

**Once Upon A Coffee**

**A Wishful Meet Cute Romance**

**By Kait Nolan**

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Written and published by Kait Nolan

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Cover design by Kait Nolan

*For M, great appreciator of my Richard Armitage impression.*

*All my love,  
K*

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## *Once Upon A Coffee*

Professor Hendricks was a certifiable asshole. As Dillon Lange climbed the stairs to his second floor apartment, he ran through a number of other less than flattering descriptions for the man who didn't give a damn that Dillon's project partner had a ruptured appendix, thus blowing their chances of finishing the midterm project on time. At least if they expected to finish it together.

"You should've planned for this," Hendricks had said when Dillon met with him to plead for leniency since Noelle was still in the hospital.

Right, because a *ruptured organ* was so easy to predict. Noelle felt awful about leaving him in the lurch, but she was so doped up on medication, she could barely stay awake, let alone string a coherent sentence together. During his brief conversation with her about it, she'd fallen asleep twice and woken up with a lurch, shouting "Save the crazy cat lady!" Totally *not* the frame of mind they needed for a project on macroeconomics. Because Dillon wasn't an asshole himself, he'd said he'd take care of the project and that she should focus on getting well.

God, he missed undergrad when he could still live from class to nap to party.

The thump of machine gun fire greeted Dillon before he even got the door open.

Half crouched on the futon, half standing, his roommate Owen clutched the Xbox controller with all the intensity of a drone pilot on a mission as war raged on the flat screen TV. "Come *on*, dude! You've gotta close in on the flank, I'm getting slaughtered here!"

Battlefield? Titanfall? Hell if Dillon knew. He hadn't had time for video games since he started his MBA at the University of Mississippi. He was at *least* two editions of Assassin's Creed behind.

Owen grunted as Dillon shut the door. "Hey man. How'd it go?"

"Lousy." Dillon dumped his keys in the Cool Whip bowl that served as a catch all by the door. "No extension."

"That bites. No, no not you," he spoke into the headset perched in his shaggy dark hair. "Well, yeah, getting ambushed at the spawning point bites, too. I'm comin' to you. Hang on."

"Are you gonna be at this a while? Because I've got a crapton of work to do on this project if I'm going to make the deadline."

"Huh? Oh, well we're in the early stage of this campaign. I can't walk away right now."

Of course, he couldn't.

Heaving a put upon sigh that was completely lost on his roommate, Dillon made a beeline for his room. No way could he work here with all this noise. Loading up his laptop and all the books he'd need for this project, he retrieved his keys and headed downtown to hole up at his favorite coffee shop.

There was, predictably, no parking on the Square. Not a shock. The weather was gorgeous and sunny, and everybody in Oxford was out enjoying it. Couples and groups teemed like ants along the sidewalks. None of *them* had an epic midterm deadline hanging over their head. As he drove past Uptown Coffee, he saw patrons spilling out the doors, effectively squashing that plan. Hooking a left back toward campus, Dillon considered camping out at the library, but he needed caffeine to get through this. Gallons of it. He didn't want to have to pack up and relocate once he got set up.

This called for drastic measures.

Forty-five minutes later, Dillon rolled into the sleepy little town of Wishful. He'd

stumbled upon this little jewel on one of his rambles in undergrad. Boasting a population of only 5,000, it reminded Dillon of his hometown in Texas. Friendly, quirky, and, most importantly, *quiet*, it made Oxford look positively metropolitan in contrast.

As he pulled into a parking space in front of Lickety Split Ice Cream, a family of five wandered by, talking and laughing as they did their best to catch drips from their ice cream cones. Dillon gave fleeting thought to ice cream.

*A reward when I finish*, he decided. That presupposed it would be open when he finished. If that wasn't optimism, he didn't know what was.

Gathering his gear, Dillon walked the short distance to his actual destination. The Daily Grind was cool and dark and blessedly empty but for a pair of old guys playing checkers in the corner. Somebody was moving around in the kitchen at the end of the counter, so Dillon took the time to peruse the menu tacked up to the pallet board wall.

"Welcome to The Daily Grind. What can I get you?" The barista, a college-age guy with spiked, frosted blond hair, offered a flirty smile. The name tag pinned to his purple apron read *Daniel*.

"Whatever you've got that will get me through an epic midterm deadline."

Daniel nodded soberly. "You want the zombie killer. Would you like anything to go with that? A muffin? Scone? Blueberry crumble bar?"

