

Earl Grey, Hot

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Summary

Will Riker handles even the grumpiest customers with style.

The glass door slams open, aided by the wind, and just as Will is wiping down the counter, a stranger bolts inside. He's a small guy, bald, bundled up in an expensive wool coat, with snowflakes melting on his shoulders. Valdez is small, and Will knows just about everyone here, at least by sight. But he's never seen this guy before.

"Hi there," he calls, his voice warm, and the stranger gives him a scowl. "I'm Will, welcome to Betty's Cafe. You familiar with our menu?"

The stranger stomps the snow off his boots and snarls out, "Earl Grey, hot."

Oh, that type.

"Milk?" asks Will pleasantly, reaching for the kettle.

The stranger looks affronted.

"You want a twist of citrus in it, or just plain?" Will asks.

"Plain," says the stranger shortly. His voice is great, even if his attitude sucks. Baritone, rich. He circles the empty cafe, not sitting – projecting quite loudly that he will take his tea and leave as soon as possible. With the water on, Will punches the stranger's order in.

"I can put it in a paper cup for you," he says, "but if you have time to sit, it's better served in glass."

The stranger's frosty expression melts a little. He studies Will warily. "Yes," he says, voice stiff. "It is." He approaches the counter, as if he's just remembered he needs to pay. The sight of Will at the cash register must have triggered it. While he digs for his wallet, Will says,

"Can I get a name for your order?"

The stranger narrows his eyes. "Because it's so busy?" he says drily, and Will can't help but laugh.

"Well, it gets busy soon."

The stranger hands him exact change. No tip. "Jean-Luc," he says.

"Ah, Canadian?" Will asks.

"No." And Jean-Luc marches away, to the table at the farthest end of the cafe. He sits with his legs crossed tight and his shoulders angled toward the window, so Will can't even see his face.

Caffeine fiend, Will guesses. He lets the tea bag steep for five minutes, guessing that Jean-Luc likes it strong. But he doesn't serve the tea until he's polished all the fingerprints off the glass teacup – not because he really cares what Jean-Luc thinks, but because it's good service, and also because he catches Jean-Luc looking, and it feels a little cheeky. He delivers the teacup with a little bow and a flourish.

"How is it?" he asks.

Jean-Luc takes a sip. His eyes flutter closed. The column of his throat shifts.

“Terrible,” he says.

It’s three days later, on a milder day, when Jean-Luc comes back. His hawk-like nose is dripping. He lurks at the back of the line, his face buried in a handkerchief. Two deep-set eyes scowl at Will as the line shuffles forward: scones for Mrs. Harris, a latte for Innis Baker, a great deal of patience as a gaggle of school-skipping teens shyly push each other forward and waver between fifteen different highly-caffeinated beverages that will stunt their growth.

When Jean-Luc makes it to the cash register, Will spreads his hands apart on the counter and leans forward, grinning.

“Back for the terrible tea?” he asks brightly.

With great dignity, Jean-Luc says, “You brewed it for too long. Try it again, for no longer than three minutes.”

“Aye, sir,” says Will, snapping to a salute. Behind Jean-Luc, the teens giggle again, and Jean-Luc whips around to give them a glare. He pays with exact change again, no tip, and this time lurks near the bathrooms, his arms crossed tightly over his middle. “Disposable cup?” Will calls as the tea brews.

“No,” Jean-Luc snaps.

Grumpy as all get out. At 2:59 (just to be safe), Will whisks the tea bag out of the cup. He feels vaguely bad for saluting. That, plus the teenagers, have apparently embarrassed Jean-Luc enough – or pissed him off enough – that he won’t even sit down. So this time, Will delivers the tea without a flourish or a bow.

“There’s always milk if you need any,” he says softly, so just Jean-Luc can hear.

Jean-Luc gives him an expression of immeasurable disdain and takes a sip.

“Well?” says Will.

Jean-Luc mutters something in French.

“*Pardon ?*” says Will, heavy on the Gallic accent.

“It’s dogshit,” Jean-Luc says.

The next day, when Betty’s was empty, the bell over the door tinkles. There he is, Will’s least-happy customer, his face already set in a scowl. Jean-Luc approaches the counter with the stormy yet regal air of a pissed-off king.

“Let me stop you there,” says Will affably, putting up a hand. “You can insult my tea-brewing skills all you want, but from now on, there’s an upcharge for grouching. Every sneer is gonna cost you twenty-five cents. Every insult, a whole buck.”

