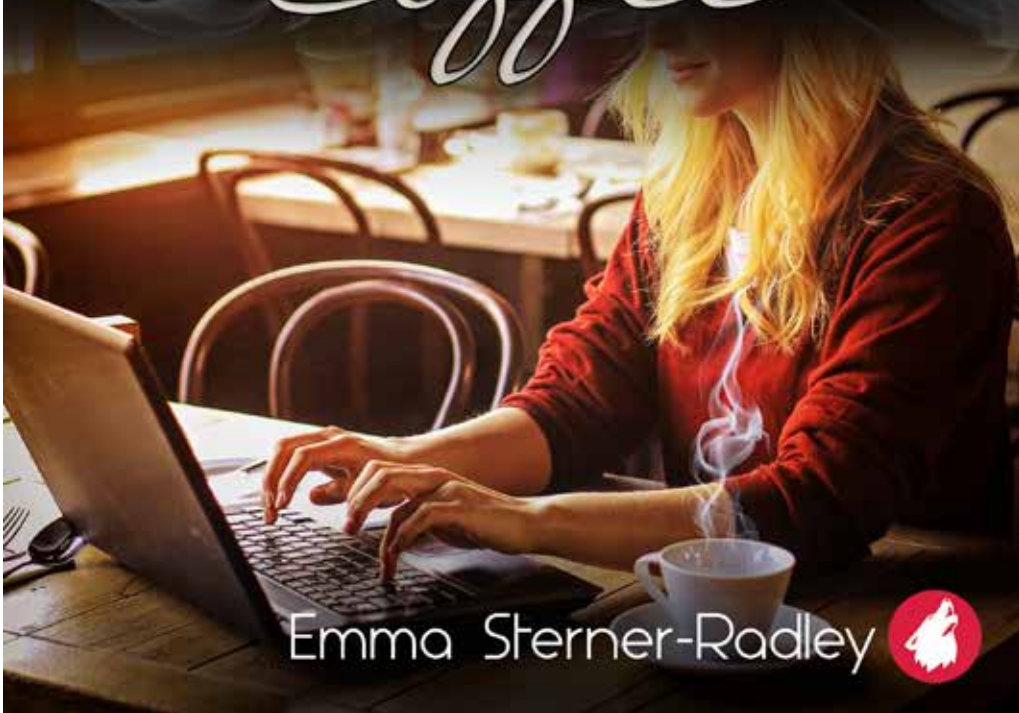


The Midnight Coffee Series Part One

Long-Distance Coffee



Emma Sterner-Radley



Chapter 1

Erin Black Can't Sleep

IT WAS LATE, AND SHE wished she had something to do. She picked off a strand of long, blonde hair that had stuck to her sweater. Erin prided herself on her hair, even though it wasn't very practical for a personal trainer who spent most of their time sweating in a gym.

She was standing by the window and moved her gaze out to the narrow, littered street below. It looked freezing out there, and it probably was. February in New York was always bitterly cold. Two middle-aged women staggered out from the Irish pub across the street and huddled together, as they laughed and stumbled their way down toward the avenue.

She sighed and turned around. The only light source in the dingy apartment was the bluish glow from her laptop standing on the table which served as both eating place and desk. Twitter was open. Erin had just started following an actor she had loved as a kid. It turned out that he was now a bitter old man, complaining about the lack of manners and the complacency of America's youth.

Erin sat down and scrolled through his timeline. Her bored expression moved a little toward interest, as she saw what had clearly been a dispute between the aging actor and someone who called themselves `The_Apple_Core`. Erin clicked *view conversation* to see what had been said. Apparently, her faded childhood hero had alleged women were too sensitive about jokes these days and seemed to think everything they didn't like was misogyny. `The_Apple_Core` had pointed out that they found that opinion to be

misogynist and him to be “a washed-up embarrassment with the manners of a rhino.”

Erin snorted out a laugh, which echoed through her quiet apartment.

The conversation between the two combatants continued, and Erin was impressed to see that, while her former childhood hero became more and more aggressive and insulting, his opponent did not. The *The_Apple_Core* stuck to intelligent but snide remarks and made quite a few points about misogyny, respect, and seeing things from someone else’s point of view. All of that was lost on the actor, but not on Erin. She clicked on the name and read the bio.

