

Edited Novel Excerpt B

The rain came down in heavy waves, pelting the glass with a lullaby rhythm. Harper Calwell stood behind the window and wrapped her light blue sweater tighter around herself. The early morning storm reminded her that despite the week of unseasonably warm weather, it was only late March.

“Are the pastries in yet?”

Harper jumped a bit, shaken from her trance by the voice of Caleb, her older brother. His dark brown hair was soaked as he walked in from the rain.

“Not yet. Kelly said they’d be in by 4:45.” Harper glanced at the clock. Four thirty a.m. Their coffee shop had been open three months, but she didn’t know if she would ever get used to these hours.

“Hopefully she built in some extra time,” he said. “There was an accident on the bridge.”

Caleb lugged bags of coffee grounds to and from the counter. He moved with a fluidity that told her he’d had a morning workout. *Always ready to start the day*, Harper thought.

She, on the other hand, believed days didn’t actually begin until noon. Harper slurped the rest of her coffee, eyeing the road as Kelly drove up.

“She’s here,” she said, moving to unlock the door.

Kelly raced in, boxes balanced haphazardly in her arms.

“If I’d known hell would open up this morning, I would have left an hour ago,” she said, setting down the boxes to wipe blonde curls out of her eyes. “Got my coffee?”

Harper smiled, handing her a mug. Kelly looked considerably younger than her fifty years. Harper thought she resembled a pixie.

“What have you got for us today, Kelly?” Caleb asked, blue eyes twinkling. He’d always had a weak spot for pastries.

“The usual croissants, plus some with chocolate chips. Then mini red velvet cupcakes, the quiches you wanted, blueberry muffins, poppy seed muffins, and your favorite,” she said, digging through the depths of another cardboard box. “Banana walnut bread.”

Caleb smiled, picked a piece off the loaf. “In exchange for the coffee,” he said, nudging her. Kelly laughed. Few women could resist Caleb’s charm. Harper rolled her eyes.

“Well I better get out of your hair,” Kelly said, pouring her coffee into a to-go mug. “Looks like you’ve got some early risers.”

Harper looked to the front door and sighed. Three girls she recognized as nursing students huddled outside, smiling in at them. Luckily, Harper thought, she was pretty fond of them. Fond enough to open ten minutes early.

Caleb beat her to the door, putting on his cheeriest smile.

“Good morning, ladies! I’ve already got your favorites brewing.”

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As noon rolled around, Harper felt herself perk up. She liked the afternoon. The customers evolved from the suit-and-briefcase crowd to groups of students situated in corners, laptops open, phones at hand. She had been a student herself just a couple years before, waiting to impress the world with her paintings. She remembered what it was like to be where they were, on the cusp of everything. But with graduation came reality, and with reality came bills. Landscape portraits and abstract art did not pay the bills.

“I’m going to take a break, pick us up some food from across the street,” Caleb said. “What do you want?”

He dug some bills out of his pocket as he waited for her reply.

“Just get me a burger,” she said. The milk steamer hissed in the background. “I’ve been craving one of their burgers.”

Caleb nodded and tossed off the red apron. She watched him run across the street to Fifth Street Grill, the sun shining bright and clear now.

She handled the customers efficiently, working briskly to brew, steep, and heat pastries without ever missing a beat. Her years of coffeehouse labor had come in handy since Caleb had proposed opening their own shop.

He returned five minutes later with the food.

“That was fast,” Harper said. “Did you call it in, or what?”

“No, Andy knows me now,” he said. “He makes extra burgers during the lunch rush. Said he’d hand some over in exchange for coffee.”

Harper wiped her hands on the apron and caught the burger Caleb tossed her way.

“Give me five minutes, it’s calmed down a bit,” she said.

She walked outside, burger and a bottled water in hand, to breathe. The downfall to owning your own business, she realized, was trusting someone enough to hire them on for help. So far it was just she and Caleb, slaving away six days a week, 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. They had an apartment two streets away, a two-bedroom hole-in-the-wall that they shared with spiders and the occasional rodent. No matter, she thought. This was their dream, and once it picked up, it would be worth the trouble.

Halfway through her burger, Andy Parks strolled out of the grill, lifting a hand to wave to

her.

“Hey, Harper,” he said, smiling. “Caleb lets you eat? I figured the burgers were all for him.”

She stared up at him, praying she didn’t have mustard on her chin.

“Oh, yeah. I...hey, how’d you escape? Looks like the place is packed,” she said, peering around him to see a line forming near the door.

“Hired someone new last week. My cousin, Josh. He thinks he wants to be a chef, so I talked him into some cheap labor. He’s not half bad.”

She continued to stare at him. She had met him a month or so ago when he had stopped in for coffee, and she remembered thinking he had a Hollywood smile.

“Um, Caleb’s inside,” she said. “If you want coffee.” She took a bite of burger, dropping pickles on her lap. Andy smirked.

“Yeah, I’ll go cash in that offer. Have a good day.” He smiled and walked inside, leaving her to her burger. Sometimes when she and Caleb were closing up, she’d notice Andy finish out his shift and leave with a woman. Various women. It depended on the day. The grill had opened last year, and it had done a great deal of business since then. Andy had started it up with the help of a few friends, and they had acquired an additional chef or two along the way. He never seemed to work overtime. He never looked tired or stressed.

*Must be nice*, Harper thought. She rolled up the wrapper and tossed it in the trash, taking in a few more minutes of early spring sunshine.

She turned to walk back inside and nearly ran headfirst into Andy. A drop of coffee splashed on his shirt.

“Watch it! The coffee’s too good to spill,” he said, dabbing at his shirt with a napkin. She straightened herself, trying not to look rattled.

“Damn right it is.” She pushed past him, ignoring whatever he started to say and walked inside to a list of requests from Caleb.

“Five hours and twenty-two minutes until closing,” she told herself, and started washing a pile of dishes.

Fifteen minutes until closing, a young woman raced in, tossed her bag on the counter.

“You’re still making coffee, right?” she asked, digging through the enormous bag.

“Of course,” Caleb said. “What can I get you?”

“Hang on,” she said, fishing her phone out of her bag. She picked it up, fumbled it onto the ground and picked it up again. “Hello, Mr. Duncan? Emily Anderson. No, I got your message, though.” She paced around quickly, nearly bumping into the last few customers as they walked out. “I told him that I would. I told him. Then meet me tomorrow. Fine.”

She clicked her phone off and walked back to the counter as if nothing had happened.

“Large coffee, triple shot espresso. Skim milk instead of cream.” She seemed to speak into her bag.

“Got it,” Caleb said. “Four dollars and eighty-two cents.”

She handed him a five, shoved a dollar into the tip jar. Her phone rang again, and she answered it as she collected a few napkins.

“Hi. No. I said I’d be there in ten. Coffee. The coffee shop on Fifth. No, it’s called Joe’s Cal or something. Tell him to wait...”

Harper flinched. “It’s Calwell’s Joe,” she mumbled.

Caleb capped the cup and slid it on the counter. The woman scooped it up and glided out the door, the tiny bell jingling furiously as she left.

“That woman did not need espresso,” Harper said, shaking her head.

Caleb shrugged. “Hey, she paid. Let’s get this place cleaned up.”

