

“The Coffee Shop”  
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Halley shifted her weight to her left leg, placing her right foot forward. With one hand on her hip and the other hand cupping her chin, she stared at the menu. She wasn't really reading it, just staring for the sake of staring. She glanced at her watch, her eyes moving to the door, then back to the menu.

She absently played with the bottom of her crisply ironed shirt, then straightened the wrinkles in her skirt. She stifled a yawn as the line moved forward. It was time for coffee. She glanced towards the glass door one more time before ordering.

“Grande house coffee.”

Halley liked the taste of lattes and frappuccinos, but coffee was enough. Always grande. She preferred the reserved sense of moderation, never excess.

She paid for her coffee and headed to the “fixin” counter. A little bit of sugar, sometimes cream, although not today, and never too much.

She passed the occupied tables, searching for a place to sit. It was crowded this morning. She found a table next to the window and sat down. Her eyes were drawn once again to the parking lot. There he was. She looked at her watch, then smiled to herself. She recognized the faded jeans—must be his favorite pair. His fitted white tee shirt, hugging his biceps, showed the traces of his six-pack. He slammed the door of his rusty old Ford that was probably once bright red in its better days. He took off his cowboy hat and walked inside.

She opened her book and pretended to read. A few minutes passed when she heard him say, “Mornin’ Prom Queen.”

She rolled her eyes playfully. He’d developed the nickname for her on their second encounter, even though she had told him she was never prom queen, only runner-up.

“Good morning. How are you?”

“I’m great, especially now.” He raised his cup. “Mind if I sit?”

“Not at all.” She moved her purse and marked her place in *Canterbury Tales*.

He was here almost every morning, about the same time. Sometimes he’d sit down; sometimes he would come by just to say hi on his way out the door. But it was always the same smile.

That first day she had been reluctant to return such a genuine smile. She had been pouring the sugar into her coffee when a deep voice somewhere near her neck said, “Do you always just get coffee? Ever think about a latte?”

“Excuse me?” she had asked, her eyebrows raised.

“No, I mean, I’m just curious. Every morning it’s just the house coffee.” He took a step back, but the playful grin remained.

“What’s wrong with the house coffee? I like the house coffee.”

“Well, of course. I mean, I see that.” He smiled again before heading to the door.

The next morning he had been waiting for her with a grande something in his hand.

“Just try it. If you don’t like it, at least it was free.” There was that boyish grin again. *What is it about that smile?*

“What is it?” She had asked. She was more surprised than anything. She couldn’t remember anyone having bought her a latte before.

“Do you always question everything?”

“No.” She grabbed the cup, and took a sip. “That’s pretty good.” She shrugged her shoulders.

He looked into her eyes, smiling. She gave in and smiled back. “There it is!” he said laughing.

“What? I smile!”

He just shook his head. “Let’s sit down.”

Since it wasn’t really a question, and he was already headed to a table, she decided to follow him. They had barely passed the particulars of “It seems crowded in here” and “It’s a nice morning” when he leaned across the table.

“I’ve never seen eyes like yours. What color are they?”

She had looked down, then up again, finding his eyes intently on her. Her eyes went to the ceiling. “Um, I don’t know. Just green, I guess.”

“Do you get that a lot?”

“Kind of.” She looked at him again.

He checked his watch and stood up. “I guess I’d better get to work.”

“Oh, okay. Um, thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime.” He had smiled, then winked, causing Halley to blush.

It had progressed from there, although Halley would say he “wasn’t her type.” But this nameless man arrived again and again, and their meaningless conversations continued. Her parents were both lawyers, and she had spent most of her life at one social

function or another. Growing up, she rarely had someone sit down and listen to her talk. So, she looked forward to this stranger's appearance each morning. He made her feel at ease, the way he would lean back in his chair or prop his elbow on the table, resting his hand on his chin, listening intently as she spoke.

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This morning he was sharing a humorous story about his German Shepherd, Jack, who was in the process of being house-trained.

He laughed. "You would think I'd keep him in the kennel at night now, at least for the sake of saving laundry detergent. But," his smile faded, "I guess I like the company. Makes the other side of the bed not seem so cold, you know?"

She searched his blue eyes. *He's lonely? Who would've thought? He seems so optimistic.*

"Dogs are great for company," she said instead.

"You ever have one?"

