasses and scan the client profile one more time, trying to find the thread—that magical connection point that might bring two strangers together. Krissa leans over my shoulder, her cherry-red lips pursed in concentration.

"Ben Thompson," I read aloud. "Landscape architect. His sister Leah says he's married to his career."

"Aren't they all?" Krissa drops into the chair beside me, the full skirt of her vintage dress billowing around her. "What's his deal? Commitment issues? Bad breakup? Secret collection of garden gnomes?"

I flip through his questionnaire. "None of the above, apparently. Just genuinely loves his work creating gardens for people. His sister says he loses track of time when he's designing outdoor spaces."

"A man passionate about beauty. I can work with that." Krissa taps a perfectly manicured nail against her chin. "What's he look like?"

I slide the photo across our shared desk. Ben Thompson stares back at us—tall, broad-shouldered, with tousled blond hair that looks perpetually windswept. His smile reaches his eyes, creating little crinkles at the corners that speak of days spent working under the sun.

"Well, hello there, Mr. Green Thumb." Krissa fans herself dramatically. "Those hands look like they know what they're doing."

"Focus, please." I try to sound stern but can't help smiling. "His sister says he needs someone who understands his creative drive but might help him remember there's more to life than work."

Krissa straightens in her chair, suddenly all business. "Let me see the potentials."

I pull up our database. "I've narrowed it down to three, but I keep coming back to this one." I tap Jasmine Carter's profile. "Visual artist, specializes in floral paintings. There's something about the symmetry of their work that feels right."

"Ooh, she's pretty." Krissa studies Jasmine's photo—a curvy woman with striking auburn hair and expressive hazel eyes. "What's her story?"

"Talented but doubts herself. Her art sells well at local galleries, but she's always worried people find her work 'too whimsical."

" I make air quotes with my fingers. "I met her last week for coffee.

She has this way of lighting up when she talks about color theory that reminds me of how I felt when Gage first—" I catch myself and feel heat rise to my cheeks.

"When Gage first what?" Krissa's eyebrows waggle suggestively.

"Never mind." I clear my throat. "The point is, she's passionate too. And I think someone who appreciates beauty in nature might appreciate how she captures it on canvas."

"Garden Boy and Flower Painter." Krissa claps her hands together. "It's almost too

perfect. Like they could start a business together making those fancy garden books."

I roll my eyes but smile. "Let's not marry them off before they've even met."

"Speaking of meeting..." Krissa pulls out her planner. "Where and when?"

"The community arts festival this weekend? Jasmine will have a booth there showing her work. I could suggest to Ben that he might find inspiration for his designs."

"Perfect!" Krissa scribbles something in her planner. "I'll take Ben, you take Jasmine. We'll coordinate by text."

"Do you think it's strange that a landscape architect doesn't like flowers?" I ask, reading a note from his sister.

"What? Let me see that." Krissa snatches the paper from my hand. "'Ben appreciates structural plants but isn't big on florals—prefers foliage texture and form over showy blooms.'" She looks up at me with wide eyes. "That's like a chef who doesn't like flavor!"

I laugh. "Maybe he just hasn't met the right flower yet."

"Or the right flower painter." Krissa winks. "Trust me, once he sees Jasmine's work—and Jasmine—he'll change his tune."

"You seem awfully confident."

"Honey, I'm always confident. That's why our clients pay us the big bucks." She stands and straightens her pencil skirt. "Plus, did you see those forearms in his photo? The man works with his hands all day. He's practically romance novel material."

I shake my head, smiling. "You're terrible."

"I'm right, though." She points at Jasmine's profile. "Look at her notes—'sometimes feels invisible in crowded rooms.' A woman that beautiful, feeling invisible? She deserves someone who really sees her."

"And you think Ben's that someone?"

Krissa's expression softens. "I think two people who create beauty deserve to find it in each other. Don't you?"

When she puts it that way, I can't argue. I make a note in our shared calendar: Ben Thompson + Jasmine Carter. Community Arts Festival. Operation: Bloom & Grow.

I just hope they're both ready to plant something new.

Zaftig Dating Agency Intake Form

Name: Ben Thompson

Occupation: Landscape architect known for creating stunning, personalized garden designs

Referred By: His sister, who insists he needs someone special in his life to complement his dedication to work

Notes: Ben is passionate about his craft and finds joy in nature, but has been too focused on his career to pursue romance

Name: Jasmine Carter

Occupation: Visual artist who specializes in vibrant floral paintings

Notes: She struggles with self-doubt about being perceived as "too whimsical" but has a big heart and a creative spirit

Meeting Location: The upcoming community arts festival in the local park

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:04 am

CHAPTER TWO

JASMINE

I dab my brush into a blend of crimson and cadmium yellow, watching the colors swirl together like a sunset caught in a raindrop.

With a flick of my wrist, I add another petal to the wild rose taking shape on my canvas.

Each stroke brings the flower to life—not a perfect botanical illustration, but something wilder.

Something more me . The rose emerges with delicate imperfections (a slight tear in one petal, a subtle discoloration in another), exactly as I found it growing stubbornly between cracks in a forgotten corner of the park.

"There you are," I whisper to the painting. "Coming out to play finally." I lean in closer, adding tiny veins to the petals with my finest brush, the kind of detail most viewers might never consciously notice but would feel somehow.

My studio—actually just the spare bedroom of my apartment—catches the morning light perfectly.

The eastern exposure bathes everything in a golden glow that makes even my paint-splattered drop cloths look artistic.

Canvases in various stages of completion lean against every wall, some barely started with just a whisper of an idea, others nearly finished but waiting for that final spark of inspiration.

Dried flowers hang from strings across the ceiling—Queen Anne's lace, lavender sprigs, black-eyed Susans—spinning slowly in the breeze from the cracked window.

My inspiration wall is a chaotic collage of torn magazine pages, pressed petals, and handwritten quotes about art and nature.

A postcard from Monet's garden in Giverny.

A dried dandelion I preserved after making a wish on it last summer.

This is my sanctuary. My safe place. The only room where I never question myself.

I step back from the easel, tilting my head to study my work, smudging a bit of paint on my cheek without realizing it.

The wild rose painting is nearly finished.

It's part of my new collection for the community arts festival this weekend.

Ten pieces celebrating wildflowers that most people overlook.

The ones that grow in sidewalk cracks and abandoned lots.

The fighters. The survivors. Not the cultivated beauties in manicured gardens, but the ones that make their own way against all odds.

I've spent weeks scouting forgotten corners of parks and empty lots, photographing

and sketching these resilient blooms in their natural habitats.

My phone buzzes with a text from Zara, my friend who's helped me secure a booth at the festival. The screen lights up with her name and the little flower emoji I've assigned to her contact.

Elena: How's the painting coming? Can't wait to see everything displayed!

Me: Almost done with the wild rose. Just hope people connect with them. Sometimes I worry they're not serious enough for collectors.

Elena: They will. Your work makes people feel things. That's what great art does.

That's exactly what I fear. What if the feelings my paintings evoke are disappointment? Or worse—indifference?

I set down my brush and wander to the kitchen for more coffee, carefully stepping over the drop cloths protecting my hardwood floors.

Paint splatters mark the path I travel daily between easel and coffee pot—a colorful trail of my creative process.

My apartment is small but flooded with natural light—a lucky find in this neighborhood.

The rent stretches my budget to its limit, but the light makes it worth every penny.

Plants crowd every windowsill, each one named after a different artist. Monet, my sprawling pothos, needs watering.

Georgia, my stubborn succulent, is finally sprouting a new leaf after months of

seeming dormancy.

A tiny fiddle leaf fig I've named Frida is struggling, but I refuse to give up on her.

"Morning, friends," I murmur, touching a leaf here, a stem there.

"Anyone feeling particularly inspiring today?"

" People think it's quirky that I talk to my plants, but they don't understand.

These silent green companions are better listeners than most humans.

They never tell me to be more practical or suggest I try painting "something people actually want to buy. "

The coffee machine gurgles as I gaze out my kitchen window at the maple tree outside.

Its leaves have just started turning, showing hints of orange and gold among the green.

Nature's own artwork, changing every day.

I've been meaning to capture that transition in a painting but haven't found the right approach yet.

How do you paint something that's between states, neither what it was nor what it will become?

My phone rings, startling me from my reverie. My gallery owner's name flashes on the screen, and I take a deep breath before answering.

"Morning, Marcus," I answer, trying to sound more awake and professional than I feel with paint in my hair and coffee not yet in my system.

"Jasmine! How's my favorite floral artist?

" His voice booms through the speaker, full of the confidence I always envy.

"Just checking on your pieces for the festival.

The last show generated quite a buzz, you know.

People are asking when they can see more of your work.

That couple from Westside bought the large peony piece and apparently it's become quite the conversation starter in their dining room. "

I blink in surprise, nearly spilling my coffee. "They are?"

"Of course! That sunset peony series sold out completely. I have three collectors specifically asking to be notified when you bring in new pieces. One mentioned something about the 'emotional honesty' in your work. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it."

"Oh." I pour my coffee with my free hand, unsure how to process this information. The mug I choose has "Create Bravely" written on it—a gift from Elena that often feels more like a challenge than encouragement. "That's... good."

Marcus sighs, and I can practically see him shaking his head. "You sound surprised. When will you accept that your work resonates with people? You have a unique vision, Jasmine. Not everyone can see beauty in the things others walk past without noticing."

There it is. Unique . The word people use when they don't know what else to say.

Like when my third-grade teacher called my science project "unique" because I'd painted the solar system in watercolors instead of using styrofoam balls like everyone else.

Or when my college boyfriend described my style as "uniquely bohemian," which I later realized was his polite way of saying he wished I'd dress more conventionally.

"Thanks, Marcus. I'll have everything ready for setup tomorrow afternoon. The varnish on the last few pieces should be dry by then."

After hanging up, I carry my coffee back to the studio and stare at my paintings leaned carefully against the wall.

Ten wildflowers, each one captured not in photorealistic detail but in emotional impression.

How they make me feel. How they move in the wind.

How they stubbornly push through concrete to reach the sun.

The chicory with its surprising blue blossoms. The defiant dandelion.

The persistent clover. The overlooked beauty of Queen Anne's lace catching dewdrops like tiny diamonds.

Is that too fanciful? Too dreamy? Maybe even too soft for what people expect from "real" art?

My mother's voice echoes in my head: "Jasmine, honey, have you thought about

painting something people actually want to buy? Like landscapes or portraits? Something that would look nice over someone's couch?"

I tried that once. The resulting paintings were technically proficient and utterly soulless. Like I'd abandoned myself at the door and let someone else hold the brush.

With a sigh, I pick up my brush again and return to the wild rose.

Its imperfection is what makes it beautiful to me.

That's what makes it real. I add a hint of dew clinging to the edge of a petal, reflecting the first light of dawn.

A tiny detail that might go unnoticed but feels essential to the story I'm telling.

I work steadily through the afternoon, losing myself in the flow of creation.

Time disappears as colors and shapes emerge from the canvas.

The festival is two days away, and while the paintings are nearly finished, I still need to varnish them, attach hanging wire, and create labels with thoughtful descriptions that won't sound pretentious.

Plus figure out how to arrange my booth to best showcase my work without overwhelming viewers.

And decide what to wear: something professional enough to be taken seriously but that still feels like me.

As twilight falls, I finally set down my brushes.

My back aches from standing all day, and paint speckles my hands and forearms like a constellation of tiny stars.

I catch my reflection in the window—auburn hair escaping its messy bun in copper tendrils, a smear of yellow ochre across my cheek, my favorite green dress spotted with paint despite my apron.

The dress that always makes the green flecks in my eyes stand out, now probably permanently marked with ultramarine blue.

I look exactly like what I am: an artist who forgets the outside world exists when she paints.

Is that so bad? Is there something wrong with losing myself so completely in creation?

My phone buzzes with another text, this time from my friend Elena:

Elena: Dinner tonight? Need to hear all about your festival prep! Plus I have gossip about that guy from the coffee shop who always orders the complicated pour-over.

Me: Rain check? Covered in paint and still have work to do. Haven't eaten since breakfast and might just collapse into bed with a peanut butter sandwich.

Her response makes me smile.

Elena: Artist mode activated. I get it. But remember to eat something besides coffee! And wear something besides that green dress to the festival. First impressions matter when you're selling yourself. Love you!

I wander to the bathroom and scrub the paint from my hands, watching the colors

swirl down the drain in a miniature whirlpool.

I study my face in the mirror, noting the smudge of paint I'd missed earlier.

Hazel eyes with flecks of green stare back at me, currently more green than brown in the bathroom light.

People always comment on my eyes—how they seem to change color with my mood.

Right now, they look tired but bright with creative energy, like I'm running on some fuel only artists can access.

"You can do this," I tell my reflection, pointing my dripping paintbrush at the mirror. "Your work matters to someone, even if it's just you. Even if no one buys a single painting."

Back in the studio, I carefully set the finished wild rose painting aside to dry and uncover my final canvas.

This one will be different—a meadow scene featuring all the wildflowers from the individual paintings, growing together in harmonious chaos.

Dandelions intertwining with chicory, clover nestled against Queen Anne's lace, wild roses climbing over everything.

The centerpiece of my collection, larger than the others and meant to tie everything together.

