

I. THE CUSTOMER

THE RAIN DRUMMED, charging down the darkened windows like great silver cracks. Silent shimmering ribbons fought each other to reach the sill first, melting and streaking into oblong spider webs. A stark contrast to the cacophony inside.

Courtney couldn't remember ever having felt so claustrophobic. Coffee hung on the air in a burnt, chocolaty dust. The scream of the steaming wands, the hiss of milk churning, the clamor of customers filing past the counter... it all squeezed in like a big warm fist. Under the rumble of rain on the roof, someone else might call it cozy. She might, in another café.

Not here. Not tucked in so close to the suffocating shadow of the Wall.

"It's really comin' down," Max said, leaning back against the bar while she steamed her thirty-seventh latte of the hour. "Funny how dark it can get at three o'clock this side of Main Street."

Courtney watched the thermometer climb to one-hundred-forty degrees.

“Packed today, huh?” He peered out at the lobby beyond their tiny linoleum-floored haven. “No great tippers, either.”

“They just don’t want to be wet and cold,” she replied, soft tone clipped.

Max grunted, arms folded over his apron. His eyes drifted back out the window to the drizzled gray concrete beyond. “At least the wind’s blocked here.”

Her grip tightened on the pitcher handle. Killing the steam, Courtney tipped the milk into the next cup, topping the espresso with an expert, foamy swirl. Stepping around Max, who had yet to finish his macchiato, she slid the mug across the pickup counter.

“Latte for Dave!” she called.

“What would you do? If it happened tomorrow.”

Courtney snapped a look at him, side-stepping again to pick up the next order. “If what happened?”

“If it came down—you know, the Wall.”

Eyes on the espresso machine, Courtney queued up an Americano with stiff precision. “Your foam’s going flat.”

Turning back to his pitcher, Max sloshed the milk into a cup, flipped the shots over the top and slid the cup across the counter. “Emily, your macchiato’s ready!”

Hands fidgeting as she watched the shots drip for the Americano, Courtney bent to snatch a bag of beans. She stretched up on her toes to overfill the already stocked espresso hopper.

“Come on, what would you do?” he persisted.

Why did they have to be the only two on shift today?

“I’d head straight for Chicago,” Max went on. “Screw packing, whatever, I’d hop on my motorcycle and see the first live concert in town, blow my paycheck on the ritziest hotel I could find, kiss a foreign girl. Or someone from the West Coast. Hell, a Chicago native, born and bred. I’d kiss her so hard she’d wonder what the hell kinda man they breed out here in Orion City.”

“Classy,” Courtney muttered. “Derek, your Americano!”

“You a beach girl?” he asked. “I could see a beach girl. Or wait, maybe a mountain chick? Pick the first road north, drive straight on up to Canada. That’s more your vibe.”

“You’ve got drinks backed up.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Plucking a cup from the bar, Max twirled it in his hand before poking the number of shots on the espresso machine. “C’mon, I’m bored. Would you go international? See the Eiffel Tower? The Pyramids?”

A tightness crept up in Courtney’s chest. She carefully lined up her next order. “Didn’t you grow out of this in middle school?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about After.”

The thrum on the roof intensified. Unable to resist, Courtney’s eyes jumped to the window. To the thin line of sky above the arrested horizon, that tiny sliver crushed between the press of buildings and the cage of concrete beyond.

“There is no After.”

A heartbeat or two, then Max’s snort cut over the rain. “What a sunny place it must be inside your head.”

“I’m a realist.”

“A pessimist, more like.”

She caught her reflection in the window, and smoothed her scowl. “It’s been ten years.”

“Yeah. That’s like a century in scientist time. A century to find a breakthrough.”

“Pour your latte. I’m gonna check the front.”

Escaping the bar, Courtney picked her way over the sticky mats to the front counter, snatching a rag to wipe down the few empty tables.

