

One

It wasn't the face of the typical hitchhiker and that decided him. It was a long trek back to the city and if he didn't pick her up she might be strolling along the Colorado interstate at night, and be the next girl that vanished before dawn at the hands of some faceless John with a fetish for squeezing necks and tossing corpses in untraveled sections of woods. So Dennis took it upon himself to be the savior of both her and his own peace of mind, and pulled his Jeep into the breakdown lane and let the engine idle as the girl quickened her pace to catch up.

"My God," she said, and he heard a backpack that sounded like it was holding a ton of bricks hit the rear seat like a bomb. "I thought no one would ever come!" She opened the passenger door and used the foot ledge to climb up into the seat, a tall, mocha-skinned black girl of perhaps twenty or twenty-one.

"Thank you," she said, extending a gloved hand. "For not being among the darker side of nature."

This choice of words made him smile, and he shook her hand, pulled the Jeep out of the breakdown lane and continued to Downtown Denver. The top of the Jeep was up and the soft windows in place.

"It's cold out there," Dennis said.

The girl nodded, adjusted the seat and leaned back. "Yes it is. Quite cold."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but are you crazy?"

"Why, because I'm a twenty two year old girl making myself vulnerable to the darkest side of the world?"

"Exactly?"

"Well than yeah, I guess I am kind of crazy."

Mountains and a wide range of curving green landscape slid by in a blur on the right, and the wind made rapping sounds on the Jeep's soft windows.

"You don't ever get scared," Dennis said, "being out here alone like this? You're a pretty girl. There's sickos out there that would—"

“Chop me up and make me disappear into the depths of the woods unknown. I know.”

Dennis looked at her, grinned. “What? Are you a poet or something?”

The girl shook her head. “No. But I like poetry. Read it all the time. I have one of those paper white Kindles in my luggage and I read that every night before I catch my zzz’s.”

“Well...uh...”

“Fiona.”

“I’m Dennis,” he said.

“I like the name Dennis. Go on.”

“Where do you sleep at?”

“Pretty much any place where it’d be hard for someone to sneak up on me. Under bushes or in the backseats of unlocked cars.”

Dennis nodded, considering. “And you don’t ever worry that you’re going to get arrested living like that? For trespassing or breaking and entering? Whatever the laws are these days.”

Fiona looked at Dennis, a smirk on her dark face. “I’ve been arrested plenty. Has done nothing to dissuade me from living this life.”

“Wow,” Dennis said, staring straight ahead. “You have balls of steel, young lady.”

“Actually, ovaries of steel would be more appropriate, but I get where you’re coming from. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

That was the first conversation they had. The second one was when the storm hit and up until the point when the rain gushed down, Dennis had no idea that there had been bad weather on the way.

“Wow, it’s really coming down, huh?” Fiona said, watching the gigantic rain drops torpedo the jeep. “Thank God you didn’t leave the top off, huh?”

“You have no idea.”

“But it’s coming down really hard. Do you think you’re going to be able to keep driving?”

The highway was full of rain water and Dennis had been forced to slow down to keep from being forced off the road when the wheels didn't catch.

"I hope," Dennis said. "I need to get back to the hotel. Work to do."

"Hotel? Are you here visiting?"

Dennis shook his head. "No. I'm in my work season, actually."

"What do you mean work season?"

"I'm an author, so when I'm actively writing a book I complete the first draft in a hotel. Kind of something I've been doing for years." He chuckled a bit uneasily, not used to talking to anyone about this.

"Well, that's cool. Maybe you'll let me read something."

Dennis smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "I doubt you really mean that though. A lot of people I run into—people that are not part of my fan base but learn that I'm an author—always like to claim that they want to read something of mine. They never do. I'll give them a free hardcopy of the book and they'll say a fake thank you and never speak of it again. One time I asked a guy how he was coming along on my book and he acted like he hadn't seen the book since the night I gave it to him. Thank God for my hardcore fans, because we sure don't live in a nation of readers."

"Well I read," Fiona said. "I really do. And if you give me a copy, hard or digital, I'm going to read it. I don't care how long it is I'll have it done within a month, period. Probably less. What do you write, anyway?"

"Fiction."

Fiona nodded. "I figured that. What kind of fiction?"

"Mystery. The same kind of stuff I read."

"Well that's cool. I don't read much mystery but I'll still give your story a try if you want to throw a copy my way."

