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Summer in Portland

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Chapter One: The First Raindrop

The moment Sarah stepped off the plane, a fine mist kissed her cheeks, a signature Portland welcome she'd heard so much about. It wasn't a downpour, not yet, but a gentle, atmospheric dampness that clung to the air and softened the edges of everything. She pulled her rolling suitcase behind her, the wheels a steady rhythm against the polished terminal floor, and adjusted the strap of her oversized tote bag on her shoulder. Her rental car reservation was confirmed, a small silver sedan that promised to blend in with the local traffic. She'd spent months planning this move, meticulously packing boxes, bidding farewell to friends and family in sun-drenched Southern California, and mentally rehearsing her new life.

Portland, Oregon. The city of roses, craft breweries, and an abundance of rain, or so the stereotypes went. Sarah, a freelance graphic designer, had grown weary of the relentless sunshine and the incessant pressure to be 'on' all the time in Los Angeles. She craved a place with seasons, with a creative pulse that felt less overtly commercial, and with a slower, more intentional pace of life. A few online forums and a deep dive into travel blogs had led her to Portland, a city that consistently popped up as an ideal haven for artists and introverts alike.

Her apartment, a charming, if slightly eccentric, two-bedroom in the Hawthorne District, was still filled with the boxes that had arrived a week prior. She'd only managed to unpack the essentials: her bed, a few kitchen items, and her beloved espresso machine. The thought of facing another evening of takeout and the daunting task of unwrapping her life appealed about as much as a root canal. What she truly needed was a distraction, a brief escape from the domestic chaos that awaited her.

Outside the airport, the sky was a muted canvas of grays, the kind that promised an imminent, more substantial rain. Sarah retrieved her rental, a Toyota Corolla that was indeed silver and entirely unremarkable, and punched the address of her new apartment into the GPS. The drive was a blur of towering evergreens and unfamiliar street names, a stark contrast to the palm-lined boulevards she'd left behind. Each turn felt like a step further into a new chapter, a tangible breaking away from her past.

The Hawthorne District was vibrant, even under the somber sky. Eclectic shops with brightly painted facades lined the streets, interspersed with cozy-looking cafes and independent bookstores. Street art adorned brick walls, adding splashes of color to the otherwise subdued palette. Sarah felt a faint flicker of excitement, a tentative hope that this move was indeed the right one. This wasn't the sterile, cookie-cutter suburbia she'd sometimes feared.

Her apartment building, a grand old dame with peeling paint and a slightly crooked porch, exuded a kind of charming decrepitude. It was exactly what she'd pictured when the landlord had sent her grainy photos online. She parked the Corolla and gathered her belongings, a small backpack now supplementing her suitcase, containing a change of clothes and toiletries. The key, a heavy brass contraption, felt solid and real in her hand.

Inside, the apartment was cool and quiet, the scent of fresh paint faintly lingering. Her boxes, neatly stacked in the living room, seemed to loom, a silent challenge. Sarah sighed, dropping her bags by the entryway. She knew she should start unpacking, but the idea was utterly unappealing. Instead, she wandered through the empty rooms, picturing her furniture in place, her artwork on the walls. It was a blank canvas, full of potential, yet currently devoid of her personal touch.

A rumble of thunder, distant but distinct, brought her back to the present. The sky was darkening considerably. "Well, that settles it," she muttered to herself. Unpacking in a storm was hardly a celebratory start to her new life. She decided to postpone the inevitable, opting instead for a foray into her new neighborhood. Perhaps a walk, a quick bite, anything to delay the unpacking ritual.

She grabbed her light jacket - a sensible, water-resistant choice, a definite upgrade from her usual California denim - and her wallet. Stepping out, the air was crisp and cool, a welcome change from the oppressive heat she'd endured for so long. The light drizzle had intensified, painting the sidewalks with a sheen of moisture. She pulled up her hood, a small smile playing on her lips. This was Portland.

Her phone, still adjusting to the new time zone, vibrated with a text from her sister, Chloe: *How's the new digs? Don't tell me you're already missing the sun!* Sarah typed back quickly: *Just landed. It's raining. Perfect, actually.* She knew Chloe wouldn't understand. Chloe loved the sunshine, the beach, the predictable warmth. Sarah, on the other hand, found solace in the muted tones and the promise of cozy evenings.