As I sketch the initial composition in light charcoal strokes, I feel that familiar mix of excitement and anxiety bubbling in my chest. Will people understand what I'm trying to say?

Or will they just see pretty flowers? Will they grasp that these paintings are about resilience and finding beauty in overlooked places?

About surviving despite not being cultivated or tended?

The festival will be my biggest public showing yet. Hundreds of people will pass by my booth, judging my work and, by extension, judging me. Some will stop, others will glance and move on. The thought makes my stomach tighten and my palms sweat.

But beneath the anxiety lies a tiny, persistent hope.

Maybe someone will see these paintings and feel what I feel when creating them.

Maybe someone will understand that these aren't just flowers—they're stories about resilience and beauty in unexpected places.

About finding your way even when no one plants you in the perfect spot.

Maybe, just maybe, I'll finally find my audience. People who see the world the way I do, who appreciate the beauty in imperfection.

I step back from the blank canvas, brush poised, and take a deep breath. The evening light casts long shadows across my studio, turning everything golden and mysterious.

"Show me what you want to be," I whisper to the empty white space, feeling that familiar tingle of possibility in my fingertips. Something is coming—I can feel it in my bones. This festival will change things.

I just don't know how much.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:04 am

CHAPTER THREE

BEN

I trace my finger along the edge of a newly rendered landscape design, feeling the slight texture of the premium paper beneath my fingertips.

The client's property comes to life on the page: a meandering stone path that leads through a series of garden rooms, each with its own character but flowing naturally into the next.

A reading nook nestled beneath a pergola draped with wisteria, where dappled sunlight will create patterns across comfortable seating.

A meditation space surrounded by ornamental grasses that will catch the breeze and create a soothing whisper, with a small reflecting pool to mirror the changing sky.

A kitchen garden with raised beds arranged in a pattern that's both practical and visually pleasing, herbs and vegetables mingling in a tapestry of textures and scents.

It's good work. Some of my best, actually. The balance of structure and wildness, the careful consideration of seasonal interest, the thoughtful integration of the clients' lifestyle needs; it all works together seamlessly.

So why do I feel so empty looking at it?

I push back from my drafting table and stretch, feeling the satisfying pop in my

shoulders after hours hunched over the design.

My studio is bathed in late afternoon light, dust motes dancing in the golden beams streaming through the tall windows.

Plants fill every available surface: specimens I've collected over years of travel and study.

A Japanese maple in a handcrafted pot, its delicate leaves shifting from crimson to burgundy with the changing light.

A collection of native ferns, their fronds unfurling in graceful spirals.

Architectural succulents arranged in a modernist concrete planter I designed myself, their geometric forms creating a living sculpture.

This space is my sanctuary. My creation.

My life's work manifested in a converted warehouse loft with concrete floors stained the color of fertile soil and exposed brick walls adorned with botanical prints and photographs of gardens I've designed.

The ceiling beams still show marks from the building's industrial past, now softened by trailing vines I've trained to climb along custom trellises.

And yet lately, I find myself wandering through it feeling like something's missing. The silence that once felt peaceful now seems to echo with absence.

"You need a life outside of plants, Ben," my sister Leah had said during our last lunch together, her expression equal parts exasperation and concern as she pushed her salad around her plate, poking at it as if it was one of the plants that personally offended

her.

"When was the last time you went on a date?

Or even just out with friends who don't talk about soil pH levels and drainage systems?

You've got this amazing talent for creating spaces where people connect with nature, but you're not connecting with anyone yourself. "

I'd brushed her off with some comment about being busy with the Westridge project, but her words had stuck with me.

They're still sticking with me three weeks later as I stare at my perfect, empty apartment.

The bookshelves filled with volumes on landscape design and botanical history.

The kitchen with its herb garden thriving under grow lights.

The comfortable furniture arranged for optimal views of both the city and my indoor garden.

Everything in its place. Everything carefully curated.

No evidence of anyone else's presence or preferences.

My phone buzzes with a text from Krissa Phillips, the matchmaker Leah somehow convinced me to meet with. Against all logic and my better judgment. I still can't believe I let my sister talk me into visiting a dating agency, of all things.

Lil Sis: Arts festival tomorrow at Riverfront Park. Your sister mentioned you're looking for inspiration for the Hamilton project. Lots of local artists showcasing work. Some incredible botanical pieces that might spark ideas. 10 AM?

I hesitate, my thumb hovering over the screen.

The Hamilton project does need something special The clients want a garden that feels like "living art" rather than a conventional landscape.

And I have been stuck in a creative rut lately, recycling elements from previous designs rather than pushing into new territory.

Maybe seeing how other artists interpret nature could help break through this block.

That's what I tell myself, anyway. It has nothing to do with Krissa's not-so-subtle hints about a certain artist who'll be displaying her work there.

An artist who, according to her, "sees beauty in the overlooked corners of the natural world" and "captures the spirit of plants that most people walk right past without noticing. "

Me: I'll be there

I ignore the flutter of anticipation in my chest. A flutter that feels suspiciously unrelated to professional inspiration.

I set my phone down and walk to the wall of windows overlooking the city.

The sunset paints everything in shades of amber and rose, softening the urban landscape.

The harsh angles of downtown buildings glow golden, their windows reflecting the fading light.

Below, people stream along the sidewalks—couples holding hands, friends laughing together, families herding children toward dinner.

All these connections. All these lives intertwined.

And here I am, alone in my perfect space, surrounded by beautiful things I've created, feeling the hollow echo of emptiness. Designing spaces for others to enjoy together, while I experience them in solitude.

The community arts festival transforms Riverfront Park into a vibrant maze of white tents and colorful displays.

The morning air carries the mingled scents of coffee, fresh-baked pastries, and the earthy perfume of the river.

Musicians play at scattered locations throughout the grounds, creating pockets of melody that fade in and out as I walk: a violin here, an acoustic guitar there, a jazz quartet near the food trucks.

I navigate through the growing crowd, coffee in hand, observing how people interact with the space.

It's something I always notice—the flow of human movement through an environment, the natural gathering points, the quiet corners where people seek respite.

Understanding this is essential to good landscape design.

Gardens aren't just about plants; they're about creating spaces for human experience. For connection. For memory-making.

My conversation with Krissa at the Zaftig Dating Agency replays in my mind as I walk.

I'd gone there mostly to appease Leah, expecting to politely decline whatever service they offered.

Instead, I'd found myself talking more openly than I had in years, sitting in their comfortable meeting room that felt more like someone's living room than an office.

"So you create spaces for people to connect with nature," Krissa had said, leaning forward with genuine interest, her blonde hair styled in a distinctive retro updo. "But when was the last time you felt truly connected to another person?"

The question had caught me off guard with its simplicity and accuracy. No one had asked me that in years—maybe ever. People usually asked about my design philosophy or my favorite plants or my opinion on sustainable landscaping practices.

"I connect with clients all the time," I'd answered, knowing even as I said it how hollow it sounded. How professional. How safe.

"That's work, Ben," she'd replied gently.

"I'm talking about the kind of connection that makes you lose track of time.

That makes you want to share the beautiful things you see rather than just create them for others.

When you spot that perfect light filtering through autumn leaves, who do you want to

show it to? "

Her words echo in my head as I wander through the festival, observing couples sharing experiences, friends laughing together, artists explaining their work to interested viewers.

All these connections happening around me while I stand apart, observing rather than participating.

Designing the container but never being part of the content.

I stop at various booths, admiring woodwork with grain patterns that could inspire garden pathways, ceramics glazed in colors that mimic water reflections, metal sculpture that captures the movement of wind through tall grasses.

The craftsmanship is impressive, but nothing speaks to me until I round a corner and see a flash of color so vibrant it stops me in my tracks.

Wildflowers.

Not just any wildflowers, but paintings that capture their essence in a way I've never seen before.

Not botanical illustrations with scientific precision, but emotional interpretations that somehow convey the spirit of each bloom.

A dandelion pushing through concrete radiates defiance, its yellow petals almost glowing against the gray.

A wild rose with slightly torn petals speaks of resilience, its imperfections making it more captivating than a perfect specimen.

Queen Anne's lace capturing dewdrops shimmers with unexpected beauty, transforming what many consider a roadside weed into something magical.

I move closer, drawn by the raw emotion in the work.

These aren't the showy, cultivated blooms I typically avoid in my designs.

I've always preferred the architectural quality of foliage, like the texture of ferns, the structure of ornamental grasses, the form of shrubs.

Flowers always seemed too fleeting, too obvious in their appeal, too dependent on perfect conditions.

But these paintings make me see wildflowers differently.

They're survivors. Fighters. They create beauty in unlikely places without anyone's help or permission.

They don't need carefully amended soil or irrigation systems. They find a way to thrive in the margins, in the forgotten spaces, in the cracks of our constructed world.

As I study the collection, I notice a larger piece slightly apart from the others.

It's a meadow scene where all the individual flowers grow together in what should be chaos but instead forms a harmonious whole.

Queen Anne's lace creates a delicate architecture above nodding black-eyed Susans.

Chicory adds splashes of periwinkle blue.

Clover forms a soft groundcover beneath it all.

It's breathtaking in its complexity and emotion, capturing both the individual character of each species and the community they create together.

"What do you think?"

I turn to find Krissa beside me, a knowing smile playing at her lips. She looks completely in her element in a vintage-style dress with a full skirt, her height accentuated by red heels.

"They're incredible," I admit. "Not what I expected. There's something about the way she captures these plants. It's like she's painting their personalities, not just their appearance."

"The artist should be back any minute. She just ran to grab coffee."

"Krissa glances at her watch. "I need to check on another client, but you should stay and meet her."

Jasmine Carter. She has a fascinating perspective on finding beauty in overlooked places.

I think you two might have more in common than you'd expect. "

Before I can respond, she's gone, disappearing into the crowd with a wave and leaving me standing before these extraordinary paintings. I move closer to read the small cards beside each piece, handwritten in an expressive, flowing script.

Wild Rose (*Rosa canina*) – Found growing between cracks in an abandoned parking lot. Nature always finds a way. What would our lives be like if we adapted to difficult circumstances with such grace?

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) – Considered a weed by many, but look closer. What persistence. What perfect design. What determination to thrive despite being unwanted. The first food for bees in spring. Medicine in its roots. A wish-maker for children.

Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus carota*) – Overlooked beauty that transforms ordinary roadside ditches into fairy wonderlands. Named for a queen but democratic in its growth, offering its lacy canopy to any insect seeking shelter or food.

Each description reveals not just observation but a deep emotional connection to these resilient plants.

A perspective that resonates with something long dormant inside me.

A reminder of why I fell in love with plants in the first place.

Not just for their design potential, but for their inherent character and tenacity.

I'm still standing there, absorbed in the meadow painting, studying how the artist captured the way sunlight filters through the delicate umbels of Queen Anne's lace, when I sense someone approach.

Turning, I find myself looking at a woman who embodies the same vibrant energy as her artwork.

Auburn hair catches the sunlight, shifting between copper and deep red as she moves.

She's shorter than me by nearly a foot, wearing a paint-splattered apron over a dress the color of spring leaves that makes her hazel eyes seem more green than brown.

It's those eyes that hold me—flecked with emerald that seem to change intensity as

she looks from me to her painting and back again.

She carries two coffee cups and moves with a graceful, expressive energy that immediately draws my attention.

A smudge of yellow paint marks her cheekbone like an accidental highlight.

Her face is animated, open, curious as she takes me in, her expressions shifting rapidly as though her thoughts are too lively to contain.

Something shifts inside me—a recognition, a possibility—as I realize this must be Jasmine Carter. The artist. The woman Krissa thought I should meet. The creator of these paintings that have awakened something I thought I'd lost. A sense of wonder at the raw, undesigned beauty of the natural world.

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel a spark of something beyond professional interest or aesthetic appreciation.

I feel a desire to connect. To understand the mind that created these paintings, to know the person who sees beauty where others see weeds, to share my own perspective with someone who might actually understand it.

I turn back to look at the paintings, not wanting to start at her in an upsetting way. That's when I feel a very warm splash on my back.

CHAPTER FOUR

JASMINE AND BEN

I juggle two coffee cups while attempting to straighten a painting that keeps tilting despite my best efforts. The morning breeze has picked up, just enough to be problematic for my display. Of course this would happen now, when my booth is finally starting to draw attention.

"Stay put," I mutter to the dandelion painting, wedging a small rock under its easel. "Just for a few hours, that's all I'm asking."

The festival bustles around me—musicians tuning instruments, food vendors calling out specials, children darting between booths with colorful pinwheels.

I've been setting up since dawn, arranging and rearranging my paintings until each one catches the light just right.

The coffee run was supposed to be quick—one for me and one for Zara when she stops by—but the line stretched longer than expected.

As I turn back to my display, I freeze. Someone is studying my meadow painting—the centerpiece of my collection, the one I poured my soul into finishing just yesterday.

Not just glancing, but truly looking, leaning in to examine details most people would miss.

He's tall with broad shoulders, tousled blond hair catching the sunlight.

His posture suggests complete absorption, as though the rest of the noisy festival has disappeared.

I hang back, watching him read the small description cards I labored over.

There's something different about the way he studies each painting—methodical but emotional, his expression shifting subtly as he takes in each piece.

My heart beats a little faster. This is why I paint—for that moment when someone truly sees what I'm trying to say.