"Am I going to have any stomach lining left after drinking it if I don't?"

"Iffy. I'd soak some up with carbs."

"Then I'll have a slice of that friendship bread."

"Heated?"

"Sure."

The barista rang up his order. "Did you drive over from the university?"

"Yeah. Needed to get out of town to get some quiet so I could finish a project," said Dillon.

"You'll certainly get that here. I suggest you set up upstairs. You'll miss the afternoon rush that way."

"Is there much of a rush here?" Dillon couldn't imagine that in a town this size.

"Honey, you do *not* want to get between some of these soccer moms and their afternoon caffeine fix."

"Noted," Dillon chuckled.

"You go on up. I'll bring this when it's ready."

"Thanks."

The second floor of the coffeeshop was empty. Dillon picked a booth by a window and spread out his stuff. By the time Daniel brought his order, Dillon was already up to his eyeballs in Noelle's notes on her portion of the presentation. It was gonna be a long day.

~\*~

Avery Cahill parked her faithful Toyota beside the town green and resisted the urge to wipe her damp palms on the legs of her capris. *Stupid to be nervous*, she thought. It was just coffee. And a more or less blind date with a guy she'd been matched up with on Perfect Chemistry. A guy with no profile picture.

He'd said he was camera shy—which could mean...anything. Actually shy. Physically deformed. Homely. Axe murderer. Her friends hadn't even thought she should talk to a guy not willing to put his picture up, but he'd seemed nice in their admittedly non-personal conversations. Respectful, which was something in astoundingly short supply in online dating.

The things some guys thought they could get away with—insults, asking directly for booty calls, texting naked pictures of themselves—it had almost made her give up on online dating entirely.

But Ross had done none of those things. He'd been friendly and made no assumptions. They'd talked movies and TV and SEC football, steering clear of pretty much all things personal and identifying owing to that whole could-be-an-axe-murderer thing. She could get over the fact that he was a lifelong Bulldog fan. Probably. He was an architecture grad student at Mississippi State, after all. She could get through a conversation with a guy who thought "Hail State!" was a more inventive battle cry than "Hotty Toddy!" It was worth a try, anyway. It wasn't as if the post-college dating scene in Wishful was exactly jumping. So when he'd said he was coming to town for the afternoon and suggested they meet for coffee, she'd said yes. Public place. Daytime. She'd get a better feel for him in person than from online anyway.

It wasn't a big deal.

So she'd changed her outfit. Twice. And gnawed off her lipstick and had to reapply. Avery had known that if she stayed home and thought about it any more, she'd end up over thinking and canceling on him. Or worse, standing him up because he'd already left Starkville and didn't get the message. So, she'd arrived early and decided to walk to The Daily Grind so there'd be time to get her nerves under control.

Sunlight filtered through the enormous oak trees that peppered the green, dappling the spotty grass. Summer had baked the ground in places, and the green hadn't quite recovered. In another month or two, the leaves would turn brown and fall—Mississippi rarely saw much in the way of autumn color—but for now, the green was as she liked it best. Bright and breezy.

Out of long ingrained habit, Avery stopped by the huge central fountain that dated back to the town's founding, just after the Civil War. She was pretty sure it hadn't run since she was little bitty, but her granddaddy had trained her to make a wish every time she walked by, and today was no exception. Clutching a coin in her hand, she thought, *I wish for this date to be something special*. Then she tossed it into the basin, where it plunked into the few inches of rainwater that hadn't evaporated over the summer. It was both tradition and comfort, and Avery felt some of the nerves smooth out.

Thus fortified by local ritual, Avery strode purposefully to The Grind. The date might be a disaster, but at least if the whole thing tanked, she'd have an entertaining story to tell around the water cooler at City Hall when she got to work on Monday.

"Well hey there, Sugarplum!"

The tension in Avery's shoulders immediately bled out at Daniel's cheery greeting.

"You're dressed up awful cute for an afternoon read-a-thon," he remarked, already turning to put together her current favorite Black Irish mocha.

"What?" She glanced down at the novel sticking out of her purse. "Oh...no. Actually, I'm here to meet somebody." She pulled out the book and the Gerbera daisy, clutching both to her chest.

Daniel arched both perfectly manicured brows. "Oh!" He drew the exclamation out to three syllables. "You're pulling a *You've Got Mail*. That's just adorable. Anybody I know?"