As she walked, the rain began to fall in earnest, soft but persistent. Droplets beaded on her jacket, and the scent of wet earth and growing things filled the air. She passed a vintage clothing store with mannequins sporting quirky outfits, a record shop where a faint melody drifted out, and a bustling independent bookstore. Each storefront offered a glimpse into the unique character of the district.

A particularly enticing aroma wafted from a small, unassuming building with a hand-painted sign: "The Daily Grind." Coffee. Exactly what she needed. The thought of a warm, comforting beverage was immensely appealing on this damp afternoon. She pushed open the heavy wooden door, and a chime above her head announced her arrival. The interior was warm, dimly lit, and smelled heavenly of roasted beans and

something sweet, like cinnamon.

The cafe was surprisingly busy for a late afternoon. Students hunched over laptops, couples whispered across small tables, and a few solitary figures read paperbacks, occasionally glancing up to watch the rain outside. Sarah took a moment to absorb the atmosphere, the hum of quiet conversation, the gentle clatter of mugs. It felt immediately welcoming, a stark contrast to the impersonal chain cafes she was used to.

She approached the counter, where a young woman with vibrant purple hair and an assortment of facial piercings was expertly steaming milk. "Hi," Sarah said, feeling a slight flush of self-consciousness. "Could I get a latte, please? And... any recommendations for a new Portlander?" The barista, whose name tag read 'Luna,' offered a friendly smile. "Welcome! Best advice? Embrace the rain. And try our cardamom knot. It's life-changing."

Sarah laughed, genuinely amused. "Cardamom knot it is, then. And thank you, I think I'm already embracing it." She paid, and Luna efficiently prepared her latte, crafting a delicate leaf design in the foam. As she waited, Sarah surveyed the cafe, her gaze lingering on a man seated by the window. He was engrossed in a book, a thick volume with a worn leather cover, and had a thoughtful, almost scholarly air about him.

He had dark, slightly tousled hair that fell across his forehead, and a strong, defined jawline. A pair of glasses rested on the bridge of his nose, and every now and then, he'd push them up with a finger, a small, unconscious gesture. He wore a simple dark sweater, and despite the casual attire, he exuded an understated elegance. Sarah found herself subtly studying him, a strange pull drawing her attention.

Her latte and cardamom knot arrived, and Sarah thanked Luna, her eyes still drifting back to the man by the window. She found a small, unoccupied table tucked away in a corner, offering a good vantage point of the cafe without being too conspicuous. The first sip of her latte was pure comfort, the warm, rich flavor spreading through her. Luna hadn't oversold the cardamom knot; it was indeed delicious, soft and fragrant with just the right amount of sweetness.

She ate slowly, savoring each bite, the warmth of the coffee seeping into her. The rain pattered steadily against the windowpane, creating a soothing backdrop to the cafe's gentle murmur. Sarah pulled out her phone, intending to check messages, but found herself instead just watching the world go by. It was a novel sensation, this unhurried pace, this quiet observation.

The man by the window eventually closed his book, placing it carefully on the table beside him. He stretched, a slow, deliberate movement that revealed the breadth of his shoulders. As he did, his gaze swept across the room, and for a fleeting moment,

their eyes met. Sarah felt a jolt, a quickening of her pulse. His eyes were a startling shade of green, intense and intelligent, and a faint smile touched his lips.

He didn't linger, his gaze moving on, but the brief encounter left Sarah feeling oddly flustered. She quickly looked down at her half-eaten pastry, a blush creeping up her neck. It was foolish, of course. She'd just arrived in a new city, barely unpacked, and here she was, already distracted by a handsome stranger in a coffee shop. This was not part of the plan for a fresh start.

She finished her latte, the warmth a comforting presence against the cool of the rain outside. As she gathered her belongings, she stole another glance at the man. He was now rummaging in his bag, pulling out a small notebook and a pen. He began to sketch, his brow furrowed in concentration. An artist, then. That only added to his mystique.