“Well I could send one to your Kindle from my phone if you want, but don’t feel like you have to do it as a favor to me.”

She laughed. “You’re rich I’m assuming. I don’t need to do you any favors. I’m offering to read one of your books because I read. If I had money I might even pay for it.”

How much money would get you out of this situation, he came close to asking but resisted. She assumed he was rich and that was dangerous enough. The last thing he needed was to be throwing money at her.

“Well, despite those questionable readers it looks like you’re doing well Dennis,” Fiona said, shifting a bit in her seat. “Hopefully, you can keep it up.” At this point Dennis noticed exactly what she was wearing. A pair of dark sweats, some old black Timberland boots, and multiple sweatshirts. She had a very pretty face and Dennis was curious about her hair, but it was tied up in a scarf.

“So what made you decide to live this life,” Dennis asked. The rain was finally beginning to taper off.

“Parents on the dark side of nature, what about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What made you decide to be an author?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“Because I love to read and write stories. I started off reading, going through one book after another and when I was ten I picked up a pencil and a piece of notebook paper to write a story of my own and the rest is history. From that point I was hooked.”

“Yeah, if only my story was as nice to listen to as yours. But despite how I came to be here I live a good life. I go where I want when I want. There’s no one that I have to answer to. And I’m not going to lie to you. Being a girl makes it easier to get loose change from people.”

The rain had stopped, but the road was still wet. Dennis put his foot down on the gas and sped up.

“So what’s your money situation looking like right now, if you don’t mind me asking? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Fiona shook her head, leaning back in her seat as she reached into the left pocket of her sweats. She pulled out a twenty with some one dollar bills folded inside of it.

“Like twenty three dollars,” she said. “That’s pretty good. That means I’ll definitely be able to have a decent dinner tonight.”

“Do you ever have to go nights without eating at all?” He was trying his best not to let it show, but he was concerned about this girl. And the idea of her sleeping outside by herself, partially hidden or not, made him sick to his stomach.

She nodded. “Yeah, all the time. One time I went for nearly two days without food. Part of it had to do with the weather being bad, it being so far from people’s paydays, and feeling too sick to persist. I spent a lot of time sleeping those days.”

“And it doesn’t make you sad, Fiona, that kind of stuff? Doesn’t make you feel sorry for yourself?”

She sighed. “When it gets sad...yeah, it’s harder to look at things from a positive angle. I’m not going to lie. But stuff like that rarely happens. I usually do get food.”

“But on the coldest nights. I mean when the temperature is below zero and you know that snow’s coming in, where do you sleep?”

“The shelter,” she said. “For the most part. Or I do something stupid on purpose just to get arrested. And just like that I have a free meal, bed, and security.” She pointed to the side of her head. “See, it’s all tactical. You just have to know how to play the game.”

Dennis estimated that he was twenty five minutes from his destination. Wondered how cold it’d be by the time he arrived.

“So where do you want me to let you off,” he asked Fiona.

“When you get to downtown it’ll be perfect, actually. I’m going to take a bus to the shelter. Tonight the temp’s actually going to be in the negative, just like we were talking about. Yeah, I want to get there early just to ensure I have a spot to stay. If you get there late you miss out. You’ve seen the movie *The Pursuit of Happiness*?”

“Yeah. Love that movie.”

“Well, it’s just like that. You have all these people waiting outside to get in. And it could get pretty chaotic outside too, if you cut someone or if someone cuts you. It’s a mess. Just a bunch of down and out people needing a place to sleep. It’s not a place I go to unless I feel sick or it’s too cold to be out. I don’t want to die in my sleep which is very easy to do when you’re sleeping outside on a negative ten degree night.”

“Yeah, that sounds horrible.” Dennis drummed his hands on the steering wheel, thinking. “Fiona. I know you barely know me, but do you think you can do me a favor?”

“I don’t do tricks,” she said, suddenly stiffening in her seat.

Dennis glanced at her in alarm then looked back at the road. “No. No, I’m not trying to ask you to do that at all. No, I was just hoping you would let me treat you to a late lunch. Or an early dinner? Whatever the case, I want to take you out to eat and I want you to stuff yourself.”

Fiona looked uneasy. “You think you could give me a little bit to think about it?”

Dennis nodded. “Yeah, go ahead and think it over and tell me if you’re interested. You can choose where we eat. This isn’t me hitting on you either. I just want to feed you is all. So let me know.”