A sudden gust of wind chooses that precise moment to sweep through my booth. Several smaller paintings wobble on their easels, and my carefully arranged business cards scatter like confetti. I lunge forward, trying to save everything at once while still balancing the coffee cups.

"No, no, no!" I yelp as my chicory painting tilts precariously. I make a desperate grab for it, but physics is not on my side. The movement sends one coffee cup flying from my hand, its contents arcing through the air in slow motion.

Directly toward the tall stranger.

I watch in horror as coffee splashes across the back of his light blue shirt, dark droplets speckling the fabric like an abstract painting. The empty cup bounces off his shoulder and rolls away, the perfect punctuation to my mortification.

"I'm so sorry!" I gasp, setting down the surviving coffee cup and rushing toward him with napkins I grab from my supply bag. "The wind just—and then the painting was falling—I didn't see you turn around!"

He turns, and I find myself looking up—way up—into the most startlingly kind eyes I've ever seen. They crinkle at the corners as he takes in my distress, laugh lines deepening. Instead of anger, I see amusement warming his expression.

"Well," he says, his voice deep and surprisingly gentle, "I was planning to introduce myself, but I didn't expect it to be quite so... memorable."

Heat floods my cheeks as I dab ineffectively at his shirt. "I've ruined your clothes. I'm so sorry. I was trying to save my paintings from the wind and didn't see you and?—"

"The paintings are more important than the shirt," he interrupts, glancing back at my display. "That meadow piece especially. It's extraordinary."

I stop my frantic dabbing, napkins frozen mid-motion. "You... like it?"

"Like is an understatement." He turns back to look at the painting again, seemingly unconcerned about the coffee soaking into his shirt.

"The way you've captured how those plants interact with each other—competing but also supporting—it's exactly how they behave in nature.

Most people miss that relationship entirely. "

I stare at him, momentarily forgetting my embarrassment. Most viewers comment on the colors or the composition, but he's noticed the ecological relationships I tried to convey. The delicate balance between competition and cooperation that allows these plants to thrive together.

"That's exactly what I was trying to show," I say, my voice softer now. "How they create a community."

Another gust of wind sends my business cards flying again, and we both instinctively move to catch them. Our hands brush as we reach for the same card, and I feel a tiny jolt of awareness at the contact. His hands are strong and tanned, with calluses that speak of outdoor work.

"I should probably help you secure these before we lose everything," he says, glancing around my booth with an appraising eye. "Do you have any weights for the easels? Or maybe we could angle them differently against the wind."

"I brought some rocks," I admit, "but clearly not enough."

He smiles, and something flutters in my chest. "Rocks are good. I might have something better, though." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small roll of what looks like gardening wire. "May I?"

When I nod, he moves to the first easel, quickly and efficiently securing it with the wire, creating an anchor that's both functional and nearly invisible. His movements are precise, practiced, as though he's used to working with his hands to solve practical problems.

"You came prepared for an art festival," I observe, watching him work.

He glances up with a smile that transforms his entire face. "I came prepared for a day outdoors. Habit from my job."

"Which is?"

"Landscape architect." He secures another painting, this time my wild rose. "I design gardens and outdoor spaces."

Suddenly his interest in my work makes perfect sense. "So you work with plants

professionally."

"I do. Though I tend to focus more on structural elements—trees, shrubs, architectural grasses. The bones of a garden." He pauses, looking at my dandelion painting. "I've never given much thought to wildflowers. I've always considered them too unpredictable for designed spaces."

"That's exactly why I love them," I say, feeling a spark of passion warming my voice. "They don't follow rules. They find their own way."

His eyes meet mine, and something passes between us—a moment of recognition, perhaps. Understanding.

"I'm Ben Thompson," he says, extending his hand.

"Jasmine Carter," I reply, taking it. His palm is warm against mine, his grip firm but gentle.

"I know," he says, then looks slightly embarrassed. "I mean, I saw your name on the booth. And Krissa mentioned there might be a floral artist here."

"Krissa? From the dating agency?" The pieces suddenly click into place. "Wait, are you?—"

"Her client? Apparently." He runs a hand through his hair, looking slightly sheepish. "My sister signed me up. Said I spend too much time with plants and not enough with people."

I laugh, surprised by his candor. "Zara's been trying to convince me to sign up for months. She says I need to meet someone who appreciates my 'unique perspective.'"

"Well," Ben says, his eyes returning to my paintings, "she wasn't wrong about that part."

Another gust of wind rushes through the booth, but this time everything stays put thanks to Ben's improvised solutions. We both look around, satisfied, and I realize we're standing closer than strictly necessary, my shoulder nearly touching his arm.

"So," I say, suddenly aware of how easy it feels to talk to him, "what do landscape architects think about artists who paint weeds instead of proper garden flowers?"

His smile deepens, creating those crinkles around his eyes again. "This particular landscape architect thinks he might need to reconsider his definition of beauty." He gestures toward my meadow painting. "And maybe incorporate some of these resilient fighters into his next design."

"Really?" I can't keep the pleased surprise from my voice.

"Really." He looks down at me, and I notice the flecks of darker blue in his eyes, like shadows in clear water.

"Actually, I'm working on a project right now that needs something special.

Something unexpected. Would you..." He hesitates, then continues.

"Would you be interested in showing me some of the places where you found these wildflowers? I could use some inspiration."

The invitation hangs between us, filled with possibility. This isn't just professional interest—I can feel it in the way he watches me, waiting for my answer. There's something more here, something neither of us expected to find at an art festival on a windy morning.

"I'd like that," I say, surprising myself with how much I mean it. "I know all the best forgotten corners where beauty hides."

His smile widens. "I'm counting on it."

As festival-goers begin to fill the pathways between booths, I realize I should probably be focusing on potential customers. But I can't seem to look away from Ben, with his coffee-stained shirt and wire-calloused hands and eyes that actually see what I'm trying to show in my work.

For the first time in ages, it's like someone is looking past the surface and actually seeing me. Not just my art, but me—the person behind the paintings. The woman who finds beauty in overlooked places, who believes in resilience and wild, untamed growth.

And as Ben moves to help another painting that's starting to tilt, I find myself hoping that this unexpected meeting might be the beginning of something just as wild and beautiful as the flowers I paint.

I watch Jasmine chat with a potential customer, her hands animated as she explains something about her dandelion painting. There's a transformation that happens when she talks about her art. Her entire being lights up, her movements become more fluid, more confident. It's captivating.

The coffee stain on my shirt is already forgotten. I've worked outdoors long enough to know that clothes are just tools, meant to get dirty. What matters is what we create with our hands, our minds, our vision.

And what Jasmine creates is extraordinary.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:04 am

I move slightly away to give her space with her customer, taking the opportunity to study her other paintings more closely.

Each one reveals something new on closer inspection—the way she's captured light filtering through Queen Anne's lace, the defiant angle of a chicory bloom, the complex structure of clover that most people overlook entirely.

"Sorry about that," Jasmine says, appearing at my side after the customer leaves with one of her smaller paintings. "First sale of the day."

"Congratulations." I smile down at her, noticing how the sunlight brings out copper highlights in her hair. "They chose well. Though I'm partial to the meadow piece myself."

"That one's not for sale," she admits, then looks surprised at her own words. "I mean, it could be, but... it's special to me. I finished it just yesterday."

"I understand." And I do. Some creations feel too personal to part with, at least right away. "It captures something essential about how plants interact in natural settings. The community they form."

Her eyes widen slightly. "Most people don't notice that part."

"I spend my life observing how plants relate to each other and their environment. It's the foundation of good landscape design." I gesture toward her paintings. "But you've captured something I often miss—the emotional quality of these relationships. The... personality of each plant."

"Personality." She repeats the word softly, a smile playing at her lips. "That's exactly it. Each one has its own character, its own way of being in the world."

Another customer approaches, and Jasmine excuses herself again. I watch as she engages with them, her expression open and genuine. She seems both completely present with each person yet somehow vulnerable, as though each interaction requires a small leap of faith.

I notice Krissa watching from across the way, not even trying to hide her satisfied smile. She gives me a not-so-subtle thumbs up before disappearing into the crowd. I shake my head, smiling despite myself. My sister will be insufferable when she finds out the matchmaker was right.

While Jasmine is occupied, I continue securing her display against the persistent breeze.

Years of creating gardens in challenging environments have taught me to improvise with whatever materials are available.

I find small rocks to weigh down her business card holder, reposition her easels to create less wind resistance, and use my wire to secure the larger pieces.

"You didn't have to do all this," Jasmine says when she returns, looking around at her now wind-proof display.

"I wanted to." I step back to survey my work. "Consider it an apology for distracting you from your customers."

"You're hardly a distraction." Her cheeks flush slightly. "I mean, you're helping. That's not distracting. That's... helpful."

Her flustered response is endearing. There's something refreshingly genuine about her, a quality I rarely encounter in my professional circles where everyone is carefully curated, including me.

"So," I say, "tell me about these forgotten corners where you find your subjects. I'm working on a project for clients who want something different—a garden that feels like living art rather than a conventional landscape. Your perspective could be exactly what I need."

"You're serious?" She studies me, as though checking for sincerity.

"Completely serious." I meet her gaze directly. "I've been stuck in a creative rut lately, recycling elements from previous designs. Your work shows a completely different way of seeing beauty in the natural world."

The festival continues to bustle around us, but in this moment, it feels like we're in our own small bubble of shared understanding. A connection forms between us—tentative but unmistakable.

"There's an abandoned lot behind the old textile factory," she says, her voice taking on a dreamlike quality.

"Nature has reclaimed it completely. That's where I found the wild rose in that painting—growing right through a crack in the concrete, its roots somehow finding soil beneath all that pavement. "

I can picture it perfectly. "Adaptive. Resilient."

"Exactly." Her eyes light up. "And there's a forgotten corner of Riverside Park that the maintenance crews never seem to touch."

It's where I found that Queen Anne's lace.

In the early morning, when dew catches on those tiny umbrella blooms, it looks like someone scattered diamonds across the field. "

The way she describes these places makes them sound magical, sacred almost. In my work, I'm usually imposing order on nature, creating deliberate beauty through careful selection and placement.

Jasmine's approach is the opposite—finding beauty in what emerges without human intervention, in what persists despite neglect or active discouragement.

"I'd love to see these places," I say, meaning it more than I expected to. "To understand what you see in them."

"I could show you." The offer comes quickly, eagerly, before she seems to catch herself. "I mean, if that would be helpful for your project."

"It would be." I pause, then add more quietly, "And I'd enjoy your company."

Another customer approaches, and Jasmine turns to greet them.

I step back again, giving her space to work, but I can't help watching her.

There's something captivating about the way she lights up when talking about her art, the way her hands move expressively, the way her entire being seems engaged in sharing what she sees with others.

I realize I'm smiling, and it feels unfamiliar—not the polite, professional smile I offer clients, but something more genuine. Something that reaches my eyes and warms my chest.

My phone buzzes with a text from my sister.

Lil Sis: How's the festival? See anything inspiring?

Me: More than you know. You might have been right about the matchmaking thing.

Lil Sis: !!!!! Details!!!!

I slip my phone back into my pocket without responding.

Some experiences are too new, too precious to share right away, even with Leah.

This unexpected connection with Jasmine feels like finding a rare seedling—something promising but delicate, needing protection and nurturing before exposure to the wider world.

When Jasmine finishes with her customer, I help her rearrange her display to fill the space left by the sold painting.

Our movements fall into an easy rhythm, as though we've worked together before.

When our hands brush accidentally, I feel that same jolt of awareness I noticed earlier: a spark of something that has nothing to do with art or professional collaboration.

"So," I say as we step back to assess our work, "when would you be free to show me these wildflower havens of yours?"

She tucks a strand of copper hair behind her ear, a gesture I'm beginning to recognize as a thinking habit. "I'm here all weekend for the festival. But maybe Monday? Morning light is best for seeing the dew on the Queen Anne's lace."

"Monday morning it is." I pull out my phone to add it to my calendar, then hesitate. "I should probably get your number. For coordination purposes."

She smiles, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "For coordination purposes. Of course."

As we exchange numbers, I'm struck by how easy this feels. How natural. Like plants growing together in that meadow she painted—different species finding harmony in the same space.

"I should probably let you get back to your customers," I say reluctantly as more festival-goers begin to cluster around her booth. "But I'm looking forward to Monday."

"Me too." Her smile is warm, genuine. "And Ben? Thanks for seeing what I was trying to show in these paintings. That means more than you know."

As I walk away, I glance back to see her already engaged with another visitor, her hands moving expressively as she explains her work.

The morning sun catches her hair, turning it to living flame, and for a moment she looks like she belongs in one of her own paintings—vibrant, resilient, unexpectedly beautiful.

I touch my phone in my pocket, feeling the weight of her number saved there. Monday suddenly seems very far away. But some things—the most worthwhile things—are worth waiting for. Like gardens. Like connections that promise to grow into something beautiful.

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel a sense of anticipation that has nothing to do with work or obligation. A feeling that something important is beginning. Something unplanned, unexpected, and all the more precious for it.

Like wildflowers pushing through concrete, finding a way to bloom against all odds.

CHAPTER FIVE

JASMINE

I nearly dance into my apartment, closing the door behind me with a gentle push of my hip.

