

## *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."

"What was that?"

"That love is the cruelest teacher?"

"Yeah."

"And sometimes it can seem like a big waste of time."

Dennis nodded. Took another slow sip of his drink. Fiona gulped the rest of hers down, held her cup up to Dennis.

"Mind if I have another one?"

"Yeah," he said. "Certainly." Dennis began to make her another drink.

"I've only had one relationship that ever mattered," Fiona said. "I've been broken up with the guy for three years. Being homeless, this didn't come until after it ended with him. He's one of the reasons I'm homeless now, but I'm not placing blame, of course. As I've told you I've made a choice to live like this."

The world was beginning to lose its edges, the fine details in the corners and crevices of the room starting to blur.

"It's a hell of an adventure," Dennis said, and handed her the drink. "It'd make a hell of a book. Young black girl, idolizes famous entrepreneur, learning about life on the rough and tumble streets of America."

Fiona imitated George W. Bush's voice, and repeated,

*"America."*

Dennis chuckled.

"You're good people," Fiona said, leaning back against the counter with her cup. She gulped half of it and let out a small burp.

"So I see you're a seasoned drinker?"

"Yeah, the saddest story. I've been drinking hard stuff like this since I was about sixteen. Yeah, I would put something like this in a water bottle walking down the street. My facial expression would have you thinking I've been drinking nothing but a very delicious soda."

“Tell me more about your first love.”

“Well, he had actually been kind of heavy into the drinking. I mean, not like with what I have here. Like, if he were here right now he’d have your glass full to the brim with straight whiskey. ‘Fuck mixing it! It hits harder when it’s not mixed!’ That’s what he would say, anyway. He had a bad temper; set him off and he would say the worst kind of things to you.”

“Sounds like an asshole.”

Fiona chuckled. “He was. He once got so pissed because his chicken alfredo wasn’t ready on time that he punched the corner of the wall. Broke three fingers, I swear I heard them snap. I tried to comfort him, but you know what he did?”

“What? Did he hit you?”

“And still be living.” She shook her head. “No, he didn’t hit me. But he blamed me for it. *‘You let me punch the wall, bitch! You let me!’* ”

Dennis snickered. “Yeah. Asshole 101 right there.”

“He had his bright spots. There were times when he could be so sweet.”

“White or black?”

“Does it matter?”

He shook his head.

“He was Hispanic. Had an accent too. But, yeah...when I loved him I really loved him. But he had a mean streak too, like you were talking about with your ex. Was she your wife...your ex?”

He nodded. “We were married four years. Man, that’s something I’ll never do again.”

Fiona looked in the direction of the hall. “Come on. Let’s talk about this in the room. There’s a TV in there, we could watch something.”

Dennis looked at her. Her eyes were dark, quite striking. Something about the liquor seemed to accentuate them. Why hadn’t he noticed their roundness, their depth? He liked how they looked right now, liked the unsteady, half-lidded look. Despite being a practiced drinker the liquor was hitting her hard.

“That’s not right,” Dennis said.

“Yeah,” she said, slipping her hand into his. It was soft, small. “Tell me why.”

“Because we both know what’s going to happen if we go in there. And you’re just...*a baby*.”

Fiona grinned, baring a top and bottom set of perfectly white teeth. Then her expression suddenly turned stern. She deepened her voice as she spoke.

*“So, what big bad thing is it you think’s going to happen if we go into that room?”*

“Really,” Dennis said. “You want me to say the word?”

Fiona’s voice went back to normal. “We’ll just watch movies and shows and talk.”

“You think you could stay,” he said, and stopped to consider what he had just said.

“What, past tonight?” she asked, and finished off her drink. She turned toward the counter with her cup, grabbed the whiskey, took the cap off, poured it, added Coke, and turned back and leaned against the counter.

“Well,” Dennis said, scratching the back of his neck. “Yeah. Maybe, you could. At least for a few days. I don’t want you to just get up and go tomorrow, like that. We’ve had time to get to know each other.” He hesitated, but the liquor carried him the rest of the way. “I’d like to take care of you.”

She chuckled. “You want to take care of me, huh?” She brought her cup to her lips, chuckled again as her lips touched the edge, then drank. “What is it about me that makes you think I’m worth taking care of? At girl being pretty doesn’t always mean she’s an angel.”

“So, what are you trying to say, you’re not a good girl?”

“I’m just saying that you don’t really want to take care of me. You’re just inebriated and think it’s what you want. Once you sober up a little you’ll realize you could have girls a lot better than a girl who’s homeless.”

“Man. I don’t care about that.”

She looked up at him, furrowed her brow. “You know, I find it interesting that you’d be so determined to take care of me but you won’t even come into *your* bedroom to watch movies.”

Dennis said nothing, and finally finished off the last of his drink.

“You’re thirty years old Dennis,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with sleeping with a girl eight years younger. It doesn’t make you evil...manipulative.”