"Nobody I know. We got matched up on Perfect Chemistry. He's a grad student at the university."

Daniel brightened. "He's already here! Upstairs." He dropped his voice and leaned across the counter, offering her Black Irish. "A real hottie, too."

"Thank goodness," Avery sighed. "He didn't have a picture on his profile. Jessie was positive he had a third ear or weird mole or something. And Brooke was convinced he was a

creeper.”

“No strange growths or creepy vibes. Scout’s honor,” Daniel swore. “He’s been working on a midterm project of some kind for a while now. Could probably do with a refill on his coffee. You want to take one up?”

“Sure.” It would be a nice ice breaker.

Daniel made it up and handed over the second cup. “Good luck, cupcake. If he turns out to be a stinker, just text me an SOS and I’ll create a diversion to get you loose.”

“You’re an angel.”

Avery took the stairs slowly. With her luck, she’d step wrong in her wedge sandals and slosh coffee on her pale khaki capri pants in a highly embarrassing location. But she made it to the top with her outfit unmarred.

He was the only patron up here. Hunched over a laptop, with a stack of books and notes scattered on the table around him, she could just make out the strong edge of his jaw and the serious set to his mouth. Maybe he’d come early planning to get some homework out of the way before their date? Avery considered turning around and going back downstairs until the appointed time, just to give him a chance to finish what he was working on. Then he looked up and she almost bobbed the coffee.

Daniel hadn’t exaggerated. This guy *was* a certifiable hottie with all that dark hair mussed by frustrated or nervous hands and those clear gray eyes that seemed to pierce her from across the room. His brows winged up in question.

Aware she was staring, Avery mustered a smile and crossed over, setting the cup of coffee in the few inches of free space beside the empty cup already there. “Daniel said you could do with a refill.” She slid into the booth across from him and laid her book and flower next to her own coffee. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

~\*~

As the brunette slid into the seat across the table, Dillon realized three things. One, she wasn’t a waitress getting her flirt on. Two, it was really hard to be annoyed at being interrupted by a beautiful girl. Three, she completely thought he was somebody else.

“I’m so glad I’m not the only one who believes in showing up early.” Freed of the coffees, her hands darted briefly, like hummingbirds unsure where to land, before settling in her lap.

Dillon recognized nerves when he saw them. He opened his mouth to tell her she’d made a mistake, then his eyes lit on the book she’d set between them. The latest in *The Iron Druid Chronicles*.

“You’re a Kevin Hearne fan?” he asked.

Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, giving her a faintly feline look as she said, “Yes! Have you read this one?”

Dillon quickly held up a hand. “No. Don’t say a word. I’m three books behind in the series and have been rabidly avoiding spoilers. I didn’t discover them until *after* I started grad school, so there’s not a lot of free time for reading.”

“No, I imagine not. I confess, I’ve been a reading *machine* since I graduated two years ago. I haven’t been able to get enough of all things commercial fiction. I’m sure my English professors would have a heart attack that I’m reading something other than Faulkner.”

“And yet, you were an English major?” he asked.

“Honestly, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I like reading. They don’t tell you when you sign up to major in English that what they do isn’t *reading*. It’s analyzing



texts—often by a bunch of dead white guys that haven't been relevant in at least a century—to within an inch of their lives.” She shuddered theatrically and sipped at her coffee. “I’m pretty sure they make up at least half of all the hidden meanings. I really don’t give a damn what the author supposedly meant by the curtains being blue. Sometimes, the curtains are just blue.”

Dillon grinned. “Or the light at the end of the pier in *Gatsby* was just a green light.”

“Yes!” She lifted her coffee in a gesture of agreement so enthusiastic, he expected it to slosh.

“Why didn’t you switch majors?”

“Eh, I was already most of the way through. The alternatives would’ve involved adding a bunch of stuff and graduating later. I was ready to get *out*. Though I do miss having time for a daily nap.”

“Naps are one of the greatest benefits of undergrad,” Dillon agreed. “I’m pretty sure half the violence in the world would disappear if everybody had a daily nap. I know I’d be much less inclined to murder my roommate if I got one.”

“I guess you don’t much have time for that between juggling classes and your assistantship.”

“Not so much, no.” So whoever she was supposed to meet was also a grad student. He really *ought* to say something. But she looked so sweet as she absently played with the stem of the daisy, her attention focused on him. He could at least keep her company while she waited for her real date to show up. “So, what is it you do now with your English degree that doesn’t offer a chance for a daily siesta?”

