

West Harbor

A sample scene Evan and Clara

West Harbor smells like salt and sawdust. Evan Whitfield has forty minutes to walk around the district before his first meeting with the woman who is according to three separate emails from the city council essential to the process.

He pictured someone in a blazer with a clipboard, someone who speaks in the flat language as the rest of the committee.

He did not picture a woman standing in the middle of Harbor Row with a bucket of chalk paint kneeling in front of a mural of a sailboat that looks like it is about to sail into a parked Buick.

"You are early " she says, without turning around.

"You are the one blocking the sidewalk."

That gets her attention. She sits back on her heels. Looks up at him with sun-warmed brown skin dark hair pulled back in a knot and an expression that suggests she already knows exactly who he is and has already decided how this is going to go.

"Evan Whitfield " she says, like she is reading his name off a form she does not like. "The architect."

"Restoration architect " he says. "There is a difference."

"Is there?"

"One tears things down the other one does not."

" Funny " she says, standing and wiping chalk dust off her palms onto jeans that have clearly seen worse. "Because from where I'm standing you are both usually holding the same clipboard."

Evan does not have a clipboard. He has a tablet, a folder of surveys and the sense that this conversation is not going to go the way the councils briefing document suggested.

"Clara Bennett " she says, before he can ask. "I run the events and programming for the district. Also, this." She gestures at the mural with the flat of her hand like she is introducing him to a person of a paint job. "Unofficially, whatever needs doing that no one put in a budget line."

"That is a job description."

"It is a district."

"For now, " Evan. Immediately regrets it because something in her face closes like a door.

"Right " she says. "For now. That is the showcase in a nutshell is it not."

He should have let it go. He has four site visits; two contractor calls and a report due to the council in six days. He does not have time to relitigate a phrase.

"I did not mean it like a threat " he says instead. "I meant it descriptively. The Showcase is a decision point. That is the reason it exists."

"A decision point " she repeats, like she is testing the shape of the words in her mouth. "You say that like it is neutral."

"It is neutral. It is a mechanism for evaluating"

"It is not neutral if you grew up three blocks from here " Clara says. "It is not neutral if your moms shop used to be where that parking structure proposal wants to put a mixed-use amenity node." She says the phrase like it tastes bad. "You can call it a decision point. I call it Tuesday except with odds."

Evan looks past her at the mural at the sailboat that's he has to admit, objectively terrible and somehow

completely charming at the row of shopfronts behind her with their uneven brick and hand-lettered signs half of them structurally sound and half of them one bad winter from a collapsed lintel.

"I am not here to gut it " he says. "I am here to figure out what is worth saving. What is not. That is the job."

". Who decides what is worth it?"

"Structural engineers, mostly. Building codes. Budget."

"So not the people who live here."

"The people who live here get a seat at the Showcase " Evan says. "That is the design of the event. Community input, weighted alongside feasibility."

"I have read the packet Evan " she says, using his name like it costs her something. "I helped write half of it. I know what the process is supposed to look like on paper. I am asking what it actually does which is let people like you walk around with a tablet deciding which buildings get to keep existing."

That lands harder than he expects. He does not entirely know why except that it is not wrong exactly it is

just missing something. A piece he apparently needs to supply loud to a woman he has known for six minutes.

"I do not decide anything " he says. "I write a report. The council decides. For what it is worth I have spent the last decade keeping buildings standing that everyone else had already given up on. That is not incidental to who I'm. It is the reason I do this instead of new construction, which pays better and comes with fewer people yelling at me on sidewalks."

Something shifts in her face not agreement, not yet but a recalculation. She crosses her arms and studies him the way she probably studied the mural before she started it deciding where the lines should go.

"Okay " she says. "So, convince me. What is the West Harbor Community Impact Showcase going to show, in your professional opinion that is not just square footage and load-bearing walls?"

"I do not know yet " Evan admits. "I have not been here enough to know what matters beyond the structural report."

"That is refreshing " Clara says. "Wrong, Refreshing."

"Wrong how?"

"You have been here forty minutes and you already know the parking structure proposal calls this a mixed-use amenity node. That is not nothing. That is you already knowing which fights are coming."

"I read the file on the plane " Evan says. "That is not the same as knowing the place."

"No " Clara agrees. "It is not."

She looks at him for a longer than the conversation strictly requires then bends down and picks her paintbrush back up apparently done deciding whether he is worth continuing to argue with, at least for now.

"Come on then " she says.

"Where?"

"You said you wanted to know what is worth saving " Clara says. "I am not explaining that with you standing on the sidewalk taking notes like I'm a tour guide." She starts walking, brush in hand chalk dust trailing off her fingers. "Bring the tablet. You are going to want it."

Evan does not move for a half- thrown by the sudden reversal, half-suspicious that he is being led somewhere specifically to be proven wrong.

"Is this a trap?" he asks, catching up to her.