“That’s not what I think.”

Fact was, he didn’t want to sleep with a girl that was going to be on the street tomorrow. It seemed tacky and somehow, wrong.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Well,” Fiona said and finished her drink. “I’m not asking anymore.” She put down her cup and grabbed his hand. She pulled him toward the room and he wasn’t surprised to find that he gave little resistance.

“We’re just watching movies,” Dennis said.

“Yep. That’s it.”

### *Five*

The next morning Dennis was the first up and out of bed. The light had just started to peek through the curtains, the visible shaft falling on Fiona’s bare back and blanketed bottom. Dennis sat on the side of the bed, found his underpants and pulled them on. He wanted to write this morning. Fact was, he never missed an opportunity to get some words in before the afternoon.

Last night wasn’t much more than a blur, but he came away remembering three distinct things. Fiona had taken the lead last night, she had come, and after he had finished they had sat nude in bed, eating sandwiches and watching TV for the next two hours.

By the time Dennis had finished his morning bout of writing Fiona had woken up. She was dressed in a pair of black sweats and a Colorado State T-shirt, and for a brief moment Dennis considered asking if she had ever attended college, then decided against it.

“Good morning hug,” she said, extending her arms just outside the hallway. Dennis smiled, strolled over and embraced her. He felt the give of her breasts against him and nearly became hard on the

spot. He gently let go and stepped back.

“Now, come on,” she said, rubbing his arm. “Didn’t last night make you feel better? I can tell you, it was just the thing *I* needed.”

“You know,” Dennis said, walking over to the fridge and opening up the door. “That is something I wondered about.” He grabbed some eggs, cheese, and orange juice, kicked the fridge door closed and put all the items on the counter. Fiona was seated on a stool on the opposite side.

“What do you mean,” she said.

“A girl in your position. Maybe I’ll refer to you as a transient. How does a girl like you go on dates, meet guys, make love?”

Fiona snickered. “You said make love. You ever heard the term slapping bellies?”

Dennis smirked. “Yeah, I’ve heard it.”

“Well, if you know how the world works Dennis, an attractive girl—even a not so attractive one—can slap bellies pretty much anywhere she goes. Guys will give sex like a capable homeless man swallows his pride. Always.”

“So, you just pick up guys and do one night stands?” Dennis had the skillet out and had mixed the eggs and the cheese and was actively pouring it in the pan when he realized she hadn’t responded. He looked at her, and saw a strange smile on her face. Almost seductive.

“Is that your thing, Dennis? One night stands.”

“Really. I want to know.”

She shook her head. “Hell no. The only time I ever sleep with a guy is when I’m staying at one place, which is only three times out of the year.”

“So how did you know you were going to see me past last night? Considering you were on the move?”

She shrugged, picking at her fingernail. “I don’t really know, to be honest with you. At first I just wanted to kick it and talk. Yeah...I’d have to say the liquor changed the night’s intended trajectory.”

“Is that so?” Dennis chuckled.

She smiled. “You know, I considered what it would be like to be a poet at one point, and the thought bored me to tears.”

“Wow, I’m surprised you say that. Writing probably gives me the best kind of rush I can get. I don’t know what heroin’s like, but—”

“I should hope you don’t.”

Dennis laughed. “But the joy I get from it—not necessarily the sensation but the joy—is the same. Based on how people describe it. They say heroin is like touching God.”

“That’s an interesting analogy.”

“Well, I’m sure you could’ve done better. Here.” He handed her eggs on a paper plate, the fork on the side.

“Thank you. You...you’re not going to eat anything?”

Dennis had made just enough eggs for her. He grabbed a banana out of a brown basket near the sink.

“No,” he said. “I’m good with this.”

“Put that down,” she said, grinning. “Grab a fork and come eat this with me.”

Dennis put the banana down, walked around the counter and joined her. She stabbed the eggs with the fork, and fed a bite to him.

“So,” she said, taking the next bite. “Do your skills extend beyond making eggs, or are you doomed to cooking one meal breakfasts’ forever?”

“They go further, but not by much.”

She nodded. “Okay. So...I have a question for you, and I want you to be honest.”

“All right,” Dennis said. “Shoot.”

“Did you mean what you said? About taking care of me?”

“I did,” he said quickly. “I really did. But I know you don’t really know me and I don’t really know you so we shouldn’t jump into anything. But it’s just something we can try out and if it doesn’t work, I could fix you up in a nice place for six months or a year so you can get on your feet and we’ll

move on with our own lives.”

“I wouldn’t make you do that. What right would I have? To say everything that I’ve said and then take a handout?”

Dennis put his hand on her wrist and she looked into his eyes.

“Tell me what it is you expect of me,” she said, her face solemn.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“I mean what you see here Dennis. You realize you might never get more than this. I talked about finding myself. What if I’m just trying to find myself for the rest of my life? It’ll just be a waste of your time and that isn’t fair to you.”

