



Chapter One



"My dear if you could give me a cup of tea to clear my muddle of a head I should better understand your affairs."

—CHARLES DICKENS, *MRS. LIRRIPER'S LEGACY*

The Perfect Cup of Tea

Instructions by Annie Green



- Bring fresh cold water to a rolling boil, but don't let it boil for too long.
- Let it come off the boil and settle down for a moment.
- Pour water into a teapot containing a heaping tablespoon of your favorite loose tea leaves.
- Let the leaves bloom and steep for at least three minutes.
- Pour the tea into your favorite preheated cup.
- Sip and smile.

There's a right way and a wrong way to do many things, and when it comes to tea, my opinion is one should not mess around. My grandmother Louisa first taught me to brew a fine pot of tea when I was five years old. She told me what a nice job I had done, and I announced I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. Louisa laughed merrily at the time. I hoped she wouldn't laugh today. I couldn't bear the thought of being laughed at today, which is why I, Annie Green, am hiding out in the storage room of the Steeping Leaf.

Well, not *hiding* exactly. That would be silly. I love the

Leaf, and there isn't anything out there to hide from, least of all my grandmother Louisa. But the fact of the matter is I am here in her teashop, she doesn't know it yet, and the reason for all my sneaking around is I need to psych myself up for what I am about to do.

You know how some people have weird/cool talents, like being able to wiggle their ears back and forth just by concentrating really hard? Well, I have one too. I can stand on my head forever. Like, seriously forever. My two brothers can even try to tickle my feet to knock me over, and I just make faces at them, upside down, secure in the knowledge that I am just as steady on my head as they are on their feet. Which isn't, come to think of it, as steady as, say, *Louisa* is on her feet, but it's pretty darn good. And as a bonus, when I stand on my head, I can feel myself getting smarter and calmer. I think it has something to do with the fact that a headstand is a real yoga pose.

With two younger brothers and an older sister, it's hard to ever find even half a moment alone. And the silence of the storage room is blissful. It's just me, upside down and Zenlike amidst a few dozen boxes of loose tea, some old teacups Louisa hasn't taken to St. Vinny's yet, and my "Perfect Cup of Tea Instructions," which I've written on a whiteboard that, for readability's sake, has also assumed the sirsha-asana pose.

I am almost ready to ask for a job here as a barista. And when I do, I will be calm, centered, grown-up, and only *slightly* red in the face. I am a tiny bit worried because sometimes my family doesn't take me seriously. Everyone else in my family already has their "thing"—Beth is all "college, college, college . . . did I mention that I'm going away to college in the fall?" and Luke and Billy have the lock on the local emergency room—skateboarders, it's like they have a death wish or something. My mom has her students, and my dad has his engineering projects. And I have tea.

Okay, I'll admit, I'm interested in a lot of things and I tend to announce my newest obsessions rather frequently—but working at the Leaf is not just a phase. I've always loved the Leaf and confess that I consider it partly, well, mine. Am I ready to be a barista, taking money, making complex foamy drinks, and asking after the customers' families like the perfect hostess? I think so. I hope Louisa does, too.

Still staring at the board and mentally picturing each and every step of brewing a pot of tea, I sighed happily and closed my eyes to fully commune with the delicious smells of the shop. Inhale. Exhale. "I am one with the tea. The tea is one with me. I am one with the t—"

The storage door banged and there was some

commotion. My eyes snapped open, but all I could see was a pair of legs in jeans. And a box. A really big box. A really big box coming straight at me. “Hey, watch out!”

Instead of changing course however, the startled jeans-wearer swung the box around. Right into me. “AUGHH!” he cried, tripping a little and juggling the box. It was definitely a *he*, I thought as I tumbled over, directly into a precarious stack of napkins, tea samples, and the shelf with the old cups. *CRASH!* went one cup. Then, *CRASH!* *CRASH!* *CRASH!* came three more. Ouch.

The napkins flew everywhere, and some of the samples burst open, sending leaves and particles of rosehips, chamomile, orange spice, and white tea every which way. I stared at the intruder from the corner where I was sprawled out, confused. I thought Louisa was the only one who ever came in here. Well, and me, of course. *CRASH!* One more cup slid to the ground.

The intruder set his box down *veeery* slowly and righted the shelf I had tipped. I was just about to sputter something extremely non-Zenlike when the words got tangled up in my tongue. My scowl fully retreated as my eyes widened. Why hadn’t I seen him before? It occurred to me that most girls could go a whole *lifetime* of seeing strange boys in teashops (grocery stores, movie

theaters, stadiums . . . you get the idea) and not lay eyes on someone so perfectly gorgeous.

“What were you *doing?*” he asked, offering me a hand up. I took it slowly, my stomach flipping.

“I . . . I . . .” Apparently, I could no longer speak. Great.

He cocked his head expectantly. I stared. And stared. And stared. Finally I said the first and best thing that came to mind. “I was standing on my head. I do that.”

I do that. Wow. Smooth. I could feel my face reddening.

“Oh.” He looked at me as if I were some amusing—yet potentially deranged—creature from another planet. “Why?”

I didn’t get the chance to reply because the door to the main shop opened again and Louisa came hurrying into the room, her scarves flowing luxuriantly behind her.

“What on earth? Is everything all right? Annie, my sweetness! What are you doing here?”

Just when you think your face can’t get any redder, know this:

It can.