Sarcastic to the (apple) core. Mother of one. Writer. Latina. Moody. I live in Florida, and the sunshine and the cheerfulness is nearly killing me. Send help. And black coffee.

Erin smiled to herself as she clicked *follow*. She read through some of the tweets, some that made her laugh and some that made her think.

She looked at the button marked *Tweet to The_Apple_Core*. Had she been fully rested and in possession of the common sense that accompanied daylight, she probably wouldn’t have clicked. But it was 12:52 p.m. on a Thursday night, and she knew that her insomnia was going to keep her up for at least another three to four hours, just like it had every other night for the last few months. She clicked and thought for a couple of moments about what to write.

@The_Apple_Core Hey! I just wanted to thank you for explaining a few things to Dicky McActor earlier. I can’t believe I had a T-shirt with his face on when I was 12!

She cursed loudly, as she realized it was too long. Damn Twitter and its 140-character limit. She started to fiddle with the message.

@The_Apple_Core Wanted 2 thank you 4 explaining a few things to Dicky McActor. Can’t believe I had a T-shirt with his face on when I was 12!

It wasn't Hemingway, but it would do. She rolled her shoulders and looked down at her mug of cold coffee. She got up to pour herself a hot refill from the full pot she always made before starting her long, wakeful nights.

Of course, she knew she shouldn't. Caffeine was sleep's worst enemy. But she'd tried everything to combat her sleeplessness: cutting out all caffeine, additional exercise, better diet, herbal teas of all kinds, relaxation techniques, meditation, massage...even going to a doctor. So far, the only thing that helped was heavy sleeping pills, and they made her feel numb and drowsy the following day. She'd rather be tired and cranky than walk into walls and be spacey all day. So, yeah, she allowed herself the caffeine. If she had to be up, she might as well be feeling human throughout the night.

She took a sip of the strong brew. The little heat sting on her lips was nothing compared with how the acidic liquid was going to burn her stomach lining. She was usually very health conscious, she had to be as a personal trainer—so she felt she could allow herself one little, body-torturing vice.

Her laptop made a muted little noise. She always kept the sound low so as not to bother the neighbors. She walked over to check her e-mails and found a Twitter notification. The `_Apple_Core` had replied.

Erin gave a surprised little “huh,” before remembering that Florida was in the same time zone as New York and that it wasn't *that* late there. Still, it was a bit late for a mom to be up. Maybe not so late for a writer. Didn't those creative people keep weird hours? She clicked the Twitter link and read.

@BuffBlonde83 He needed a long cold-facts-and-common-sense shower. I'm sure he didn't even grasp half of it, though.

Erin smiled again and bit her lower lip, as she considered her reply.

@The_Apple_Core Probably not. But hopefully, some of his followers did. Maybe you made a current 12-year-old throw HER T-shirt away.

A reply came in quickly. Clearly this writer chick was quick at typing.

@BuffBlonde83 I don't care about their apparel, but if I made them think for themselves, then I am proud of my work here tonight.

Keen to keep up the same pace and carry on the conversation, Erin didn't think twice before answering.

@The_Apple_Core You should be! If not because you educated the kids, then because you smacking that asshole down really made my night. ;-)

It was only after she had clicked send that she realized this reply might seem a little too...flirty? "You made my night." And then the winking smiley. Was that okay to say to a stranger online? Shit. Could she not be such a huge gay for two seconds and have a conversation with a woman without borderline flirting?

The next reply took longer to come in. Erin sighed before rolling her shoulders again. She had just resigned herself to deciding she had been too friendly, too fast and had scared her conversation partner off.

@BuffBlonde83 Then my night hasn't been wasted. Speaking of nights, shouldn't you be asleep?

With a smile, Erin quickly typed back.

@The_Apple_Core Yeah, I have work tomorrow morning, so I should. But insomnia is a bitch and has me totally whipped. Why are you up?

There was a moment's pause during which Erin ran her hand through her tousled blonde hair.

@BuffBlonde83 Sleep is a luxury for people without babies. Mine wakes every two hours. I might as well be awake and nap with him tomorrow.

Erin whistled low to herself, happy that she'd decided against having kids. Not that anyone had ever offered to have them with her. Most of her girlfriends hadn't stuck around long enough for the topic to even come up.