“You’re young. I don’t mind you taking time to find yourself. I mean, as long as it doesn’t mean you’ll be leaving me to be homeless for a year then coming back.

She chuckled. Looked down at her plate. “No, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Well then, let’s do it. Make it official right now. Try finding yourself with me”

“This is crazy though,” she said, impaling a bunch of egg with her fork. “We barely know each other and now I’m going to be moving in with you like I’m your wife. I just...”

He closed her left hand in both of his and they locked eyes.

“This will work,” he said.

He couldn’t help but notice the bags under her eyes, and realized that she must’ve been up half the night watching TV. He wasn’t certain how long it had actually been because he had been out like a light.

“All right,” she said, smiling. “Let’s do it.”

*Six*

The maid was the first to discover his body; she had entered the hotel room with her cleaning supplies and started from one end of the room, and moved slowly to the other. After she finished in the



kitchen she made her way down the hall with her vacuum and the cart of cleaning supplies. She stopped at the bathroom, briefly wiped down the sink, the toilet, and the edges of the tub, and had moved on. She expected a clean room, because Dennis's room was always clean. He was a bestselling author after all—she had read two of his books!—and he had a reputation to uphold.

When she came into the room it was still relatively clean. Of course the curtain on the south side of the room was closed, which let in limited light. She was able to see, however, a human form on the bed, and with a step forward for a closer look saw that it was Dennis, everything but his head under the covers, and one arm hanging to the side.

“Oh, so sorry sir. Do you want I should come back?”

Dennis didn't respond, probably still asleep. He was a hard worker. He'd told her about his schedule and how serious he was about maintaining it.

*“If I want to be the best writer,” he said. “I have to be willing to do what the other guy isn't.”*

There was a magazine lying open on the floor, cover side up, and though she only glanced at it, she was able to make out the smiling face of a black woman, probably in her mid to late thirties, her hair straight and down to her shoulders. She was about the same complexion as Dennis, perhaps darker. **Versha Mitchell**, a self-made, millionaire. She'd seen her on the money channel talking to a politician not long ago. She liked Versha.

She took her eyes off the cover of the magazine and looked back at Dennis. The gloom made it hard to get a good look at his face. It was as if the present light had conspired to leave Dennis's face out of it.

“Dennis, do you want I should clean?”

No answer.

“Sir?”

No answer.

“Dennis?”

Still no answer. She stepped forward to get a better look at him. Perhaps he had drunk too much

the night before and was now sleeping it off, which would mean he'd most certainly be out like a light. But just two extra steps forward let her know that wasn't the case. She'd caught a fair amount of people still sleeping when she'd cleaned hotel rooms in the past, but never had she'd caught someone sleeping with their eyes open.

She reached out and turned on the bedside lantern. His head was turned to the side and his eyes, narrow and brown, stared toward the floor. His mouth was slightly parted.

"*Oh Dennis,*" the maid cried, and put a soft hand on his forehead. It was cool, like touching the skin of someone fresh out of a snowstorm. Her other hand moved instinctively to the blanket that extended up over his neck if only because it seemed pulled up a bit too high. The blanket stuck a little at first, but with a firm tug, the maid managed to unstick it. A long, bloody gash ran along his neck. Two, actually. The wounds were nearly halfway through his throat, but cleanly cut, as if whoever had done it was adept with the weapon they were using. The blood had soaked the mattress and dripped along the edges and the sides.

"*Oh Dennis,*" the maid repeated and lifted the blanket back up over his neck. She kissed him on the forehead, and continued to sob as she picked up the phone and called the police.

### *Seven*

For about two weeks the murder of Dennis Ridge was a national story. News outlets, both foreign and domestic, covered the story and countless guests, from retired investigators to book reviewers, were booked to talk about Dennis Ridge's work and what role it might've played in his untimely end, if any. Theories ranging from probable, to impossible, to clinically insane, were spouted by men and women as if it was the gospel, and anchors spent time talking to authors in Dennis's niche, and asking if fiction authors have a moral obligation to tone down the violent content in their stories. An author by the name of Cody Cassidy managed to make it through a seven and a half minute barrage of accusatory questions like 'Do you think your book, in some way, contributed to how Dennis Ridge wrote fiction, and therefore to

his death', only for Cassidy to show up a week later and end the interview two minutes in with the words, "No wonder none of the fucking kids are reading anymore."

Fans poured out their condolences on Dennis's Facebook page, sharing pictures of themselves with Dennis at books signings and writing such praise as *'Without you Dennis, I don't know if I would've become a writer. It's authors like you that keep me writing.'* In one such post a woman stated, *'Your work affirms the value of life every bit as much as it entertains.'*

Dennis's mother and father, the largest beneficiaries of his success as an author and also of his death (since Dennis had no kids, the bulk of his ten million dollar fortune was bequeathed to his parents) appeared on as many talk shows and primetime news slots as possible, pleading to the American people to help find Dennis's killer.