"Yeah, I've had a couple actually. We had one growing up." She paused, smiling. "Hank. He was a great dog. So protective of us as kids. He eventually died of old age, had arthritis I think. Then, of course, I had the usual 'love dog.' You know, the one given by a boyfriend that typically lasts longer than the boyfriend. At least that was the case for me. He was a good dog too. Knew exactly how I was feeling, or what I needed. It sounds stupid, I guess."

"It's not stupid. I know exactly what you mean," he said.

She blushed at the intensity of his gaze, then quickly recomposed herself. "So, I guess I changed my sheets every day for a while too."

She looked at her watch. “I guess it’s my turn to leave first. I have a mid-term this morning.”

“So you’re a student. I was beginning to wonder. What are you studying?”

She watched the lines next to his eyes crease. He was a handsome man. She figured he was in his mid to late 20s, but his skin was slightly aged from the sun. His face was tan with freckles and had little white scars here and there, probably from manual labor of some sort. She stood up, mentally scolding herself for gawking at him and blushing as if he could read her thoughts.

“I am getting my master’s in English,” she said at last.

“Ah, an English major. I could’ve guessed as much.”

“That’s right, because you know me so well,” she said.

“Nah, there’s still plenty to figure out.” He winked as she put her one-strap backpack over her shoulder. “You know, I don’t even know your name.”

“I know.” She smiled, then turned and headed to the door.

She welcomed the cool air as she walked to her brand new black Tahoe. She couldn’t help blushing every time he winked at her, but she wasn’t ready to know his name. Didn’t that make it personal? A name is personal isn’t it? Then they would be friends, acquaintances at least. He wasn’t the kind of guy she would become friends with, if she even had guy friends, which she didn’t. No, she had long believed girls and guys couldn’t be friends—someone always got hurt. Usually her. *No, he’s definitely not my type. I mean, with his rough hands and faded jeans, he probably doesn’t know a thing about Hemingway. What would we talk about? I don’t even know what he does for a living. I can see my dad’s face now if I pulled up in that old Ford.*

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“Mornin’,” he said a few days later. He was behind her in line, but she hadn’t seen him come in. With him standing so close to her, she realized he was probably only a few inches taller than she was. He smelled like Old Spice, and if she wasn’t careful her nose would draw her closer to him. *What is it about a man’s cologne?*

She caught his eyes. “Good morning.”

“You look tired.”

“Yeah. I was up kind of late. We have midterms now, and I have all these research papers due.”

He put his hand on her back to move her forward in line. A shot of warmth crept up her spine. “Don’t worry so much. You’ll do great, I’m sure.”

He paid for her coffee as he sometimes did, and they searched the coffee shop for a table. When they had sat down, she pulled out her agenda and began organizing her thoughts. She determined how much time it would require for each class and decided what she would tackle first. For a few seconds, she wished she hadn’t taken 9 hours her first semester of grad school. She looked up and realized he was closely watching her.

“So, you get it all planned out?” he asked, with that boyish grin spreading across his face.

“Yeah. I’ll get it done.”

“You always do, right?” he said, drawing out the ‘i’ in “right.” He leaned back in his chair, maintaining eye contact. Then he stood up and said, “Hey, I know what you need.”

She watched him walk to the counter again, then began pulling her books out from her backpack. He came back a few minutes later with a slice of cheesecake in his hand and a smile on his face. He set it before her, looking triumphant.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Cheesecake makes everything better.”

She moved the plate in front of him, trying to hide the agitation in her voice. “The thought was nice, but it’s 8 o’clock in the morning. I can’t eat cheesecake this early.”

“And why is that?” He looked amused, pushing the plate in front of her again.

“Because I can’t.” She was starting to get annoyed. *Doesn’t he know you don’t eat desserts before the meal? And certainly not before noon!* He continued to smile. *He thinks it’s funny?*

“Come on. Be a rebel,” he said, laughing out loud. He reached for her hand, but she grabbed the fork instead.

“Fine.”

She took a bite, then set the fork down, pushing the plate aside. “Now, I have to read.”

“Read away. I’m off to work.” He hesitated before standing up to leave. “Enjoy your day. And don’t worry. I think you think too much.” He winked and walked away.