The festival exceeded all my expectations—not just in sales, which were surprisingly good, but in ways I never anticipated.

I set my bag down and kick off my shoes, still feeling the lingering excitement of the day buzzing through my veins.

"Hello, plant babies," I murmur to my collection of green friends crowding the windowsills. "Your mom had quite a day."

I pull my phone from my pocket, looking at the new contact entry: Ben Thompson. My thumb hovers over his name, tempted to text him already, but I resist. Monday morning isn't that far away, even if it feels like an eternity right now.

Instead, I dial Elena.

"Spill everything," she demands by way of greeting. "How many pieces did you sell? Did anyone important see your work? Did you wear something besides that green dress?"

I laugh, collapsing onto my couch. "Hello to you too. I sold seven paintings,

including the chicory and the wild rose. And yes, I wore the blue dress with the pattern you like."

"Seven! Jas, that's amazing! I told you people would connect with your work." Her voice brims with genuine excitement. "Any collectors I should know about?"

"A couple from Oakridge bought the rose painting for their sunroom. But that's not even the most interesting part of the day." I pause, suddenly feeling shy about sharing.

"What? Did Marcus show up? Did someone famous buy something?" Elena's questions tumble out rapidly.

"I met someone." The words come out in a rush. "A landscape architect named Ben. He really understood my paintings, Elena. Not just thought they were pretty, but actually got what I was trying to say about resilience and finding beauty in overlooked places."

"Wait, wait, wait. You met a guy? At the festival? Who actually appreciates your art?" The surprise in her voice would be offensive if it weren't so justified by my dating history (or lack thereof).

"He helped me secure my display when the wind kept knocking everything over. After I spilled coffee on him." I cringe at the memory. "But he didn't even care about his shirt. He was too busy looking at my meadow painting and talking about plant communities."

"Plant communities? Sexy." Elena's tone is teasing, but I can hear the genuine interest underneath.

"It was, actually." I feel my cheeks warm at the admission. "The way he looked at my

work... it was like he was seeing me. The real me."

"So when are you seeing him again?"

"Monday morning. I'm showing him some of the places where I find my wildflowers. For his work," I add quickly.

"Mmhmm. For his work. Sure." Elena's smile is audible. "I want every detail after. And Jas? I'm really happy for you. You deserve someone who sees you."

After hanging up, I wander to my studio, pulling out a fresh canvas. The evening light streams through the window, casting long shadows across the floor. I don't usually paint at night, preferring natural morning light, but right now my fingers itch to create.

I set up my easel and squeeze colors onto my palette—rich greens, warm browns, vibrant purples, and golds.

No specific plan in mind, just letting the feelings of the day guide my brush.

As I begin laying down broad strokes of color, I realize I'm painting a garden.

Not a wild meadow this time, but something that blends structure with wilderness—architectural elements softened by untamed growth.

Organized paths winding through seemingly chaotic plantings that reveal their harmony only when viewed as a whole.

A garden that might exist in the space between Ben's world and mine.

My brush moves faster now, adding details—a stone bench nestled among tall

grasses, dappled sunlight creating patterns across a path, wildflowers pushing between carefully placed stepping stones.

The painting takes shape beneath my hands, becoming something I've never created before—a vision of wildness contained but not constrained, of structure enhanced rather than diminished by spontaneity.

As I work, I catch myself smiling, remembering the way Ben's eyes crinkled at the corners when he looked at my paintings. The gentle confidence in his movements as he secured my display. The surprising softness in his voice when he said he'd enjoy my company.

My inner critic whispers: Don't get carried away. He was just being nice. He's interested in your work for his project, that's all.

But for once, I don't listen. The warmth I felt in our connection wasn't imagined. The way our hands fit together when we shook goodbye wasn't coincidental. The spark when our fingers brushed wasn't just in my head.

Was it?

I step back from the canvas, suddenly uncertain. My excitement dims as doubt creeps in. Am I reading too much into a professional interaction? Creating a romantic narrative where none exists?

I set my brush down and wrap my arms around myself. This is what always happens—I get carried away by possibilities, by what could be rather than what is. I build elaborate fantasies from the smallest interactions, only to be disappointed when reality doesn't match my imagination.

My phone chimes with a text, startling me from my spiral of self-doubt. I wipe my

paint-smudged hands on a rag before checking it.

Ben: Just wanted to say thanks again for today. Your work has already sparked some new ideas for the Hamilton project. Looking forward to Monday.

A simple, friendly message. Professional. But then a second text appears.

Also, I can't stop thinking about your meadow painting. The way you captured the relationship between those plants... it's changed how I see the wild spaces I passed on my drive home.

I read the message twice, then a third time, a smile spreading across my face. Not just professional interest after all.

Me: I'm glad. That's exactly what I hope my paintings will do—help people see beauty in places they might otherwise overlook.

Ben: Mission accomplished. My drive home has never been so interesting. I spotted three different wildflower species I've been ignoring for years.

I laugh out loud.

Me: Careful. Next thing you know, you'll be the one painting weeds.

Ben: I'll leave that to the expert. My talents lie elsewhere.

I hesitate before sending the next message.

Me: I started a new painting tonight. Something different for me—a garden that balances structure and wilderness. Your influence, I think.

The typing indicator appears, disappears, then appears again.

Ben: I'm honored. Maybe you could show me sometime. After our wildflower expedition.

My heart does a little flip.

Me: I'd like that.

Ben: Goodnight, Jasmine. Sweet dreams.

Me: Goodnight, Ben.

I set my phone down, feeling lighter than before. Maybe I wasn't imagining things after all. Maybe this connection is real—tentative and new, but real nonetheless.

I turn back to my painting with renewed confidence, adding touches of light and shadow, defining the spaces where structure meets wildness.

The garden takes shape beneath my brush, becoming more than just a fantasy—a possibility.

A meeting place between two different ways of seeing beauty in the world.

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I paint without my inner critic whispering doubts in my ear. I paint with joy, with hope, with the simple pleasure of creating something that feels true.

And when I finally step back, brush in hand, I see something I've never created before—a painting that honors both the wild and the cultivated, finding harmony in their coexistence rather than conflict.

Just like Ben and me.

Monday morning arrives with perfect clarity—cool, crisp air and sunlight that makes everything glow.

I arrive at our meeting spot early, nervous energy making it impossible to sit still.

I've chosen my favorite jeans and a soft sweater in a shade of green that brings out the emerald flecks in my eyes.

Practical for scrambling through abandoned lots, but still flattering.

Not that I spent an hour deciding on this totally casual outfit.

When Ben's truck pulls into the parking lot, my heart does that ridiculous flutter again.

He steps out looking like he belongs in an outdoor clothing catalog, in faded jeans, sturdy boots, and a henley that stretches across his shoulders in a way that makes my mouth go dry.

His hair is slightly damp, as though he's just showered, and those laugh lines around his eyes deepen when he spots me.

"Morning," he calls, striding toward me with a travel mug in each hand. "I brought coffee. Peace offering in case you wanted to even the score from Saturday."

I laugh, accepting the cup he offers. "I think I still owe you a shirt."

"Forget the shirt." He smiles down at me, and I'm struck again by how tall he is, how solid. "I'm more interested in these secret wildflower havens you promised to show

me."

"Then you're in luck. We have three stops planned, each one better than the last." I gesture toward my car. "We can take mine if you want. I know where we're going."

"Lead the way."

As we drive to the first location, conversation flows easily between us.

Ben tells me about the Hamilton project—clients who want a garden that feels like "living art" rather than a conventional landscape.

I share stories about finding unexpected beauty in forgotten corners of the city.

There's none of the awkward silence I usually dread on first..

. whatever this is. Not quite a date, but definitely not just a professional meeting either.

"Here we are," I announce, pulling into a small parking area near an old industrial complex. "Former textile factory. Abandoned for years before they started converting part of it into lofts."

Ben looks skeptical as we get out of the car. "This is your wildflower haven?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:04 am

"Just wait." I lead him around the chain-link fence to a gap I discovered months ago. "The main building is being renovated, but they've left this back lot alone. It's like nature is reclaiming it inch by inch."

We slip through the gap, and I watch Ben's expression change as he takes in the scene before us.

What looks like a desolate concrete wasteland at first glance reveals itself as a testament to nature's persistence.

Wildflowers push through cracks in the pavement.

Vines climb the rusted remains of old equipment.

Morning sunlight catches on dewdrops, transforming the seemingly barren lot into something magical.

"This is where I found the wild rose in that painting," I say softly, leading him to a corner where, sure enough, a determined rose bush grows through a fissure in the concrete.

"Look how it's adapted to these conditions.

Smaller leaves to conserve water. Thornier stems for protection.

But the flowers are just as beautiful as any garden variety. "

Ben crouches down, studying the plant with professional interest that gradually shifts to something more like wonder. "The root system on this must be incredible," he murmurs. "Finding a way through all this hardscape to reach soil and water."

"That's what I love about it. The determination." I kneel beside him, careful not to tear my jeans on the rough surface. "It doesn't care that it's not supposed to be here. It just... is."

He looks at me then, something soft in his expression. "You see yourself in these plants, don't you?"

The observation catches me off guard with its accuracy. "I guess I do. My art isn't what people expect. It's not sophisticated or trendy. But it's authentic. It's mine."

"That authenticity is what makes it powerful." His voice is quiet but certain. "Anyone can paint pretty flowers. Not everyone can make people feel something when they look at them."

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, I forget to breathe. There's understanding in his gaze—not just of my work, but of me. Of the parts of myself I usually try to hide.

"We should, um, check out the other areas," I say finally, breaking the moment before it overwhelms me. "The morning light won't last forever."

As we explore the lot, Ben points out things I've never noticed—the succession patterns of different plant species, how certain flowers cluster together for mutual benefit, the way some plants prepare the way for others to follow.

His knowledge adds layers to my appreciation, helping me see the ecological stories behind the beauty I've been painting.

In turn, I show him details he might have missed—the perfect symmetry of a dandelion seed head, the way chicory flowers track the sun throughout the day, the subtle color variations in Queen Anne's lace that indicate different soil conditions.

"I've walked past places like this a thousand times and never really looked," Ben admits as we head back to the car. "I've been so focused on creating designed beauty that I missed the beauty already happening all around us."

"That's what my paintings are trying to say," I reply, feeling a surge of connection. "That beauty doesn't need our permission or cultivation to exist."

His smile warms me from the inside out. "Show me more."

Our second stop is the forgotten corner of Riverside Park.

There's a section where the maintenance crews rarely venture.

Here, native grasses grow tall among wildflowers, creating a miniature prairie ecosystem.

The morning dew still clings to everything, turning ordinary plants into glittering sculptures.

"This is incredible," Ben says, taking it all in. "The biodiversity here is probably higher than in the maintained sections of the park."

"That's what I thought! The butterflies and bees certainly think so." I point to where several monarchs flutter among the milkweed plants. "I come here to sketch at least once a week. The light is different every time."

We wander through the tall grasses, Ben occasionally stopping to examine a

particular plant or take photos with his phone.

I find myself watching him as much as the landscape—the way his hands move when he's explaining something, the focused expression when he's studying a plant detail, the smile that appears when he discovers something unexpected.

"What?" he asks, catching me staring.

"Nothing. Just... it's nice to share this place with someone who appreciates it."

"I more than appreciate it," he says, his voice sincere. "You're making me rethink what matters in my designs. I'm starting to value the unexpected, the wild touches I used to edit out. Making me question assumptions I've held for years about what makes a landscape valuable or beautiful."

The simple honesty in his words touches something deep inside me. No one has ever suggested that my perspective might change theirs in any meaningful way.

"Ready for the grand finale?" I ask, trying to lighten the moment before my emotions get the better of me.

Our final stop is my favorite—a small wetland area hidden behind a commercial development. A forgotten piece of land that most people would consider worthless, but which has become a thriving ecosystem of cattails, rushes, and water-loving wildflowers.

"The developers probably thought this area was too wet to build on, so they left it alone," I explain as we pick our way along a narrow path. "But look what happened when nature was allowed to take its course."

The morning sun creates a golden haze over the water. Dragonflies dart among the

reeds. A great blue heron stands motionless at the water's edge, watching for fish.

"This is..." Ben shakes his head, seemingly at a loss for words. "I design water features for clients all the time, but nothing I've created has this kind of life, this kind of... soul."

"Maybe because you're trying to control everything," I suggest gently. "Sometimes the most beautiful things happen when we just create the right conditions and then step back."

He looks at me for a long moment, something shifting in his expression. "That applies to more than just gardens, doesn't it?"

My heart beats faster at the implication. "I think so."

We stand together in comfortable silence, watching the heron successfully catch a small fish and take flight, its massive wings carrying it effortlessly across the water. The moment feels significant somehow—a shared experience that's creating something new between us.

"Thank you for showing me these places," Ben says finally. "For helping me see what I've been missing."

"Thank you for seeing it," I reply softly. "Most people just think I'm weird for finding beauty in abandoned lots and overgrown corners."

"Not weird. Visionary." His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining with gentle pressure. "You see possibilities where others see weeds."

The warmth of his palm against mine sends a current up my arm. Such a simple touch, but it feels monumental. Significant. His thumb brushes across my knuckles in

a small, unconscious gesture of intimacy.

