The CAFÉ at the END of the WORLD

Books by Helen Comerford

The Love Interest
The Hero Complex

The Café at the End of the World

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HELEN COMERFORD

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For those who choose kindness.
You deserve something sweet …



CHAPTER ONE

Picturing my happy place is easy; I work there every weekend and some evenings after school. Mismatched tables and chairs, sofas to sink into, feathery ferns that stroke you as you pass, fairy lights winding through the rose-strewn trellis on the ceiling, random action figures that Dad insists on buying, and the sunshine scent of baked cinnamon and pineapple. The Snug. Pont-on-Wye's cosiest café, owned and run by my parents since they bought the place a little over seventeen years ago.

Influencer @Coffees&vibes called it eclectic chic, but I call it perfect. The Snug is my heart home, even if my feet are starting to ache as I enter the last hour of my shift.

'We all become our parents in the end,' Mila declares from the counter.

I swallow and focus on frothing the milk for Mr Henson's latte. No need to read anything into that statement. Our

part-time barista says things like that all the time and I'm pretty certain she's not one of Pont's Natural residents, although I can't always tell and it's rude to ask. She's probably showing Mum something that she picked up at the market on her day off. That's her normal routine: *'Rose, look at this doormat/cactus/bag of spices I bought. Such a bargain! Can I get a cappuccino?'*

'I'm telling you; I resisted for as long as I could, but I've officially become my mother!' she continues. 'Look at this ugly thing. It called to me from across the marketplace! Thought I could keep my keys in it. Next thing you know my neat little house will be a sparkly hoarder's nest, just like my old mum's.'

I can't help myself. I turn to find Mila in her gym gear, holding up a small golden tureen with etched swirls. It's like someone shrank a royal chamber pot.

'Embrace it, love. You might as well enjoy the journey,' Mum says. 'At least Lydie has all of this fabulousness to look forward to.' Her fingers brush the smooth brown skin of her forehead as she gestures to her braids and glittering headscarf.

Mila laughs. 'Lucky thing.'

'Isn't that right, Lydie?' Mum calls over.

'Mm-hmm,' I reply, and they giggle.

Mr Henson is still latte-less, so I focus on his decaf caramel afternoon treat. The pensioner had told me, again, why caffeine is a bad idea for him in the late afternoon (*irritates my bladder, Lydie-pet*) but how the caramel syrup still gives him a kick, so I give him extra. I like Mr Henson. I like pretty much all of our regulars. I might not want to actually become my mum, but I'm

going to do business at university so I can look after the Snug when I'm older. Then maybe I'll also open other Snugs, and maybe I'll get married to a sweet boy with kind eyes at the town hall, and buy a house overlooking the river, and have between one and three children. Mum's life is perfectly cosy, but I'm going to make my own version.

We don't have assigned seats in the Snug, but we might as well have. Mr Henson always sits in the armchair next to the tasselled reading lamp, working on his crossword with a stub of red pencil. It is both an excellent spot to watch the bustling high street of Pont-on-Wye and the comfiest seat in the house.

'Here you go, Mr Henson.' I deliver his frothy coffee and he places his hand lightly on my arm. I know the drill: it's time for the Daily Cat Drama.

'Lydie, I think someone else is feeding Annabelle.' Mr Henson's tabby cat, Annabelle, occasionally manages to sneak into the café. She is as devious as she is adorable.

'How can you tell?' I ask.

'It's the look she gives me when I put her food down,' he grumbles. 'Like she's had better, the little traitor.'

I give Mr Henson's hand a sympathetic pat. 'She might be taking their food, but she loves you, Mr Henson. Has she brought you any gifts recently?'

He shrugs and reaches for his decaf. 'A sock, a leaf and half a frog.'

'See. You're her person.' I turn back to the counter, trying desperately not to picture half a frog. On my way back through the café, I retrieve the newest action figure, Darth Vader, and

place him back at the top of the yucca, where he lives like a vengeful Christmas fairy.

'All right, Dumpling?' Mum leans against the counter.

You'd think seventeen years would be long enough for a nickname given to a chubby baby to fade away, but 'Dumpling' might be eternal. It's not that I hate it, hate's such a strong word; I just prefer Dad's approach. He's always called me Lydie, even when I was small. I'm a young professional, not a delicious lump of dough. I am going to ask Mum to retire 'Dumpling' or at least keep it for home.

'Lean with me,' Mum says. 'There's something I want to talk to you about.'

'Me too.' I find a space next to her and pull the bottom of my T-shirt out from under my woolly jumper to wipe the condensation off my glasses. This is my moment. I am going to assert myself.

'I'll go first,' Mum says. 'How do you feel about managing a shift?'

'Managing a shift in the café?!' I almost jab myself in the eye in my rush to get my glasses back on.

'Yes.'

'I'd be in charge?'

'That's what managing means.'

'Where would you be?'

Mum shrugs. 'Well, I'd be here too, because it still takes two of us to run the café. But Mila is taking fewer shifts to focus on her yoga classes, so we need to hire someone else. When we find them, you would be the shift manager with them and I will

be, I don't know, dancing or swimming or forcing your dad to get some sunshine.'

I clench my lips to stop myself from squealing. I've been pushing to be left in charge of the Snug since before I was legally allowed to work here.

'What do you think?' Mum asks. 'You could run the café tomorrow afternoon?'

Sunday afternoon is pretty sleepy in Pont, but I'd be in charge. I nod so fast my neck twinges. 'I can do that.'

'Tomorrow it is, then. We'll see how it goes and if we're both happy, it can become a regular thing. I was thinking you could manage the first day of the Autumn Fayre too.' Her face softens into a smile. 'You're ready for this.'