Fiona was smiling, her dark eyes firmly on his. “I will Dennis. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So, are you married? Do you have kids?”

“No to both questions. Though I did get out of a marriage a year ago, and to be frank, it’s something I would never go back to. I don’t know how you feel about the institution of marriage, but I could trash it for days.”

“I’m an advocate of marriage so that’s probably a subject we don’t want to talk about. I’m pretty sensitive about that subject, don’t ask why.”

“Okay.”

A couple of minutes later Fiona turned on her side, indicating that she was going to try to sleep. Dennis let her. For a girl that lived her kind of life she was going to need all the sleep she could get.

Two

He reached over and shook her gently. The Jeep traversed both street that was smooth and rough in areas. They were in Downtown Denver and it had started to sprinkle outside.

More rain, Dennis thought. That really sucks.

He thought of his warm hotel room and the provided desk where his laptop was perched. He thought of the glow of his laptop screen, the warm carpet and the fireplace. Once he made it back he'd have a light drink, get a slight buzz going and sit down and write.

"Wow," Fiona said, sitting up and looking around. "That was fast." She stretched, yawned and cracked her knuckles. She looked at Dennis. "Thank you so much. I really do appreciate it. You didn't have to do this at all."

"I wanted to do it," Dennis said. "No thanks necessary."

"You can just drop me off at this corner up here and I'll find my way."

"It's raining outside."

Fiona smiled at him. "I'm well aware of that. But it's okay. I've been doing this for years."

Dennis wanted to say something, but he had no words. Insisting that she shouldn't get out of the car would make him seem like a creep or a guy that wanted to hurt her. She was an adult and free to live the kind of life she wanted. He wasn't her father.

As he pulled up to the corner of an intersection he remembered what he had proposed.

"Do you still want to take me up on that offer for a late lunch, early dinner?"

She had her hand on the door handle when he asked this and pulled it back.

"Yeah," Fiona said, looking at him. "I'd love you to treat me to lunch right now. My stomach's doing its rumbling thing."

"Perfectly understandable," he said. "Tell me where you want to go."

They ended up in the parking lot of a Taco Bell, scarfing down burritos and tacos and listening to old school songs on Dennis's stereo. He was surprised by her choice, because he had made it clear that he would've taken her anywhere, but she'd been insistent. Dennis took a large bite of a supreme taco drenched with hot sauce and as he chewed Fiona reached over with a napkin and wiped his mouth for him.

"Got some remnants there," she said, and chuckled.

"On the right day," Dennis said, "Taco Bell hits the spot. On the right day that is."

"I agree. Except for me Taco Bell always hits the spot."

"Well, that just means you need some more variety in your life, girl."

"How old are you, Dennis? If you don't mind me asking."

"Why would I mind? Thirty."

"You don't look it."

"Well thanks. Black don't crack, as I'm sure you've heard."

Outside the rain had picked up and like on the interstate it had turned into a downpour. As they ate Fiona began humming along with one of the songs on the radio.

"That's Temptations," Dennis said. "What you know about that?"

"My parents. Pieces of shit that they are, they did have some good taste in music. This was on all the time growing up, whatever the turmoil transpiring in their supposed humble abode."

Dennis snickered, looking at her.

"What?" she said.

"Are you sure you're not a poet?"

"What, anyone who uses words with more than one syllable is considered a poet now?"

Dennis shook his head. Took a bite of what was known as a double decker taco, which was a taco with both a hard and soft shell.

“I’m going to end up missing out on the shelter,” Fiona said. “But I know some parking lots that security doesn’t do much checking on. I’m pretty sure I can find a car to sleep in the back of. You think you could take me to—”

“Stop with all that,” Dennis said, waving a dismissive hand. “There’s no way I’m going to, in good conscience, let you sleep in the back of a freezing car when I have a luxury hotel room that I’m staying in. You’re coming with me.”

Fiona shook her head, her mouth full of food. “You don’t have to do that Dennis. Seriously.”

“I’m doing it and you’re going to let me, or this day’s going to end on a bad note.”

“What, are you going to get on your knees and beg?”

“Yeah,” Dennis said. “I actually will do that. Better than reading about your death in the paper.”

“Oh please, I’m a young, healthy woman. I’m not going to die from a night in the back of cold car.”

Dennis shook his head. “This isn’t up for debate. We’re heading back to my place as soon as we’re done eating.”