@The_Apple_Core Ouch! I know some kids don't sleep, but he sounds like a bad case. Is he an insomniac like me?

There was a long break again, and Erin wondered if she had done her usual trick of putting her foot in it. Had she sounded like she was criticizing the kid?

@BuffBlonde83 No, not really. However, I'm sure that anyone not knee-deep in the world of babies would be bored with hearing the details.

Erin tilted her head and thought. She knew nothing about babies. But she was bored stiff, and this woman seemed interesting. She could always bail if the baby talk got dull.

@The_Apple_Core I can't sleep, and I'm tired of watching TV or scrolling through Twitter. Try me.

@BuffBlonde83 Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you. He has problems with his tummy & the pain wakes him. The doctor said he will grow out of it.

Erin swallowed a mouthful of coffee before replying.

@The_Apple_Core Poor little dude! Think it's stress related? Has he got a lot to do at work? Bills to pay?

As soon as she pressed *Tweet*, Erin wondered if her joke would go over well. What if this woman thought she was mocking her son's pain and lack of sleep? The reply took a while, and Erin wondered if she was more invested in this chat to a stranger than she ought to be. *Shit, I must be getting lonely*, she thought. Finally, her laptop quietly pinged.

@BuffBlonde83 I don't know. Does that usually cause intestinal gas and sometimes vomiting up your milk?

Erin snorted into the coffee she was drinking.

@The_Apple_Core Wouldn't know, never had an ulcer. Maybe he should cut down on the coffee? ;-)

@BuffBlonde83 The only coffee he gets is from my milk. I only allow myself two small cups a day, though, to limit the caffeine transfer.

Erin blinked a couple of times. *Whoa, we're actually talking about her breast milk? This chick's certainly not shy*, she mused. Before Erin had time to reply, there was another tweet.

@BuffBlonde83 I suppose you are now going to lecture me on drinking coffee while breastfeeding and about keeping a healthy diet?

Erin saw the defensiveness and chuckled. People always assumed that because of her profession she would judge their eating habits and their exercise regime, or lack thereof. The truth was that Erin knew what people should do, but as she did not always do so herself, she tried not to throw stones from inside her glass house.

@The_Apple_Core I don't judge. And, anyway, I couldn't live without coffee, so I don't blame you. Plus, you'll get him into coffee early. Kudos!

@BuffBlonde83 Oh, thank God. I couldn't stand another lecture on what to do with my non-sleeping baby right now. Are you a coffee fan too?

Erin looked down at her now empty coffee mug.

@The_Apple_Core Yeah, against my own advice, I drink buckets of the stuff. It's probably gonna kill me one day.

@BuffBlonde83 We all have to die somehow. There are worse poisons. I hear moms complaining about giving up alcohol, but that was easy for me.

Another tweet came in right away, and Erin was again impressed by how fast this woman typed, not to mention the lack of typos.

@BuffBlonde83 So was giving up the seafood and other foodstuffs that are bad during pregnancy and breastfeeding. But coffee is a must.

Erin wondered why this mom was so defensive. Was it because she was—according to her Twitter bio—a first-time mom, or was it just in her personality?

@The_Apple_Core It sounds like you are doing fine, but I know nothing about kids. What kind of coffee do you like?

Erin was expecting a brand she knew, as she had tried every kind available in her local grocery store. She had even gone down to an organic, fair-trade shop to buy really pricey coffee, which in the end, tasted like crap.

@BuffBlonde83 It's called Azúcar Negra. The coffee beans are dried and stored with burnt sugar & take up the taste from that. That's the theory anyway.

Erin frowned, as she typed out a reply.

@The_Apple_Core Never heard of it. Some kinda exotic import stuff?

@BuffBlonde83 Afraid so. Call me pretentious, but it tastes amazing, and when you can only have a little, you certainly want those cups to count.

Erin grinned, unable to resist taking the bait.

@The_Apple_Core Okay, you're pretentious. ;-) Makes sense, tho. Where'd you get it?

@BuffBlonde83 I order it online, and it ships from Guatemala. It's pricey but certainly worth it for the small quantities I have.

Erin shook her head and looked over at her coffee pot and its dark liquid.

