

Coffee on the House

5:42 p.m. and the *Bling Boutique* was still overrun. Wrinkling women gathered in knots around the stands of thick flip-flops and lacy tunics, chattering to each other across the shop in shrill voices. They were like so many peahens, with hair too blonde falling sharply around their faces, and gem-crusted jeans tight around every roll of their thighs. A few older men leaned back on the frayed couches with their iced coffees, their scuffed cowboy boots set up on the chairs, lazily watching the women out of the corners of their eyes.

Keagan washed the blender and set it upside down to dry. He shifted his weight on aching feet. The sweat trickled down his back, and he fought for breath in the coffee-laden air. The wet Texas heat pressed against the thick plate-glass windows and rushed in with every loud *dring* of the bell and swing of the heavy door. Keagan leaned under the counter and pulled out a tattered photo. An army of skyscrapers loomed silver against the sunset, their sleek sides lit with a million blinking lights. Behind them, the city stretched endlessly away, melting into the glowing clouds on the horizon. **Manh-**, the letters spelled boldly at the bottom of the photo, but the rest of the word had been torn away by his clumsy, childhood fingers. He'd carefully smoothed down the pages on either side of the missing picture so the school librarian would never know.

Keagan glanced outside at the long line of cars inching away through the four-way stop. Tomorrow, everything would be gone - everything but a car or two cruising around the courthouse, and Dr Pepper mixing with the dust on the concrete floor of the arbors, and the high school kids tiredly picking up the last candied nut packages. And it would just be Canton, Texas, the capital of lowing dairy cows and gasoline-leaking, jacked-up trucks, with its *Bling Boutique* and stimulating Walmart, waiting for the monthly flea market to roll around again.

5:44. Keagan gave an inward groan as the teenage girls pushed through the door. The tall one came on first, the flirt with her head up and dainty step, toes gingerly testing the tile before her heels clicked down. Her smooth brown shoulders were thrust slightly back. She glanced at Keagan, and then quickly dropped her long lashes. "Could I have a latte with soy milk, *por favor*?" Her slender fingernails were carefully manicured, sleek rose polish tapering down to a

smooth, rounded point, like Sarah's. Keagan wondered who Sarah polished them for, now. It had been over a month since he'd told her the comedy was over. It wouldn't have taken her long to recover.

"Isn't it kinda warm for a latte?" He asked.

"It's never too warm for a foam-design!"

"Heart *parfait*, on the way." Keagan gave the Flirt what he hoped was a friendly grimace and turned to the little punk in her wake. "What about you?"

"I want a cinnamon frappe." The eyes staring up at him from behind the dark bangs were lifeless and guarded, like a snake's. The girl's short hair fell sharply around her thin pixie face, and her tiny hip was stuck out to support the chunky baby.

"Wan dat! Wan dat!" The kid squealed, pointing at the cookie jar on the counter. His cheeks were chapped, and a crust of dried snot clung to his nose. The girl slapped his chubby hand.

"Quit! Mama will get you snack in a bit."

Keagan slowly poured the steaming milk into the hot espresso, lowering the pitcher as the toffee-colored liquid rose. The first tinge of foam hit the surface, and he swerved the pitcher in a tight circle, pulling it up with a jerk to make the point at the bottom. Too late! The heart was lopsided again. Keagan shrugged. Who cared, anyway?

With a start, he looked up to see the girl still watching him from behind her protective bangs. "Uh... how old is he?" Keagan gestured awkwardly toward the toddler with the milk pitcher.

The girl mumbled something inaudible and turned to go. The Flirt slipped an arm through hers with a maternal pat, leaning to whisper something in her ear. The girl almost smiled, then stared obtusely back down at the floor. "Sulk!" Keagan muttered. He forced his eyes away, but somehow they couldn't help wandering back to the two settling at a small table.

The Flirt was whispering something to her friend. Her smile was fake, painted on like a Barbie's with the lip gloss and mascara. She flicked a silky curl over her shoulder with every bit of

Sarah's deliberate charm. Her eyes drifted in Keagan's direction. He just glanced up at the clock.

5:50.

The kid was still griping about something when he brought their drinks. "Gimme! Gimme!" He shrilled, clinging to the Sulk's skinny jeans. "Quit!" The Sulk set a scented candle back on its shelf and shook her leg free. The kid stood there for a minute, fat tears spilling down his cheeks, and then he wobbled away, insecure in his clunky tennis shoes. A dirty finger was poked up his nose. Keagan rolled his eyes and slouched toward the counter. Why people had to bring their spoiled brats to enliven coffee shops was beyond him.

