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Emersyn Renée Zucker wasn't sure what she needed more, a hike in the woods, to snuggle a puppy, or an oversized cup of creamy coffee.

She grabbed her messenger bag, then stepped out of her car. Breathing in the warm, mid-May air, she sighed. It was only Tuesday. This was going to be a long week.

Emersyn trudged from the parking lot to the front door of her go-to coffee shop in Newport News. As she stepped across the threshold, she smiled. The upcycled décor, framed covers of whodunnit novels, and the comforting scents of espresso and aged wood wrapped her in a warm hug.

For now, she needed coffee.

She eyed her favorite booth in the corner. Three teen girls stared at their phones. Great. Why weren't they in school?

Sliding into the long line, her mind did loops like a rollercoaster. Her last week of college. She had three essays due, a curriculum outline on the life of bees, and a final week of student teaching art appreciation at Maplewood Preparatory School. After all that, she could take the summer off to relax.

"Your usual?" The barista with a jet-black pixie cut smiled wide.

Emersyn eyed the seasonal menu. "I'll try the blackberry

mocha this time. Large. With an extra shot. And make it to-go, please.”

She surveyed the room again. She only had a few minutes to work, but finding a seat might be difficult.

Her gaze drifted back to her favorite booth. The teens took a quick selfie and shimmied out of the booth. Perfect.

The reclaimed bench seats beckoned her to the back corner. Cozy and quiet, the booth had a great view out the window. Now she could get some work done before her martial arts class. She’d agreed to teach the younger belts for the next two weeks while her instructor visited family in Seoul.

“Whole milk. Right?”

She turned back to the barista. “Yes. Thanks.”

While she paid for her coffee, she continued to eye her favorite seat.

“Your name?” The barista wagged a marker in the air.

“Em—I mean Renée.”

“Hiding from someone?”

“Something like that ...”

Pivoting on her heel, she took off for the blue velvet bench seat with gold buttons.

Emersyn pulled her laptop from her messenger bag and set it on the table. She wasn’t hiding, just recovering from her last attempt at a happily-ever-after. Her new rule for dating: no more wealthy heirs in need of a high-society wife. She huffed out a sigh. Why was love so complicated?

While she waited for her caffeine, she opened her laptop and clicked on the local news app. Her ex’s photo loomed on her screen. If Guy Atwater won this cycle, he’d be the youngest mayor on record. She stared into those chocolate brown eyes. Guy was handsome, intelligent, and driven. But he was a shark.

She read all the letters after his name and internally deciphered them. He’d be a great politician. Maybe even a great husband and father. As she thought about their last phone call, Emersyn clicked off the article. Nope. She wanted to date

someone down to earth, not someone who wanted to merge estates.

Her gaze lifted and zeroed in on the for-sale sign taped to the lower corner of the front window. She'd missed that when she walked in. Why did things have to change?

She pawed the edge of the table until she found what she was looking for. *Em's bench*. As a teen, she'd carved the words with the antique pocket knife her papa had given her.

"A pocketknife can sharpen a pencil or slice through a rope. It all depends on what kind of trouble you plan on getting into."

Papa believed the pen was mightier than a sword. But it didn't hurt to have a sword with you either.

Her gaze swept over to the counter. Two iced drinks and a frappe. All of Newport News had decided to give in to their caffeine addiction today.

She eyed the for-sale sign again. Instead of dwelling on Guy, she should buy the coffee shop. Isn't that what one did after a breakup? Shopped? Or ate gallons of ice cream?

A smile spread across her lips. She'd buy the place and add an ice cream bar. Name a dessert after Guy. Maybe call it the *Shark Sundae*. Then she'd hang a plaque above her booth that read, "This booth is for teachers, starving artists, and daydreaming writers."

"Renée." A barista hollered her name along with two others.

She scooted out of the booth and trailed between the crowded tables to the front counter. Giving a quick nod to the high schooler behind the counter, she glanced down at the row of drinks. She reached for the first paper cup and read the name. *Reid*.