@The_Apple_Core Well, living on my salary and forking out for a New York apartment means I don't have money to burn. I'm sticking to Maxwell House.

@BuffBlonde83 Your loss. I have to go. Little Alberto seems to be waking up, and he'll need me to walk around with him for a while.

Erin was disappointed. This Apple Core person was really making time go by faster. She felt guilty resenting the baby for waking up and ending the conversation early.

@The_Apple_Core Okay. Thanks for the chat. Good night and good luck with the lil' stressed-out man.

There was no reply, but that was to be expected if her new acquaintance had rushed off to pick up a screaming baby. Erin rubbed her eyes, realizing a moment too late that she hadn't removed her mascara and now probably looked like a panda.

She cursed under her breath and went to wash off her makeup. After that, she figured she would have to spend her upcoming sleepless hours with the TV on. Or perhaps she could watch some puppy videos YouTube. *Or maybe google that weird-ass coffee that sits around in burnt sugar*, she thought to herself, as she turned on the bathroom tap.

Chapter 2

Isabella Martinez Can't Sleep

IT WAS TEN THIRTY AT night, and the house was finally silent. Only Isabella was awake. She wished that wasn't the case, though.

She sat under a blanket in the plush armchair she'd put in the nursery. It was comfortable for long nights of snoozing, using her relatively new iPad, and rocking a fussing baby back to sleep.

She blinked her tired eyes and looked around. The small room was her and Alberto's own safe little world. Everything smelled of Alberto and baby powder, to the point where Isabella wondered if her perfume was even detectable on her skin anymore. It didn't matter to her, though.

At night, all that mattered was that she and Alberto both got as many moments of sleep as they could. The rest of the time, she was supposed to do housework or write. After all, she'd abandoned a lucrative career as CEO for a large catering company with franchises all over the nation for motherhood. Not that she missed her former occupation. Not really. She missed the daily social interaction, and she missed the adrenaline rush of power, even though that last thought left a bad taste in her mouth. She had never thought of herself as power hungry. That title belonged to her mother. But, yes, there had always been a certain high in being admired, being obeyed, and having the power to change things as she saw fit.

Is that how Mother feels? Is that why she does what she does? To get that rush?

She shook her head. That wasn't the point here.

The point was that she had given it all up to have Alberto and write her novel about retellings of fairy tales, so that was what she was going to do. Even if it killed her. She had to prove she could. She had to prove to her mother that she had made the right decision.

In her mind, she heard her mother's derisive voice mocking her wish to write. She closed her eyes tightly to rid herself of the unwanted memory.

There was a noise from the crib next to her—a little, muffled baby grunt. She waited. But, no, Alberto didn't wake up this time. He just gave a little sigh before returning to soft, deep breaths. She relaxed and looked back to the iPad screen, which she'd turned down as dark as it could go and still be legible.

She was supposed to be writing. What she was actually doing was checking out the Twitter profile that began "Erin Black—Personal Trainer."

It was an odd thing for her to be doing, as she very rarely spent her sleepless nights speaking to people. Talking to people online late at night could lead to trouble, as the people who were up weren't always reasonable or appreciative of her wry brand of humor. But last night's brief exchange had been diverting. It had been nice to discuss Alberto's problems with a complete outsider. She hadn't judged, given advice that Isabella had heard a million times, asked stupid questions, or generally annoyed her.

That was rare. Most people managed to push Isabella's buttons and get her snapping at them in seconds, leaving them disliking her and Isabella berating herself. She didn't know why she did it. Well, actually she did. Her mother was famous for snapping at people and being unnecessarily harsh. Of all the things to inherit from her mother, she had to get that undesirable trait.

Alberto moved again, and Isabella watched him, only to see that it was another false alarm. Thankfully, he seemed quite deep in sleep tonight. She knew that she should probably turn the iPad off and try for a few hours' sleep too.

Soon. She just had to check what this Erin Black was talking about with someone who called themselves RedHeadRedHot, which sounded terribly like something from a porno. Not that Isabella had watched one of those since she was in her early twenties. She wondered if they'd gotten more tasteful since then. She sincerely doubted it.

She brought her focus back to the conversation on Twitter and a tweet from Erin.

@RedHeadRedHot Are you actually going to show tomorrow, or will I be at the gym with my weights, looking like I was stood up for a date AGAIN?