“I’m the city recorder and personal assistant to the mayor.”

“City recorder. That sounds all official.”

“I’m pretty sure I got the job because I can type accurately at over a hundred words per minute. Writing all those papers in college had that side benefit. Mostly I’m a gopher for whatever Sandra—Sandra Crawford is our mayor—needs me to do.”

“Do you like it?”

She shrugged. “It keeps me busy. And I’m usually in on whatever drama results from small town politics, which can be very entertaining.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Like...” She tipped her head in consideration and the sunlight from the window hit her hair, bringing out all the rich, warm undertones and making Dillon itch to touch it to see if it was as silky as it looked. “Last month Leonard Culpepper—he’s the president of the local historical preservation society—went to war with Bernice Davies over her choice of paint color for the Victorian she’s been restoring.”

“What was wrong with the paint color?”

“Well, hot pink was definitely *not* historically accurate. It went all the way to the City Council.”

“So what happened?”

“It turns out that Bernice is actually color blind. *She* thought the color she’d picked out a kind of gray green. Never crossed her mind that ‘razzle dazzle’ didn’t make much sense for a green. They’ve been warned down at the hardware store not to let her pick out paint without assistance.”

“You like the small town life,” he said. There was no question about it. Her expression was one of comfort and satisfaction with her place in this tiny world.

“I do. So many people grow up and they’re hell bound and determined to get away from

where they grew up. I was really happy to come back. I like the fact that I run into my third grade teacher at the grocery store or my best friend's parents at church on Sunday. Roots are important."

"I miss them." The words slipped out before he realized. But hell, it was true.

"Where are you from? Originally, I mean."

"Little bitty town in East Texas called Rango."

Her eyes crinkled again. "Like the lizard in the movie?"

"Exactly like. It's 'bout this size. Part of why I come over here once in a while is because Wishful reminds me of home."

"What would you be doing if you were there now instead of in school?"

"Working at the feed and farm supply probably. Running cattle on the side."

"That's a big jump from architecture."

Ah ha, so his mysterious competition—and when had he started thinking of this girl's real date as competition?—was from MSU.

"Yeah, it is," he agreed. It was the truth, in a general sense.

"What do you do on a cattle ranch in the fall?" As her bottle green eyes sparkled, Dillon could see she was imagining a Hollywood version of a dude ranch.

"This time of year, we'd be baling hay for winter. Making sure the herd is up to date on immunizations and such. It's not glamorous by any means. Most folks who raise cattle have other jobs too. It's hard to make a living at that on its own anymore."

"My granddaddy raised dairy cattle forever, same as his daddy and granddaddy before him. But they had to close the dairy, before I was born. Now he farms. Soy. Corn. Cotton. It's all a tough business these days." She paused to sip. "So will you go home once you finish with grad school?"

Dillon shrugged. "I don't know. Depends on how things unfold, I guess. Where I wind up getting a job. Whether it's just me to think about or if I'm in a relationship when I finish." And where had *that* come from? "Lots of unknown variables. What about you? Are you settled here for good?"

She smiled into her coffee and glanced back up at him through sooty lashes. "I am until somebody worth leaving for catches my eye."

~\*~

What on *earth* possessed her to say that?

As she looked down into her mug again, she caught a flash of Ross's smile. Oh, yeah. That was why. He had a great smile—an inviting curve of lips that made you feel like you were sharing some kind of juicy secret.

He made so much better an impression in person than he did online.

"Why didn't you have a picture up on your Perfect Chemistry profile?" She couldn't resist asking and hoped it wasn't a sensitive subject.

The oddest expression crossed his features. "It wouldn't have been me."

*Huh.* He hadn't struck her as much of a philosopher in their previous conversations.

"Well, I guess we do tend to place too much importance on physical appearance."

"Why are you on one of those sites? You can't tell me you have trouble finding dates."

"Wishful is a little bitty pond, in case you haven't noticed. Of the guys here in my relative age bracket, I already dated half of them in high school. The other half are either married, dated friends of mine long enough that it would be weird, or they just don't ring my bell. We don't get a whole lot of new blood, as it were. I'm sure your hometown is the same."

“True,” he agreed. “In a town that size, we had to revoke the whole no dating your friends’ exes rule, otherwise nobody would’ve had anybody to date. Most folks either married their high school sweetheart or hoped to meet somebody in college.”

