

TAKE ON ME

BY
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A Story about Love,
Grief, Food, Music,
and the people who
accept you exactly
as you are.



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“Will, can you come reach the cups?”

Casey is short. Tiny. She can't reach anything higher than the bottom shelf of your average kitchen cabinet without a chair. I think it's adorable and she knows it. Casey is my work buddy, and well, also my not-work buddy, and has been since I moved back to Dover Bay from NYC two and a half years ago. We hit it off the first day and I've been her best gay ever since. I'm also her substitute arms when things are needed from tall shelves.

I walk into the storage room, scratching my beard as if I'm assessing the situation, and grab the box off the shelf. I hold it over her head.

“You mean this one? This one right here that I can get without even needing a ladder?”

She pouts and stamps a foot, but she's fighting a grin. This

is exactly the kind of response you want from your tiny work buddy.

“Jerkweed.”

She laughs and I know it’s because she loves me. And I’m lucky she does because the girl’s getting her Masters degree in Artisanry and Crafts. You don’t mess with those people. They know how to use glue guns. I risk life and limb every time I taunt her, but it’s one of my great joys in life.

Cafe Ducard is quiet, only a couple of regulars studying at the scattered tables. Even though it takes us a couple of minutes to get back out to the counter, there’s only one person waiting for us.

It’s him. The guy I’ve been crushing on for the past couple weeks. My heart may or may not skip a beat or two. Okay, maybe three. Time to be cheerful, but not plasticity. I hope I can pull it off. My stomach didn’t just flip when he looked up. Yours did. Definitely wasn’t mine. Nope. I smile at him.

“Hey! How are ya? Sorry you had to wait. We were grabbing cups.”

I show off the box with a grin before dropping it where Casey can finally get to it and start refilling the stacks. Classes let out soon and we’ll get bombarded by half the Dover Bay U. campus.

He nods, brushing his greying hair out of his eyes. His lips are pressed together in a small, patient smile. He's even better looking when he's a little tense. Damn, I'm almost not sorry I made him wait.

"So, what can I get you? Americano?" I ask, knowing it's his regular.

Am I talking too fast? Keep it smooth, William. Chill.

He nods again, the smile loosening a bit. Is he surprised I remember? "With almond milk."

"Of course," I reply, making sure I don't sound like I forgot.

I step behind Big Red, our crimson enameled beast of an espresso machine and get to work on the shots. It's like second nature doing this now, though the smell is still something that gets me every time. I love that smell.

Grind the beans. Tamp them down. Pull the shots. Try not to get distracted by the man in my peripheral.

As I work, I wonder if he's vegan, lactose intolerant, or what. We use good almond milk, so it's not like it's gross or anything. Still, it's usually just the hippie college girls that ask for it.

I wonder about a lot of things with him. Like his name. And where he lives and if he likes good music. And yes, I will be the arbiter of whether music is good or not. As Frank Zappa once said, "Most people wouldn't know

good music if it bit them in the ass.” I happen to agree. I also happen to think the Backstreet Boys “Millennium” meets the qualifications of what’s good as much as Aaron Copland’s “Rodeo” so do with that what you will.

Did I mention Americano guy is good looking? Because yes, he is. Not intimidatingly so, which is good, because between my beard (it’s just laziness not a fashion statement I swear) and dressing like some kind of lumberjack hipster, I don’t exactly light up the night with my dazzling looks. No self esteem problems here, well mostly, but anyway, I’m okay with how I look, but honest with myself. And I’m really really okay with how he looks. He’s always a little sad, too. Not in a “someone just kicked my puppy way” but there’s something melancholy about him. Okay, he’s dark and brooding and that’s a turn on, alright?

It’s always clean lines and grey or black with him. Lots of tailored stuff. Pinterest worthy. Today it’s a button down shirt under a slim vest, snug jeans, well-worn Chucks. His sleeves are rolled up to the center of his forearms, revealing a slim leather bracelet around his wrist. It’s all so casually dashing I almost forget to ring him up.

I finish making his drink and he’s on his way out the door when I see Denny walking in. And Denny stops and talks to Americano guy.

What. The. Fuck?

They shake hands and chat, then Americano guy leaves and here comes Denny.

“You know him?” I ask Den, blurting it out instead of playing it cool, before he even gets to look at the menu.

“Black coffee, and yes, I know him,” Denny replies, shifting his laptop bag on his shoulder. “He comes to the coding meet ups on campus. He’s mostly a front-end developer, but we need that. You never want to see a hardcore backend guy try to write CSS. That way ends in tears.”

I nod, vaguely understanding what he’s talking about. I design a lot of websites as part of my freelance work, I’m not completely clueless. But Den’s a genius programmer (no seriously). If he goes much deeper into geek speak, he’ll be way over my head.

“So, you guys see each other often then?” I ask, hoping the cool is back in my voice.

“About once a month, why?”

I grab a wet rag and start wiping the counter down. “Oh, ya know, just—”

“Will thinks he’s hot.” Casey interjects, destroying my cover completely and getting a bit of her own back in one fell swoop. Bravo Casey.

Denny chuckles. “Riiight. Well, we don’t talk about relationships and shit much during the meetings,” he says.

“But we did have a beer once. Con, that’s for Connor, by the way because I know you’re going to ask that next, is a good guy. And he’s bi and single from what I’ve gathered, so there’s definitely a shot for you there.”

That was more information than a casual beer with a new acquaintance usually produces. Casey and I exchange worried glances.