Sarah knew she should leave, go back to her apartment and face the mountain of boxes. But something held her. A quiet curiosity, a burgeoning sense of possibility. This city, with its mist and its charm and its unexpected encounters, was already beginning to weave its spell. The first raindrop had brought her inside, and now, perhaps, it was leading her towards something more.

She stood up, pushing in her chair with a soft scrape. As she turned to walk towards the door, a sudden gust of wind outside rattled the window, and a heavy drop of water, having somehow collected on the cafe's awning, fell with a soft *plink* onto the window directly beside the man's head. He looked up, startled, and then, catching Sarah's eye, he smiled again, this time a genuine, unreserved grin that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Welcome to Portland," he mouthed, his voice unheard over the cafe's gentle din, but his lips forming the words clearly. Sarah felt a warmth spread through her, unrelated to the coffee. She smiled back, a genuine, delighted smile that she hadn't realized she was capable of. This city, it seemed, had a way of surprising you. The rain wasn't just water falling from the sky; it was an introduction, a prelude. She exited the cafe, stepping back into the gentle rain, a new lightness in her step.

Chapter Two: Coffee Shop Serendipity

The gentle patter of rain against the windowpane became the soundtrack to Sarah's first official day in Portland. The morning brought a lighter, more hopeful hue to the sky, a soft, diffused light that promised more mist than downpour. Despite the lingering dampness, a newfound energy surged through her. Yesterday's coffee shop encounter, brief as it was, had sparked a curiosity she hadn't anticipated. The man by the window, with his intelligent green eyes and that unexpected, easy smile, lingered in her thoughts like the faint scent of cardamom.

She made herself a simple breakfast - toast and the delicious local jam she'd picked up at a small market near the airport - accompanied by a strong cup of coffee from her beloved espresso machine. The aroma filled her still-unpacked kitchen, a small victory in the grand scheme of her new life. Looking out her window, she saw a vibrant mural on the building across the street, a whimsical scene of towering trees and hidden forest creatures. It was exactly the kind of unexpected art that had drawn her to Portland.

Today, the boxes could wait. She needed to experience more of her neighborhood, to immerse herself in the unique rhythm of the Hawthorne District. She donned her sensible jacket again, the one that offered both style and protection from the elements, and slipped on her comfortable walking shoes. Armed with her phone and a determination to explore, she stepped out, the cool, fresh air invigorating her.

The streets were more bustling than yesterday afternoon. People walked dogs, chatted outside cafes, and browsed storefronts. The vibrant energy of the district was infectious. She passed a vintage cinema advertising an old classic, a comic book store with brightly illustrated windows, and a bakery that smelled of warm bread and sugar. Every corner held a new discovery, a testament to Portland's independent spirit.

Her steps, however, seemed to gravitate in a specific direction. She told herself she was simply looking for a good place to grab a proper lunch, a local spot, perhaps. But a small, undeniable part of her hoped to stumble upon "The Daily Grind" again. It was a silly thought, she chided herself. The chances of seeing the same stranger twice in a city of over half a million people were slim to none, especially when she didn't even know his name.

Still, the allure of that warm, inviting cafe was strong. Its distinct aroma of roasted beans, a scent she now associated with comfort and a hint of intriguing possibility, pulled her along. She rounded a corner, and there it was, nestled between a quirky gift shop and a brightly painted thrift store. "The Daily Grind." Her heart gave a small,

inexplicable flutter.

Taking a deep breath, Sarah pushed open the heavy wooden door, the familiar chime announcing her arrival. The interior was just as she remembered it: warm, inviting, and humming with the gentle buzz of conversation. Luna, the barista with the purple hair, was behind the counter, her smile as friendly as yesterday.

Sarah ordered another latte, and this time, feeling bolder, she asked, "Is the cardamom knot as good today as it was yesterday?" Luna winked. "Always. It's a daily ritual for some people." Sarah paid, accepting the warm mug and the fragrant pastry, her gaze sweeping subtly across the tables.

The man was not there.

A small pang of disappointment, sharp and unexpected, pricked at her. Of course, he wouldn't be. This wasn't a movie, it was real life. She found a different table today, closer to the window, but further from the corner where she'd sat yesterday. The seat by the window, his seat, was occupied by a woman engrossed in a paperback, occasionally sipping from a large mug.