"I think that one's mine. Americano, two sugars." As a deep, honeyed voice floated behind her, gooseflesh covered her arms.

She turned and held out the drink like a peace offering. The tantalizing smell of leather and bergamot mingled with fresh ground coffee. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

"Sure. Anytime." She eked out her response with a shrug.

Behind a pair of dark, masculine frames, gray-blue eyes glinted with a hint of amusement.

"That one must be yours." Mr.Americano reached around her and retrieved her cup.

He smelled like an uptown bookshop. "Yeah. Blackberry mocha."

"Here you go." He handed her the cup, his fingers brushing against hers. "Blackberry mocha? Sounds sweet. Is that your regular?"

"Uh, no. I buy seasonal. In the fall, I'm all about the pumpkin. And cinnamon. And the spice."

His grin deepened along with his dimples.

Emersyn's skin heated. Spice? Really? She needed caffeine. And quite possibly a nap. Or maybe a time jump to another century. "Um, thanks again. For, uh ... grabbing my drink."

Forcing herself out of Mr.Americano's orbit, she sidestepped to the right, made a beeline for her booth, and flopped into the seat. "Maybe I should click my heels and land back on planet Earth."

As she took a sip of her mocha, Emersyn stole another glance at Mr.Americano. She'd never seen him before. With his chiseled jawline and wavy hair, she would have remembered someone who looked like they'd stepped right out of a superhero movie.

He wore a charcoal suit, cut to fit, and stood almost a head taller than her. He'd opted for no tie with a blue pinstriped shirt and two buttons open at the collar. While she sipped her mocha, she daydreamed about what he did for a living. Banker. Lawyer. Or maybe a professor. *I wonder if there's a cape under that suit.*

She set her cup down and wiggled her fingers. His brief touch still lingered over her skin. Ridiculous. It must be the stress of finals.

Mr.Americano said something to pixie haircut behind the counter, and she blushed. After a quick back and forth, the girl

fished a muffin out of the display, dropped it into a paper bag, and handed it to him.

Emersyn opened her laptop but kept her gaze lingering. Mr. Americano scanned the room, then frowned. Not even a superhero could find a seat today.

Biting back a smile, she glanced at her screen. Time to stop daydreaming and get to work.

"It's a bit of a packed house in here."

Emersyn jerked her head up. Mr. Americano? Her pulse jumped to treadmill levels. "Oh, yeah. It's busy today."

"Would you mind if I shared your booth?" He gripped his laptop bag and shot her a mournful look. "I hoped to get a few things done before I get back on the road."

Yes! Wait. Take a breath. Act natural. She clicked her heels under the table. "Are you a starving artist or a writer?"

His brow shot up. "What?"

"Molder of young minds?"

"None of the above." He flashed her a charming smile. "Just a guy looking for some Wi-Fi."

A shudder tumbled from the back of her neck to her toes. He's adorable. "I guess if you put it that way, I can share." She scooted her bag off the table and motioned to her laptop. "I need to read over a few notes before my next class. I shouldn't be long."

"Please, don't rush." He slid into the seat opposite her and set down his coffee cup and muffin bag. "I'm invading your space. Besides,"—he nodded between their cups of brew—"it will be nice to share breakfast with someone."

Warmth tickled her skin. When was the last time she shared breakfast with anyone other than her study group? Or Donna, her housekeeper?

"Are you a teacher?"

"I ... I'm ..." Emersyn worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Student teacher. I graduate this month."

"Congrats. Where will you be teaching in the fall?"

"A local private school." She hesitated. Careful. You don't know him. "What brings you into *this* coffee shop today?"

"Work. Well, pleasure." Mr. Americano pulled out his laptop and opened it. "Honestly, a little bit of both."

The glare from his screen reflected in his specs while he tapped on his keys and took intermittent bites of his muffin. When he looked up, he threw her a playful grin.