The rush had died down since the beginning of the rainstorm. Most people had found their cover for the afternoon. The various shops and boutiques up and down Main Street were probably packed. Courtney looked out over the stuffed seating area of the café, spotting only two

empty chairs by the bar. Once she'd cleaned those, everybody else would be sitting down with their beverages. She'd get a break for the first time since coming in five hours ago.

Max's low hissing curse jerked her back around.

"You okay?"

"Ow," he muttered. "Someone get Jess to fix this stupid thing already."

Courtney took a step back in his direction, following his gaze—and stopped, clammy prickles rushing over her. A spot of crimson trickled down the corner of the espresso machine, where a tiny piece of metal poked up over a broken plastic seal. Grumbling, Max grabbed a clean rag and pressed it between his fingers, then looked up to catch Courtney standing there, frozen. He laughed.

"You have got to be the wimpiest almost-doctor I've ever met."

She flinched back, turning to put him and his bloodied finger behind her. She dragged the rag over an already clean counter.

"Seriously," Max continued. "Who goes to med school if they're afraid of a papercut?"

Lips squeezed together, Courtney scrubbed the bar harder.

"Your friend's still there, right? The hot one. What was her name? Dina?"

"She's a nurse now." She focused on an ancient smudge glued between the counter tiles, back still to him. "She graduated." And Courtney had celebrated with her, like a good friend, even been happy. Like there was no sting.

"Huh, maybe I'll go see *her* to get stitched up."

"You said it was a papercut. You don't need stitches."

"How do you know? You couldn't even look at it." Max chuckled. "Could you even look at the pictures in your textbooks?"

"Yes," she snapped. Then, swallowing, "Sometimes."

"How the hell did you ever think you could become a doctor?"

She tossed the towel into the bucket of sanitizer under the counter.

“Well, I’m not one now, am I? Maybe you should focus on catching up to me with your coffee game. I can steam a latte four times faster than you.”

“Yeah... you put way too much effort into this job. It’s kinda sad.”

The front door swung open with a jingle, tugging with it a blast of thunderous rain and mist. Courtney spun toward it, eager to leave the conversation. Max scoffed under his breath.

The man striding in brought a tiny river with him. Her relief at the distraction dimmed to sour exhaustion as she watched the gleaming footprints spread into each other. She’d just mopped. Returning to the cash register, she focused on the newcomer sauntering up to the counter.

Water dripped from his long, ragged gray overcoat. It had a hood, which he hadn’t bothered to pull up, and an umbrella hung unopened at his side. Rain glistened off the ends of his dark hair.

“Hello, sir.” Courtney cleared her throat, realizing her voice still shook from the sight of blood. “How may I help you?”

“Odd request.” Twirling the umbrella by its hooked end, he paused before the counter. He was rail thin, almost gaunt despite his youth. He couldn’t have been much older than late twenties. Porcelain white cheekbones, high and sharp, lent a skeletal edge to his smile.

“What would you like to drink?” she clarified. Like that needed clarifying.

“Black house coffee. Thirty sugars.”

“House coff... I’m sorry, *thirty*?”

His gaze flickered down to her nametag. “You heard me, Cour...” he paused, as if considering. “C.”

She blinked at the unorthodox shortening of her name. Most people called her Court if they wanted to be friendly. Uncapping her sharpie, she picked up a paper cup. “All right. Can I get a name for your order?”

“W.”

She held the felt tip of the sharpie to the cup. “How do you spell

the rest of your name?”

“You’ve got it right there.”

A handful of customers didn’t like hearing their real names shouted across the café. So long as they gave her something to identify their drink, she didn’t care. Courtney looked up to find a pair of gray eyes fixed on her. The color was so light it was almost startling, his pupils a sharp prick of black against pale irises.

“You gonna give it to me for free?”

She set the cup down. “Two dollars and fifteen cents.”

He slid a bill across the counter, stepping away. “Keep the change.”

As she ground the coffee for a new pot, Courtney peeked at him over the top of the machine to find him studying the other customers in the café. People watching was pretty much part of her job description, but the way this guy surveyed the other patrons was unsettling. She couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe it was the way his ashen eyes roved the room, staring too intently, as if searching for something. Or maybe it was his overall presence that was off. The café lights glistened off his soaked clothing, a ring of water pooling around his boots. Who carried around an umbrella if they didn’t plan to open it?