“Did you put him through the Denny Masters Five Point Quiz?” I ask, kind of horrified, also simultaneously absorbing that “Americano guy” is now “Connor”, uh, Con. And hello bi and single?

Denny just nods, smirking.

“Oh, Den, that’s awful.” Casey crinkles her nose.

Denny has this weird five point evaluation for whether you’re worth his time. It’s actually not hard to pass if you’re a decent human being who knows how to be a good friend. It doesn’t hurt if you’re a bit of a nerd, too. Anyway, one of the questions is “Are you straight?” and it’s not which way you swing that matters to him, it’s how you answer the question.

I passed with flying colors when we met in high school, though the questions were a little different then. Casey ran the gauntlet a couple years ago when Denny started

working from the cafe a couple days a week. So, we're Denny's friends.

Even though I was away living in NYC for a bunch of years, somehow we managed to pick our friendship up again when I moved back. It's kind of a miracle to get your best friend back after a decade or so apart and we both know it so we see each other pretty often. He comes for coffee most days and on Wednesdays I hang out with him a bit at the comic book store where he works a few hours a week. Big comic discount for me! Woo!

Casey gives Denny his coffee and I catch her sliding her fingers down his palm as she hands him his change. He smiles sheepishly as he takes his cup. Huh. Well, that's new.

Anyway, Cafe Ducard has this amazingly comfortable charm to it. It's a deep space with worn couches and armchairs interspersed with tables and chairs. It even has a little stage along one wall where we have music on the weekends, but for now it's covered in more couches and chairs.

Denny claims his usual spot, a quiet corner on one of the stage couches, pulling his laptop out. He gets his "code face" on, as he calls it, and I go back to work. He'll be there all afternoon, except when he needs to run upstairs to deal with some server thing or another at the startup renting the second floor. It was lucky timing that the founder was

down here getting her mid-morning latte when Denny was complaining about wanting to get out of his last contract. Bonus for me because it means we get to hang out a lot.

“You know,” Casey says, leaning on the counter. “Con doesn’t usually come in if you’re not here.”

“Yeah?” I reply, not sure where she’s going with this. Do I want to know what happens when I’m not here?

“Mmhmm.” She’s smirking now. “I’ve seen him walk by and look in, but he usually keeps walking if he doesn’t see you.”

“Really?” I am sounding way too eager right now, and trying to hide my enthusiasm by giving the counter some serious attention with the rag. This is new and awesome information, right? If he skips his coffee when I’m not here that’s...that’s good.

I hear the back door slam shut and some mild cursing. “Sara’s back, I’ll go help.” I tell Casey before she can drop any more info bombs. This one is enough to keep me going for now.

She nods. She was pretending to fiddle with Big Red while Denny and I talked and turns now to go back to her cup stacking. As I push open the door to the kitchen, I wonder if it’s me or if Casey has just repositioned the cups so she can see Denny while she works.

I inhale deep when I step into the kitchen. It always smells like baking and coffee back here. So good.

“Hey, Squirt!”

I’m thirty-five years old and my cousin still calls me by her childhood nickname for me.

“Thank whoever is watching over this fuckshow of a world you’re here. Help me with this crap.”

Sara, my cousin, who likely should have been my sister we’re so close, is flushed but smiling. She owns Ducard, built it from the ground up after her mom died. It’s what Aunt Lacy always hoped she’d be able to do someday, so it’s incredibly sad and poetic that Sara’s inheritance let her build all this.

“Is it that warm out?” I ask and she nods in return.

“And I’ve been hauling all this stuff around on my own. I need to bring someone with me next time.”

“Maybe Kirk?” I ask. It’s been a week or so since I’ve seen her partner, which means he’s not been out of the house much except for work.

I take the box she’s carrying and it’s warm from the sun. The scent of fresh herbs hits my nose. Love that.

“Nah. Did I tell you there’s a full-time librarian position opening up? He’s putting in an extra day when he can for

good measure, but we're sure he's a shoe in. It's going to be really good for him."

"That's great," I tell her and mean it. I like Kirk, I want to see him happy. They've been together for a couple of years now. He's family.

She sits down on the stool at her desk, fanning herself with a pile of junk mail.

"Late September used to be all sweaters and apple picking when we were kids, remember? Now it's summer heat and humidity even after we put the pumpkins on the tables."

I nod. I miss the cool weather, too. The leaves haven't started changing yet, but I pulled out the box of sweaters from my closet last night. I live in hope that the heat will break soon. Can't wait to see Americano gu...Con... in autumn clothes. Did I really just think about that? Yup.

I go out the back and carry in a couple more boxes, some of them have some real heft to them. Sara definitely shouldn't have to get them into her truck on her own.

The fresh food all smells amazing, crisp and bright. It's Thursday and that means Full Dinner night at Cafe Ducard. Lots of the university students go home for the weekend and front-load their classes to have Fridays off, so the place always feels a bit like a celebration on Thursdays.

I like working Full Dinners and helping Sara cook

everything up. A couple of the part-timers come in to start their shifts while we're unpacking vegetables. Sara sends them out front to help Casey with the afternoon onslaught as we clear the baking bowls and tools off the big worktable and settle into prep. I spend the rest of my shift chopping stuff, listening to music, and thinking about Con and how nice it is that he doesn't get coffee when I'm not here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Lyn Parsons is a writer, programmer, and maker. With influences ranging from Laura Ingalls Wilder to Jim Jarmusch, her tales feature a rare physicality with details that feel hand-carved. When not writing code or prose, she is also the editor-in-chief of the venerable Luna Station Quarterly. She finds joy in video games, comics books, and making things out of wool, paper, and wood.