"I guess I should introduce myself since I'm invading a portion of your world today." He laid down his muffin and extended his hand across the table. "I'm—"

"Reid. Americano, two sugars." She shook his hand. "Sorry, that sounded weird. I envisioned that wittier than it came across."

Reid laughed and withdrew his hand. "It was very witty." He took a sip of his coffee, and a curl of his ebony hair fell over his forehead. Reid swiped at the curl then pushed his glasses up on the rim of his nose. "Not on a level of Dickens' wit. But close."

He's into the classics. Perfect.

"What's *your* name?" Reid popped the last piece of his muffin into his mouth.

"My name?" Her chest tightened as a city bus filled the window in front of the coffee shop. In large, sweeping script, an advertisement for the *Zucker School of Art* spread across the side.

Reid shifted in his seat, following her gaze. When he turned back, concern covered his face. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah." She waved him off. "I thought I saw someone I recognized." She stuck out her hand, then realized they'd already shaken hands. Heat prickled her cheeks. "My name's Renée."

He wrapped his fingers around hers, holding his grip there for a second longer than before. "It's nice to meet you, Renée." After he released her, he glanced down at his screen and punched in a few keys. "That's a beautiful name. French origins, right?"

"It is." *If he speaks French, I'm done.*

"*Parlez-vous français?*" His smooth accent rolled off his tongue like a song.

Her toes curled in her boots. "*Oui*. A little."

Reid looked up and shot her a bemused look.

"I struggle with learning languages." Shrugging, she took a drink of her mocha. "Music and art are more my thing."

"I love music, but I can't play an instrument to save my life. Do you play something?"

"Piano."

For a fleeting second, his expression fell. "So did my mom."

She took note of the past tense. Was his mom no longer around? She could relate to that wound.

"Is it always this busy?" Clearing his throat, Reid did another perusal of the coffee shop.

"No. But then again, I'm usually here in the evenings." She waved her hand around the booth. "I never have a problem getting my favorite seat after six." She shrugged. "Finals week. Maybe that's why it's busy."

"I remember those days."

"You make it sound like you're older than *Father Time*. How long have you been out of school?"

He chuckled as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. "A year. I'm twenty-five. I deviated from the direct path in school for a while."

"Decided to live in Paris?"

He arched a brow. "How did you know?"

Tipping her chin down, she lifted a brow back and waited.

A grin tugged at his lips. "Oh, I get it. The French."

"Simple deduction. I studied in England for a year."

"Really?"

"I have close friends who live in London. I think they wanted to keep an eye on me." Emersyn recalled how Kelly and James hovered like nervous hens after Papa passed away. She loved them, but sometimes she wished they were a little less ... well, a little less like hens.

Reid continued to type on his keys. "I didn't go to school in France."

"What did you do while you were there?"

"It's top secret. If I tell you, then ..." He flashed her an ornery look and lifted his cup to take a drink.

She leaned across the table and whispered, "Please don't say you're FBI or something." Living so close to the DC area, she'd run into plenty of clandestine government workers. "Is Reid even your real name?"

Reid stopped mid-drink and coughed. "What?" After he placed his cup back on the table, he tugged at his collar. "Of course, Reid's my name."

"Go ahead, fess up. FBI? CIA? NSA? Another three-letter acronym? Silver spoon heir whose ambition is the White House?" She squinted her eyes, trying to goad him further. "Or is this the point where you tell me you can't divulge that information?"

Reid curled his fingers around his napkin, then released it. A flicker of pleasure flashed in his eyes. "You have quite the imagination, Renée."

The way his voice deepened when he feathered her name with a French accent shot fire through her veins. *Please tell me you're just a normal guy.*

"I'm sorry to disappoint you." He leaned forward and held her stare. "I'm just a regular Joe. I work in IT."

"Is that so?" She leaned back in her seat and folded her arms. "Well Reid, you're just the man I'm looking for."

Lucas Reid Bennett's heart pumped in his ears. "I am?"

"You are." Renée's face brightened before she redirected her gaze back to her laptop.