*"Someone out there knows who this young woman is,"* his mom had said one evening, holding up a blurry image of an African American female with a scarf on her head, strolling into the hotel with Dennis. *"If you're protecting her you are protecting a criminal and nothing more. It is shameful, anyone who would do such a thing."*

At that point Dennis's mother was overcome with emotion and fell into the embrace of her husband. Their interviews resulted in hundreds of tips pouring into the national crime hotline, with mostly false claims spanning from the girl being an assassin sent on behalf of *the Illuminati* and the killer actually being Dennis's down and out, disgruntled, long lost sister. One of the only tips that did pan out was of a claim that a truck driver had spotted the mystery girl walking along the interstate just hours after the incident was said to have occurred. Similar sightings seemed to back this claim all the way into New Mexico before the trail went cold.

Authors, news anchors, fans, and average citizens also debated the case in online forums, these discussions more constructive though still resulted in theories such as Dennis having a hit put on him by the Mexican mob. It was better than theories such as the illuminati, but less likely than the most common theory of Dennis picking up a prostitute and getting killed over a dispute over payment.

The picture of the girl with the scarf over her head was disseminated to every media outlet and

social media website in hopes of finding someone who knew who the mystery girl was or where she was going to be. This, however, resulted in no usable leads and after two months jokes started to pop up on internet sites of Dennis Ridge having been murdered by a ghost. The picture of the girl existed in one black and white video from the hotel camera, the footage merely showing her enter the hotel with Dennis and leaving alone. Investigators estimated her height to be somewhere between five-seven and five-nine and her age between seventeen and forty. This obviously did little to narrow the search, and as the story of the girl faded, so did the story of Dennis Ridge's murder.

Dennis Ridge had passed away with six books published and three more novels queued for publishing over the next year and a half. The sales of previous works skyrocketed, netting the late Dennis Ridge and the publishing company an estimated \$125,000,000 in a three year span. He was immediately propelled into the ranks of the top ten most popular authors of the last twenty years, compared to the likes of Stephen King and J.K. Rowling by a wide range of book enthusiasts. The movie rights for two unpublished books, *A Night of Dime's Work*, and *Basher Town* were purchased for a whopping \$2,000,000 apiece. Dennis Ridge was indeed a martyr, and where his books were once shelved by customers, they were now purchased after a brief glance, and read in earnest. Glowing reviews came in by the dozens, one man stating *Dennis Ridge's uncanny attention to scene decoration coupled with an understanding of human behavior are without equal; he fuses elements in story as well as candy makers fuse sugar for treats*, was a fan favorite.

And as Dennis's legacy grew so did the mythology surrounding his life and untimely death. But cartels, mob bosses, disgruntled relatives, and countless other theories were discredited in large part by social media. Versha Mitchell, a multi-millionaire business woman running for Congress made a suggestion when asked on the two year anniversary of Dennis's murder, about celebrity worship and its inherent dangers.

*"Well...it's hard to say,"* Versha Mitchell stated, *"whether the celebrity being worshipped or the person doing the worshipping is the one in more danger. Celebrities have influence."*

"Do you believe the late author Dennis Ridge was a victim of celebrity worship?" Charlie Rose

had asked. “There are people that believe he was murdered by an obsessed fan.”

Versha Mitchell shook her head. “I consider that a possibility. But since you brought it up there is one thing I don’t believe law-enforcement has looked into in regards to this case, and that’s whether this woman is deceased. She couldn’t have had much money, she couldn’t have been that well connected. The obvious tends to stand unnoticed in the face of the majority.”

Charlie Rose nodded. “That *is* an interesting point, Mrs. Mitchell. The case of Mr. Ridge is indeed sad, both for the fans and the parents who still don’t have an answer for what happened to their son two years ago.”

“I couldn’t imagine.”

“How many kids do you have Ms. Mitchell?”

Versha’s expression brightened. “Three and a fourth one on the way.”

“And how old?”

“Seventeen, twelve, and three. Two girls, one boy.”

“And you still look amazing for a woman in her late thirties if you don’t mind me saying. You want to tell your supporters how you manage that?”

“Healthy eating, exercise, uh...having kids. Good kids keep you younger and I have the best Hobbies to deal with stress.”

“Thank you for your time Mrs. Mitchell.”

“Thank you Charlie.”

## *Eight*

Six years later...

Two detectives sat inside of a late night diner, a window spanning most of the north wall beside them. It gives a clear view outside, and the periodic white and red glow of moving lights splash onto the

street as another random car speeds by. Both detectives are eating burgers, and one of them has a napkin tucked into his tan button up like a bib.