Sarah tried to shake off the lingering sense of anti-climax. This was still a lovely cafe, the latte was still excellent, and the cardamom knot was, indeed, still life-changing. She pulled out her phone, intending to finally tackle some of the administrative tasks of moving, but her mind kept drifting. She found herself wondering about the man's book, the one with the worn leather cover. What kind of stories did he like? What was he sketching in that notebook?

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't immediately notice the new arrival until she heard Luna's cheerful, "Morning, Liam! The usual?"

Sarah's head snapped up. And there he was.

He was standing at the counter, a light jacket slung over one arm, his dark hair a little more tousled than yesterday. He offered Luna a polite smile, the same faint, charming curve of his lips she remembered. "Morning, Luna. You know me too well." His voice, when he spoke, was a low, pleasant rumble that sent a shiver down her spine. It was a voice that matched his quiet intensity.

He turned slightly as he waited for his order, and his gaze swept across the room once more. This time, their eyes met directly, and a faint flicker of recognition, or perhaps surprise, crossed his face. He held her gaze for a beat longer than polite, and then, a genuine smile spread across his features, the kind that reached his intelligent green eyes and crinkled the corners.

He didn't say anything, simply offered the smile, and Sarah, caught off guard, felt herself blush again. She managed a small, hesitant smile in return, feeling completely foolish. He was even more attractive in the softer morning light, and there was an approachable ease about him that she hadn't fully registered yesterday.

Luna handed him a steaming mug, and he thanked her, then walked over to the table by the window. The woman who had been occupying it had just packed up her things and was heading for the door. Perfect timing. He settled into the same seat he'd occupied yesterday, pulling out his thick, worn book. He was back in his element, a fixture in this charming Portland cafe.

Sarah, still nursing her latte, found herself subtly observing him again. He seemed utterly at ease, a natural part of the cafe's tapestry. He took a sip of his coffee, then opened his book, immersing himself in its pages. The morning sun, now managing to peek through the clouds, cast a soft glow on his profile, highlighting the strong line of his nose and the subtle curve of his lips as he read.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the window, just as it had yesterday, bringing a fresh sprinkle of rain. Liam looked up, a faint smile playing on his lips, and his eyes, as if on cue, found hers again. This time, he didn't just smile. He lowered his book, his gaze holding hers, and then, he inclined his head slightly, a silent, elegant acknowledgement.

Sarah felt a surge of courage. This was her new life, her chance to step out of her comfort zone. She took a deep breath, gathered her empty mug and pastry plate, and instead of heading for the door, she walked towards his table.

"I see you're a regular here," she said, her voice a little more confident than she felt. He looked up, his green eyes sparkling.

"I am," he confirmed, his voice a rich, low tone. "And you, it seems, are becoming one. Welcome back." He gestured to the empty chair across from him. "Please, join me. Unless you have important unpacking to do?" He remembered.

A delighted laugh escaped her lips. "How did you know about the unpacking?"

He chuckled, a warm, genuine sound. "I saw you yesterday. You had the look of someone recently displaced. And that rental car is a dead giveaway for a fresh arrival."

Sarah settled into the chair, placing her items on the table. "Guilty as charged. Sarah, by the way." She extended a hand across the small table.

He took it, his grip firm and warm. "Liam. Pleased to meet you, Sarah. Welcome to Portland. Again."

"Thank you," she said, feeling a warmth spread through her, much like the coffee. "It's already full of surprises."

"That's Portland for you," Liam agreed, leaning back in his chair. "Always something unexpected around the corner. Or in a coffee shop, it seems." He gestured to her empty plate. "I trust the cardamom knot lived up to its reputation a second time?"

"Absolutely," Sarah confirmed. "Luna was right. It's life-changing."

"Luna has excellent taste," he agreed. "So, 'recently displaced,' as I suspected. Where are you from?"

"Los Angeles," Sarah admitted, bracing herself for the inevitable reaction. Most Portlanders, she'd heard, had a complicated relationship with Californians.

Liam's eyebrows raised slightly, but he didn't scoff or make a dismissive comment. Instead, he said, "Quite the change of scenery. What brought you north?"

