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Baker's  
Misadventures

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# The Muffin Baker's Misadventures

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*"How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out. You seem to me to be perfectly heartless."*

*"Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them."*

*"I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances."*

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

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## CHAPTER 1: AT THE BEGINNING, WHERE IT ALL ENDS

Sometimes extraordinary things happen to ordinary people. And sometimes the most ordinary of people can become extraordinary. Ben was one such person, and the day he turned twenty-eight years old was the day where it all started. For little did he know, on this day when he was ninety-eight thousand and sixty-two days, two hours, and thirteen minutes old, his life would change. In the years to follow, he would ponder if it altered for the better or for the worse. He could never be sure, but it wouldn't ever be denied that it certainly changed.

The morning started out just the same as all the other days. Ben awoke from a deep sleep, stretched out his long arms and begrudgingly hauled himself out of bed. Breakfast followed a shower, toast and cereal. Always toast and cereal. There was nothing in his routine that would beseech the extraordinary day ahead. Not even his birthday had altered his well-worn pattern.

Picking up his keys and walking down the seven floors to the ground, Ben's mind was full of his required tasks. First, he had to open the store. He had this down pat - lights on, blinds open, coffee warming. When done correctly, and in

order, the whole process would take exactly nine minutes and fifteen seconds.

Secondly, he would need to start the oven. Muffins didn't cook themselves, Ben did. His patrons would never fully appreciate the time and care that went into every single one of his muffins. They would never realize that at five o'clock every morning, Ben would start baking for the day. If he slept in, there would be no sweet treat for them to have with their coffee. Not that Ben would ever allow that, he took his business very seriously. If it wasn't for their sugar fix in the morning, accompanied by a caffeine hit, his customers would never be able to get through their day. People would be driving into lampposts or missing important meetings. It was a social responsibility he held.

After ten minutes and fifty seconds, Ben had opened his store, grumbling about the extra time he had taken. Whatever had costed him that extra minute, he was sure wasn't necessary. Unaware about the events about to unfold, he started the oven and placed all the ingredients onto the cold counter. Ben never pre-planned his muffin recipes. Some days he felt like berry should be the flavor of the day, other times it was chocolate. Today was a banana and coconut day. He gathered these ingredients and added them to the mix.

Humming softly to himself in the otherwise quiet kitchen, Ben baked. He mixed and poured until each and every muffin pan was full to the half-brim. The room warmed as the oven heated to the perfect temperature. The moment the buzzer went off, Ben filled the very last spot in the pan. This was another routine he had perfected down to the second. When everything went as planned, there were no surprises. That was how Ben liked it, and that was the way Ben lived. He never wanted for more, it wasn't worth it.

That was, until twenty minutes past ten o'clock that morning. The muffin store was full of people. Each customer sipping on their brewed coffee and indulging in a sweet muffin. Conversations all blended into one, the occasional



laughter ringing a little louder. Ben, coffee pot in hand, walked amongst the tables and booths attending to his patrons like a mother tending to her children. He lived for this, it was his life goal.

Sitting in the far right corner, tucked into a booth, sat a woman in a black hat. She had already had one cup of coffee, a half-eaten chocolate chip muffin was in her hand. She watched Ben as he hurried about the store. She liked the way he cared so much, and she liked the way she *knew* he cared. She was glad she had come, all the inner turmoil she had suffered while making that decision was now gone. Just seeing Ben was enough to settle her acid-reflux.

The woman had gone unnoticed to Ben. That is, until he saw her empty coffee cup. It was like a beacon for his keen eye. A customer not drinking was a potentially unhappy client. He weaved through the tables, avoiding a collision with a small child, and made his way over to table number 17, hidden in the right-hand corner.

"Coffee, Madam?" He held up the pot as a visual aide, from habit rather than need. His eyes were fixated on the empty cup.

"Yes please, Ben. And Happy Birthday," the woman answered, smiling. She was waiting for the moment of recognition in his face. She hoped it would come quickly; her heart was thudding loudly in her chest with the anticipation.

It did. Ben didn't even need to see her face to know the woman. The sweetness in her voice was enough to pull at his heartstrings. At that very moment, she turned her head to meet his, revealing her face from underneath her low sitting hat. Their eyes locked in surprise, Ben almost dropped his pot.

"Ava?"

"Ben."

"What are you doing here?" For no other reason than fearing he might collapse, Ben took a seat in the booth across from the woman. The coffee pot banged as it came to rest on

the table. His lips set in a surprised gape, not another word would come out.

“I came to talk to you,” the woman - Ava - stayed calm. She didn’t wish to startle the man. She had hoped for happiness rather than shock at her arrival. The doubt that had melted away was now starting to creep back. She swallowed. “You’re needed.”

“I can’t be needed. I don’t do that anymore and I haven’t done so for many years,” Ben replied, faster than he had expected. It had been as he feared; Ava didn’t come here to catch up on old times. As much as her mere presence made his heart beat faster, he wished she hadn’t come.

“I need you Ben. Please, would you just listen? If you decide after hearing the facts that you would rather turn your back, then so be it. I just want you to hear me out first. Is that too much trouble?” Her voice was pleading, which was reflected in her face.