@BuffBlonde83 Chill, woman. I paid for the session, so I'll be there. I was just hungover and forgot last time. You gonna go easy on me, Er?

@RedHeadRedHot Stop calling me Er, Riley. It's weird. Oh, and hell no, so I recommend you don't show up hungover this time.

@BuffBlonde83 Wanna make me sweat, huh? I knew you were into me. ;-)

@RedHeadRedHot Ha! Just coz I'm into women and nice to you doesn't mean I want to bang you, Riley.

A second tweet from Erin followed right after it.

@RedHeadRedHot Oh, and stop outing me on Twitter, or get yourself a new personal trainer! :-P

@BuffBlonde83 Dude. Your bio says you are Out & Proud. YOU outed you, Er. I just spoke the truth about what you really want—ME!

Isabella realized she was frowning. She wasn't sure if it was the pet name for Erin, the way the person spoke, or something else, but she wasn't a fan of this Riley. She scrolled farther, seeing what Erin had replied.

@RedHeadRedHot It did say that when you met me. It doesn't anymore, dumbass.

@BuffBlonde83 Oh shit! I didn't realize. I'm really sorry, Er. Want me to remove the tweet?

@RedHeadRedHot Nah, it's fine. If people don't want a gay trainer, they can just pick someone else. I have no need to train homophobes anyway.

@BuffBlonde83 It would be their loss, babe. Well, I can't sit around here. New York is full of hot people to meet and Mama wants some fun. BYEEEE!

@RedHeadRedHot At the risk of sounding like your mom, be safe, have fun, and don't be too hungover for our session tomorrow!

@BuffBlonde83 Yeah, whatevs. If you can't sleep, I recommend a hot bath and then rubbing one out. Always works for me! ;-)

@RedHeadRedHot Fuck, Riley! Inappropriate much? Go get laid. I'm gonna have coffee and stalk my ex on Facebook. Like a civilized person!

The conversation ended there. Isabella realized that her eyebrows had shot up at some of the stuff she had read. Firstly, because all of that had been said on a public forum where anyone could see, and secondly, because her new Twitter friend was a lesbian. Interesting. The joke about stalking an ex... So, she was single. None of this mattered in any way, of course. It was just plain curiosity on Isabella's side.

Alberto kicked his little white-and-blue-onesie-clad foot at the side of the crib. Isabella put her hand over the bars and gently rubbed the spot to make sure the pain didn't wake him. His foot was soft, and she could feel the tiny toes move as she hummed quietly to soothe him. It didn't work. His eyes opened, and he gave a heart-wrenching cry.

She picked Alberto up and cradled him to her chest while rubbing his back. She shushed him softly and hummed his favorite lullaby. He kept screaming but a little less urgently now. Soon, he settled and kept to little coughing sobs and whines.

She kept rubbing his back and rocking him, as she walked over to the window. He seemed to like looking out at the starry night when he woke. Although, Isabella wondered how much his baby eyes could focus on. She kept humming and kissed his downy head. He gurgled unhappily but otherwise stayed quiet.

Isabella could see Richard's car outside, parked badly on their drive. As always. That man could never park straight, and it bothered Isabella. Everything about him bothered her lately. She felt like such a bitch. Sometimes, she wondered if she didn't mind being cooped up in this little

room with Alberto all night, because it meant being far away from Richard. Without having to justify her absence. What father would begrudge her the care of their infant?

In here, she didn't have to listen to Richard snoring all night long. Or be surrounded by his mugs of herbal tea strewn around their bedroom, the dregs of which tainted the air with their distinctive aroma. She didn't have to sleep in bedclothes that smelled of the outdoors and that annoying cologne he always wore. Or put up with his mud-caked clothes thrown on the floor until he ran out of things to wear and had to wash them. Although if she was honest, she would usually tire of the stench of the dirt and swamp water before then and wash them for him. And of course, she didn't have to wake up with an erection pressed against her back.

She regretted the unkind thoughts the moment they entered her mind. He was Alberto's father; he was a good man, and she was the one who had decided that they should give a relationship a go. She just wished that he—her eyes focused back on the car—could park properly.