"A craving for seasons, slower pace, and less... relentless sunshine," she explained, a genuine smile on her face. "I'm a freelance graphic designer, and I felt like I needed a new creative environment. Portland seemed to fit the bill."

"It does," Liam affirmed, nodding thoughtfully. "It's a city that rewards those who look beyond the surface. There's a lot of depth here, creatively and otherwise." He paused, taking a sip of his coffee. "And you're right about the seasons. We get all four, sometimes in a single day."

Sarah laughed again. "I'm looking forward to it. I'm in the Hawthorne District, actually. Your advice yesterday about embracing the rain already came in handy."

"Ah, the Hawthorne," Liam said, a knowing look on his face. "Excellent choice. It's got character. Are you settling in?"

"Slowly," Sarah admitted. "The boxes are still staring at me. But I decided a proper exploration of the neighborhood was more important than unpacking today." She glanced at his book. "What are you reading?"

"It's a collection of essays on urban planning and public spaces," Liam replied, tapping the worn cover. "My particular brand of light reading."

"Urban planning?" Sarah echoed, intrigued. "Are you an urban planner?"

"Something like that," he smiled. "I work for a non-profit focused on revitalizing public parks and community gardens around the city. It's a passion project, really. Trying to bring more green spaces and art to the neighborhoods."

"That's wonderful," Sarah said, genuinely impressed. "It sounds incredibly fulfilling. So, you're an artist *and* an urban planner?" She remembered seeing him sketch yesterday.

Liam chuckled. "The sketching is just a hobby, a way to visualize ideas for projects, or sometimes just to capture a moment. Are you settled on a specific design niche, or do you dabble?"

"A bit of both," Sarah replied. "I do a lot of branding and web design, but I also love illustration. I'm hoping to connect with the local art scene here. Maybe find some galleries, meet other creatives."

"Portland has no shortage of those," Liam assured her. "There are always art walks, pop-up markets, and galleries in every district. You'll fit right in." He looked at her, his green eyes thoughtful. "Since you're exploring, have you ventured beyond Hawthorne yet?"

"Not really," Sarah confessed. "Just the airport and back. My apartment building is a beautiful old dame, by the way. A little rough around the edges, but full of character."

"That's how most of Portland feels, in a good way," Liam said. "Speaking of exploration, if you're up for a walk later, Washington Park isn't too far from here. It's an excellent way to see some of the city's natural beauty and get a sense of its geography. And it often offers a break in the clouds."

Sarah hesitated for a moment, a mix of excitement and nerves bubbling within her. A walk with a handsome stranger she'd just met? It was spontaneous, risky even, but something about Liam felt trustworthy, and entirely engaging. And wasn't this exactly the kind of unexpected adventure she'd come to Portland for?

"I'd like that very much," she said, a wide smile spreading across her face. "Lead the way, Urban Planner."

Liam's smile deepened, a genuine warmth radiating from him. "Excellent. Let me finish my coffee, and then we can embark on your first official Portland expedition." He closed his book, placing it carefully on the table. The conversation flowed easily after that, moving from the quirks of Portland weather to their shared love for independent coffee shops and the challenges of starting anew.

Sarah felt a lightness she hadn't experienced in months. The weight of her unpacked boxes, the uncertainty of her new life, all seemed to recede into the background. Here, in this cozy coffee shop, under the soft Portland light, she was simply Sarah, engaged in a captivating conversation with a kind and intelligent stranger named Liam.

The rain outside picked up slightly, a gentle drumbeat on the window, but inside, the warmth of the coffee and the unexpected connection created a bubble of comfort. This serendipitous meeting, sparked by a shared appreciation for cardamom knots and a surprising shared glance across a crowded room, felt like more than just a coincidence. It felt like the beginning of something.

Liam stood up, stretching slightly. "Ready for your tour, then?" he asked, his green eyes twinkling.

"As I'll ever be," Sarah replied, standing as well, a thrill of anticipation running through her. She felt ready for anything now. The city of roses, with its unexpected rain and even more unexpected connections, was already starting to feel like home. And she hadn't even seen a single rose yet. That, she suspected, would come later. For now, a walk in Washington Park with Liam seemed like the perfect next step.

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