"It is a walking tour " Clara says. "Try to keep up Whitfield. I have got a district to save. You have apparently got a report to write so let us not waste each other's Tuesday."

"You said Tuesday was the worst-odds day " Evan says.

"It is," Clara says, not slowing down. "That is why we are starting now."

She leads him past the mural past a coffee shop with a hand-painted sign and a line out the door past an alley strung with lights that clearly had not been on the structural survey he read on the plane and stops in front of a building with a slightly crooked awning and a window full of secondhand books.

"This is Marisols " she says. "She has owned it for thirty-one years. Your report is going to say the second floor has water damage and the foundation needs work and both of those things are true. What your report is not going to say is that this is where half this neighborhood learned to read in a language that was not the one the school district taught in."

Evan looks up at the awning then down at his tablet, where a note from the preliminary survey sits waiting to be

expanded: Water intrusion, rear wall, moderate severity.
Foundation settling, corner.

"That is " He stops. "That is context. I will flag it."

"Flag it " Clara repeats, like the word amuses her.
"See this is what I am worried about. You are going to put
'community significance moderate' next to 'foundation
settling, corner,' and somewhere, in a boardroom those two
things are going to weigh the same amount."

"They do not weigh the amount to me " Evan says.

"Then say that " Clara says. "Do not flag it. Fight for
it."

"I do not know yet what is worth fighting for " Evan
says, sharply than he means to. "That is not evasion, Clara is
I have been doing this for eleven years and the buildings I
have lost the ones that actually came down on my watch
they came down because someone fought for the wrong
thing. Sentiment of structure. I am not going to do that. Not
because I do not care. Because I care enough to get it right."

For the time since he arrived Clara did not have an
immediate answer. She looked at him for a moment. She was
chalk-dusted and unimpressed. For a second something
gentler was underneath it.

"Okay " she said finally. "That's an answer than I expected from you Evan."

"High praise " Evan said.

"Don't get used to it " Clara said.

They kept walking. Clara showed Evan the community garden. It doubled as a stage every summer. She showed him the wall. Six different school classes had contributed to it over four years. Then she showed him the loading dock behind the cannery. She informed him that it had the acoustics in the district. It hosted a concert series. The fire marshal had opinions about it.

At each stop Evan asked a question. He asked about load, drainage, egress, age of the roofline. Each time Clara answered it. At first, she was reluctant. Then she was so. She folded facts about realities in with facts about who'd gotten married in that garden. She told him whose kid had painted which section of the mural. Until the two kinds of information stopped feeling like they were competing for the slot in his notes.

At the loading dock Clara made Evan stand where the bass player stood during the summer concerts. "So, you understand why nobody's going to accept a soundproofing solution that ruins the echo " she said. When Evan pointed

out that echo was the property the fire marshal found most alarming Clara informed him that the fire marshal could take it up with the several hundred people who showed up every month specifically for the echo.

"You have an answer for everything, Clara " Evan said.

"I've been doing this a time Evan " Clara said.

"How long Clara?" Evan asked.

"Since I was nineteen and helped organize a sidewalk sale to keep Marisols from closing the time the rent went up Clara said. I'm thirty-one. Do the math, Evan."

"Twelve years, Clara " Evan said.

"Twelve years " Clara confirmed. "Which is longer than most of the people on that council have lived in this city. Sure, lets weigh their vote the same as mine, Evan."

"That's not how the Showcase works, Clara " Evan said.

"Isn't it Evan?" Clara said.

Evan did not have an answer for that one. Clara seemed to know it. She didn't press. Instead, she led him down a side street he hadn't noticed. They walked past a row of townhouses with wrought-iron balconies. They

went to a courtyard with an old fig tree growing up through a crack in the pavement. Its roots buckled the stone. It would have made any structural engineer wince.

"This tree is older than the districts founding date
Evan " Clara said. "I know what you're going to say, Evan."

"I wasn't going to say anything, Clara " Evan said.

"You were going to say the roots are a liability, Evan
" Clara said.

"They're a liability, Clara " Evan admitted. "I was also going to say it's the thing I've seen all day. I don't have a technical reason for that. Which is it's kind of problem for me, Evan."

That finally got a laugh out of Clara. It was short. Startled. It had escaped before she'd decided whether to allow it.

"There he is, Evan " Clara said.

"There who is, Clara?" Evan asked.

"The version of you that doesn't talk exclusively in survey language Evan " Clara said. "I was starting to wonder if he existed, Evan."

"I contain multitudes Evan " Evan said.

This time Clara rolled her eyes. She didn't tell him not to push it. Evan decided to count it as progress.

"You're better at this than I expected, Evan " Clara said.

They circled back toward Harbor Row.

"At what Clara?" Evan asked.

"Listening, Evan " Clara said. "I had you filed under 'guy who reads reports on planes, Evan. '"

"I contain multitudes Evan " Evan said.

"Don't push it Evan " Clara said.