"I have a garden I'm designing," he says, still holding my hand. "A private project on some land I own outside the city. Would you... would you want to see it sometime? Maybe offer some thoughts on how to incorporate some of these wildflower communities?"

The invitation hangs between us, clearly more than just a professional consultation.

"I'd love to." I squeeze his hand gently. "Maybe you could see my studio too. I'm working on that painting I mentioned—the one inspired by you."

His smile brightens his entire face. "It's a date, then."

A date. An actual, intentional date. The word makes everything real in a way it wasn't before.

As we walk back to the car, still hand in hand, I feel something taking root inside me—something fragile but persistent. Like a wildflower finding its way through concrete, determined to bloom against all odds.

Hope.

CHAPTER SIX

BEN

I stand at the edge of my property, watching the morning light filter through the trees.

The land stretches before me—five acres of potential that I've been slowly transforming over the past two years.

Not for a client, but for myself. My own canvas where I don't have to compromise vision for practicality or budget constraints.

Jasmine's coming today. The thought makes me smile as I take another sip of coffee, surveying what she'll see. Will she understand what I'm trying to create here? Will she see past the unfinished sections to the possibility beneath?

It's been three days since our wildflower expedition, and I can't stop thinking about her.

About the way her eyes lit up when she showed me that stubborn rose growing through concrete.

About how her hand felt in mine as we walked back to the car.

About the painting she's creating that somehow blends her world and mine.

She's bringing color into my carefully structured life, and I'm still trying to

understand what that means.

My truck's headlights catch movement at the end of the long driveway. It's Jasmine's car approaching through the early morning mist. I take a deep breath, surprised by the flutter of nervousness in my chest. This isn't a business meeting. We both know that.

Her car pulls up beside my truck, and she emerges wearing jeans and a light sweater the color of spring leaves. Her auburn hair is pulled back in a loose braid, with tendrils already escaping around her face. She looks both excited and nervous as she spots me.

"You found it," I call, walking toward her.

"Your directions were perfect." She smiles, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Though I wasn't expecting quite so much... space."

"Five acres." I gesture to the surrounding land. "Most of it was cleared for agriculture decades ago, but I've been letting sections return to their natural state while designing others more intensively."

"It's beautiful." Her eyes scan the property, taking in the mix of open meadow, young woodland, and the beginnings of my more structured garden areas. "I can already see what you're trying to do here."

"Can you?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"Creating dialogue between the wild and the cultivated." She steps forward, moving toward the nearest garden bed where native perennials grow in carefully considered groupings. "Showing how they can enhance each other rather than compete."

Her insight surprises me. That's exactly what I've been attempting, though I've never

articulated it quite so clearly.

"Come on," I say, offering her the extra travel mug I brought. "Let me show you the whole place."

We walk side by side through the property, our shoulders occasionally brushing.

I explain my vision for each area: the meadow I'm establishing with native grasses and wildflowers, the small orchard of heritage fruit trees, the woodland garden where shade-loving natives grow beneath the canopy of mature oaks.

"This is the section I'm currently working on," I tell her as we approach a partially completed garden room.

Stone paths wind through plantings that are still taking shape, leading to a small circular patio.

"It's meant to be a contemplative space.

Somewhere to sit and observe the changing seasons. "

"I love how you've framed the view of the meadow beyond," Jasmine says, walking along the path. "It's like a living painting."

Her words please me more than I expected. "That's exactly what I was going for. Creating a series of vignettes that change as you move through the space."

She stops at the edge of the patio, turning in a slow circle to take everything in. "Your work is so different from what I imagined."

"What did you imagine?"

"Something more... formal, I guess. More controlled." She looks up at me with those changeable hazel eyes, now more green than brown in the morning light. "But this has soul. It feels alive."

Something warm unfurls in my chest at her words. Most clients appreciate my technical skill or the functionality of my designs. Few recognize the emotional intent behind them.

"That's the highest compliment you could give me," I admit. "I've been trying to move away from the more structured approach I use in my professional work. To create something that feels more... authentic."

"It shows." She reaches out to touch a native iris, its purple bloom nodding in the breeze. "There's heart in this garden."

We continue walking, and I find myself sharing more than just my design philosophy.

I tell her about growing up with a mother who loved gardens but had no time to create one, working long hours as a nurse.

How I started helping an elderly neighbor with his vegetable garden when I was ten, fascinated by the way plants responded to care and attention.

How landscape architecture combined my love of nature with my need to create order from chaos.

"What about you?" I ask as we pause by the small pond I've excavated. "How did you find your way to painting?"

Jasmine kneels to examine a clump of marsh marigolds blooming at the water's edge. "I've always painted. Even as a kid, I was constantly drawing the plants and bugs I

found in our backyard." She looks up at me with a small smile. "My parents thought I'd grow out of it. Get a 'real job' eventually."

"But you didn't."

"No." She stands, brushing dirt from her knees. "I tried other things—worked in an office for a while, took some graphic design classes. But I was miserable. It wasn't until I gave myself permission to paint what truly moved me that I felt... right."

"The wildflowers."

She nods. "Everyone told me to paint what sells—landscapes, pretty garden flowers, things people want over their couch. But those overlooked plants kept calling to me. Their resilience, their determination to bloom whether anyone notices or not."

I see it now—the connection between her and her subjects. The same quiet determination, the same authentic beauty that doesn't demand attention but captivates once you notice it.

"I'm glad you didn't listen," I tell her. "Your work is powerful precisely because it's so personal."

A shadow crosses her face. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm just being stubborn. If I should try to be more... conventional."

The vulnerability in her voice touches something in me. I recognize that doubt—the question of whether following your own vision is worth the struggle when a more mainstream path would be easier.

"Conventional is forgettable," I say quietly. "What you create is memorable. It makes people see differently."

Her eyes meet mine, searching. "You really think so?"

"I know so." I step closer, drawn by the uncertainty in her expression.

"Since seeing your paintings, I've noticed wildflowers everywhere. Plants I've walked past a thousand times without really seeing. Since I met you, I notice wildflowers everywhere. You've opened my eyes to a kind of beauty I didn't even know I was missing. "

The morning light catches the copper highlights in her hair, and I resist the urge to touch it. Instead, I gesture toward a rustic wooden bench nestled beneath a flowering dogwood.

"Hungry? I brought breakfast."

Her smile returns. "Starving, actually."

I retrieve the basket I prepared earlier—fresh bread, local cheese, strawberries from the farmers' market, and a thermos of hot coffee. We sit side by side on the bench, the dogwood petals occasionally drifting down around us like snow.

"This is perfect," she says, biting into a strawberry. "I usually just grab coffee and call it breakfast."

"That explains why you're always pouring coffee on strangers," I tease, remembering our first meeting.

She laughs, the sound bright in the morning quiet. "Only the ones who appreciate my paintings."

"A very select group, I'm sure."

"Smaller than you might think." Something vulnerable flickers across her face again. "Most people don't get it. They see pretty flowers, but they miss the point."

I watch her profile as she looks out across the meadow. There's a tension in her shoulders that wasn't there before, a slight furrow between her brows.

"What is the point?" I ask softly. "Beyond the beauty."

She's quiet for a moment, considering. "That there's value in the overlooked. That persistence matters. That finding your own way to bloom is more important than fitting someone else's idea of what you should be." She glances at me, then away. "That probably sounds silly."

"Not at all." I shift slightly, turning toward her. "It's why your work resonates so deeply. It's honest."

"Honest." She repeats the word thoughtfully. "That's what I'm trying for. But sometimes I worry I feel things too deeply. That I care too much about what most people overlook—like wildflowers growing in the cracks. That my passion is overwhelming, or that I'm just not practical enough."

The insecurity in her voice surprises me. How can someone so talented doubt herself so deeply?

"Jasmine." I wait until she looks at me. "Those qualities are exactly what make your work powerful. What make you interesting."

She studies my face, as though searching for insincerity. "Most men I've dated found it charming at first, then irritating later. My 'artistic temperament,' as my last boyfriend called it."

"Then they were fools." The words come out more forcefully than I intended. "Sorry. I just... I don't understand how anyone could see your passion as a negative."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "Says the man who's known me less than a week."

"Sometimes you recognize something valuable right away." I meet her gaze steadily. "I've built my career on seeing potential where others don't."

The tension in her shoulders eases slightly. She reaches for another strawberry, her fingers brushing mine in the basket. The simple contact sends a current up my arm.

"What about you?" she asks. "Any romantic disasters I should know about?"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:04 am

I laugh, leaning back against the bench. "Nothing dramatic. Just the usual story—too focused on building my career to maintain relationships. At least, that's what my sister tells me."

"The one who signed you up for the matchmaking service?"

"That's the one. Leah thinks I need someone to 'draw me out of my shell,' as she puts it."

Jasmine tilts her head, studying me. "Are you in a shell?"

The question catches me off guard with its directness. "I... maybe. I've always been more comfortable with plants than people. They don't expect conversation."

"And yet here you are, talking quite comfortably with me."

"You're different." The words slip out before I can consider them.

"How so?"

I look out across the property, gathering my thoughts. "It's like we're looking at the same landscape from two different vantage points. Where I see structure and form, you see emotion and story. But we're both looking at the same thing—the beauty in what others overlook."

When I glance back, she's watching me with an expression I can't quite read. Soft. Open. Maybe a little surprised.

"That might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me," she says quietly.

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's true." She sets down her coffee cup. "People compliment my work or my appearance, but you... you see me. The way I think. What matters to me."

The morning sun illuminates her face, highlighting the delicate curve of her cheek, the slight dusting of freckles across her nose. I'm struck again by how beautiful she is—not in a conventional, perfect way, but in a vivid, authentic way that makes it hard to look anywhere else.

"I like what I see," I tell her simply.

Her cheeks flush, and she looks down at her hands. "Even the messy parts? The insecurity and the overthinking and the obsessing over plants most people consider weeds?"

"Especially those parts." I reach over and gently lift her chin, bringing her eyes back to mine. "They're what make you real."

The air between us changes, thickens with possibility. Her eyes drop to my mouth, then back up. I lean forward slightly, giving her time to pull away if she wants to.

She doesn't.

Our lips meet softly at first, a gentle exploration. Her mouth is warm, tasting faintly of strawberries and coffee. When her hand comes up to rest against my chest, I deepen the kiss, drawing her closer. She makes a small sound in the back of her throat that sends heat coursing through me.

When we finally pull apart, her eyes remain closed for a moment, as though she's memorizing the sensation. When they open, they're darker than before, the green flecks more pronounced.

"That was..." she begins.

"Overdue," I finish, smiling.

She laughs, the sound slightly breathless. "I was going to say 'perfect,' but that works too."

I tuck a strand of copper hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger against her cheek. "I've wanted to do that since I saw you at the festival."

"Even after I spilled coffee on you?"

"Especially after that. Your horrified expression was adorable."

She groans, hiding her face against my shoulder. "Don't remind me. Not my smoothest moment."

I wrap my arm around her, enjoying the way she fits against me. "I liked that it wasn't smooth. It was real."

We sit like that for a while, talking quietly as the sun climbs higher.

I point out the hawks circling above the meadow, the subtle color variations in the new growth emerging throughout the garden.

She tells me about her painting process, how she often works through the night when inspiration strikes, losing all track of time.

Eventually, I stand and offer my hand. "There's one more section I want to show you. It's where I could use your input the most."

She takes my hand, allowing me to pull her to her feet. But instead of releasing it, I keep her hand in mine as we walk. Her fingers intertwine with mine naturally, as though we've been doing this for years instead of minutes.

I lead her to the farthest corner of the property, where a small stream cuts through a wooded area. Here, I've started creating a series of tiered gardens that follow the natural contours of the land, descending toward the water.

"This is the most challenging section," I explain, guiding her along a rough path. "I want to preserve the wild character while adding elements that draw the eye and invite exploration. But everything I've sketched feels too... constructed."

Jasmine walks slowly through the space, taking in the dappled light, the sound of water over rocks, the volunteer plants already establishing themselves on the slopes.

"What if you work with what's already happening?"

" she suggests, crouching to examine a cluster of native violets growing near the stream bank.

"Look at how these violets have naturally colonized this area.

What if you enhanced that pattern, maybe adding some complementary native plants that would thrive in similar conditions? "

I kneel beside her, seeing the area through her eyes. "Instead of imposing a design, amplify the natural patterns."

"Exactly." Her face animates with excitement. "You could create little moments of surprise—a particularly beautiful rock positioned just so, a small sitting area nestled among existing vegetation, stepping stones that guide without dominating."

As she speaks, I can see it—a garden that feels discovered rather than designed. A space that honors the wildness while subtly enhancing it.

"That's brilliant," I tell her, genuinely impressed. "It's exactly the approach this area needs."

Her smile is radiant. "Really? You like the idea?"

"I love it." I stand, helping her up. "It solves the problem I've been wrestling with for months. How to intervene without intruding."

"That's what I try to do in my paintings," she says. "Show what's already beautiful without imposing too much of myself on it."

"Yet your perspective is what makes them special." I squeeze her hand gently. "Just like your perspective is exactly what this garden needed."

We spend the next hour exploring the stream area together, identifying plants already thriving there and discussing others that might complement them.

Jasmine sketches quick impressions in a small notebook she pulls from her pocket, capturing the quality of light, the movement of water, the relationship between different elements.