'The Autumn Fayre,' I whisper. The Autumn Fayre is Pont-on-Wye's most important event of the year. Thousands of people visit our town and head to the decorated town hall where the Snug has the stall next to the entrance … and I would be in charge?!

'Breathe, Lydie.'

'Yeah, yeah, OK.' My glasses have steamed up again. 'Yeah. Let's do that.'

'I'm proud of you, Dumpling.' She pulls me into a hug. 'What did you want to talk about?'

'Oh.' I need to wipe my glasses, but I'm enjoying being held, so just for a moment I'll live within the white mist and the warmth of my mum's arms. 'Nothing important.'

Mum heads to the kitchen to finish the pineapple drizzle slices for tomorrow, leaving me at the counter. The sun turns

the floor of the café golden and the autumn wind makes the copper leaves along the high street dance and I am going to manage the Snug. This is happiness; a sore-footed, sunshine-scented moment in my café.

'Dumpling!' someone practically shouts in my ear. Jane. I didn't hear her coming. I whip my head round to glare at her. Jane knows how I feel about 'Dumpling'. Jane Jones knows everything about me.

She holds up her hands. 'In my defence, I said your name about eight times before resorting to the D-word.'

'Your hair is purple!' My mouth drops open.

She ruffles her violet waves. 'Do you like it?'

'I love it!'

She does a little spin so I can see her mid-length bob from all angles. 'I think you'd suit purple too, or pink maybe.'

I pull a curly strand of my afro from the ponytail I forced it into for work. My mix of Caribbean and European heritage has resulted in bouncy black curls. 'There's no way I'm bleaching my hair.'

'My hairdresser can do it without bleach.'

'Me turning my afro pink is in the maybe pile.' I don't mention that her hairdresser probably costs more than I can make in a week and there's no way I'd let Jane pay. I grab her one of our big ceramic mugs that are reserved for family. 'Ginger tea?'

'Um.' Jane looks sheepish, which is not a look I often see on her. 'I might actually …'

My hands fly to my mouth. 'Jane Emma Jones, do you want to go full cosy?'

She leans in across the counter. ‘Can I have marshmallows too?’

I’ve already grabbed them and the cocoa powder. ‘Naturally. Whipped cream?’

Jane glances over her shoulder like one of the subscribers of Middle Distance, Full Metal (the only creator channel that combines athletics, nutrition and metal music) might be lurking, ready to tell the community that she’s consuming excessive sugar.

‘Do it,’ she whispers.

We’ve reached the late afternoon lull, so once Jane has her drink, I slip out from behind the counter and grab a seat with her at the little mosaic table by the till. It’s where people sit when they want to distract whoever is behind the counter, so it was always Grandpa’s favourite spot.

‘Mr Henson thinks Annabelle is eating away from home, but no one else had any gossip.’ A few grains of sugar shine up from the grooves between the mosaic tiles. I wipe them away with my lingering sadness. ‘Give me some juicy Pont-on-Wye drama, and if nothing happened, make something up. I need my fix.’

‘Junkie.’ Jane smacks me in the arm. ‘I don’t have to make anything up.’

‘Ow!’ I rub the spot where she hit me. Jane’s love language is violence and she’s far stronger than she realises.

‘Pal’s on a walkabout.’

My jaw immediately tightens. This is not the type of gossip I wanted. ‘Pal’s out. On his own?’

'That's his thing.' Jane takes a sip of her drink and sighs. 'Your hot chocolate is always incredible; it's basically magic.'

'Pal?' I prompt.

'Right.' Jane licks some more whipped cream from her mug. 'He was wandering up the high street about ten minutes ago.'

'Crap.' I should go and get him. Or call Dad. Not that Dad ever does anything when his horse heads into town. Last time he didn't even look up from the book he was reading. People see what they want to see, and if that happens to be a gigantic white horse eating the town's flower displays, it doesn't worry Doyle Mortimer.

'Pal,' I mutter, rising in case I can see him trotting up the high street.

'He'll be fine.' Jane pulls me back into my seat. 'Pal's gonna Pal.'

I frown. Pont-on-Wye is an oasis surrounded by forested hills and misty waterways. My town is practically perfect, from the year-round bunting to our cottage at the end of Knell Lane, and keeping things safe and cosy in Pont-on-Wye is my unofficial mission. Today that includes finding Pal before he poops on someone's car.

'Speak of the devil!' Jane's eyes light up.

Pal, the enormous white horse, moseys past the front of the Snug and swings his head to look in through the window.

'Hello, Scared Apple Girl.'

I've tried to teach him my actual name, but Pal communicates telepathically in a strange mix of words and images. His enduring memory of me is a five-year-old Lydie

wearing a pink raincoat and holding out an apple in her shaking hand.

'Hello, Pal,' I think back. *'Will you go home?'*

'Hello, dog.' The click of his hooves is clearly audible over our atmospheric music as he clip-clops after a nervous-looking golden retriever.

'He'll be fine,' Jane says, and I realise that I've stood up again.

Before I can rush out and intercede on the dog's behalf, the bell above the door tinkles and a boy slams into the café. Big backpack, intense eyes, neat golden-brown hair, and I'm torn between welcoming him to the Snug and pushing past him to go after Dad's horse.

Life is a balancing act when you're the teenage daughter of Death, retired Rider of the Apocalypse. The smallest thing can tip it from cosy to chaos. Like a boy with a cleft chin glaring round the Snug and opening his mouth and saying—

'Whose horse is that?' His cool blue eyes scan our startled customers and, for some reason, come to rest on mine. 'Someone needs to tell me about that horse, now.'