Fiona sighed. Sniffed. “Really, Dennis. You’ve been really generous already. You don’t need to do anymore.”

Dennis’s brow wrinkled and he looked at her, as if perplexed. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

Fiona smiled. Grabbed his hand and gave him a kiss on the knuckles.

“Thank you Dennis.”

Three

He used a key card on a large white door and pushed it open for her. He had her duffel bag slung over one shoulder, the weight of it every bit as heavy as it had sounded when she’d dropped it in the back

seat of the jeep. They stepped onto plush red carpet, the living room and the kitchen with its marble island counter in their immediate view.

“You can take the bed tonight. It’s down that hall to your right and the bathroom’s right before it, and there you go, simple.”

“Oh, it’s so warm in here,” Fiona said, looking around. “Mind if I take off some of my clothes. I mean, just to get comfortable.”

“Mi casa su casa.”

“Works for me,” she said, pulling off one of her sweatshirts just to reveal another light one beneath.

“Toss it over here,” Dennis said, lifting his hand.

“Go long,” Fiona said, balling it up. Dennis backed up down the hall and she tossed it. Dennis caught it easily and took it to the bedroom with her backpack. He placed the items on his bed and came back out into the living room. Fiona was rubbing the arm of the sofa with her palm, and stopped when she noticed him.

“Do more than just rub it,” Dennis said. “Sit.” He chuckled, and strolled into the kitchen to prepare for a writing binge. He made coffee, mixed in whiskey from a high quality bottle atop the fridge, made several sandwiches and placed them on a giant plate on the kitchen counter, then moved to the east side of the room where the wall embedded desk was located.

“What do you watch on this,” Fiona said, pointing to the widescreen TV. He turned to her, halfway to his desk.

“Nothing, really. I spend most of my time writing when I’m here. By the time I’m done I’m so exhausted I go right to bed. Anyway, make yourself at home. I’ll be done in probably three or four hours.”

Fiona nodded. “See you soon.”

When he sat down at the desk he went to work, opening up his laptop, and working on his story. When he finished he could barely keep his eyes open, and the thought of bed seemed better than another

bestseller. Then he remembered that he'd told Fiona that she could have the bed, which of course meant that the couch, which folded out into a bed, would be his.

When he made it back to the living room he saw Fiona seated on the sofa, watching a program on birds on National Geographic. She looked at him and smiled.

"So," she said, stretching her arms. "Did you get a lot of work done?"

"Yeah, a very productive day. You ever been on a laptop or computer extensively?"

Fiona nodded. "Yes."

"Isn't it funny how you can be on one all day, just sitting down the whole time, and be dead tired by the time you're done?"

Fiona giggled. "Yes. That happened to me all the time. A lot of mental activity, you know? Actually more tiring than physical activity, I think. I remember being tired after staying up in high school to finish assignments at the last minute. I did that more than I even care to remember. But I remember those being the kinds of days that wore me out the most."

"So it's about nine o'clock right now. If you weren't staying in a shelter on a night like this what would you be doing right now?"

"It depends," she said, touching the lobe of her right ear. "Right now I might be sitting outside somewhere eating the food that I managed to purchase with some of the money I was given." She shrugged. "Maybe I'd be in a McDonald's eating. It really just depends where I happen to be and how much money I was able to get from someone."

Dennis took a seat on the sofa, leaving two feet of space between them.

"How much do you make on an average day panhandling?"

Fiona scratched the tip of her nose, furrowed her brow in thought. "Twenty five dollars a day on average."

"Yeah? You just buy food with that money?"

"Cleaning products. Soap, deodorant. Sometimes I take my clothes to the laundromat, throw them in the wash and take a nap while I wait. They don't bother me because they assume I'm some teenage

mother from down the street that lives in whatever broke down apartment complex that happens to be nearby. And if they wake me up that's the exact kind of story that I play up." Dennis laughed. "You ever hear of Versha Mitchell, Dennis?"

He shook his head.

"Yeah, she's not mainstream but she makes a lot of money. Is even on certain money magazines which you can probably get by typing her name into Google. Anyway, she's probably the key reason I'm able to keep doing this. What I mean is she keeps me strong. Because of her story. She's a black woman. Late thirties and was homeless at one point, but stopped when a string of murdered girls showed up around the Interstate where she frequently hitchhiked. What she says in this interview is that if it wasn't for her life as a homeless woman she would've never developed the strength to build her own business." She chortled. "She goes out of her way just to hire black people too, which is something else I like about her."