I find myself watching her as much as the landscape—the focused expression as she draws, the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when concentrating, the graceful movement of her hands as she gestures to explain an idea.

There's a freedom in how she approaches the space, unburdened by the technical constraints that sometimes limit my thinking.

"What?" she asks, catching me watching her.

"You're changing how I see my own work," I admit. "Making me question assumptions I've held for years about what makes a successful landscape."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It's a very good thing." I step closer, drawn by the uncertainty in her expression. "It's easy to get stuck in patterns, to keep creating variations of the same design because it works. You're helping me break out of that."

Her smile returns, brightening her entire face. "Good. Because I'm pretty sure you're changing how I see my work too."

"How so?"

"You notice structural relationships I often miss—how plants interact with each other, how they create spaces together. I usually focus on the individual beauty of each flower. You're teaching me to see the larger composition."

The realization that we're influencing each other's creative perspectives deepens my sense of connection to her. This isn't just attraction or shared interests—it's a genuine meeting of minds that has the potential to help us both grow.

As the sun climbs higher, we make our way back toward the house—a simple cabin I've been renovating alongside the garden. It's still a work in progress, with exposed beams and unfinished walls in some rooms, but the main living area and kitchen are complete.

"Would you like to see inside?" I ask as we approach.

She nods, and I lead her up the porch steps. The cabin is modest but thoughtfully designed, with large windows that frame views of the garden and bring natural light into every room. The interior is simple—warm wood tones, comfortable furniture, open spaces that flow into each other.

"This is lovely," Jasmine says, turning slowly to take in the main room. "It feels like an extension of the garden."

"That's the idea." I move to the kitchen, filling the kettle for tea. "I wanted the transition between inside and outside to be seamless."

She wanders to the bookshelves that line one wall, examining the collection of volumes on landscape design, botany, and natural history. Her fingers trail over the spines, pausing occasionally to pull one out and flip through it.

"You have an amazing library," she comments, replacing a book on native plant communities.

"I'm a bit of a collector." I set out mugs and tea bags. "Knowledge is never wasted in this field. There's always something new to learn, some historical approach to adapt for contemporary use."

She moves to the large drafting table positioned near the windows, where sketches and plant lists for the stream garden are spread out. "May I?"

"Of course."

As the water heats, I watch her study my drawings—the careful renderings of topography, the detailed planting plans, the perspective sketches showing how the

garden will look when mature. She examines each one with genuine interest, occasionally nodding as though confirming something to herself.

"Your technical skill is incredible," she says finally, looking up. "These drawings are beautiful in their own right."

"Thank you." I bring the tea to the small table near the drafting desk. "But they're missing something, I think. The emotional quality that would make them truly compelling."

"Maybe." She accepts the mug I offer. "Or maybe that's just not their purpose. They communicate information clearly and precisely. My paintings aim for emotional impact, but they'd be useless for actually constructing a garden."

Her generosity in seeing value in our different approaches touches me. So many people frame differences as deficiencies rather than complementary strengths.

"Still," I say, "I'd like to find a way to capture more of the feeling of a place in my designs. The qualities that can't be measured or quantified."

"Like what you're doing with your own garden here." She gestures toward the windows. "It has both technical excellence and heart."

"Because it's personal," I admit. "I'm not trying to please a client or meet a specific brief. I'm just creating what feels right to me."

"That's how I paint," Jasmine says, her eyes lighting up with recognition. "When I try to create what I think will sell, the work feels flat. It's only when I follow my own vision that it comes alive."

We sit together by the windows, drinking tea and sharing stories about our creative

processes—the struggles and breakthroughs, the moments of doubt and inspiration.

The conversation flows easily, punctuated by laughter and moments of silent understanding.

I can't remember the last time I talked so openly with someone about my work, my aspirations, my uncertainties.

"I should probably get going soon," Jasmine says eventually, glancing at her watch. "I have a commission I need to work on this afternoon."

"Of course." I try to hide my disappointment. "Let me walk you to your car."

Outside, the day has warmed considerably, the morning mist long burned away by the sun. We walk slowly down the path, neither of us seeming eager to end our time together.

At her car, she turns to face me. "Thank you for showing me your garden. It's truly special, Ben. A perfect reflection of you."

"Thank you for seeing it that way." I step closer, drawn by the warmth in her eyes. "And for your insights about the stream area. You've given me exactly what I needed."

"I'm glad." She looks up at me, a question in her expression. "So... what happens now?"

The directness of her question makes me smile. "Now I'd like to see your studio. Your creative space. If you're willing to share it."

"I'd like that." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's not as impressive as all

this, just the spare room in my apartment. But it's where the magic happens, I guess."

"Then it's important." I reach out to take her hand. "How about tomorrow evening? I could bring dinner."

Her smile brightens. "That sounds perfect."

I lean down to kiss her goodbye, intending something quick and light. But when our lips meet, the same electricity from earlier courses between us. Her hand comes up to rest against my chest, and I pull her closer, deepening the kiss. When we finally part, we're both a little breathless.

"Tomorrow, then," I say, reluctantly stepping back.

"Tomorrow." She gets into her car, but rolls down the window before starting the engine. "Ben? This was wonderful. All of it."

"For me too." I rest my hand on the car door, not quite ready to let her go. "Drive safely."

As I watch her car disappear down the driveway, I'm struck by a realization that should probably concern me but instead fills me with a quiet joy: in just a few days, this woman has become important to me in a way I didn't expect.

Her perspective challenges me. Her presence grounds me.

Her smile makes me happier than I can remember being in years.

I turn back toward my garden, seeing it with new eyes—her eyes. The wildflowers pushing through between my carefully placed stones. The volunteer saplings I've allowed to remain where they sprouted. The natural patterns I've enhanced rather than

erased.

For the first time, I truly see the dialogue between structure and wildness that Jasmine recognized immediately. The conversation between what I've designed and what nature has contributed. The beauty in that collaboration.

Just as there's beauty in what's growing between Jasmine and me—something unplanned but promising. Something worth nurturing to see what it might become.

I smile to myself as I head back to work on the stream garden, her suggestions already reshaping my vision for the space. Tomorrow can't come soon enough.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JASMINE AND BEN

I drive home from Ben's property with my heart so full it feels like it might burst. The morning we spent together keeps replaying in my mind—the way he looked at my paintings with genuine understanding, the feel of his hand in mine as we walked through the gardens, that kiss that still makes my skin tingle when I think about it.

For the first time in forever, I feel seen.

Not just as an artist, but as a person. Ben doesn't just tolerate my "whimsical" side—he appreciates it.

Values it, even. The way he listened to my ideas about the stream garden, his excitement when I suggested working with the natural patterns already forming.

.. it wasn't patronizing. He truly wanted my perspective.

I hum along to the radio as I pull into the parking lot of my apartment building, already thinking about tomorrow evening when he'll come to my studio.

I should clean up a bit, maybe move some of the half-finished canvases to make space.

But not too much—I want him to see my creative process, messy as it sometimes is.

My phone buzzes.

Elena: Coffee at Perks in 30? Need to hear EVERYTHING about Garden Man.

Me: Be there in 45. Need to shower off the garden dirt first.

At home, I quickly shower and change, unable to stop smiling as I get ready. The reflection in the mirror looks different somehow—my eyes brighter, my movements more confident. Is this what happiness looks like on me? It's been so long I barely recognize it.

Forty minutes later, I push open the door to Perks, the local coffee shop where Elena and I have been meeting for years. She's already there, waving from our usual corner table, two mugs steaming in front of her.

"There she is!" Elena calls as I approach. "Looking suspiciously happy for a Monday."

I slide into the chair across from her, wrapping my hands around the mug she's ordered for me—chai latte with an extra shot of espresso, my usual.

"So?" She leans forward, eyes sparkling with curiosity. "How was the garden tour with Mr. Landscape Architect? And don't leave anything out."

I take a sip of my latte to hide my smile. "It was... perfect. His property is amazing, Elena. Five acres that he's transforming into this incredible blend of wild and cultivated spaces. And he actually values my perspective on plants. He asked for my input on a section he's designing."

"Input on his garden? Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" Elena waggles her eyebrows suggestively.

"Stop!" I laugh, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. "It wasn't like that. Well, not entirely."

"Oh my god, details immediately." She sets down her coffee cup with such enthusiasm that some sloshes over the side.

"We kissed." I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. "And it was... wow."

"Just kissed?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Yes, just kissed. It's only been a few days since we met." But even as I say it, I know that time doesn't really matter here. The connection between Ben and me feels deeper than the brief span we've known each other.

"And? When are you seeing him again?"

"Tomorrow evening. He's coming to my studio. To see my work," I add quickly when she gives me another suggestive look.

"I'm sure that's all he wants to see." Elena grins, then her expression softens. "Seriously though, I'm happy for you. You're practically glowing. It's been a long time since I've seen you this excited about someone."

"I know. It's just..." I trace the rim of my mug with my finger, trying to find the right words. "He gets me, Elena. Not just my art, but me. The way I see the world. And he doesn't think it's silly or impractical."

"Why would he think that?" Elena frowns slightly.

I shrug, uncomfortable with the question. "You know how people can be. They think artists are flighty or unrealistic. Especially when you paint things most people consider weeds."

"Speaking of which, how's the commission for the Hendersons coming? They're still set on the wildflower meadow piece for their dining room, right?"

"Almost finished. I just need to add some final details to the foreground. I think they'll love it."

We chat about work for a while—her promotion at the marketing firm, my upcoming gallery showing, the commission I need to complete this week. It feels good, normal. But my mind keeps drifting back to Ben, to the way he looked at me when we said goodbye, like he couldn't wait to see me again.

As we're finishing our coffees, the bell above the door chimes, and I glance up to see my friend Mara entering with a woman I don't recognize. Mara spots us and waves, making her way over to our table.

"Hey, you two!" She smiles brightly. "This is Sophie, my new colleague from the design department." She turns to the woman beside her. "Sophie, this is Elena and Jasmine."

We exchange pleasantries, and Mara asks about my festival showing. I tell her about the sales and the positive feedback, feeling that familiar rush of pride and gratitude.

"That's amazing, Jas!" Mara beams. "I knew people would connect with your work. Oh, and how was the garden thing with the landscape guy? Did that happen yet?"

"This morning," I confirm, unable to keep the smile from my face. "It was wonderful."

"Ooh, details!" Mara pulls up a chair, gesturing for Sophie to join us. "Is he as dreamy as his portfolio suggests?"

"Even dreamier," I admit, feeling my cheeks warm again. "And he has this incredible property he's designing himself. It's like nothing I've ever seen—this perfect balance of structure and wildness."

"Just like the two of you," Elena interjects with a smirk.

I roll my eyes at her, but can't deny the accuracy of her observation.

"Wait," Sophie says, looking interested. "Is this Ben Thompson? The landscape architect who did the Riverside Plaza renovation?"

"Yes, that's him." I'm surprised she knows his work. "Do you know him?"

"Not personally, but I've admired his designs for years.

My firm collaborated with his on a commercial project last year.

" Sophie takes a sip of her coffee. "He's incredibly talented.

Very detail-oriented and precise. Not the type I'd expect to be interested in.

.." She pauses, gesturing vaguely toward me.

"In what?" Elena asks, her tone suddenly cooler.

Sophie seems to realize her misstep. "Oh, I just meant... his aesthetic is so structured and architectural. Very clean lines and deliberate compositions. And your work is more..." She searches for a word. "Whimsical? Free-form? I'm just surprised, that's all. You seem like artistic opposites."

"That's what makes it interesting," Mara jumps in, clearly trying to smooth over the

awkward moment. "Complementary perspectives, right?"

But Sophie's words have already lodged themselves in my mind, feeding the insecurities that never fully disappear.

She's right. Ben and I are opposites in many ways.

His work is precise, controlled, respected in professional circles.

Mine is emotional, intuitive, often dismissed as merely decorative.

"Absolutely," I say, forcing a smile. "Opposites attract and all that."

The conversation moves on, but I'm only half-listening.

Sophie's observation—casual as it was—has cracked open the door to all my doubts.

Would someone like Ben, with his prestigious clients and technical expertise, really be interested in someone like me?

Or is this just a temporary fascination with something different from his usual world?

By the time I get home, the glow from the morning has dimmed considerably. I stare at my phone, at the text Ben sent while I was at coffee.

Ben: Still thinking about this morning. Can't wait to see your studio tomorrow. And you, of course.

I type and delete several responses before settling on

Me: Looking forward to it. See you then.

Short. Safe. Not revealing the sudden tumult of insecurities churning inside me.

In my studio, I look at the painting I started after our first meeting—the one blending structure and wildness, inspired by the space between Ben's world and mine.

It had felt so promising, so full of possibility.

Now I see all its flaws—the composition that doesn't quite work, the colors that clash in places, the concept that feels forced.

I turn it to face the wall. Maybe Sophie is right. Maybe we're too different. Maybe what I saw as understanding was just professional courtesy or passing interest.

My phone buzzes again.

Ben: Everything okay? That seemed a little brief.

He noticed. Of course he noticed. He notices everything.

Me: Just busy with commissions. Talk tomorrow.

I set my phone down and pick up my brushes, determined to lose myself in work rather than worry. But as I face the Henderson commission, I find myself second-guessing every stroke. Is this too fanciful? Too emotional? Too much?

Am I too much?