“I told you,” the one without the bib said. “The decision was made. I see these other kids around my neighborhood ignoring their parents and not knowing what to do with themselves because of that flashing color box being on twenty-four goddamn seven.”

The officer with the bib smiled, holding his burger up with two hands. “Why don’t you just say it’s your brother’s kids? No reason to bullshit about it.”

“Well fine, all right motherfucker. One of those little assholes put a hole in the goddamn drywall yesterday, and you know my worthless brother ain’t going to do anything about it. If he can’t afford the damage his kids do at his own house, he sure isn’t going to be able to afford mine.” He wiped his hands with a napkin, crumbled it and dropped it on the table. “Makes me so sick I don’t think I can finish eating.”

“I have total sympathy for you, Roscoe. But hey, what are you going to do?”

“Disown the motherfucker as my brother, that’s what. Shit, get a restraining order and get CPS on his kids.”

“Oh, come on. Now you know that ain’t right.”

Roscoe had his brown fingers interlocked beneath his chin, his gaze dark and directed out the window. “You know I don’t mean it,” Roscoe said in a low voice. “But sometimes it you wears you down man. Especially, when you have to deal with relatives from three different cold cases calling you endlessly. Just one unsolvable headache on top of another.”

Bobby considered this for a moment, his head tilted slightly up and his brow furrowed. “You have that one case, don’t you? The famous author?”

“Hmmm?”

“The famous author. The Ridge case. You have that, right?”

“Yeah, I don’t want it. If there was ever a case to tack the word *unsolvable* to.”

“Not a single suspect? Not an inkling of who the suspect might be? Nothing at all still, huh?”

Roscoe snorted. "If we had that this case might not be so unsolvable."

"There hasn't been a single tip that you even wondered about? You know everyone gets those tips where...well, you wonder. Even if there is not the slightest string of evidence to support it."

Roscoe seemed to consider this, his brow wrinkled in thought. "Well Bobby, there was one tip from some wack job heroin addict."

Bobby smiled. Clapped his hands together "All right, good. So what happened with that?"

Roscoe waved a hand in dismissal. "She kept claiming she saw the woman Dennis was with getting on a school bus."

Bobby pursed his lips. Then he shrugged and opened his mouth wide for a gigantic bite of his burger. He chewed for a few moments, then swallowed.

"Oh, well. Sometimes I guess a case is just fucked, right?"

"Yeah," Roscoe said, his eyes distant.

"Tell me something, though," Bobby said, through a mouthful of food. "How old did this girl look?"

"Fifteen. And says she saw her in the South."

"And she was black, right? I mean for her to say she looked like the girl Dennis was with she had to be black, right? Dark skinned."

"About my shade," Roscoe said, pointing at himself.

"What? *Midnight*?"

Roscoe chuckled, pointing at his partner. "You're the only white boy in existence I'd let get away with saying some shit like that. But yeah, she said the girl was dark and got on a school bus."

"And?"

"And she thought the girl looked familiar, like maybe she'd seen her somewhere before."

"That's all?"

Roscoe shrugged. "She wondered if it might be the daughter of someone famous. I don't know, she was a heroin addict, after all."

Bobby leaned back in his seat, three-quarters of his burger eaten. He chewed the bite in his mouth slowly. Swallowed. He leaned forward.

"Okay, so she must've mentioned who the celebrity was."

Roscoe shook his head. "No. That's just it. Actually she didn't. She did a lot of rambling at that point. Really just seemed kind of lost, like she forgot who she was talking to, forgot what she was saying and why she was with me in the first place."

"What, did she fix in front of you," Bobby said, and chuckled.

"Come on. You know I wouldn't let her do that."

"I'm just kidding."

"Yeah, I know Bobby."

"I don't know...I'm just saying that it's odd how she suddenly lost her place in the story. It's like...what the fuck? Did she know how big this case is?"

"At times it seemed she did and at times it seemed like she didn't even know what year it was. My opinion, she's on more than heroin. Met her on one occasion and it was enough to convince me whatever story she told, about whatever subject, was something that could've all been made up in her head."

"You follow every lead?"

"She had nothing else to give." Roscoe took a sip of his Coke. "She was a lost cause and the case a lost cause right along with her."

"The girl was black and looked like the daughter of a celebrity. And this was in the South. Well, that doesn't really tell us anything."

"In Louisiana, I think she said."

Bobby considered this, leaning back in his seat with his hands across his belly. "A celebrity from Louisiana. Black. Who's been big out there, lately. Haven't heard much about anyone from Louisiana, ever."

"It's not something people would probably pay a lot of attention to. I mean, there's probably a lot of names if you Google it."



"Whoever she mentioned must've been a household name," Bobby said. "Or a name fast on the rise."

Roscoe pursed his lips.

"There's only one notable celebrity I could think of," Bobby said. "But it's as good as shit, seeing how your tipster doesn't even know what celebrity she was talking about."