“Exactly. And since I didn’t do that while I was at Ole Miss, online dating helps...cast a slightly wider net. And it’s nice to theoretically have a system to match you up on *some* kind of criteria that suggests compatibility.”

“You think an algorithm or whatever can actually do that?”

“Don’t you?” she asked. He *was* on the same dating site, after all.

“I don’t think it’s a substitute for real, in person conversation. It might be able to match you with somebody based on—I don’t know—similar values or movie tastes or political views. And, sure, maybe you end up hitting it off. But I don’t think there’s any true substitute for a chance meeting where you feel that indefinable spark with a complete stranger—and you know they won’t stay a stranger for long.”

The moment stretched between them, pulling taut with awareness and unspoken things. Avery felt her skin prickle and thought if she reached over to touch his hand right now, she’d feel a snap of electricity.

The thump of footsteps on the stairs broke the spell. Avery glanced over to see an unfamiliar guy step into the room. Tall and exceptionally thin, he had a mug in one hand and what appeared to be a sketchpad in the other. She gave him a polite smile as he paused to survey the room, then moved to take a seat in a booth by the other window.

“Well, there’s definitely something to be said for serendipity,” Avery admitted. “Whether it’s facilitated by outside sources or not.” She thought about the wish she’d made in the fountain and smiled. Maybe the old fountain still worked after all.

Ross lifted his mug in a toast. “To serendipity.”

Avery clinked her mug to his.

Conversation shifted back to books. They both had diverse tastes—she liked urban fantasy and romance, he liked sci-fi and more traditional fantasy—but there was sufficient crossover that they had plenty to discuss. Avery had to appreciate a man who could as readily debate George R. R. Martin’s no character is safe policy as whether *The Hunger Games* was a reasonably accurate political forecast for the distant future. But she really knew she’d found someone special when he confessed to being one of the original backers of *The Veronica Mars Movie* and said he owned the entire series on DVD.

“Season one is as close to a perfect series of television as I’ve ever seen,” he declared.

New guy checked his watch and fidgeted, tapping a pencil lightly against his sketchpad. The sound wasn’t *quite* loud enough to be truly annoying. He looked nervous. *Waiting for somebody*, she guessed. Knowing very well how that felt, Avery silently wished him as much luck on his date as she was having on hers.

“Hey,” said Ross, “I saw an ice cream parlor a bit down the street. How do you feel about banana splits?”

“They are one of the singular joys in life,” said Avery. “Extra peanut butter?”

“Naturally.”

“Then why don’t we relocate,” he said.

“I support this plan,” she said. Ice cream was always a good idea.

Ross shut the laptop he’d shoved aside sometime during their conversation and began to gather up the notes scattered across the table. As he started to stuff his bag, Avery’s attention strayed to the books he’d brought. A compulsive reader, she angled her head to get a better

view of the titles. *Peddling Prosperity: Economic Sense and Nonsense in an Age of Diminished Expectations. The Return of Depression Economics.*

*How odd*, thought Avery. “Economics?” she asked. “Are you taking business classes on top of the requirements for your architecture degree? Doesn’t that make you a glutton for punishment?”

Ross stopped stuffing his bag and gave her a sheepish look. “Ah, about that.”

“Excuse me.” The newcomer stood by their table. “But are you Avery?”

Avery had a very bad feeling as she cautiously answered, “Yes.”

“I’m Ross,” he said, with a look that clearly said Party Foul to her companion. “Your actual date.”

~\*~

Avery’s face cycled through a number of different emotions—distress, embarrassment, maybe even disappointment—before she finally pinned him with a horrified glare. “You’re not Ross?”

Dillon gave a *what-can-you-do?* shrug. “Guilty.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she demanded.

“You didn’t ask,” he said. Wrong answer.

She shot to her feet, hands fumbling for her book and coffee as she looked to her real date. “I’m so sorry for the confusion! I got here early and we simply don’t get that many new faces in town. Daniel said—well it doesn’t matter. We made assumptions. I thought he was you.”

“No harm, no foul,” said Ross, though the glance he shot back at Dillon suggested otherwise. “Shall we?” He gestured for her to precede him.

“Thanks for the coffee and conversation,” said Dillon.

Avery made a little *hrmph* by way of reply. She left her daisy behind as she followed Ross.

He expected they’d head downstairs, but instead, they settled at a table on the far side of the room.