Jean-Luc blinks at him. Slowly, despite Will’s easy smile, a storm cloud gathers behind Jean-Luc’s eyes.

“May I speak to your manager?” he says stiffly.

“Nah,” says Will, eyes twinkling. “What can I do for you today? Earl Grey, hot?”

A pause as Jean-Luc calibrates. He studies Will closely, his eyes narrow, as if sizing him up. “Yes,” he says finally, and a little more politely. “If you don’t mind.”

“How long shall I brew it for today, then?” Will asks.

He hears the distinct sound of Jean-Luc shuffling his feet as he turns around. He’s reaching for the kettle when Jean-Luc says,

“Perhaps it isn’t the brewing time. Perhaps you should adjust the water’s temperature.”

“Oh?” says Will.

“It should be just below boiling,” Jean-Luc says. “The ideal temperature is 208 degrees Fahrenheit.”

Will considers it, chewing on his bottom lip. “I don’t have a temperature dial,” he says, holding his kettle up so Jean-Luc can see. “It’s old-fashioned. What if I just boil it, then turn the heat off while I warm up the pot?”

Jean-Luc’s eyebrows shoot up. “That ... might work,” he concedes.

Will grins at him. As he prepares the kettle, Jean-Luc counts out his change, plus insult tax, on the countertop. He lines his coins up, studying them in the light to figure out which is the twenty-five-cent piece.

“Can I ask you something?” Will says. “If you hate my tea so much, why don’t you just make your own?”

His question adds years of weariness to Jean-Luc’s face.

“Because this is bloody Alaska,” says Jean-Luc. “And your Earl Grey blend is the only halfway decent one I can find.”

Will snorts out a laugh. When the kettle is warmed, he pours not-quite-boiling water over the tea bag. Three minutes, and then he hands it over, and gets to watch Jean-Luc making a face.

“Still terrible?” Will asks.

Mindful of his dollars, Jean-Luc doesn't say a word.

“Alright,” says Will, “you want it brewed right?”

He flips the counter's gate up and stands aside, gesturing for Jean-Luc to come in. Across the room, cradling his teacup in two hands, Jean-Luc looks like a deer in highlights.

“I beg your pardon?” he says.

“Look, you've been coming here for two weeks and my tea isn't getting any better,” says Will. “You'd save us both a lot of hassle if you just came back here and showed me how it's done.”

Jean-Luc sets his teacup down. Slowly, he slides back from the table, but he doesn't stand. Not yet. “You could simply tell me where you find that blend,” he says.

“Oh, no way in hell,” says Will, grinning savagely. “And lose my most loyal customer? Come on, get back here.”

Jean-Luc gives in. He approaches the gate with his shoulders hunched and slides behind the counter, looking totally out of his depth. What he does for a living, Will isn't sure. It's something to do with the airport ... construction, consultation, or plain old piloting, Will doesn't know. But Jean-Luc definitely makes a good officer. He has the bearing, the snootiness, the type of rich voice that demands everyone follow his orders at once. Behind the counter, though, he looks lost and small.

“Do you cook?” Will asks.

“Ah, no...” Jean-Luc says, eyeing Will's coffee press.

“No? I love cooking. Obviously.” Will fetches the kettle and presses it into Jean-Luc's hands. “Started when I was six and never looked back.”

“I assumed your food items were pre-packaged,” says Jean-Luc.

“Okay. That's a dollar for the insult tax.” Will points to the sink, where Jean-Luc fills the kettle up with purified spring water. “Narrate for me, or I'll never learn.”

Jean-Luc reaches into his pocket. He pulls out what looks like a digital clock and slaps it on the side of the kettle.

It's a thermometer.

“You just carry that around with you?” asks Will, aghast.

“Only on special occasions,” says Jean-Luc stiffly. He sets the kettle on the stovetop. Together, they're literally watching it boil, crowded close behind the counter, when the bell over the door tinkles and Will is pulled away. He squeezes past Jean-Luc, one broad hand on the small of Jean-Luc's back, and grins when he sees who it is.

“Hi, Innis, the usual for you?”

“Sure thing.” The wizened old man takes a peek at Jean-Luc. “You finally hire yourself some help, then?”

Jean-Luc's ears are a delightful shade of red.

“Just a temp,” says Will cheerfully.