“Thanks,” she said under her breath as he pushed open the glass door to the parking lot. She watched him walk to his truck and get in. *Why didn’t I just eat the cheesecake?* She looked at the plate in front of her, an entire slice only missing a small part. *He shouldn’t have wasted it on me.* She looked at his truck again, pulling out into the street, then looked around. Picking up the fork, she began eating. *I can allow myself a*

*few seconds for pleasure, right?* She pictured him before her, his easy wink that made her heart stop. It was so easy to talk to him, but at the same time, he was all wrong for her. *I mean, what kind of a guy will genuinely listen to me and hang out at a coffee shop, and yet drive a beat up truck and wear the same faded jeans... even if they do look good on him?* She frowned. *Okay, Halley, back to work.*

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Halley didn't see her mystery man for a few days. Every morning she would look for him and then scold herself for being silly. She would return to the piece of fiction in front of her, forcing her mind to focus.

Then one morning, as she was typing away at her laptop, he appeared in the chair across the table from her. She was startled by his presence.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you," he said.

Her face lit up. "Hey! I was beginning to wonder about you."

"So you did notice?" He winked at her and took a sip of his coffee.

"Am I not supposed to?"

"I thought I wasn't your type," he said.

"I never said that." She knew it was a bold statement, and she knew she was only playing, but she felt like flirting this morning. *What's the harm?* She liked the way she felt with him, more relaxed and laid back than ever before.

"You didn't have to say it."

She opened her mouth to reply, but closed it again. She was shocked. *So now he can read my thoughts too?* He had that amused look on his face again. *Why do I feel like*



*he thinks I'm funny?* She raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth to say this, but he cut her off.

“It’s okay, because we’re just friends anyway. So, what are we studying this morning?” he asked. She was a little disappointed that he changed the subject, but she tried not to show it.

“Oh, it’s an analysis paper.” She didn’t go into details. He probably wouldn’t understand anyway.

“For what piece?”

“Well, it’s more of a contrastive analysis of two or three works by Chaucer.”

“Hmm. I’m not much for Medieval literature, but I sure got a kick out of the ‘Miller’s Tale.’”

She raised her eyebrows. *He’s read Chaucer?*

They spent the next hour discussing their favorite pieces of fiction. Apparently, he enjoyed 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature from the Bronte sisters to Austen. She was astounded at his knowledge and keen interest. After a while, they finally exchanged names. David Edwards, named after his grandfather who had passed away just before he was born. He later admitted that he never finished college. He would have liked to, he was especially interested in literature, but he didn’t have enough money. So, he took a job as a ranch hand and eventually worked his way up to foreman. As she studied his face, she truly admired him for his determination and work ethic. Her parents had taught her that these qualities meant going to college, getting the degree, and climbing the corporate ladder. But as she listened to him, she began to wonder what makes an intelligent man do nothing more than ranch work? *He clearly seems to love his job, but doesn’t he want*

*something more satisfying like an education? Maybe there are more satisfactions in life than climbing a corporate ladder?*

“Well, I’m very impressed with your knowledge,” she said, her eyes still looking intently at him.

“Still not your type though, huh?” he joked, winking at her.

She blushed at his wink, and he gave her that boyish grin that sent her heart reeling. She didn’t know how to respond to his statement, so she simply smiled at him, then glanced at her watch.

“Oh my gosh! It’s almost lunch, and I still have so much to do before class tonight!” She began shuffling her pages, then pulled out her agenda to see what she had left.

He put his hand over hers on the table, looking amused. “Halley, don’t worry. You have enough time, you’ll get it done.”

She moved her hand. Her face was a little flushed. “Thanks. I don’t mean to be rude, but—”

“No, by all means—write! I’m fixin’ to get back to work anyway.” He rose to leave. “Thanks for the conversation, I enjoyed it. You’ll do fine on the paper. Don’t stress too much okay?”

“Okay. Thanks.” She half-smiled, then turned her attention to the laptop screen, attempting to recall her previous train of thought.

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The next morning David was a little later than usual, but he had Halley’s attention the moment he stepped out of his truck. Her jaw dropped. She closed her mouth and

smiled. He was wearing starched jeans and a pressed Cinch collard button-up. She couldn't see the details of his face beneath his cowboy hat, but she was certain that the shades of blue plaid would look great with his blue eyes.

She pretended to be intently reading when he walked inside. A huge grin spread across his face, and wrinkles appeared next to his eyes as he said, "Mornin'."

"Wow. You look really nice. Going somewhere?"