"Think she'll hire me on as a writer."

Fiona laughed. Slapped his knee gently. "Now you know you don't need a job, kid. Anyway, the company she owns funds startups for young black entrepreneurs. She's all about helping a person be the best they can be and stay that way, no matter the stakes. Because it's not until you change yourself that anything around you can change."

"Wow," Dennis said, nodding. "So with all that knowledge, it's amazing that you can be so accepting of your current position."

"I think part of the reason that I'm out here, doing what I do, is to find myself. Let's not be mistaken. I have some aunts and cousins I could move in with right now and I'd be off the streets. They're way in the south. But I don't consider them good people and if I lived with them I think I'd eventually end up in a very bad place in my life." She smiled. "And yes, there are things out there far worse than homelessness."

Dennis nodded, looking at a bird grab a large fish from a body of water. The next scene was of another bird attempting to do the same thing and failing.

“Okay,” he said. “Name one.”

“Loss of identity,” Fiona said. She clapped her hands together one hard time. “Boom.”

Dennis cackled. “That’s good. It is. Elaborate though.” He propped his elbow on the back rest, resting his head on his palm. “Seriously, what you’re saying intrigues me.

“All right,” Fiona said, rubbing her hands together. “I intrigue a bestselling author. Awesome!”

“The challenge is can you keep me intrigued though.”

“I think I can.” They grinned at each other and a moment passed between them, a shared-flicker of the eyes. “Loss of identity, Dennis, happens to people who put themselves in circumstances with other people that allow them to feel trapped. Or put them in danger. It doesn’t need to mean having someone take your social security card or something.”

“Mmm. Okay.”

“Loss of identity is when you live for someone else, whether it’s a husband, a wife, your employer, a best friend, or even worse, the justice system. Key reason to do whatever it takes to stay out of prison in this world. It’s when you put your life in someone else’s hands, though there were signs all along that this person could be a danger to you, that they were not good to you. It’s when you make stupid, unnecessarily, risky decisions. I know people who do it all the time, who had a good thing and blew it.”

“What you say about the justice system though. You’ve been in and out of jail.”

“Yeah, but that was necessary. And I didn’t go to prison, just jail. The things I did to get put into jail were to survive. You remember what I told you Dennis, about a free room, bed, and security being the reward for committing a crime. Either that or take your chances out in negative degree cold.”

Dennis thought of the one time that he had been to jail, only he’d actually been taken to Juvie, because he had been a minor at the time he’d committed his crime. He’d stolen a pair of sneakers and a watch from a clothing store. Had attempted to, anyway.

“Here’s something that might surprise you, Dennis. I’m not homeless one hundred percent of the year. I’d peg it more at sixty percent. I have mountains and valleys to conquer in life, and being homeless, in my humble opinion, is a way to quicken the process.”

“You’re definitely going to have to explain that one to me.” She had him intrigued, but his eyes were beginning to feel heavy. As satisfying as his writing binges were, they sure exhausted the hell out of him. And these days he was working harder than ever

“Are you sure you want me to,” she said. “You seem tired. Go to bed. I’ll sleep on the couch if that’s okay with you.”

“No,” Dennis said, shaking his head. He cocked his thumb over his shoulder. “The bed’s down the hall. That’s where you’re going to sleep. No exceptions.”

Fiona giggled. “I saw that bed. It’s a king sized. More suitable for you, kiddo.”

“This couch, right here, is plenty comfortable.”

“All right,” Fiona said. “I’ll make you a deal, and I know I’m not the one in the position to be presenting such a thing, but listen. If you agree to sleep in the bed, I’ll sleep in it too.” She smiled and Dennis suddenly felt guilty, like to do so would be to take advantage of a girl who only needed food and a place to sleep.

Dennis shook his head. “No, sorry. I can’t do that.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she said. “Now, anyway, I’m stinking up your place. Is it okay if I use the shower?”

“Crap,” Dennis said, shooting up from the couch and making his way down the hall. “I feel like an asshole! I didn’t even think about that. Of course, you can use the shower.” He flicked the bathroom light on, pulled out a towel and washcloth and placed them neatly on the sink.

“Don’t worry about it,” Fiona said, approaching the bathroom. “I’m not someone who trips over these kinds of things.”

“Still,” Dennis said, stepping out into the hall. “You’re a guest.”