“Well, about time. Running yourself ragged working by yourself. You know back when this was Annie's Diner, she had a line cook, a dishwasher, a sous chef—”

Will slaps Innis' latte on the counter and returns to Jean-Luc's side, affably ignoring the rambling anecdotes. Soon, Innis has chattered himself right out the door, and there's nothing but the scent of bread baking in the back room, butter and sugar, and the subtle fragrance wafting from the tea bag Jean-Luc has found.

“You work here alone?” asks Jean-Luc, his voice a little strange.

“It's my cafe,” Will says.

Silence. When the kettle reads 208, Jean-Luc warms the cup and pours the water straight in. “I thought you were just a barista,” he says as he sets a timer.

“Well, I am a barista,” Will says. “But I'm also the head baker, the line cook, the dishwasher, the sous chef—”

Are his eyes deceiving him, or is that an actual smile on Jean-Luc's lips? A smile ... and a hint of a blush. Will eases closer, interested now, and when their arms are touching, he peers into the glass teacup.

“You found my tea leaves,” he notes.

“Yes.” Jean-Luc’s smile fades. “You took the labels off.”

“No,” Will says. He admits, “There never were any labels. You can’t find a blend like this one because I make it myself.”

More silence.

“You make it yourself?” asks Jean-Luc, his voice dripping with disbelief.

“I do!”

“Using what? Bergamot imported from Italy? To Alaska?”

“No.” Will’s chest swells with pride. “Using my bergamot, from *my* Seville oranges, grown here, in my greenhouse.”

Jean-Luc stares at him, mouth slack. “And what kind of tea?” he demands.

“It’s a type of Lapsang from the Wuyi mountains,” Will says. “They dry it out over fresh -cut pinewood and smoke it in these wonderful wooden smoking sheds – gives it a nice, spicy aroma.” He pulled out a tea bag he’d packed and opened it up. “See, this version is rarely exported; it’s cold-smoked using just the tips. Makes the Earl Grey more mild. You add the oil of bergamot from the rind, and *et voila!* Earl Grey!”

Jean-Luc, a bit subdued, ends his timer. He picks the tea bag out and hands it over to Will, who cups it, sopping wet, in one palm.

Jean-Luc takes a sip. He rolls the Earl Grey around his mouth. He hands the teacup to Will.

“Me?” Will asks.

Sharp-faced, Jean-Luc nods. Will grips the teacup by its little handle, still clutching the teabag, and holds the cup to his lips. He parts them over the rim, exactly where Jean-Luc sipped from it, a phantom kiss.

“Acceptable?” he asks.

“Acceptable,” Jean-Luc says. “Just barely.”

It tastes divine.

It’s deep winter when he invites Jean-Luc to see the Seville orange trees. From Will’s cafe, it’s a bit of a trek to the old log cabin where he grew up. They have to take the snowmobile. Jean-Luc, who’s so ill-prepared for Alaska, he must be from Southern France, has to borrow Will’s extra snow suit, and it doesn’t fit him right at all. He’s practically swimming in it, unable to roll up the thick cuffs, but he climbs onto the back of Will’s snowmobile and holds on tight.

His arms wrap around Will’s waist. His face nuzzles against Will’s shoulder, protecting him from the cutting wind and snow.

The ride is over too soon.

“Through here,” Will says, parking his snowmobile out front. He pries his gloves off and leads Jean-Luc to the mud room. “It’s hot as hell in there, so you’ll want to take everything off.”

When Jean-Luc looks alarmed, he adds, “Just the snow suit.”

“Oh,” says Jean-Luc faintly.

They strip. It’s the first time Jean-Luc has really seen Will without his apron on. Will’s hyper-aware of those deep-set eyes scanning his body, taking in the tight fit of his shirt, the rolled cuffs exposing muscular forearms and a great deal of body hair. It’s kind of nice to be subtly leered at. What Will doesn’t like is the way Jean-Luc’s gaze roams, studying the walls of the house where Betty Riker died and Kyle Riker abandoned his teenage son. Suddenly Will is aware of how sparse his cabin is, how strangely stripped of possessions and mementos. First they had cleaned out everything that reminded them of Mom. Then Dad had left, and taken everything he liked, and all that was left was a place to sleep, a futon with a single blanket, and not much more.

Will has been cooking his own meals since he was six. Dad leaving didn’t change much. It just made him love cooking all the more, love it fiercely, so he’d never stop to think about *why* he had to cook his own meals – so he’d never let Kyle Riker ruin this, too.

