

Haunted Brews and Sober Roots

Free Sample: A Cozy Ghost Cafe Mystery — Book 1

By Wren Harlow | frankwesley.com

A cozy ghost cafe mystery about recovery, community, and the small magic hiding in ordinary places.

I get to Brew Haven before the rain, like Aunt Mae always said: the shop breathes easier when it's empty and the world is quiet. It sits crooked on Maple Street, painted a tired teal that peels like sunburned skin. A bell hangs over the door and when it rings it sounds like a teaspoon dropped into a teacup, gentle and funny, the exact noise Mae loved. Two years sober today and I keep counting it like a mantra, seven hundred thirty days and a morning with light through the front window that looks like forgiveness.

I still half expect the party lights. Old me liked the flash and crowd, the way laughter bounced off exposed brick and nobody asked hard questions. Alice, who I was before the decision and then the quiet months, liked not sleeping and not feeling that low-house ache that never dropped when a bottle sat empty. Now I like sticky notes Mae left to herself and the tiny rule she taped over the espresso machine: No rush. Brew with care.

Mae left the shop to me because she said I could take care of it, and she had a way of making things sound simple even when they weren't. She wrote the will in her crooked handwriting and underlined Brew Haven like it was sacred. My sister asked if I was sure. My therapist said it would be good for structure. I said yes because structure tastes like chamomile in the mouth and because the shop makes me feel less like a ghost in my own life.

Between the cups and the corners there is a soft hum. It isn't the generator or the ancient grinder that groans when you make a double shot. It's quieter. When I set my bag down, a small metallic clink comes from the pastry case. A croissant rolls and lands butter-side up like it had rehearsed. I smile even though a small part of my chest tightens. The smell of cinnamon and something green, rosemary maybe, curls under the stronger coffee aroma. I breathe that in and it steadies me.

On the back counter I find a note in Mae's handwriting. Ellie, remember: small sips. Strong roots. If you hear the thirsty voice, pour yourself another cup of courage. Love, Mae.

Mae called cravings the thirsty voice. She said it was like a neighbor that knocks at three a.m. and asks to borrow sugar. Now, it sometimes wants to borrow everything. Two years sober hasn't made the voice polite. It still comes. But in the note, in the shop, there's a feeling I can hold that isn't made of liquor. There's a shelf of labeled jars: dried lavender, lemon peel, dried hops, something labeled clarity. Mae's handwriting has a little heart over the i in clarity and that is exactly Mae, theatrical and precise.

I flip the sign by the door to OPEN and the bell sings soft. No one is in. That's okay. I move like I'm learning the room again, turn the grinder on and the machine breathes awake. Steam fogs my glasses and for a minute my face is soft and odd. I wipe them with my sleeve and find another note stuck to the latte art stencil: First lattes, first chances. Trust the beans, Ellie.

I hold the portafilter like it's a tiny chalice and tamp the grounds with certainty. The stream pours slow and brown and golden, and the shop smells like home. I make myself a cup and when I bring it to my lips the lights flicker once. A whisper moves across my ear like hair. Two hundred and nine, it says, as if counting the days with me.

For a second I freeze. Then I laugh, soft, unbelieving. Mae? I ask out loud, because the idea of calling her ghost to account makes me feel brave and a little ridiculous. The whisper doesn't answer, but a tiny stack of ceramic saucers shifts on the shelf and lands perfectly nested. The shop is settling, or a house is, or something in between. I sip. It's warm and tastes faintly like lemon and courage. I tuck my hair behind my ear and set the cup down. The bell tinkles again, as if someone has come through the door, and I tell myself the day is only beginning.

Morning Rituals

I get to Brew Haven before the rain, because the quiet helps me hold the day. Opening is a ritual that steadies my hands and keeps the thirsty voice from filling the silence.

Every morning I push the sign out and the bell gives that small, clear note Mae loved. It sounds like someone dropping a teaspoon into a teacup. In that noise is a promise: the shop opens, the day starts, and I get to try again. The bell is my tiny invitation back into the world.

Tamping the portafilter feels like a small, tangible vow I can keep. The weight of the tamper in my palm is honest work. I press until the grounds sit even, until the surface is flat and ready. The motion is literal and simple, and staying focused on it gives my hands something truthful to do when the rest of me wants to drift toward old habits.

Mae left sticky notes with similar tiny vows. Tamping, for me, joins her voice and my hands. The ritual turns nervous energy into a steady rhythm, and every even puck of coffee becomes proof that I can hold to small, honest promises.

Counting two hundred and nine days is both habit and comfort, a soft anchor. I say the number like a prayer sometimes and it settles something in my chest. The count keeps a map of my progress that I can touch. On good mornings it is a badge; on hard mornings it is the handrail I grip to keep walking forward.

Mae's notes nudged me to mark days with kindness instead of shame. I mark them with small celebrations — a lemon slice in my tea, a moment of breathing, a tidy counter. The number is an anchor, and anchors hold ships through shifting tides.

Steam fogs my glasses and for a moment the world blurs into possibility. The ordinary becomes gentle magic. That fogged lens is also a reminder I am allowed to be imperfect. I don't need to see every consequence perfectly to do the next right thing.

The first sip of my cup tastes like lemon and courage and helps me breathe. I cradle it and take a careful sip. It is warm in a way that goes past the throat and seems to settle into my bones. There is a brightness — lemon peel, maybe rosemary Mae tucked in — and a quiet strength that makes my shoulders drop. Courage, not grand but enough, fills a hollow place.

That is the opening of [Haunted Brews and Sober Roots](#). The full story is waiting for you.

Ready to find out what happens next?

Grab the full novel on Amazon and follow Ellie, the ghost of Brew Haven, and the found family that holds when everything gets strange.

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Haunted Brews and Sober Roots by Wren Harlow is a full-length cozy horror novel. More from Wren Harlow at frankwesley.com and soberonlineempire.substack.com.