5:54. The bell dinged as the crowd slowly melted away, the older men slipping their Blackberries into their pockets and holding the door open for their strutting counterparts, laden with their plunder. Keagan swabbed his sweaty neck with a wet paper towel and breathed a sigh of relief. Six more minutes and he could put away the syrups and start sweeping.

A large man chose that moment to push his way through the swinging door and trudge toward the counter. "I want a large caramel frappe with double espresso..." He stopped to puff, staring over Keagan's head at the blackboard, "and lots of whipped cream." His flabby face was red with yesterday's stubble. His stomach fell out of his Duck Dynasty shirt, and large pools of sweat had gathered under his armpits. Keagan held his breath and turned on the espresso machine. It hissed and spat like a singed cat, sprinkling Keagan's cracked fingernails with a soft chocolate mist. "Double espresso!" The man seemed to think Keagan was deaf.

"Your frappe is on the way, sir." Keagan focused on the dull red EXIT sign behind the man's ear. "If you'll make yourself comfortable I'll bring it to you as soon as possible."

5:59. The last sunrays filtered in through the smudged windows, lighting the tile underneath into a blaze of burnished copper. They found a solitary leaf where it dangled from a chair by an invisible strand, tiny fingers of light illuminating it like a wispy cloud. Its crimson tips, rounded like a baby's glove, were as delicate as fairy glass. For just a moment, Keagan forgot the heavy air, and sweat, and aching feet. He started toward the leaf, iPhone poised for the shot. But as he knelt beside it the last sunrays disappeared behind a ridge of storm clouds. The darkening sky

stared down at him with a lurid glare. Outside, the rising wind sent crumpled leaves gusting down the sidewalk in the September wind, but the *Bling Boutique* felt like a sauna. Keagan's stomach grumbled. He shoved the iPhone back into his pocket.

"Mzzzzz Freeler!" He let his tongue roll over her precious title. A sharp pair of cheekbones emerged from around a stand of purses. One sculpted eyebrow tilted slightly up over her dark mascara. "Kea-gan *Terrance*!" She enunciated every syllable. She must have been an English teacher in her distant youth. She could deny it all she wanted, it wouldn't make a difference. He could see her now, straight as a rod by the blackboard, staring down the little kids all in a row in front of their desks. Her lips were shaped like a pointed pencil. "Children, you say, good morning, Mzzzzz Free-ler!"

"Kea-gan *Terrance*, how many times must I remind you to look for me with your eyes, not your voice?" Keagan felt bad for her previous students.

"My apologies, but can I start shutting down now? It's 6 o'clock."

"You *may* shut down when everyone has left. Until then you may help me organize the sales racks."

She turned on her heel and almost ran over the toddler squatting on the floor. He had tugged a bright bead necklace down from a low hook and was slobbering all over it. *Crunch*, Keagan could see his tiny teeth latch down on a big fake diamond. Ms. Freeler glanced around to make sure the kid's mom was out of hearing distance. "And for heaven's sake watch the brat!" Keagan pried the kid's mouth open and teased the necklace away. The kid plopped to the ground and set up a shrill wail that echoed against the wooden walls. A fresh trickle of mucus seeped slowly down toward his top lip.

"Hey, girls!" Keagan heard a soft voice around the corner. "How have y'all been?"

"You had better not want coffee, woman," Keagan muttered as he scuttled back to his corner behind the counter.

He could see the woman now. She couldn't be older than fifty, with bouncy, silvering hair falling into her face, and a long hippie skirt. It swished comfortably on the tile as she leaned

down to press her ample bosom against the Sulk's stiff shoulders. "Where's Sky? Is that him crying by the counter?"

"Who else?" The Sulk dropped her eyes back down to her cracked iPhone.

"I'll keep him for a little bit." The woman hurried around the corner and swept the kid up in her arms. "How's Teacher's buddy?" She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and pulled out a Kleenex to dab at his runny nose and tearstained cheeks. "Is somebody hungry? How about a cookie?"

Keagan glanced mechanically up at the clock. 6:07.

"Ookie!" The kid chirped. For the first time that afternoon a grin spread across his chubby face. He reached to stroke her dangling leaf pendant with a dirty, adoring finger. Keagan gazed from the glinting silver leaf to her face. Her face with the thinning hair and broad nose and tired, sea-gray eyes. Slowly, he fished a big cookie out for the kid and dropped the change into her calloused palm.

"Thank you," she smiled. Her eyes danced with a sudden flicker of blue, and green, and tiny laughter wrinkles lifting in the corners. Keagan felt something soften inside of him, the first swelling raindrop forming on the tip of the icicle, waiting for spring. Waiting to let go.

He gave her a big grin.

"Would you like a coffee on the house, ma'am?"