*Well hell*, thought Dillon. He’d certainly blown that. As soon as the other guy had come up the stairs, Dillon had suspected it was probably her real date. He’d had crazy idea that if he could just get her out of there...

*What*, he thought, *that she wouldn’t be pissed when you told her the truth later? That she felt that spark, too?*

Cursing himself as an idiot, he began laying his notes back out. Break time was over, and he had plenty of work to keep him busy.

Avery looked over at him as he opened his laptop again, her eyes narrowed. At what? His effrontery at actually staying put while she had her date? He was here first. She was the one who’d interrupted *him*, with her smiles and enthusiasm and chatter about books and small town living. He had *work* to do. He could’ve been a complete jerk and sent her packing when she sat down, but no, he’d been *polite*. Conversational.

And interested, damn it.

Dillon’s gaze strayed back to Avery. He couldn’t hear their quiet conversation over the music that piped through the speakers, but she certainly wasn’t as animated with Ross as she had been talking to him. She was nervous again. Beneath the edge of the table, her hands twisted in her lap. Her smile seemed a little strained around the edges.

Was that his fault? Had he made her feel even more awkward over that blind date than

she already did? Dillon felt a prick of guilt at that. He hadn't intended to make things more difficult for her, just wanted to enjoy the chance circumstance that had brought her to his table.

It didn't matter. What was done was done and couldn't be taken back.

He had work to do. Determined to finish what he'd come here for, Dillon whipped his books back out, opened his files and did his best to focus on the task at hand. His grade and Noelle's were counting on it.

He lasted all of fifteen minutes. The damned flower sat there in his periphery, its bright orange petals taunting him, indirectly dragging his focus back to Avery.

She wasn't even *laughing*. What kind of a date couldn't at least make her chuckle to put her at ease?

Catching her glancing his way again, Dillon made a goofy face. One corner of her mouth twitched before she quickly shifted her attention back to Ross. The guy seemed to be recounting some incredibly detailed...something...with visual aids. He was drawing on the pad he'd brought, and Avery was struggling to look appropriately serious, nodding and interjecting the occasional question. Those long, slim fingers tapped against her mug.

Dillon tucked the daisy behind his ear, laced both fingers under his chin, and batted his eyes at her in a wholly exaggerated fashion. Though she didn't look directly at him, he knew Avery could see him from the corner of her eye when she let loose one short bark of laughter that she quickly covered with a coughing fit.

"You okay?" asked Ross.

"Yeah, yeah. I just swallowed wrong. Please, go on." Eyes on her date, Avery made a shooing motion at Dillon from beneath the table.

He smothered a grin behind one of the books.

*You are a bad bad boy*, he thought.

Vowing to behave, he turned his attention back to the computer screen and pretended to work for a few minutes, weaving Noelle's notes in with his own and making notations about where he needed to expand points with support from the class texts.

This whole situation needed musical accompaniment. Something other than the low key jazz favored by the coffee shop. Dillon dug through his eclectic and extensive music collection until he found what he was looking for. *Yes, this will do very nicely*. He hit *play* and Celine Dion belted out the chorus to "All By Myself" loud enough to echo off the high rafted ceiling.

Avery and her date both turned toward him with *WTF?* expressions.

"Sorry! Sorry." Dillon plugged his headphones into the correct port on his laptop and managed not to laugh. *The devil made me do it*.

Avery laid a hand over Ross's and gave him the first genuine smile Dillon had seen her muster since she left his table. "You wanna get out of here?"

Ross looked over his shoulder at Dillon again. "Sounds like a great idea."

Jealousy was an ugly shade of green.

They rose and headed for the stairs.

*Look back*, thought Dillon. *C'mon, look back at me*.

But Avery never turned as she descended from view. The last thing Dillon heard her say was something about an example of antebellum architecture she thought Ross might like to see. Then they were gone and his window of opportunity slammed closed for good.

~\*~

"—and then he walks up and says *he's* my date. I've been sitting there for *forty-five minutes* talking to this guy and he never said a *word* to correct my assumption. It was

*mortifying.*” Avery’s footsteps thudded against the stairs for emphasis as she climbed toward the third floor of City Hall.

Brooke slurped her to go cup of sweet tea. “What did your actual date say?”