The question haunts me as I work into the evening, my earlier joy replaced by a familiar companion: doubt. By the time I clean my brushes and prepare for bed, I've convinced myself that whatever Ben saw in me will eventually disappoint him when he realizes how different we truly are.

Tomorrow, when he comes to my studio, he'll see the real me—the messy, emotional artist who paints weeds because she identifies with their struggle to be valued. And then what? Will his interest fade when the novelty wears off?

I curl up in bed, pulling the covers tight around me.

The rational part of my brain knows I'm spiraling, creating problems where none exist. But the wounded part—the part that's been dismissed and underestimated before—whispers that it's only a matter of time before Ben realizes I'm not what he wants.

And the worst part is, I've already started to fall for him.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 11:04 am

I arrive at Jasmine's studio apartment fifteen minutes early, carrying a bag of takeout from the Mediterranean place downtown and a bottle of wine tucked under my arm.

The evening air feels charged with anticipation, but something doesn't feel right.

Her last few text messages have been uncharacteristically brief, almost cold compared to our earlier conversations.

Something's changed since yesterday morning at my property. The connection we shared, the way she lit up talking about the wildflowers, the kiss that still lingers in my mind—it all felt so genuine. But now there's a distance I can't explain.

I check the address again before knocking. From inside, I hear a muffled "Coming!" followed by what sounds like something being moved or rearranged.

When Jasmine opens the door, her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. She's wearing paint-splattered overalls over a green t-shirt, her hair pulled back in a messy bun with copper tendrils escaping around her face. Even in this casual state, she's breathtaking.

"Hi," she says, stepping back to let me in. "Sorry about the mess. I've been working all day."

"No apology needed." I hand her the wine and food. "I brought dinner. Hope you like Mediterranean."

"I love it. Thank you." She takes the bags, our fingers brushing briefly. I notice she doesn't quite meet my eyes.

Her apartment is exactly what I expected—vibrant, creative, alive with color.

Plants crowd every windowsill, paintings in various stages of completion lean against walls, and the air smells of paint and turpentine with undertones of something floral.

It's chaotic but in the most beautiful way, like a meadow where every plant has found its perfect place through natural selection rather than design.

"Your studio is through here?" I ask, nodding toward an open doorway where I glimpse an easel.

"Yes, but maybe we should eat first?" She's already moving toward the small kitchen area, setting down the bags. "I'm starving, and it smells amazing."

I follow her lead, helping to unpack the food and pour the wine. Her movements are stiff, almost nervous, so different from the fluid grace I observed yesterday. Something is definitely wrong.

"Jasmine," I say quietly as she reaches for plates. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course." Her response comes too quickly. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"You seem... different. Did I do something wrong?"

She sets the plates down with a small sigh. "No, Ben. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But something's changed since yesterday."

She busies herself with opening containers, avoiding my gaze. "I just... I've been thinking."

"About?"

"About us. About how different we are." She finally looks up at me, and the uncertainty in her eyes makes my chest tighten. "Your work is so structured and precise. Mine is emotional. Almost silly. We're complete opposites."

I study her face, trying to understand where this is coming from. "I thought that's what made our connection interesting. Complementary perspectives, remember?"

"Is it, though?" She fidgets with her wineglass. "Or is this just a temporary fascination with something different from your usual world?"

The question catches me off guard. "Where is this coming from, Jasmine? Yesterday you seemed happy about our connection."

"I was. I am." She looks down again. "But I ran into someone who knows your work professionally. She seemed surprised you'd be interested in someone like me."

Understanding dawns. Someone's planted a seed of doubt, and it's taken root in fertile ground. I recognize the pattern—I've seen it in her paintings, the way she captures the beauty in overlooked places while simultaneously questioning if others will value them.

"Let's take our food into your studio," I suggest, changing tactics. "I still want to see where you create."

She looks surprised but nods, helping me gather the food and wine.

We move into the studio space, which is even more vibrant than the rest of the apartment.

Canvases in various stages of completion surround us, each one a window into how Jasmine sees the world.

I notice one canvas turned to face the wall and wonder about its significance.

We settle on a small couch beneath the window, plates balanced on our laps. For a few minutes, we eat in silence, but it's not the comfortable quiet we shared yesterday. This silence feels heavy with unspoken doubts.

"The painting you started after we met," I say finally. "Is that the one facing the wall?"

She nearly chokes on her wine. "How did you know?"

"Just a guess. May I see it?"

She hesitates, then sets her plate aside and moves to retrieve the canvas.

When she turns it around, I understand immediately why she hid it.

It's a garden unlike any I've seen before—structure and wildness intertwined, architectural elements softened by untamed growth.

It's our worlds meeting, creating something new.

"It's not finished," she says quickly. "And the composition doesn't quite work. The colors clash in places, and the concept feels forced?—"

"It's beautiful," I interrupt, setting my plate down and moving closer to examine it. "It's exactly what I've been trying to create at my property. This balance between order and spontaneity."

"You really think so?" Her voice is small, uncertain.

"I know so." I turn to face her directly. "Jasmine, whoever made you doubt our connection was wrong. Our differences aren't an obstacle—they're the entire point."

The art festival event is starting in an hour across town at the botanical gardens. We're supposed to attend together—her paintings are being featured in the garden setting, a perfect fusion of our worlds. But I'm not sure she's in the right headspace for a public event.

"We don't have to go to the festival tonight if you're not feeling up to it," I offer.

"No, we should go. My work is already set up, and the curator is expecting us." She sets the painting back against the wall, this time facing outward. "I just need a few minutes to change."

While she disappears into her bedroom, I study her paintings more closely.

Each one reveals something about how she sees the world—beauty in overlooked places, resilience in unexpected forms, emotion in every brushstroke.

I'm drawn to a new piece I haven't seen before—a study of water reflecting light, reminiscent of the pond at my property.

When Jasmine returns wearing a flowing green dress that makes her eyes more emerald than hazel, I'm struck again by how beautiful she is—not in a conventional way, but in a way that feels alive and authentic.

"Ready?" she asks, though her voice suggests she's anything but.

The botanical garden glows with string lights when we arrive, creating a magical

atmosphere as twilight deepens.

Jasmine's paintings have been placed throughout the garden, each one positioned near the type of plant it depicts.

It's a brilliant curatorial choice—her wild rose painting beside a heritage rose garden, her dandelion study near a section on beneficial "weeds," her meadow piece in an open area where multiple plant communities converge.

Visitors move through the garden, pausing to admire both the plants and Jasmine's interpretations of them. I watch her interact with people, explaining her work with passion despite her earlier uncertainty. When she's in her element talking about art, she shines.

But I notice the tension returns whenever she's not actively engaging with others. She keeps a subtle distance between us, and twice I catch her watching me when she thinks I'm not looking, her expression troubled.

After an hour of mingling, I find her alone by her meadow painting, staring at it with a furrowed brow.

"Your work is the highlight of the exhibition," I say, approaching slowly. "I've overheard at least a dozen people saying so."

"Thanks." She doesn't look up. "The garden setting helps. Your world makes mine look better."

The way she phrases it confirms my suspicions about what's troubling her. "Jasmine, can we talk? Somewhere private?"

She nods, and I lead her to a secluded bench beneath a flowering dogwood, away

from the crowds. We sit side by side, not quite touching.

"I know that someone said something that made you doubt us."

She stares at her hands folded in her lap. "It wasn't just what she said. It was realizing how different our worlds are. Your work is respected, professional. Mine is..." She gestures vaguely.

"Emotional? Intuitive? Filled with heart?" I finish for her. "Those aren't weaknesses, Jasmine. They're what make your work powerful."

"But they're not what make a successful career. Or a successful relationship." She finally looks at me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I'm afraid you'll eventually realize I'm not... enough. Not structured enough or professional enough or..."

"Stop." I take her hands in mine, holding them firmly. "Listen to me. Before I met you, I was creating technically perfect landscapes that lacked soul. My work was admired but not loved. You showed me what was missing—the emotional connection, the wildness that makes a space truly alive."

She blinks, a tear escaping down her cheek. "But?—"

"No buts." I reach up to wipe away the tear with my thumb. "I've spent my entire career imposing order on nature, and you've shown me the beauty in letting things grow where they will. Do you know how valuable that perspective is to me? Not just professionally, but personally?"

"I just don't want you to wake up one day and realize I'm too much. Too emotional, too scattered, too..."

I smile gently. "Jasmine, I've spent my life being too structured, too controlled, too focused on perfection. You balance me. You show me what I've been missing."

Her eyes search mine, looking for sincerity. "Really?"

"Really." I take a deep breath, deciding to be completely vulnerable. "The truth is, I'm scared too. Scared that I'm too boring for someone as vibrant as you. That my methodical approach to everything will eventually frustrate you. That I won't be able to keep up with your creative energy."

Surprise flashes across her face. "You're afraid of not being enough for me?"

"Of course I am." I laugh softly. "You see beauty everywhere. You feel everything so deeply. I worry that my more reserved nature will disappoint you."

"That's ridiculous," she says immediately. "Your thoughtfulness, your attention to detail, the way you notice things others miss—those qualities are what draw me to you."

"And your emotional openness, your intuitive understanding of beauty, the way you find meaning in things others overlook—those are what draw me to you." I squeeze her hands gently. "Don't you see? We're not too different. We complement each other."

She's quiet for a moment, absorbing my words. "Like structure and wildness in a garden."

"Exactly." I smile, feeling the tension between us finally begin to ease. "Neither is complete without the other."

A soft breeze stirs the dogwood blossoms above us, sending a few white petals

drifting down around us like snow. One lands in Jasmine's hair, and I reach up to brush it away, letting my fingers linger against her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "For pulling away. For letting my insecurities create distance between us."

"Don't apologize for being human." I lean closer, resting my forehead against hers. "Just promise you'll talk to me next time, instead of withdrawing."

"I promise." Her eyes meet mine, the uncertainty replaced by something warmer. "If you promise the same."

"Deal." I seal the promise with a gentle kiss, feeling her respond with a sigh that seems to release all the tension she's been holding.

When we part, she smiles—a real smile that reaches her eyes. "We should probably get back to the exhibition."

"Probably." But neither of us moves. Instead, I take her hand, intertwining our fingers. "For what it's worth, I think we're creating something beautiful together. Something neither of us could create alone."

"Like your garden," she says softly. "A collaboration between structure and wildness."

"Exactly like that." I stand, pulling her gently to her feet. "And I can't wait to see what grows from it."

As we walk back toward the exhibition, hand in hand, I feel a newfound certainty about us.

There will be more moments of doubt, more challenges to navigate.

But underneath it all is something solid: a connection built on seeing and appreciating each other's true nature, not despite our differences but because of them.

Jasmine squeezes my hand as we approach the garden where her wildflower paintings glow in the evening light, surrounded by the real plants that inspired them. "Thank you," she says simply. "For seeing me."

"Always," I promise, knowing that whatever grows between us will have both strong roots and the freedom to bloom in its own unique way.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BEN

I hold Jasmine's hand as we walk from the botanical garden exhibition back to her apartment.

The evening air carries the scent of night-blooming jasmine—a coincidence that makes me smile.

The conversation at the dogwood bench has cleared the air between us, but there's still something I need to tell her. Something I've been holding back.

"Your paintings were the highlight of the exhibition," I say as we approach her building. "The way they complemented the actual plants... it was perfect."

"Thanks to the curator's placement," she replies, fishing her keys from her purse. "She really understood what I was trying to convey."

I follow her inside, watching as she kicks off her shoes and turns on a small lamp that bathes the room in soft, golden light. She looks beautiful in that green dress, her hair slightly tousled from the evening breeze, her eyes still bright with the excitement of the exhibition's success.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asks, moving toward the kitchen. "Tea? Wine?"

"Actually, there's something I need to tell you first." I take a deep breath, steeling myself. "About how we met."

She turns, her expression curious. "What about it?"

"It wasn't a coincidence." The words come out in a rush. "Me being at your booth that day. I went to the festival specifically to find you."

Jasmine goes still, her brows drawing together. "What do you mean?"

I gesture toward her couch. "Can we sit?"

She nods, and we settle on the small sofa, angled toward each other. I take her hands in mine, gathering my courage.

"My sister Leah didn't just sign me up for the matchmaking service," I explain. "She'd seen your work at a gallery opening last year. She bought one of your wildflower paintings for her office—the chicory, I think. She told Krissa about you, about how your art made her feel."

Jasmine's eyes widen. "So when we met at the festival..."

"Krissa had already told me about you. About your paintings of overlooked wildflowers, about how you see beauty where others don't. She thought we might connect over our different approaches to the natural world.

" I squeeze her hands gently. "I was skeptical, to be honest. But then I saw your work, and it was.

.." I search for the right word. "Revelatory. "

"You knew who I was before I spilled coffee on you?" A small smile plays at her lips.

"I did. But the coffee was definitely not part of the plan."

She laughs softly, some of the tension easing from her shoulders. "So our meeting was... arranged?"

"The introduction was arranged," I clarify. "Everything that happened after was real. Completely real."

I watch her process this information, emotions flickering across her expressive face—surprise, confusion, and something else I can't quite read.

"Why tell me now?" she finally asks.

"Because I don't want any more secrets between us.

Because after our conversation tonight about trust and vulnerability, it felt wrong to keep this from you.

" I release her hands to cup her face gently.