"Maybe." He winked again, causing her to blush.

"Oh yeah?" Her eyebrows came together.

"Well, I came by to see if you'd like to have dinner with me on Friday."

She tried to hide the surprise in her eyes, but knowing him, he would see through it anyway. She wasn't sure what to say. He certainly cleaned up nicely, but underneath it all, he was still a rancher guy. She frowned. She had been raised in "high society" social events. Her family money preceded even her grandparents. She couldn't imagine what they would think of David, pulling up with his pick-up truck, decked out in his cowboy hat and boots. He definitely looked good in it all. But a date? She couldn't remember the last date she had been on. She never really allowed herself to go on dates, even though she was asked from time to time. She focused on trying to finish school and attain the goals she had set for herself. Everything else was just a distraction. She looked at him, and blushed for having kept him waiting so long. Saying no was on the tip of her tongue, but instead she heard herself say, "Sure. Um, what time?"

He looked as surprised as she was at her response, but he quickly recovered. "Is 7 okay?"

"Sounds good. We can just meet here."

“Okay.” She sensed the hesitation in his voice, but she wasn’t ready for him to have her address. “Well, I’ll see you then!” He winked as he turned to leave. She watched him all the way to his truck, wondering why he didn’t stay for coffee.

\* \* \*

It was three long days before Friday arrived. Halley had talked herself into going and out of going a hundred times. Even as she was blow drying her hair that night, she wasn’t sure if she would go through with it. By the time she resolved to go, she had to rush to get ready in time.

When she pulled up, he was already there, leaning against his rusty Ford. *At least he’s prompt.* He opened the door to her Tahoe, and she got out, immediately smoothing the wrinkles in her skirt.

“You look beautiful.” He didn’t hide his admiration, causing her to blush.

“Where are we going?” She changed the subject. She was nervous and had every intention of avoiding personal compliments. She knew what that led to.

“I thought I’d take you to this great little Italian place. You like Italian?” he asked, opening his passenger door for her.

“Yeah, that’s great,” she said, climbing in.

Dinner was nice. He ordered a bottle of Beringer White Zinfandel. Somehow those personal compliments kept coming, questions too. *Why does he ask so many questions?* She eventually relaxed and settled into her chair. He had a way of easing her into conversation.

“I’m amazed at your work ethic. You’re so ambitious. How old are you?” he asked.

“I’m 21.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You’re only 21? How are you already into your graduate work?”

“Well, I graduated in three years. I knew I wanted to get my master’s in English.”

“Have you always been this driven?”

She shrugged. “I guess so.”

“What’s the rush?” he asked.

She hesitated for a moment. She didn’t have an answer. No one had ever questioned her decisions, or really paid much attention to them. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

A couple hours later, he drove her back to the coffee shop. He asked her if she wanted anything there. She declined, saying she was tired. It was a lie; she knew it, and he probably did too. But they still ended up talking in his truck for a while.

Finally, he got out and opened her door for her. Standing next to her Tahoe, he reached for her hand and said, “Halley, I really had a good time tonight. I get the feeling you’re a little nervous. I don’t want you to feel pressured. We’ll just take this slow and see where it leads, okay?”

Her stomach turned as she raised her eyes to meet his. She looked at his face and smiled, but she released his hand. Surprisingly, she knew she had enjoyed herself tonight.

Everything inside her told her she should just leave. She had stayed longer than “simply dinner” and longer than she planned. But something inside her found comfort in their meaningless conversations.

He hugged her goodbye. Strangely, she wished he would hold her longer. It had been so long... But not tonight, not any night probably. She knew he respected her, and she liked that.

As she drove home, she tried to figure out what it was about him that so appealed to her. It wasn't like she had never met an attractive man before. But it was something more than his good looks and never ending kindness.

She groaned. Why in the world did she talk so much? She cringed inside. If he didn't make her so nervous, she wouldn't ramble on.

Walking to her apartment door, she made a final decision: she simply could not see him anymore. It was perfectly logical. If she continued to see him, he would inevitably cause her to fall in love with him.

And this she could not do. No, she wouldn't. He might become a distraction, and he might even ruin everything she had worked for.

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The next morning she decided on a new coffee shop downtown. For a brief moment, she wondered if David was at the other place, but she made herself focus. She forced a smile, embracing the silence of nothing but the clicking of her laptop keys. *This is nice.*