Alberto nuzzled at her shoulder, and she realized he was looking for food. She sat down in the armchair, unbuttoned her shirt, and started to feed him. She looked down at the iPad she'd abandoned on the side table. Erin Black's Twitter feed looked up at her, and she used her free hand to scroll up to the bio.

The blonde woman in profile was wearing aviator sunglasses. From what Isabella could see in the little picture, Erin looked attractive. Under the picture was a brief introduction.

I'm Erin Black. I'm a New Yorker and a personal trainer who's very friendly at work but really a loner. I can't sleep (like, ever), and I can't stand racists/homophobes/misogynists. My landlord won't let me have a dog, and that pisses me off daily.

While Alberto ate, Isabella scrolled down Erin Black's Twitter feed. Most of it was retweets about dogs, TV shows, and physical fitness. There were a few personal tweets, mostly about if it was snowing or not, and how little she was sleeping.

As Isabella scrolled, she saw new tweets. *Erin must have decided against stalking her ex, or perhaps she was joking about that.*

She shifted in the armchair to make herself and Alberto more comfortable and to make it easier for her to use her free hand to scroll up on the iPad. She quickly clicked to *Follow* Erin Black's profile, telling herself that she could always unfollow her if this woman turned out to be annoying. She read the new tweet.

Dammit. I'm really bored, and my coffee sucks because I put too much water in. Distract me, Twitter!

Isabella smiled, ever so slightly, and noticed that Alberto had fallen back asleep. She put the iPad down, gently placed Alberto back in his crib, and tucked him in.

She buttoned up, cursing under her breath when she saw a few drops of milk on her pajama shirt, and then sat back down in the armchair. She got the iPad and quietly tapped out a reply to BuffBlonde83.

Chapter 3

The Second Night of Tweeting

ERIN WAS PUTTING HER STILL-DAMP hair up in a ponytail when the laptop beeped. She walked over. It was *The_Apple_Core*. She punched the air and shouted, “Yes.” She’d included the coffee reference as a little shout-out to the Floridian writer. She hadn’t dared hope it would work, though.

She needed to talk to someone interesting, since she had just been caught on Facebook by a former client who wanted to talk about her brother-in-law’s bad back and ask what Erin would recommend. Erin hated being forced into conversations; it made her feel panicked and weirdly exhausted afterward. Sharing a few tweets with *The_Apple_Core* was different, though. It was relaxing and fun. At least it had been last night. She hurried to read the reply to her own tweet.

@BuffBlonde83 Too much water? Sounds like someone was too tired to make coffee tonight. Tut-tut. It’s not even midnight yet.

Erin chuckled before replying.

@The_Apple_Core I know, right? I had just gotten out of the shower, so maybe I was preoccupied, but still...need to make another pot.

@BuffBlonde83 Yes, or you won’t be able to stay up and see the wonders of late-night Twitter. Especially the spirited “debates.”

Erin sat down, pulling the towel she was wearing down a bit to protect her from the cold seat of her chair.

@The_Apple_Core Gah! Don't even get me started on that. I stay in my lane as long as ppl don't say anything offensive.

@BuffBlonde83 But then you step in?

Erin nodded while she typed the reply.

@The_Apple_Core Hell yeah. Someone has to put a stop to that sort of thing.

@BuffBlonde83 Erin Black—the savior of Twitter. You just need some armor and a sword.

Erin sat up and frowned in puzzlement for a moment. How did this woman know her name? Taking a breath, she remembered that it was in her Twitter bio and focused on writing a response.

@The_Apple_Core Nah! I just don't like injustice and people treating other people like crap. Society is tough enough without people being assholes, y'know?

@BuffBlonde83 Colorful language there. But I certainly agree with the sentiment.

@The_Apple_Core I know you do! I saw what you did to a certain actor yesterday, remember?

Erin sat back and waited for a reply. Time ticked by, and while other tweets popped up all around her, there were no replies from **The_Apple_Core**.

The small apartment smelled of her strawberry shampoo and conditioner. Erin greedily inhaled the fresh, sweet scent and made a mental note to buy more of that brand. She stretched a bit. Still no reply.

She went to make a fresh pot of coffee, making damn sure she got the correct coffee-to-water ratio this time. She was contemplating putting some music on when the quiet beep of the laptop rang out. She flicked the switch to turn on the coffeemaker and hurried back to the laptop.