"What celebrity you got in mind?"

"Versha Mitchell. She's black, young. Looks very young as a matter of fact. You wouldn't think she had kids. Her face has been plastered all over TV since she won a seat in the Senate this year. People wanted her to run for president."

"And you said she has kids?"

"I think I heard something about kids. But I was back and forth out the room, you know. You can only half believe the bullshit that's on these days."

"I think I know who you're talking about. Real cutie. I only remember her face on a magazine. I don't know anything about her kids though. You have any idea of their ages."

Bobby shook his head.

"And it wouldn't matter," Roscoe said, rubbing his temple with his left hand. "The girl who killed Dennis was an adult, not a child. I doubt this Versha has any adult children or did when Dennis was killed, anyway."

"That's true. But it could be something worth looking into. Fifty year old cases have been solved by the smallest detail, sometimes details overlooked by one detective and followed more strenuously by the other." Bobby, shrugged. "But then again, it might just be fucked city."

"You've seen the footage of the girl in the hotel with Dennis. There's not even a clear shot of her face and it's in black and white. So even if the girl the addict described really looks like the girl in that picture, you couldn't know for sure."

"Yeah, but you could look into her whereabouts around the time Dennis was killed. It'll probably turn up nothing, but it's worth looking. Right?"

"Yeah. But Versha would have to have a kid that could've managed to disappear for long enough to make it from Louisiana and all the way back unnoticed."

Bobby extracted his smartphone and started a search. "Well, I'm going to check something man, because in the year 2014 the answer to most questions is often right in your pocket."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to Google Versha's kids, see their ages."

"Okay," Roscoe said. "But you should try not to get your hopes up. Save yourself the money on migraine pills."

It took less than a minute for Bobby to look up the info. "All right," Bobby said, "her oldest girl is twenty four. Attended William Grady High, a private school, and was valedictorian for the first three years—wonder what made her miss the mark senior year. She was in gymnastics, ran track, played women's basketball, and her favorite thing to do is to go camping with her mom and dad. Ah, and the perfect family portrait of the family in the yard of a house with a white picket fence."

"So she would've been seventeen at the time of the murder."

"A person can be damn deceptive at that age. Trust me, I know from experience."

"Well, whether you know or not that doesn't tell us anything. And my witness saw the girl get on a bus. She's the daughter of a millionaire, mom. You're telling me she didn't have a car at seventeen. I don't know if I could buy that Bobby. Anyway, on a side note. I've picked up a Ridge book, one of the ones from after his death."

"How was it?"

"Decent. Not much better than any of the other shit I've read. And he's sure as hell no Stephen King...no J.K. Rowling for that matter. Anyway, seems like the underlying message of his book was that America has no morals."

"Yeah, and what else is new?"

"Yeah. He's smart though. Shame for anyone to take an intellectual out, isn't it? Man, he must've had some demons."

"You think he had a past?"

"Like I said, he must've had some demons. The person that killed him didn't even take anything. His wallet had one thousand in cash in it at the time. His car was untouched. They found no hair evidence or signs of a female in the room. Now that Bobby, is what I would consider eerie."

"Yeah." Bobby was still scrolling through information on his smartphone, what remained of his burger, forgotten.

"So did you find anything else interesting?"

"Well, I'm just reading Versha's Wikipedia page. Her daughter doesn't have one. I'm just seeing if Colorado comes up at any point. Based on the date of Dennis's murder Versha's daughter would've been in school. You might want to consider calling the school her daughter went to at the time. See if there were any scheduled field trips to the state."

"There's no one visiting Colorado from the South on a field trip. What business would they have in Colorado? Touring the weed dispensaries."

Bobby chuckled. "Yeah, that's very funny. But you never know."

Roscoe finished his food, and let Bobby perform his phone searches in peace. He thought of all the ways that a teenage girl in school could've met up with a thirty-year old author and cut his throat in his sleep. If she had been there and he'd tried to sleep with her that would've been statutory rape. Of course, they were nowhere close to proving who had actually been in the room with Dennis.

"Well...*shit*," Bobby said.

Roscoe's heartbeat sped up, his hands clenched. "You find something?"

"Yeah, but it's not good."

Roscoe sighed. "What is it?"

"There were some pictures were taken for her track teams on the date he was killed. And she's in one."

"Well isn't that convenient!"

"All right," Bobby said. "So the case continues. At least you have another question out of the way."

And at least you didn't have to talk to a heroin addict to figure this part out."

"See, that's why I hate going over this case. The other two I can handle. It's just a matter of waiting on DNA testing and at one point I'm guessing both will get closed on the back of that. But with this there's nothing to go on. You know this case has had more outlandish, off the wall tips than any cold case I remember. There's been people claiming that Dennis's murderer lives in Africa and worships a shrine of him of all things."

Bobby chortled. "Well, it's okay Roscoe."