“Come on,” he says, grabbing Jean-Luc’s arm to distract him. It works. Electrified, eyes wide, Jean-Luc follows him into the snow. They don’t bother to put their boots back on. Will sinks barefoot into the snow drifts, the cold lighting up his nerves, making him jump. Behind him, Jean-Luc yelps, like he’d forgotten he wasn’t wearing shoes, and clutches tight at Will’s sleeve.

“You’re off your rocker!” Jean-Luc says, but he lets Will tug him to the greenhouse. The warmth assails them immediately. A soft earth floor kisses their feet and soothes away the burning sensation left behind by the snow. Slowly, Jean-Luc’s fingers slip away from Will’s wrist, and self-consciously, he studies the plants.

“And you use all these for cooking?”

“It’s easier,” Will says. “Easier than exporting, I mean. I don’t have any real love for gardening.” He reaches out and cups a fat, green tomato in his palm. “They’re beautiful, though. And people will kill for fresh vegetables out here.”

“Indeed,” Jean-Luc murmurs. He gravitates toward the Seville oranges. He studies the dwarf fruits, lumpy and brilliant, his thumb stroking over the soft spots in their pitted flesh.

“Take one,” Will says.

Jean-Luc’s hand draws back. “I…”

“Go on,” says Will softly.

Jean-Luc hesitates. He searches Will’s face for confirmation. He plucks the smallest orange free, the end of a twig sucking at its rind until it comes loose. “It’s not edible, is it?” he asks, studying the tiny fruit in his hand.

“Not raw.” Will takes the orange and weighs it. “But I’ll let you choose what we make with it.”

One eyebrow quirks up. “What are my options?” Jean-Luc asks.

“Marmalade,” Will suggests. “Compote. Gingerbread.” He pauses, laughs. “Or we could make a cake. Earl Grey-flavored.”

Jean-Luc turns to face him.

“Cake,” he decides.

They make the blend together, fresh, but it’s Will who sprinkles the tea leaves into the hot cream and melted butter that the recipe demands. He lets Jean-Luc be the taste-tester, fingertips dipping into the mixing bowl, teeth scraping at his skin as he tongues the cream away. The subtle, sweet flavor of Earl Grey comes through.

Will lets Jean-Luc strain the tea leaves out. He handles the orange zest himself. He chops a chocolate bar into tiny shavings, cognizant all the time of Jean-Luc’s presence at his side, the warmth of his body, the wind howling outside and rattling the glass windows in their frames.

Let it storm, he prays, and then he feels almost guilty. But he glances sideways, catches Jean-Luc staring out the window at the dark sky with a pleading expression in his eyes, and he doesn’t feel so bad. And Jean-Luc, leaning pensively against the counter, thinks of the empty flat he’s renting, the soul-crushing bureaucracy of renovating a small-town airport when all he ever wanted to do was fly – the lonely bed he’s going back to, the furnace that never works hard enough to keep him warm, the unfamiliar slang and weather patterns of Alaska and the distressing, unfamiliar feeling that he’s out of depth here, that he’d be better off back home…

And he thinks of Will’s warm cafe, and a barista who always smiles at him even when he’s at his worst, and his shoulders relax. Just a little.

The cake comes out a light, toasted brown. Will slips a toothpick into it, revealing the moist crumbs inside, the dark flecks of chocolate. He holds Jean-Luc off while he beats the frosting together, heavy cream and confectioner’s sugar whipped into near-solid peaks. Jean-Luc watches, his face inscrutable, and then peels off. Away from the counter. Away from the oven. He roots through Will’s cabinets until he finds what he needs, a little dusty, but ready to use.

Mom’s old kettle.

While Will slices the cake, Jean-Luc brews them both a cup of tea. It doesn’t come out perfect; they’ll blame that on the kettle, not the blend. But they clink their teacups together, and Will drinks from the chipped one, and instead of cutting the cake into slices, he takes his fork and sinks the tines in, like they’ll share the whole thing. Jean-Luc follows his lead.

The cake melts on his tongue. The frosting, cool as snow, ten times as sweet, brings out all the subtle bitterness of Earl Grey, the warmth and bite that Jean-Luc has always craved. The tea blend he learned to love at home in France, finding refuge with his grandmother, mimicking her tastes and guarded ways, anything to keep himself safe from his father’s disapproval. He takes another bite and feels Will’s fingers curl in his shirt, at the small of his back, holding him close.

When they kiss, it doesn’t taste like sugar.

It tastes exactly like Earl Grey.

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