"And because I want you to know that I chose you, Jasmine.

Even before we met, something about you called to me. "

Her eyes search mine. "You're not disappointed? Now that you know the real me, with all my insecurities and doubts?"

"Disappointed?" I shake my head, incredulous. "Jasmine, you're extraordinary. Your ability to see beauty in overlooked places, your emotional courage in expressing what

most people miss, your resilience in pursuing your vision despite doubts—these aren't flaws. They're what make you remarkable."

I take a deep breath, knowing it's time to lay everything bare.

"When I look at my life before you, I see structure without soul. Technical excellence without heart. I was creating landscapes that looked perfect but felt empty." My thumb traces the curve of her cheek. "You've shown me what was missing. Not just in my work, but in my life."

A tear escapes, trailing down her cheek. I catch it with my thumb.

"You paint wildflowers because you see their worth when others dismiss them as weeds. I see you, Jasmine. All of you. Your passion, your doubts, your whimsy, your strength. And I'm not just captivated—I'm falling in love with every part."

Her breath catches. "Ben..."

"You don't have to say anything. I just needed you to know?—"

She cuts me off by pressing her lips to mine, her hands sliding up to tangle in my hair.

This kiss is different from our previous ones—deeper, more urgent, filled with newfound certainty.

I pull her closer, one hand at the small of her back, the other cradling her head.

She tastes like wine and possibility, and I lose myself in the sensation of her body against mine.

When we finally part, her eyes are dark with desire, the emerald flecks almost glowing in the dim light.

"Stay," she whispers against my lips. "Stay tonight."

The simple request sends heat coursing through me. "Are you sure?"

In answer, she stands and takes my hand, leading me toward her bedroom.

The space is as vibrant as the rest of her apartment, with flowing curtains in jewel tones, a patchwork quilt in shades of green and blue covering the bed, small paintings of wildflowers adorning the walls. It's unmistakably Jasmine.

She turns to face me, suddenly shy despite her boldness moments ago. I step forward, closing the distance between us, and kiss her again, slowly this time, savoring the soft sigh that escapes her lips. My hands find the zipper of her dress, pausing there.

"Is this okay?" I murmur against her neck.

"Yes," she breathes, turning slightly to give me better access.

I lower the zipper with deliberate slowness, pressing kisses to each inch of skin revealed.

The dress pools at her feet, leaving her in simple, lacy underwear that makes my mouth go dry.

I take a moment just to look at her—the generous curves, the softness of her skin in the lamplight, the constellation of freckles across her shoulders.

"You're beautiful," I tell her, meaning it more than I've ever meant anything.

Her hands reach for the buttons of my shirt, fingers trembling slightly. "I want to see you too."

I let her undress me, watching her eyes darken as she reveals my chest, my shoulders, my arms. When her fingers trail down my stomach to my belt, I catch her wrist, bringing her hand to my lips.

"No rush," I say softly. "We have all night."

I lead her to the bed, laying her down gently against the pillows. She looks up at me with such trust, such openness, that my heart constricts with emotion. I stretch out beside her, propped on one elbow, and trace the curve of her collarbone with my fingertips.

"I want to memorize every inch of you," I murmur, following my fingers with my lips.

She arches into my touch, her breath quickening as I explore the softness of her skin, the fullness of her breasts, the dip of her waist. I take my time, learning what makes her sigh, what makes her gasp, what makes her whisper my name like a prayer.

When I finally remove her bra, the sight of her nearly undoes me. I lower my head to taste her, drawing a nipple into my mouth, circling it with my tongue until she moans and threads her fingers through my hair, holding me closer.

"Ben," she breathes, her hips rising to meet mine instinctively.

I trail kisses down her stomach, savoring the softness of her skin, the slight curve of her belly. When I reach the edge of her panties, I look up, seeking permission. She nods, lifting her hips to help as I slide them down her legs.

"You too," she insists, tugging at my remaining clothes.

I stand to remove them, feeling her eyes on me as I strip bare. When I return to her, the feeling of skin against skin is electrifying. I capture her mouth again, our bodies pressed together from chest to thigh, nothing between us now.

My hand slides between her legs, finding her wet and ready. She gasps against my mouth as I touch her, learning the rhythm that makes her clutch at my shoulders, her nails leaving half-moons in my skin.

"Please," she whispers, her voice breaking. "I need you."

As I position myself between her thighs, I pause, memorizing this moment—her auburn hair spread across the pillow, her lips swollen from my kisses, her eyes dark with desire but still flecked with that remarkable emerald green.

"I love you," I tell her, needing her to know before we take this final step.

Her eyes fill with tears, but she's smiling. "I love you too."

I enter her slowly, watching her face as our bodies join.

The sensation is overwhelming—not just the physical pleasure, but the emotional connection, the feeling of barriers finally falling away completely.

We move together in perfect rhythm, her body rising to meet mine, her legs wrapping around my waist to draw me deeper.

"Ben," she gasps, her head falling back as I hit a spot that makes her shudder. "Right there."

I maintain the angle, increasing my pace slightly as her breathing quickens. Her hands roam my back, my shoulders, my arms—touching, claiming, connecting. I lower my head to kiss her neck, her collarbone, the sensitive spot behind her ear that makes her moan.

When I feel her beginning to tighten around me, I slip a hand between us, circling her clit with my thumb. She cries out, her back arching off the bed.

"Let go," I whisper against her ear. "I've got you."

She shatters beautifully, her body trembling, her inner muscles pulsing around me as she calls my name. The sight of her coming undone pushes me over the edge, and I follow her into ecstasy, burying my face in her neck as release crashes through me.

Afterward, we lie tangled together, her head on my chest, my fingers tracing lazy patterns on her back. The connection between us feels stronger than ever, deepened by our physical joining.

"That was..." she begins, then laughs softly. "I don't even have words, and I'm supposed to be the artistic one."

I press a kiss to her forehead. "I know exactly what you mean."

She props herself up on one elbow, studying my face with a new confidence in her expression. "So you knew about me before we met."

"I knew about your work," I clarify. "I didn't know you—your laugh, your passion, the way you tuck your hair behind your ear when you're thinking, how your eyes change color with your emotions."

"And now?"

"Now I know enough to be certain I want to know more. Everything, actually."

Her smile is radiant. "I want that too."

She settles back against my chest, and I pull the quilt over us, creating a cocoon of warmth and intimacy. Outside, the night deepens, but here in this bed, wrapped in each other's arms, something new is beginning to bloom—something with both strong roots and the freedom to grow wild.

"Ben?" she murmurs, her voice heavy with approaching sleep.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you for seeing me. The real me."

I tighten my arms around her, overwhelmed with tenderness. "Always."

As her breathing evens out in sleep, I remain awake a little longer, savoring the weight of her against me, the scent of her hair, the feeling of absolute rightness that has settled in my chest. Whatever grows between us will have the best of both our worlds: her wildness and my structure, her passion and my patience, her creativity and my precision.

Like the perfect garden, balanced and beautiful in its harmonious contrasts.

Page 13

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JASMINE

I wake before dawn, my body still curved against Ben's, his arm heavy across my waist. The soft rhythm of his breathing tickles my neck, and I allow myself a moment to simply feel—the warmth of his skin, the weight of his presence, the rightness of being here together.

Six months have passed since that night when everything changed between us. Six months of discovering each other, of creating together, of learning how our different approaches to life can complement rather than conflict.

Carefully, I slip from beneath his arm, smiling when he mumbles something unintelligible before rolling onto his back.

I pull on his discarded shirt and pad barefoot to the kitchen to start coffee.

Through the windows of what is now our shared cabin, I can see the first hint of sunrise beginning to color the eastern sky.

Our garden calls to me. I grab my sketchbook and a mug of coffee and step outside into the cool morning air.

The transformation is breathtaking. What was once Ben's solitary project has become our joint creation—a living testament to what happens when function and form meet, when precision embraces spontaneity.

I follow the stone path he designed, now softened by the wildflowers I encouraged to

grow between the pavers.

Queen Anne's lace nods in the gentle breeze, catching the first golden rays of sunlight like delicate prisms.

I settle on the bench beneath the flowering dogwood, the same spot where I first began to understand that Ben saw me—truly saw me—for exactly who I am. My sketchbook opens naturally to a half-finished drawing of the stream garden, our most successful collaboration.

Ben's architectural eye provided the bones—thoughtfully placed stones creating gentle pools, a small wooden bridge that seems to float above the water.

My contribution was in the planting—allowing native species to thrive where they naturally wanted to grow, adding complementary wildflowers to enhance what was already happening.

The result feels neither designed nor accidental, but perfectly, naturally right.

Like us.

"There you are."

I look up to find Ben walking toward me, hair still tousled from sleep, carrying two fresh mugs of coffee. The sight of him still makes my heart skip. Not just because he's undeniably handsome, but because of what he represents: acceptance, partnership, growth.

"Couldn't sleep," I explain, accepting the mug he offers. "Too excited about today."

He sits beside me, his thigh warm against mine. "Nervous?"

"A little," I admit. "It's a big step."

Today marks the opening of our joint exhibition at the botanical garden—"Structured Wild," a showcase of our collaborative work.

My paintings of the garden's evolution hang alongside Ben's architectural renderings, showing how our creative visions have merged over the months.

Outside, visitors will tour the actual gardens we've created together, seeing the physical manifestation of our artistic dialogue.

"They're going to love it," Ben says, his confidence in our work unwavering as always. "Just like I love you."

I lean against his shoulder, soaking in his certainty. "Remember when I was convinced you'd eventually get tired of my whimsical nature?"

He laughs, the sound rumbling through his chest. "Remember when I thought my structured approach would bore you?"

"We were both so wrong." I turn to face him, taking in the features I've come to know as well as my own.

The laugh lines around his eyes have deepened over the months, partly from our shared joy, partly from squinting in the sun as we work side by side in the garden.

"You've taught me that structure creates the space for creativity to flourish. "

"And you've shown me that wildness brings life to even the most carefully designed spaces." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch still sending electricity through me after all this time. "We're better together, Jasmine. In every way."

The sun crests the horizon fully now, illuminating our garden in golden light. We sit in comfortable silence, watching as the day awakens around us—bees beginning their work among the flowers, birds calling from the trees, dew sparkling on spider webs stretched between grasses.

"Do you remember the first time you brought me here?" I ask, setting my empty mug aside.

"How could I forget? You immediately saw what I was trying to create, even when it was barely started."

"And you understood my paintings when most people just saw pretty flowers." I smile at the memory. "We were recognizing each other before we even knew it."

Ben takes my hand, his thumb tracing circles on my palm in that way he knows makes me shiver. "I have something for you. Before we head to the exhibition."

"Oh?" I raise an eyebrow, curious.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box. My breath catches as he places it in my palm.

"It's not what you think," he says with a smile. "Not yet, anyway. Though that's coming too, when you're ready."

I open the box to find a delicate silver pendant—a wild rose intertwined with architectural lines that suggest a garden structure. It's us, captured in a single perfect design.

"Ben," I whisper, emotion making my voice catch. "It's beautiful."

"Turn it over."

On the back, a simple inscription: Where structure meets wilderness, love blooms.

Tears fill my eyes as he takes the necklace and fastens it around my neck. The pendant rests against my skin, cool at first but quickly warming.

"I wanted you to have something to remind you," he says, his voice soft against my ear. "That your creativity is exactly what I love. That you never need to doubt your place in my life or worry about being too much."

I turn to face him fully, cupping his face in my hands. "And I never want you to think your thoughtfulness, your attention to detail, your need for order is anything but perfect for me. We balance each other, Ben. We make each other better."

He kisses me then, beneath the flowering dogwood where we once shared our deepest insecurities. Now that same spot holds a different kind of vulnerability: the openness that comes with absolute trust, with knowing you are fully seen and loved exactly as you are.

When we part, I rest my forehead against his. "We should probably get ready. People will be arriving at the exhibition soon."

"Probably," he agrees, though neither of us moves. Instead, he pulls me closer, both of us watching as the morning light filters through the branches above, creating patterns of light and shadow across our intertwined bodies.

In this perfect moment, I see our future stretching before us—a garden we'll tend together, allowing both structure and wildness their proper place.

There will be seasons of abundant bloom and periods of necessary dormancy, times when we'll prune back and others when we'll let growth run wild.

But through it all, we'll create something beautiful together, something neither of us

could achieve alone.

Like the wildflowers I paint and the gardens he designs, our love has found its perfect growing condition. It's nurtured by understanding, strengthened by difference, rooted in acceptance of each other's true nature.

And like those resilient blooms that first brought us together, pushing through concrete to reach the sun, our connection will continue to find a way to flourish, no matter what challenges we face.

As we finally rise to prepare for our exhibition, Ben keeps my hand in his, our fingers intertwined like the plants in our garden—different in form and function, but creating something more beautiful together than either could alone.

This is what I've been searching for all along, I realize. Not someone who merely tolerates my whimsical nature or appreciates my art, but someone who sees the strength in my sensitivity, the wisdom in my wonder, the structure within my seeming chaos.

Someone who looks at me—all of me—and says, "This is exactly what I want. This is exactly who I need."

Someone like Ben.

As we walk back to the cabin, morning light gilding our shared garden, I touch the pendant at my throat and smile. Where structure meets wilderness, love blooms indeed.

And ours is just beginning to flower.