"How does someone disappear? We should at least know if his killer is dead, or if she's been to prison, or if she's a relative, or something. It's all a motherfucking crapshoot."

Bobby picked up a few of his remaining fries and ate them one by one, pondering.

"You know," Bobby said, brightening. "I remember when Bin Laden was still at large. I was convinced that he was dead or that the government had given up looking for him. Hell, I was even in the conspiracy boat as far as the source of the Twin Towers' collapse. There was an old lady that told me once, that Bin Laden was hiding out in the U.S., in plain sight."

"Yeah, how old was this lady? Fifteen hundred."

Bobby smirked. "She said it wouldn't have been that hard. All he would've had to do was change his wardrobe, shave his beard, learn bad English and get a nine to five."

"Yeah," Roscoe said. "Well that's some bullshit if I ever heard it."

Bobby nodded. Seemed to realize his burger was unfinished and continued eating.

"You never know where someone is," Bobby said. "You just never know."

### **Seven Year's Earlier..**

"How does it feel?"

She had her eyes closed as she straddled him.

"It's good," Dennis said, putting his hands on her breasts as she arched her back. It was strange,

making love to her. Something about her movements were so practiced, so experienced.

"I needed this," she whispered, her face crumbling as if she were about to cry.

"Yeah," Dennis breathed. "I know what you mean."

At least to an extent. It was the afternoon and she'd agreed to stay with him at least for a little while. He wondered if providing her the things that she hadn't had before would do anything for her. After all, she seemed smart as a whip. Not like she didn't have an understanding of the way things worked in the world, especially with her extensive experience with 'the darker side of nature'. She could probably end this stretch of homelessness if she wanted.

"I'm sorry," Fiona suddenly screamed, her small hands squeezing on his bare chest as she rocked her hips more aggressively.

"Why?"

"I'm...not...not who I say I am."

"You mean your name isn't...your name isn't Fiona?" He was on the verge of a climax, unsure of how long he was going to be able to hold out. It made it hard to think, made it hard to give a shit about anything but a release.

Fiona suddenly shivered as what Dennis took for an orgasm coursed through her. She let out another scream and let her face come gently down to his.

"I know you're not done, okay?" she said, her eyes closed. "Just...ooh."

For the next minute she only lay there, on the verge of dozing, then she suddenly became alert. She started to sit up, ready to help him finish.

"What do you mean you're not who you say you are," Dennis said. He figured that'd she changed her name for safety reasons...or something else, but he needed to know. Suddenly he was concerned. Was this girl legal?

"Do you ever wonder why certain people do the things they do," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Why your wife was the way she was? Why my ex was the way *he* was?"

Dennis shifted slightly, and for the briefest moment felt something cold against his thigh, but when the feeling went away he thought nothing of it. Fiona's eyes remained firmly fixed on his, as she thrust her hips steadily.

"I don't know," he said. "The best reason I can come up with is what they experienced beforehand."

"You binge write, right?" Fiona said. She moaned a little. "That's your ...ah...that's your thing?"

"Yeah," Dennis said. "But I don't need to binge write for it to be fun. I just...I...I have that period where I like to zone in...ah...with coffee and...coffee and a...a drink."

"And do you think...hmm...do you think it's the same with how I...am homeless...go from place to place?"

Dennis blinked, nearing climax. He squeezed her sides.

"Yes," he grunted, as his bottom jerked shakily upward. Then something flickered above him, catching the shaft of light filtering through the curtains. Before he could react he felt something cold and sharp, slip in and out the front of his neck. The stinging sensation was what he first became aware of, a feeling that was faint the suddenly burning and intense. Then all at once he felt as if his head had been submerged in water and his air cut off. He could feel the water's wetness actually, feel it splashing up onto his chin, his upper chest. He could feel it swelling in his throat and filling his mouth. But it wasn't water he was feeling. No...water didn't feel...or taste quite like this.

"Stay," Fiona gasped, as he tried to roll out of the bed. She leaned forward and put her lips against his open, gasping mouth, as blood began to spill out. "*This...this* is what I do."

She sat up, arched her back, and began to ride him aggressively, screaming to the ceiling with red lips, and rivulets of Dennis's blood running down between her B-cup breasts and into her navel. She continued her screams of ecstasy, and though Dennis bucked and twisted with diminishing but desperate strength he found her thighs too strong, her weight—though ideal for a woman her height—too heavy. Her abdomen flexed with effort as she used her thighs to hold herself in place, and soon Dennis's attempts weakened. He coughed up a splatter of blood once, his eyelids stretched to maximum capacity, coughed

again and felt Fiona's lips against his as if trying to drink the blood.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

She let out a choked sob right before he felt the tip of the same blade slip back into his neck. A tear trickled from his eye and he heard her say again, "This is what *I* do."