Watching the seconds tick down on the brewing machine, she heard Max approach behind her.

“You’re not walking home again, are you?”

“I’ve got an umbrella.”

“I mean, it’ll be dark in an hour. Let me give you a ride home after shift.”

“On your motorcycle? I’ll be fine. It’s not that far a walk.”

“In Westside Orion?”

“I’ve got pepper spray.”

“No way, Court. You need something more like a knife. Just let me drive you.”

“Max, I said I’m fine.”

“You’re the stubbornest person I know, you know that?”

The door jangled again. A tiny figure shuffled in, an old woman wrapped in a tattered coat with a holey umbrella over her head that let more water through than not. Filthy red toes peeked through duct-taped shoes.

Max sighed, long and loud, as she hobbled up to the counter in a trail of rain.

“Sum’ma drink?” came the rasp.

Courtney moved to stand behind the register. “What’ll you have?”

“Jus’ wan’ sum-fin hot.” Knobby blue-tinged hands lifted to point at the menu. “Anyfin’?”

“You got money to pay for it?” Max said.

Courtney shot him a dirty look, but turned back to see the woman digging in her pockets, glassy eyes panicked for a moment. She pulled out a crumpled dollar bill, a few paperclips, and a candy wrapper. She pushed them all across the counter.

Courtney selected the dollar bill. “You want a hot chocolate?”

“A hot chocolate’s two-fifty,” Max said.

“Take it out of my tips.”

With a grunt, Max moved back behind the bar while she fished out the box of cocoa. The woman shuffled back to wait, ragged umbrella still perched on her shoulder, dripping water down over her head.

Courtney peeked at her over the espresso machine while she steamed the milk. Tongue poking out between paper lips, the old woman focused her cloudy eyes on the floor between her feet, watching the water drip into a puddle. She lifted one threadbare shoe and stomped. The small splash lit up her face. She stomped again. A tiny smile spread as she traded feet, playing with the ripples under her shoes.

“Excuse me,” barked a customer nearby, still waiting for his drink. “Hello? Baristas.”

Courtney looked up. “Do you need help, sir?”

He pointed a crinkled nose at the ragged woman. “Deal with that,

would you? Some of us *paid* to get out of the rain.”

Wincing, Courtney glanced at the woman, who didn't seem to even hear. “So did she, sir.”

An affronted look, then an instant scowl. “This is your customer service? Where's your manager?”

“Not in today,” Max replied. “Don't worry, we'll clean it up, sir.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Black coffee for W,” Max called out, placing a steaming cup down on the pickup bar. The man with the unopened umbrella walked over. He didn't pick up the cup.

“The sugar?”

“Sorry?” Max said.

“Oh, right. I forgot.” Courtney ducked around Max, grabbed two large handfuls of sugar packets from the box beneath the counter, and piled them next to the coffee. Max raised his eyebrows. Sugar rations weren't a huge part of the shipments sent into the city, but they usually had plenty to spare. At least, they'd never had to ration it out like coffee and milk.

The man stepped forward, scooped the entire pile into one large hand, retrieved his drink and slipped something into the tip jar.

With a flourish of his long gray coat, he turned—sending a spray of rain water across the customers standing nearby. People gasped and swore. The man still scowling near the old woman got the worst of it; he skittered back with an offended cry. The ragged woman looked up, eyes gleaming. Her leathery cheeks folded into a gap-toothed smile. She dropped her chin and resumed stomping in the puddles of water.

Courtney smiled without thinking. The man was halfway out the door by now, but she looked up to see him glancing back. Pale eyes grazed hers, and the corner of his mouth turned up. Then he disappeared into the sheets of rain.

“Sorry, everyone, we'll clean that up,” Max announced. With a sigh, he started for the mop closet, then paused. He reached past

Courtney for the tip jar.