“Thank you,” she said, and moved past him, the fabric of her sweater brushing against his V-neck

T-shirt.

Dennis left her alone and tried to decide where he was going to sleep.

Four

Dennis still had every intention of sleeping on the living room couch when he took the whiskey bottle back down from inside one of the cabinets. He grabbed a can of Coke from the fridge and mixed them in a glass cup. While Fiona took a shower he enjoyed his drink, leaning against the island style counter and thinking of a number of things. For one, he considered his ability to help people now that he had some good money to his name. Ensuring that Fiona had food and a place to sleep tonight felt more like an obligation than just a slick move to get into her pants. Still, she was in her early twenties, tall and attractive. Trying to keep himself from noticing these things seemed impossible. He left a robe laid out on Fiona's bed in case she wanted to get into something besides the clothes that she'd been carrying in the duffel bag for God knows how long. When she stepped out into the kitchen she had the robe on, and for the first time since Dennis had picked her up along the interstate she had her braided hair out. It was a bit longer than he would've expected—girls with longer hair tended to have it out in his experience—down just below her shoulders. He had a pleasant buzz going at this point.

"Mind if I join you," she said.

Dennis nodded. "Yeah, sure. You want a drink?"

"I'd love a drink."

"Coming right up." He grabbed a glass from a cupboard near the sink, put it down on the island counter and made her drink right in front of her.

"How old do I look to you," she said, her eyes on the glass.

"Twenty one, twenty two."

"Which is my point exactly. You can give me more than that."

Dennis chuckled, picked the glass bottle of whiskey back up and added more liquor to her Coke.

"Here," he said, handing it to her.

She took a sip with barely a grimace. Then her eyes fixed on the sliding glass door past the dining room that led onto the balcony.

"This really is a beautiful suite," she said.

"Yeah. Before I ever managed to sell a book I would go to rooms a lot cheaper than this just because I seemed to work better in the motel environment. I don't live with anyone, but there's something about being at home and writing a first draft that makes it hard to focus. For me, at least."

"Lack of inspiration?"

"Well, the motel rooms I was staying in at the time weren't very inspiring either. They were small, only gave a view of the parking lot or the highway and you could always hear some couple fighting or having next door. Still, it worked for me."

Fiona strolled over to the side of the counter Dennis leaned against and stood next to him.

"When was the last time someone made your heart flutter?"

Dennis chortled a bit louder than he intended. "My heart flutter? You mean—"

"When was the last time you've been in love?"

"Hmmm." He took a drink of whiskey as he considered this, his grimace more pronounced than Fiona's when he drank. "Probably five years ago, if you want me to be honest."

"Does it make you uncomfortable talking about it? If it does we can talk about something else."

She smiled. "We can talk about when someone last made my heart flutter."

Dennis shook his head. "How old are you exactly?"

"Twenty two."

"Then you haven't really had time for anyone to make your heart flutter."

"You can experience a lot of things by the age of twenty-two and love is not the least of those possibilities."

"You sound a lot smarter than your typical girl of twenty-two I'll give you that?"

"So do you want to trade stories," Fiona asked. "Or do you just want me to tell you mine?"

"I don't mind trading. Since I've had more time to learn how to cope with love and loss I choose myself to go first then you can tell yours after."

"Okay."

"She...was black."

Fiona raised her eyebrows, put her hand over her mouth in a mock gesture of surprise.

"No shit. Black."

"I say she was black, because she had skin like you. That kind of black. Gorgeous. Playful, fun. Smart."

"Who was older? You or her?"

He thought of the last time he'd made love to his wife and how devoid of passion it'd been. He thought of the first time and how wild and loud it was.

"Okay..." Fiona said.

"Oh, yeah," Dennis said and took a drink of his Coke and whiskey. "Just got kind of lost in thought there. I apologize."

"It's okay. No rush."

"Yeah, she was older and she was amazing in the beginning, turned into a person I didn't know toward the end."

"What? Like distant...emotional."

"Evil...cruel."

"Really? How so?"

Dennis gave a sad smile. "In a lot of ways. Some of the ways are hard to articulate. It's the kind of mean that'll give you nightmares, I'll tell you that."

"Did she...*hit* you?"

He said nothing, simply took another drink of his Coke and whiskey.

"I'm sorry," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to say anything else. I just get carried away when I hear these kinds of stories. Love is the cruelest teacher."

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