I was in a business lunch meeting with one of the company’s owners where I worked, and our office manager, when Arlene, the owner of the restaurant, and a woman I knew well, walked over with a tall, handsome man.

“Excuse me, ladies,” she looked at my two female colleagues. “I must ask you to leave.” All three of us were taken a little aback. “Not you,” Arlene added glancing at me, then turning to the others. “I have someone here that Jeffree needs to meet.”

My two colleagues began snickering as they gathered their purses and stood up.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I protested. “Where are you two going? We’re not done yet.”

“Oh yes we are,” the company owner smiled like the all-knowing Cheshire cat. “You’re on your own.”

The two women departed, laughing all the way

Moments later Arlene launched into matchmaker mode. “This is Earl. You need to meet and get to know one another,” she stated matter-of-factly. She pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the table and pointed at it indicating that Earl should sit. As soon as he did, Arlene left.

We sat there staring at one another, neither of us knew what to say. Finally, I asked, “What just happened here?”

“Not really sure,” Earl said. “I just moved back to town. I’m a commercial broker, I sold this restaurant to Arlene and her husband. When I lived here before I met a nice woman that Arlene knows. I called Arlene to let her know that I moved back and asked her for the woman’s phone number, but she wouldn’t give it to me.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“She said that there was someone in the restaurant right now that I needed to meet and that I had to get over here right away before she left. Obviously, that’s you.”

“Unbelievable!” I said shaking my head. “I’ve had people want to set me up before, but never like this.”

“Yeah, it’s a first for me too,” Earl grinned.

After that we sat there in silence. Every few minutes Arlene would walk behind Earl, wink, and make a thumbs-up motion. I thought it couldn’t get any more embarrassing when Arlene walked up and sat down on one of the empty chairs.

“How’s it going, you two?”

We silently glared at her.

“What?” she looked at each of us. “Have you exchanged business cards?”

We both shook our heads.

“Phone number? Jeffree, have you given Earl your phone number?”

Again, I shook my head.

“Do I have to do everything?” she admonished both of us, as though we were unruly toddlers. “Jeffree, give me one of your cards,” she beckoned with an open hand.

I knew I wasn’t going to get out of the restaurant until I cooperated; I handed over a business card. She immediately gave it to Earl.

“You call her, Earl,” she instructed him as though he didn’t know the protocol.

With that I got up and excused myself saying I had to get back to work. As soon as I walked through the office door the two women who had abandoned me began laughing. I got back to work and shortly forgot about the whole incident until a couple of days later, when Earl called. I barely remembered him until he reminded me of where and how we met.

“Hey, that was pretty embarrassing,” he said.

“No kidding,” I agreed.

“I was thinking, we should have lunch.”

“Um, thanks, but no,” I said.

“Why not?” he pressed.

“You’re calling because Arlene pressured you into it. I don’t need anyone setting me up on dates.”

“No, I’m inviting you to lunch because Arlene is a savvy woman,” he said. “Obviously she sees something you and I don’t and she went out of her way to introduce us. What would it hurt to have lunch and see if we can figure out what it is?”

I thought about that for a moment and then decided, what could it hurt?

“Just one thing,” I said. “I’ll have lunch with you, only not at Arlene’s restaurant. In fact, pick a place on the opposite end of town.”

We met the next day for lunch. At first it was awkward, then we began talking, really talking, about everything. Two hours passed before I realized it.

“Look, I’m actually really enjoying this, but I do have to get back to work.”

He smiled and asked, “Can I see you again?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Of course.”

A couple of days later we planned to meet at a promotional event I was staffing in the evening. As soon as he walked in I rushed up to him.

“Look, I’m really sorry, but I can’t see you tonight,” I tried to say, as tears welled up in my eyes. “My dog is really sick, she seems to be dying, and the vet isn’t sure why. I waited until you got here so you wouldn’t think I stood you up. I have to go over to the clinic now. I can’t let her die alone.”

“Let’s go together,” he said.

“What?”

“You shouldn’t do this alone. I’ll go with you.” He placed his hand on my elbow and guided me outside.

We arrived at the clinic in minutes. As soon as we walked in one of the techs led us into a large room and pointed to a metal crate where I saw Lucy laying on her side. I could hardly breathe; my precious dog was comatose and barely alive.

“Do you want me to take her out of the crate so you can hold her?” the tech asked. I could only nod; I knew if I tried to speak I would start crying.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, Earl sat down opposite me. The tech gently lifted Lucy and laid her in my lap. Suddenly, Earl picked her up and lowered her into his lap. He began speaking to her in a low, gentle voice.

“You gotta live,” he told her, as he stroked her long silver coat. “Think of all the living you still have to do. Balls and butterflies to chase. Mailmen to bark at. Bones to eat and bury in the yard. You can’t die, you’ll break your mama’s heart.”

At that moment, I fell in love with Earl. He was trying to coax my dog, who he had never met, into living, into living for me. Who does that for someone he barely knows?

We stayed with Lucy for a long time. It became clear that she wasn’t going to die as long as we were there. Before we left the clinic, I gave them explicit instructions to call me when Lucy died, no matter what the hour. They promised they would. The next morning, I awoke and realized that the clinic never called. I phoned them and asked why.

“Because your dog is standing up in the crate wagging her tail and barking for breakfast,” the tech said.

I dropped the phone, grabbed my keys and drove like a mad woman to the clinic where I scooped Lucy up into my arms; she showered me with doggie kisses. Then I called Earl and thanked him for saving my dog; for giving her a reason to live. We married five months later. That was 25 years ago.