“Uh, Court...” He tipped it toward her so she could see inside. “I knew I saw something funny.”

There, gleaming atop the meager ring of quarters and dimes, sat a folded switchblade.



Courtney walked with her hood pulled low, hands in her pockets, her stride sure and swift on the way back to her apartment. Closing shift ended at ten. Max would’ve tried to walk her home, but she’d ducked out too fast for him to offer.

Technically, curfew started at eleven. Not that the police could enforce it. Still, Orion’s streets were never a good place to be after a sundown. For the hundredth time, she wished for a car. But she knew better. People could get away with stuff like that in Eastside, but here? Owning something as luxurious as a car would paint a big fat target on her back. The only vehicles parked along the street near her café belonged to the business-class clientele, who stopped by Jessie’s Joe when their high-end cafés ran out of coffee rations before the next shipment. They never stayed long. The risk of a car burglary on Westside was a steep price to pay for a coffee habit. Oh, well. With her paycheck, it wasn’t like Courtney could afford the upkeep of the ancient models available in Orion City anyway. And transit fare added up. So, despite the cautionary tales drifting around Westside, she usually relied on her own two feet.

A sharp wind hissed up the street. Shivering, she shoved her hands deeper into her pockets. At least the rain had cleared. The Wall rose like a black horizon against the glittering sky. Cloudless nights were rare this late in October. Stars burned defiantly through the wash of city lights. She’d heard stories, from people who traveled outside the city before Quarantine, that there were actually thousands of stars visible up there on clear nights in the countryside. Personally she couldn’t

remember ever leaving Orion. She knew she had, as a child, before the Wall went up. But no memories had stuck.

Ugh. Here she was, thinking about it again: that big, black Nothing against the spray of stars. Courtney refused to look at it. If she pretended her peripherals didn't exist, she could imagine the night sky went on and on. Unscathed by city lights. Unending, unconfined. Infinite.

She'd thrown a remote at the TV last night. Of course, as soon as the cracked smudge of pixels bloomed into a permanent scar behind the screen, she'd regretted it a little. But only a little. The mayor's pudgy pink face filled her mind, his yearly spiel full of fluffy promises. She hated him, yet every time his "updates" came on she couldn't bring herself to change the channel. The scientists who'd sacrificed their freedom to join the victims of Quarantine had nearly developed a cure. Soon, the Wall would come down, and the citizens of Orion would join the outside world at last. Etcetera, etcetera.

Victims. An unfair word, since most of the citizens inside the Wall hadn't been affected by the virus.

Except there was no way to prove that. Not when it struck so suddenly. Not when there was no way of telling who could be next.

A shadow moved ahead. Courtney froze. Squinting her eyes, she focused past the harsh glare of a street light on the wet pavement—at the shape moving in the dark just beyond.

Her breath snagged.

A dog. Big, black, and moving toward her, having rounded the corner of a building up ahead. She could hear its ragged panting from where she stood. The harsh scraping sound sent ice spearing through her veins. Fast and quiet, she plunged her hands into her purse. Her fingers closed around the can of pepper spray she kept there.

"Sammy!"

A voice cut through the dark ahead, pinched with annoyance.

"Come on, boy. Why can't you do your business before curfew?"

Get on with it.”

A man jogged around the corner. Courtney’s frozen blood thawed. He held the end of a leash, catching up to the dog in the street. She let go of the pepper spray.

The dog trotted up to the light pole and sniffed at the base. Lifting its leg, it stuck its nose in the air and let loose a stream of steaming yellow. The man tapped his foot behind him.

“All right, all right, let’s go.”

He tugged on the leash. The dog lolled its tongue and flopped its tail, following him back around the corner and out of sight.

Courtney watched them go. Her pulse slowed. A dog. Just a regular dog. With a collar, a leash, attached to a human. She forced herself to begin walking again.

That was another reason she was glad to live in Westside. Even with all its crime, tatty rundown buildings, and poor plumbing, at least here a dog was just a dog.

In Eastside she might not have been so lucky.