Here it comes. Lucas readied himself to see a society picture of him with his family, no glasses—he only wore those when he

worked on his laptop—dressed to the nines, at a charity event, or shaking hands with the Senator.

“Can you help me with this?” She pivoted her screen to face him.

He adjusted his glasses. A half-organized website filled her screen and tension fled his body. She’s right. He was the guy she was looking for. Warmth tingled across his neck. *Don’t get ahead of yourself.*

Lucas pulled her laptop closer and scrolled through the pages. They were a mess. The padding was off, and she had too many plugins. He tried some of the navigation buttons. They worked, but several went to pages that didn’t exist. He read the menu—bio, curriculum, and products for sale. What was she selling? Tutoring? Not website design.

Glancing up, he caught the frustration in her eyes, her full lips bent in a pretty pout.

“What is this?” He swallowed to wet his throat. “I mean, I know what it is. What’s it for?”

“It’s my website. Well, it’s supposed to be.” She folded her arms on the table, then laid her head down, dampening her next words. “I hate technology.”

He chuckled. He loved technology. Reaching out, he nudged her arm. “It’s not so bad. Believe me, I’ve seen worse.”

When she lifted her head, her bouncy, auburn ringlets fell like springs across her shoulders. “You have?”

He nodded. “Is this part of your final?”

“Yes. But it’s a double-edged sword. I’m required to have a website for school next year. All my curriculum needs to be available online.”

“When do you need it finished?”

“Next week.”

“Have you thought of hiring someone?”

She leaned back and fiddled with the strap on her bag. “I wanted to do it on my own. That’s probably a bit ambitious at this point.”

"I'd offer to take it home and work on it but—"

She pulled her laptop back in front of her. "I ... well, like I said, I want to do it myself. When I need to upload my curriculum every semester, I don't want to call an IT guy."

"What do you have going on this evening?" He checked his watch, tearing his gaze from her doe eyes.

"Nothing. But you don't have to come back. Maybe you could just give me some pointers."

He looked up. She'd need more than a few pointers. "I only live an hour away, up in Richmond. It's not a problem."

"What about work tomorrow? You'll get home late."

He pointed to his laptop. "I'm mobile."

"Oh, that makes sense."

Digging through his laptop bag, he found a business card. *Reid Clark*. His stomach clenched. After one of his college buddies said he looked like a character in a comic book when he wore his specs, the name stuck. Everyone he knew used pseudonyms online. Gamers especially. Like authors using pen names, it wasn't that unusual. So why did he feel bad about lying to Renée?

He fingered the card. It was easier this way. He needed to keep his family out of his business—or hobby, as Dad called it—and he needed his clients to take him seriously. Not schmooze with him because he was a Bennett.

Lucas slid the card across the table. Guilt gnawed at his gut. For a second, he thought about scratching out the name and giving her his real one. No. Give it time. He couldn't be completely honest with her. Not just yet.

Renée picked up the card. "Reid Clark." When she looked up, her eyes sparkled. "Has anyone ever told you that you look like—"

"Many times." Reflexively, he pushed his specs higher onto the bridge of his nose.

"I'll meet you back here around seven." Cheeks pink, she

averted her eyes and fiddled with her coffee cup. "Make sure you don't stand me up."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

When she lifted her gaze, his heart lodged in his throat. "Good, because I don't share this booth with just anybody. Only the most noble of software designers."

He swallowed hard. Noble? Maybe he should come clean. Let her know he was an heir to one of the most exclusive estate houses on the east coast—*Bennetts Estates and Antiques*. Their showrooms brought in millions, but it was the private shows in hidden warehouses across the country that put their name in the spotlight.

If she found out he'd lied about his name, she might not think him so noble. Rich maybe. But not noble.

Pushing away those thoughts, he closed his laptop and shoved it in his bag. "I'll be here."

Her lips curved into an adorable smile. "Good."

Chuckling, he slid out of the booth and gathered his trash. With a final look back, Lucas shot her a wave, then ducked out the door.