Long-Distance Coffee

@BuffBlonde83 Sorry. Alberto (my son) woke up, and I had to walk around with him until his stomach settled and he fell back asleep.

@The_Apple_Core No probs. I was just remaking the coffee. Did you two have a nice walk?

@BuffBlonde83 No, not really. His room is far too small for anything more than a walk to the window and then back again.

Erin picked up a protein bar and ripped open the top of the packaging with her teeth.

@The_Apple_Core You can't take him into your bedroom and have him in your bed?

This time there was a longer pause before the reply came in.

@BuffBlonde83 No, he has to stay in his room so his crying doesn't wake his dad. Richard has to be up at 6 and get to work. So we stay in here.

Erin read the reply. Twice. She wondered why she felt so disappointed. Was it because the world sometimes seemed so filled with straights, and she longed to talk to people like her? She chastised herself for her assumption. Living with a man didn't make this woman heterosexual; she could be bi—or pansexual even.

Erin shook off the unwanted disappointment. After all, she was just whiling away some time by talking to a stranger who lived about a million miles away, some rich chick with a kid and a husband who could afford expensive coffee. Most likely, they didn't have anything in common and would probably not even become friends. What did it matter if this woman was in a steady relationship and into guys?

She typed out a reply and sent it before going to get the coffee which had now finished brewing.

@The_Apple_Core Ah, Okay. What does your husband do? (If you don't mind me asking.)

@BuffBlonde83 We're not married. He runs a charity that focuses on saving the endangered wildlife here in Florida.

Another tweet came in right afterward.

@BuffBlonde83 He's out wading through swamps or in offices schmoozing patrons all day, so he needs his sleep.

Erin returned to her laptop and knitted her brows, as she decided what to reply.

@The_Apple_Core What about you? Don't you need sleep to be a writer?

There was another long pause, and Erin felt sure that she had blown it and asked too many questions. She worried that she'd offended The_Apple_Core or made her feel bad about her situation. She sighed and muttered, "Damn it, Black, you should have just made a joke about dredging through swamps being good leg exercise."

Finally, a reply popped up.

@BuffBlonde83 Not as much as Richard needs it. I write between naps both in the daytime and at night. It works perfectly well, thank you.

Erin winced. There was the sarcasm, or maybe it was the moodiness that Apple Core's Twitter profile warned about.

@The_Apple_Core Right, of course. I didn't mean to question your setup there. Just curious and bad at, like, phrasing stuff, you know?

Another pause. Erin realized she was holding her breath.

@BuffBlonde83 I understand. Sorry if I seemed defensive. I've been told that I tend to come off as rather snappy.

Erin smiled, relieved that the conversation was back on track. She took another bite of her protein bar.

@The_Apple_Core That explains why your bio says you are moody and sarcastic to the (apple) core. I like your Twitter handle btw.

@BuffBlonde83 Thank you. I've been fond of apples ever since I was a little girl, and, well, coming up with these names can be tricky.

@The_Apple_Core Hey, mine is not exactly Shakespeare material. ;)

@BuffBlonde83 To be honest, I am surprised yours doesn't involve dogs. You seem to be a big canine fan.

@The_Apple_Core Ah, you've seen my tweets then, huh? Yeah, love dogs. Always wanted one as a kid, but foster homes don't really allow it.

There was another lengthy pause, and Erin wondered if the reference to her past had put the other woman off, or if the kid had woken up again.

She was aware that some people shied away from a sob story, especially if they were just trying to kill some hours online by mindlessly chatting to a stranger. She wasn't looking for sympathy or getting ready to pour her heart out. Erin had accepted her past and moved on, but this Apple Core person couldn't know that. Maybe she wondered why Erin would tweet about it in public.

Erin took a long swig of coffee and grimaced as the still-too-hot liquid stung in her mouth and throat. A tweet came up on her screen.

@BuffBlonde83 Sorry, Alberto needed to be changed. Sorry you weren't allowed a dog. I read in your bio that you can't have 1 now either?

Before Erin had time to reply, there was another tweet from **The_Apple_Core**.

@BuffBlonde83 I can't believe I just had to put a numeral into that sentence instead of typing out one. Sometimes I hate Twitter and its 140 characters.