“He was remarkably cool about the whole thing. Really polite. Which is more than I can say for Mr. Fake Date. We’re sitting across the room, trying to get through all that initial blind date awkwardness, which was completely made worse by my gaffe, and the guy is making faces behind Ross’s back. Ross was giving this completely earnest explanation of some architectural history thing, and it was all I could do not to fall over laughing.”

“There are worse things than a man who can make you laugh,” observed Brooke.

“Not when you’re on a date with *somebody else*,” insisted Avery. “I tried my best to cover, but I’m sure Ross thought I was the rudest thing ever. I finally just suggested that we go somewhere else, just to get away from him.”

“And did that actually make the date with Ross the architect go better?”

Avery grimaced. “No. I might could’ve gotten past the multi-generation Bulldog legacy if we had a lick of chemistry or mutual interests, but bless his heart, once we blew past all the mutual pop culture references, we had absolutely nothing in common. He didn’t even try to kiss me. I doubt I’ll be hearing from him again.” And that was a relief. This way she didn’t have to find a way to turn him down gently.

“Probably just as well,” said Brooke. “Lack of creeper vibe aside, I still don’t trust a guy who wouldn’t put his profile picture up. At least the day wasn’t a total loss. It sounds like your fake date went better. You must’ve had *something* in common to chat for almost an hour without things getting weird.”

*We had tons in common*, thought Avery with no little bite of regret. “Like that matters. I don’t know his name or where he’s a student or even what the heck he was *doing* here.” And if she’d wondered for half a minute whether the yearbook photos from Rango, Texas were somewhere online, she’d quickly put the thought out of her mind. She was *not* going to embarrass herself further by trying to track him down.

Avery and Brooke stepped into the reception area of the mayor’s office to find a courier juggling a vase full of flowers.

“Can I help you?” asked Avery.

“Oh good. I’m not supposed to leave these without a signature,” he said. Setting the flowers on her desk, the courier offered her a clipboard. “Just sign at the bottom.”

Avery scribbled her signature. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long. We tend to get kind of scarce around lunch.”

“Enjoy,” he said, and disappeared down the hall.

The mix of cream tulips and bright Gerbera daisies was unusual and happy. “Cam must’ve sent his mom flowers,” said Avery. “He’s such a sweetheart. Always doing stuff like that.”

Insatiably curious, Brooke peered at the name on the card envelope. “These aren’t for Mayor Crawford. They’re for you.”

“What? Who’d be sending me flowers?” She crossed over to pluck the card from the holder and eased it out.

*Let me make it up to you. Tosca. Tuesday at 7 PM.*

Avery’s mouth dropped open.

Brooke looked over her shoulder. “It isn’t signed.”

Avery flipped the card over to verify, but no, it wasn’t signed. The florist was out of

Oxford.

“You’ve got a secret admirer,” Brooke sang. “Kind of a strange combination of flowers.”

“Cream tulips are for apology,” murmured Avery.

The flowers had to be from her fake date. She’d never told Ross where she worked and he’d never seen the Gerbera daisy she’d brought. She’d forgotten it at Mr. Fake Date’s table. A flutter of excitement trembled in her chest.

“They’re from *him* aren’t they?”

She didn’t have to ask which *him* Brooke meant. “I think they must be.”

“And he’s asking you out! Properly. With style, I might add. Flowers that must’ve cost a pretty penny to deliver this far from Oxford. A dinner invite to the nicest restaurant in town. Are you going to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh come on,” said Brooke. “This is, like, the ultimate form of flattery. He *liked* you.”

Avery didn’t deny she was flattered. He’d remembered details, made an effort because he actually wanted to see her again. And there *had* been that moment, that serendipitous spark before the real Ross had showed up.

Yet...she hadn’t gotten past the annoyance and embarrassment over what had happened at The Grind. How long would he have gone on lying to her if they hadn’t been interrupted?

“How can I trust a guy who had multiple opportunities to come clean about not being my date and chose not to say anything?”

“He owns his bad behavior on the card and apologized with the flowers,” insisted Brooke. “That’s gotta earn some brownie points toward paying off the deficit.”

“Are brownie points even a thing when you’re not in a relationship?”

“You’re avoiding the issue,” said Brooke. “Worst case scenario, you get a nice dinner and a chance to ream him out for his behavior on Saturday. Best case scenario, you find out who it is you *really* made a connection with. Isn’t it worth going to find out which one?”

