

Goodbye,
LATTES.

Hello,
HOLLYWOOD.

Meet Kayla Olson, the barista-turned-author whose first novel is headed for the big screen. BY KRISTY ALPERT

LESS THAN A DECADE AGO, Kayla Olson was most often recognized around town as the girl who made a superior iced caramel macchiato from her drive-through window at the Loop 288 Starbucks in Denton. Now this former barista and University of North Texas graduate is most often mentioned in association with Leonardo DiCaprio. Her first novel, *The Sandcastle Empire*, is being made into a major motion picture produced by DiCaprio and Paramount Pictures.

Olson has come a long way since her days writing customers' names on to-go cups of coffee. Today she is set to release her second highly anticipated novel, *This Splintered Silence*, in November with HarperTeen. Although Olson is now known around the world — her debut novel has been translated into 13 languages — she can still be found hanging around Denton. These days,

the only writing she does in coffee shops is on her next novel; she leaves the to-go cup writing to the pros behind the counter.

We sat down with Olson to get the inside scoop on her favorite haunts around Denton and to hear about the people, places and pets that have inspired her journey from barista to Hollywood-bound book author.

Where are you from originally?

I grew up in Mason, Texas, but I'm currently living in Denton with my husband, my son and my two cats.

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What inspired you to write *The Sandcastle Empire*?

I was a stay-at-home-mom when I wrote the first draft. Our little guy was 2 to 3 years old, and we lived in Austin at the time. [The inspiration for my first book] was a combination of missing two things and wanting to revisit them in my head: my favorite TV show (*LOST*) and my favorite beach (Serenity Bay on Castaway Cay). Castaway Cay is an island owned by Disney, and we had visited there a few years before. I was seriously craving a vacation!

Did your family encourage you to pursue a career in writing?

My husband has been incredibly supportive of all my creative endeavors since long before I ever mentioned a desire to write. My commitment to writing was much easier to fit into my day before we had our son. After he was born, my husband was so wonderful to help me carve out time to write. He also never put pressure or expectations on me. He supported me doing it because it was something I loved, even in the years before there was ever anything to show for all of my hard work, and even though it took a lot of time and commitment from us both to make it happen.

What was it like going from being a barista to a popular author in talks with Hollywood?

It was wonderful! [Laughs] It was *hard*, of course — it was a long, winding, bumpy road between my Starbucks days and that phone call where the film deal first came into the picture. But yes, it was completely surreal and exciting. I think baristas do such valuable work — they have the power to affect someone's day for better or worse, and they have to juggle five things at once and be *fast* at it, and *friendly* — but when I was working the Starbucks drive-through at the Loop 288 store, as much as I loved my job and my coworkers, I didn't feel creatively fulfilled. When I finally decided to try my hand at writing, everything just clicked. It felt very natural to me, even though I had a ton to learn. I set off on that path and put one foot in front of the other, over and over every day, and then one day I looked up and my agents were telling me the unbelievable news that Leonardo DiCaprio's production company, Appian Way, was interested in my book. It was strange in the best way, and rewarding. I've done it all along because I loved the work of it, and it was the most wonderful feeling to know that all my hard work would become a real, actual book, let alone possibly a film, too. I'm grateful for everything.

That's such an inspirational story! So let's be real: When do you get to meet DiCaprio?

Wouldn't that be amazing?! The honest truth is, I don't know. My literary agents like to say, "The only thing that moves



slower than publishing is film,” and so far, I’ve found that to be true. I’m not allowed to share any updates on the film until they share them first — but I wish I could!

You lived in Denton through college and for your first years of marriage, but now that you’re back in the city as an author and mom, are there any new places in Denton County that inspire you?

There are three Denton places I frequent because I love them and because I love the people who work there. Seven Mile Cafe, West Oak Coffee and Soma Massage. These have yet to show up in my work in any noticeable way, but they make me a healthier, happier person whenever I visit each place, so I think they do influence my work in a way that isn’t quite so obvious.

Your new book *This Splintered Silence* comes out November 13. What can people expect



from your second novel?

This Splintered Silence is another survival story — but not related at all to *The Sandcastle Empire* — and this time it’s a mystery set in space... well, set on a space station more specifically. It’s about the shifting dynamics in a tight-knit group of friends after a virus wipes out all of their parents. The six of them step up to lead the surviving population, but are woefully

lacking in experience. They have reason to believe their generation is immune from the virus until one of their own turns up dead. As tensions rise, the six are stretched to their limits in every way, trying to keep the station, and themselves, alive.

Where else can we find you?

Online! If anyone out there would like to connect on social media, Instagram is my favorite. You can find me at @authorkaylaolson. Also, for those in and around Denton, you can usually find signed copies of *The Sandcastle Empire* on the shelves at our local Barnes & Noble. And if you happen to find one that isn’t signed, contact me on my website and I’m sure I could find a way to sign it for you!

For more information on Kayla Olson and her novels *The Sandcastle Empire* and *This Splintered Silence*, as well as event info, fun facts about the author and other relevant news, along with lots of resources for writers and readers, visit www.kaylaolson.com.

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