Erin couldn't help smirking at that comment. It was clear that Apple Core liked to speak and write properly. She was either really obsessed about her language use or just educated out the wazoo. Erin made a mental note to find out which it was.

She looked at the tweet again and realized that there was an opportunity to take the public conversation to a more private platform. She wondered if her new chat partner would go for it.

After a moment of pondering, she came up with a jokey comment. Apple Core could easily shoot it down without it seeming harsh.

@The_Apple_Core :D If you use Facetime or Skype, we could chat there? I can tell u about my lack of puppy goodness in 50,000 chars!

@BuffBlonde83 I wouldn't know what Facetime was even if it was staring me straight in the face. I have a rarely used Skype account, though.

@The_Apple_Core Cool! DM me your Skype user name, and I'll add you.

Erin smiled. Her gamble had paid off. She anxiously waited for the next message. It was, however, taking longer than she had expected, and she picked up her coffee again.

@BuffBlonde83 All right. I give up. What is a DM? (Don't mock me, or I'll make you regret it!)

Erin snorted a laugh into her coffee.

@The_Apple_Core Dog Mole. :D It's a direct message (private) here on Twitter. Just so no one else here can see your username and try to add you.

There was another pause during which Erin giggled at her Dog Mole joke. Then her Twitter account informed her that she had a DM. She opened it and read.

I think you might have been mocking me and my technophobic ways, but as I'm not sure, you may live. I've had a look and my username appears to be IsabellaMartinez1.

Erin put her coffee down and typed enthusiastically. For some reason, it made her excited to find out the woman's name. She stopped typing and bit her lip. What if Isabella Martinez was a writer or painter or something, and she was just too uncultured to have heard of her? Should she take a chance and risk sounding dumb?

Yeah, she decided to risk it. If she was wrong and this chick mocked her, at least she'd know what kind of person she was dealing with and avoid her—unless the mocking was funny, of course. She continued typing and clicked send.

Cool. Hey, does that mean I know your name now? I've never known anyone called Isabella. It's an awesome name, btw. (Don't worry, I'm not a stalker or so lonely I'd be likely to become obsessed with you or anything... much. ;-))

The reply came in, and its contents made Erin's tense shoulders relax.

Yes, that's me. Isabella Martinez. I was named after Isabela, the Puerto Rican municipality that my grandfather came from before he emigrated to the US. I actually wasn't worried about you being a stalker until you said that. Thanks for putting that unpleasant thought in my head.

Erin grinned as she answered.

I'm as normal as anyone who sits up and drinks coffee all night can be. :-P You'll get an "add me" message on Skype from BlackVelvetBitches. (It was funny when I signed up, like, ten years ago. You know, because my last name is Black. Never mind.)

The reply pinged in, and Erin nearly missed it because she was busy looking down, trying to shake her embarrassment.

I'm not a fan of the use of the word "bitches," but I like the rest. Is it from the song? "Black Velvet?"

Erin had to answer that right away.

Yes! Not everyone gets that reference. I loved that song. Well... I still kinda do.

Isabella's answer came just as quickly as Erin's had.

It's a good song.

A thrill rushed through Erin's system. She hadn't felt like this while talking to someone for a very long time. She forced herself to focus on typing a reply.

Yep. I like your Twitter handle too. What's with the apple thing? You said you liked them since you were a kid?

Erin realized that this might be a long story. She wondered if she should have waited until they were typing in the much-easier Skype chat? The reply proved to be quite short, luckily.

I used to have a huge apple tree outside my window when I was a child. It became a sort of symbol for me, I suppose. And I have always liked the taste and smell of apples.

Erin stopped herself from saying that she liked apples too but mainly if they were in a pie or a protein flapjack. Would that be interesting? Would it make her sound like a bad personal trainer if she admitted to not liking the fruit raw? She had to stop second-guessing everything. *This is why you don't socialize, Black*, she thought to herself. She stuck to using her reply to move the chat.

Gotcha. Okay, I'll see you on Skype.

Erin opened the app and thought about what she could talk about to prove that she was smart, funny, and totally normal to this Isabella Martinez. Next to Erin, her forgotten coffee was going cold, while she was just getting warmed up.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

LONG-DISTANCE COFFEE

BY EMMA STERNER-RADLEY

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com