~\*~

By ten after seven, Dillon was certain Avery wasn’t going to show. He couldn’t really blame her if she didn’t. From her perspective, he’d lied. And then he’d deliberately gone about distracting her from her real date like some adolescent nut job.

*Classy, dude.*

Why had that seemed like a good idea? Class clown wasn’t exactly a selling point for a mature relationship. Not that he’d given a lot of thought to looking for a mature relationship before now.

Once he’d turned in his project on Monday—after two almost all nighters—he still hadn’t been able to get Avery out of his head. He knew he’d behaved badly, and his mama had raised him to apologize for bad behavior, so before he crashed, he went in search of a florist who was willing to deliver all the way to the Wishful City Hall. The gesture was a Hail Mary, and he wasn’t sure what he hoped to accomplish by talking her into dinner. He just...wanted another shot at making a better first impression.

Too bad life didn’t give you do overs on those.

He’d already unwrapped his silverware and drained his water glass—which did absolutely nothing to whet his parched mouth—when Avery appeared at the hostess station, looking gorgeous and...not entirely pleased to be there. Nerves and something like hope bumped up beneath his breastbone.

On his feet in an instant, Dillon rounded the table to pull out a chair as she crossed to him

in a light blue dress and a pair of tall, strappy shoes that drew his eye unerringly to her well-toned legs.

*Behave*, he ordered himself.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” he said.

She gave him a long look with those catlike green eyes. “I almost didn’t.”

“Then I thank you for changing your mind.” He gestured to the chair, and after a moment’s hesitation, she sat.

Dillon’s hand brushed her bare shoulder as he pushed in the chair, and he felt the zing of it up the whole length of his arm.

*Don’t screw this up.*

The waiter appeared for Avery’s drink order. Dillon took the fact that she ordered a glass of chardonnay as a sign that maybe she meant to stay. Or maybe she just wanted something with a little bite to toss in his face.

When they were alone again, she said, “Was anything you told me actually true?”

Dillon didn’t hesitate. “All of it.”

She lifted one dark brow in askance.

“I never lied to you, Avery. You just showed up and sat down and started talking.”

“And you managed to talk back for almost an hour without mentioning that I’d made a mistake.”

“I’ll own that. But you’re interesting and beautiful and I didn’t want you to leave. So I might have sidestepped the truth to avoid lying.”

She didn’t soften at his feeble attempt at charm. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Just telling it like it is. You started the whole thing when you brought me coffee.”

“That was all Daniel’s doing.”

If this worked out, Dillon totally owed the barista a beer or something.

“Nevertheless, a wise man doesn’t turn away a beautiful woman with delicious stimulants. Even if he did have a behemoth group project he had to finish by himself on a deadline.”

“Is that why you were there that day?”

“My roommate was surgically attached to the Xbox. I needed some quiet, so I came down here to work. Or try to work. Then you showed up.”

“You could’ve said so.”

“I thought about it for about thirty seconds. But you were way more appealing than theories of macroeconomics. You didn’t ask who I was, and by the time I realized you thought I was somebody else, I was enjoying our conversation. Something I hope we’ll be able to do tonight. Unless,” he added, “things went awesome with your real date over the weekend and you’re just here out of pity.”

Her lip began to tremble, and for a long, horrible moment, Dillon was afraid she might cry. Both arms wrapped around her middle, she bent double, her shoulders beginning to shake.

*Oh God, what did I say wrong?*

A burst of sound escaped. She slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes going wide. Then she was laughing, wincing, unable to stop as she said, “Oh my God, it was awful. And you were just sitting over there deliberately provoking me. What was I supposed to do?”

Dillon gave her a sheepish smile. “Sorry about that. I couldn’t help myself. We’d been having such a good conversation and then you looked so...awkward with him.”



“That’s kind of a rule with blind dates.”

“It wasn’t with us,” he pointed out. “There wasn’t a single lull in *our* conversation.”

“We didn’t have a date,” she clarified, poking up. “We had an...encounter.”

Warming to the debate, Dillon argued, “We had beverages and conversation. I say that qualifies as a date.”

“It was a pseudo date,” she allowed.

“Well then,” he said, “let’s see if we can do better on the real thing.”

“On one condition.”

Dillon resisted the urge to pump his fist in victory. “Name it, milady.”

“We start with the important things. Like your *actual* name.”

He grinned and offered his hand. “Dillon Lange.”

She finally smiled as she reached across the table to take it. “Avery Cahill. It’s nice to meet you.”

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