In truth, it wouldn’t have been too much trouble to listen to Ava. Ben could listen to her all day, her voice like a symphony to his ears. The troublesome part was knowing the inevitable question at the end. If he could have moved his legs, he would have told them to run. However, the temporary paralysis and unfortunate beating of his heart meant he had to stay there in the little booth.

“Go ahead then,” he sighed, refusing to relax his grip on the coffee pot.

“I’m in trouble. Through no fault of my own, I’m currently sitting pretty high on the Cordon County Police’s Most Wanted list.”

“And you’re sitting here in my muffin shop talking to me? What makes you think I can help?”

“Because I know you can,” Ava answered, as if that explained everything. In her mind, it did.

Ben thought differently. “As much as I’d like to help, I don’t think I would actually hold much sway with the Cordon County Police. What is it that you were meant to have done?”

"Murdered my next door neighbor," Ava said quietly, dreading the reaction that was to come.

"Murdered!?" Ben couldn't help his mouth from forming a wide 'O'.

"Don't look at me like that, it's not like I actually did it. Which is why I need your help so much. I need you to help me convince the police I'm innocent," Ava tried to reduce the pleading tone from her voice. She had too much pride to beg completely.

At hearing the word 'convince', Ben knew exactly what his old friend was asking. He reeled at the word, shrinking into his shell as much as possible. If he wasn't stuck like glue to Ava's presence, he would have made a run for the door. How his brain longed to be away from this conversation.

The longer he took to answer, the more Ava fidgeted nervously. She wondered if maybe she really had made a mistake by coming to the muffin store. Maybe it was too much to ask of someone she hadn't seen for at least ten years. The uncomfortable silence stretched between them for what seemed like an eternity.

"Will you please just say something?" Pleading didn't seem so wrong now.

Ben looked Ava square in the eyes. He wasn't ready to answer. "I take it you need a place to stay?"

"I can't go home, the police will be waiting."

"I'll take you back to my apartment. They probably won't think to look for you there. Come on," Ben didn't wait for an answer. He mustered the strength in his legs so they didn't collapse underneath him as he stood. Still gripping the coffee pot like a security blanket, he returned to the kitchen long enough to let his staff know he was leaving early. The good thing about being the boss was not having to explain. Just leave them to their gossip.

The walk home was quick; it involved walking around the corner to the lobby and climbing the stairs to the seventh floor. Ava held her black hat so it covered most of her face.

She was probably being overly dramatic, but she would rather than being recognized and hauled off to the big house down town.

Ben's apartment was almost exactly the same as it was the day he'd moved in. It had come fully furnished with décor that didn't look like it had been updated since the nineteen-thirties. The furniture was a dark brown, the carpet a similar shade. Floral dark green wallpaper lined the few walls that weren't beige. The size left much to be desired too - just big enough to accommodate one bedroom, a kitchen, bathroom, and living room. The small balcony offered the only respite from the tiny abode. Ben didn't care, to him it was home. A safe and quiet place, a world away from the outside.

"Do you want the grand tour?" Ben asked sheepishly. He loved his home, but he was also acutely aware it wasn't everyone's cup of tea. To make it worse, he had a desperate desire to impress his guest. "It probably won't take very long."

"I would love to partake in the grand tour," Ava smiled. She following him as he quickly led her through the few rooms. She kept her distance as much as possible, making sure never to make even the slightest bit of contact with any part of Ben's body. She knew better.

"That's it really. It's not exactly a palace but, you know, it's home - my home," Ben uttered as they left the kitchen.

"It's beautiful. And considering there isn't a dead body lying in it like there was in my place this morning, it's even better."

The two old acquaintances stood in the middle of the living room, Ben's hands in his pockets, in an awkward silence. Somehow, neither of them could say what they really wanted to. It was like the last ten years had created a chasm between them, one that might not be capable of being filled. In the very least, not with small talk and pleasantries.

Ava took a seat on the brown sofa. It looked oversized in the apartment but it was surprisingly comfortable. For a moment, she felt like curling up and sleeping everything away

on the homely lounge. Ben took a seat beside her, as far away as possible.

"Thank you for letting me stay," Ava blurted. "I know you probably don't want to help me in the way I need helping, but anything you do is actually a help. So thank you."

"It's not that I don't want to help you, it's just that I don't want the consequences. And I never said I wouldn't do it, I'm just not going to find it very pleasant," Ben waited for Ava to process what he just said. As soon as it clicked, a smile spread across her face. One Ben couldn't help but mirror.

"Really? You'll do it?"

"Unless you want to stay here for the rest of your life," it sounded like a joke, but even Ben couldn't tell if he was serious or not. "I'm guessing not."

"I'm sure here is quite lovely, but I can't be a shut-in forever."

Ben didn't vocalize the words, but the thought of being shut-ins forever didn't seem so bad. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing special about the outside world. The only dishes it served up was a big cold plate of disappointment. Inside the four walls of the apartment, things were much better - especially when they glowed with the light of Ava.