They stopped in front of the mural again. The terrible wonderful sailboat. For a moment neither of them said anything. The afternoon light had gone gold and low. It caught the chalk dust on Claras hands. It caught the edge of her hair. It caught the paint-smudged knee of her jeans.

"Can I ask you something, Clara?" Evan said. ". I want you to actually answer it. Not just tell me what I already know is wrong with the question, Clara."

"Bold opening, Evan " Clara said. "Go ahead Evan."

"If the council votes for redevelopment, Clara. Full redevelopment. Not the mixed-use compromise. Not a

phased plan. The version where most of this comes down. What happens to you Clara?" Evan asked.

Clara didn't answer away. She crouched down in front of the sailboat mural. She dabbed at a patch of blue that had dried unevenly. For a second Evan thought she wasn't going to answer all.

"I find another district, Evan " Clara said finally. "There's always another district that needs someone to make it feel like somewhere. Instead of somewhere-adjacent. I'm good at my job, Evan. I'd be fine Evan."

"That's not what I asked, Clara " Evan said.

"It's the answer you're getting Evan " Clara said.

"Clara " Evan said.

She sat back on her heels again. Her brush hovered. When she looked up at him this time there was armor in it than before.

"Fine Evan " Clara said. "What happens to me is I spend the however many years driving past whatever they build here instead. I think about the fact that I knew every single person whose name is on that mural. None of the people who approve the amenity node will ever know any of them. It will still be considered a successful project, Evan."

Clara looked back at the sailboat. "That's what happens to me Evan."

Evan didn't say anything for a moment. He'd expected he wasn't sure what he'd expected. Something combative maybe. Something he could argue with using the vocabulary he was actually good at. This wasn't that.

"For what it's worth Clara " Evan said carefully. "The version of this job I actually respect isn't the one where I show up take measurements and let a spreadsheet decide what a place is worth Clara. It's the version where the measurements and the story end up saying the thing. So, nobody in that boardroom gets to pretend they're separate Clara."

"That's a sentence Evan " Clara said.

"I mean it, Clara " Evan said.

"I believe you mean it Evan " Clara said. "I'm less sure it survives contact with a budget meeting, Evan."

"Then help me make sure it does Clara " Evan said.

That got Claras attention in a way than anything else Evan had said. She studied him. Not the wary cataloguing look from an hour ago. Something more like curiosity. Like

she was recalculating the shape of the problem in front of her.

"You're serious Evan " Clara said.

"I have a report in six days that's going to have my name on it Clara " Evan said. "If it's wrong it's wrong because I let it be wrong. Not because nobody told me what I was missing Clara. So. Help me make sure it doesn't say the thing, Clara."

"That's a lot of trust to put in someone you met an hour ago Evan " Clara said.

"You've spent the hour proving you know this place better than the survey does Clara " Evan said. "That's not trust, Clara. That's just paying attention, Clara."

Clara looked at Evan for a moment. Chalk dust settled on the toe of her boot. The gold light slid further down Harbor Row.

"Okay Evan " Clara said. ". If we're doing this, we're doing it my way, Evan. Which means you're not just cataloguing buildings, Evan. You're coming to Thursdays mic at the cannery. You're coming to the Saturday market, Evan. You're sitting in on my planning meeting with the mural kids on Friday, Evan. At some point this week you're going to eat something from Marisol's granddaughters' food

cart that is not on any expense report Evan. Because I'm not explaining this district to you secondhand for five days Evan. If you want to understand what's saving you have to actually be here for its Evan. Not just walk through it with a tablet, Evan."

"That's not architecture, Clara " Evan said.

"No Evan " Clara agreed. "It's the part that comes before architecture, Evan. Which apparently nobody in your profession puts in the syllabus Evan."

"I had a syllabus for load-bearing analysis, Clara " Evan said. "Nobody offered a class in mic nights, Clara."

"Tragic Evan " Clara said. "We'll fix that this week, Evan." Clara stood. She brushed chalk dust off her knees. For the time since Evan arrived there was something almost like warmth in the way she looked at him. Grudging, wary, but real.

"You're not what I expected Evan " Clara said.

"You said that already Clara " Evan said.

"I'm saying it again Evan " Clara said. "Because I want it on the record, Evan. In case you turn out to be what I expected by Thursday, Evan."

"Fair enough Clara " Evan said.

Clara looked at him sideways. She weighed that the way she'd weighed everything Evan said today. Carefully. Without any particular hurry to let him off the hook.

"We'll see, Evan " Clara said. "You've got five days. A district full of people who are going to want a lot more, than a well-organized report, Evan. Structural integrity's not the thing you're going to have to convince, Evan."

Evan said no. He really meant it. He was looking at her when he said it.

"Good" she said. She picked up her paintbrush again. Turned back to the sailboat. She seemed a little more relaxed now.

"We will meet at the time tomorrow" she said. "I will show you the part of the district that is really going to be tough to save."

Evan thought this part was tough.

Clara said "this was the part", without turning around. Evan could hear her smiling when she said "Whitfield".