The second cut, though deeper, didn't hurt as much, and Dennis's last thoughts were of a book he was working on, and the lead character's relationship with a drugged out prostitute that happened to have a gift for painting large, sweeping landscapes, that were nearly, if not eerily lifelike. He thought of the paragraph he had last written.

*And she's full of energy, it's as if the intoxicants are in her system no more. She's alive and breathing, she's alive and....*

*Nine*

*"He was a good guy by all accounts. Why kill him?"*

"As long as you've been a detective Bobby, you learn that people don't need a good reason to do almost anything. It just makes us feel better if there is. It may have just been someone who gets off on that kind of thing. Sleeping with men and killing them."

"It boggles the mind."

"Yeah, we've searched the database of female sex offenders in that area and found no one that matches up to the girl's height, complexion, assumed weight. We've checked every sex freak from Denver to New Mexico. There was one woman who had slit her husband's throat during a sex act and spent twenty years in prison. If she didn't look like she'd been born during Jim Crow she would've fit everything to a T. She became a hitchhiker, she had a chip on her shoulder about all men, she travelled with razor blades, and she happened to be seen ten blocks down from *The Premiums* around the time Dennis's body was discovered. We've had leads on top of leads that led to nowhere. Now everything is as

empty as a building in the eye of the wrecking ball. *Nothing.*”

Bobby patted Roscoe on the back just before he got into his Lincoln Town Car.

“You’ll get her man. As lost as it seems now, you’ll get her. Maybe go out with the family, take some time off. Something might come to you that’s been there all along. It’s worth a shot, right?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Roscoe said, his window half down. “You have a good night Bobby. Drive safe. Give the new girlfriend, or whatever you’re calling her these days, a kiss for me.”

Bobby chuckled, his hands shoved in his pockets, his leather jacket twitching in the cold wind.

“You got it Ross.”

Then Roscoe’s Lincoln drove away, its red taillights bright and dwindling in the distance. Bobby remained where he was, the diner that he had just eaten at behind him.

“In plain sight,” Bobby said quietly, and headed for his car.

### **Louisiana 2014 (Seven Years Ago)**

Fiona stood in the bathroom of a truck stop dive way out in the Boonies. There was a mirror in front of her, the words **Freddy For Some Heady** scrawled with a permanent marker in the corner of the mirror. There were also scratches too, almost like someone had placed razor blades between their clenched fists and slid the pointed corners along its surface like fingernails on a blackboard.

She didn’t see the supposed twenty-two year old Fiona looking back at her. No, Fiona saw Dennis, and his peaceful expression as he slept after the first time they’d made love.

*Did you know then?*

Outside the bathroom she heard a couple of men screaming at each other, the words of one of them noticeably slurred.

*“Bitch nigga! Fuck yo mamma and yo sista bitch!”*

“Ah, you men are such delinquents.” She saw herself then, looking back unblinkingly, the blue scarf wrapped firmly around her head. She was beautiful indeed, and aged like she’d discovered the



fountain of youth. She suddenly laughed and pronounced, her voice barely low enough to remain unheard outside the bathroom,

“And we want a better future for our children and our children’s children!”

*I want the best future for my children, Fiona thought. My husband though...he can rot.*

Her husband wanted the best future for their children too, but he was out, despite her mild celebrity status, fucking every skeez from the West to East Coast, all the way down to the Bartholomew Bayou, the great extent of his exploits flying under the radar because of his job as a travelling sports agent. Her husband was an expert at remaining under the radar with these side bitches. Extra cell phones, extra email addresses, etcetera, etcetera. Motel rooms instead of the type of high end hotels that he could easily afford with his three hundred K a year salary. Yeah, her husband was the ultimate slickster when it came to remaining out of the spotlight.

*Well, I can be sly as fuck too,* she realized one day, after five years of him being unfaithful had become too much.

She had a feeling something was wrong, when all of a sudden the touch of anything sharp and metal, had a certain...appeal. Of course, she was a successful woman, it’s not like she could ever hurt her husband and get away with it. And when she announced that she was running for the Senate in her home state, even less so. But right now the world was full of possibilities, and when it came to flying under the radar, she could do it far better than her husband. And it could be like a game, to see how well she can *act* the part of a girl, let’s say, sixteen years younger than she actually was. Yeah, she could go all *Poetic Justice* and braid her hair, dab on just enough make-up to hide the *very* minimal signs of aging, and hit the interstate on foot.

Presently, she changed from her sweats into a pair of jeans and a very appropriate, fitting black T shirt. Over this she put on a business jacket. The sign on the bathroom read out of order, and she had locked the door. So now the critical part came into play, and with the assistance of the scratched up mirror, she spent the next three hours unbraiding and fixing up her hair. All the necessary tools to do so were in her backpack.

*And why do people like me do what they do,* she thought.

She worked on each braid carefully, her thin, strong fingers working tirelessly. When she was finished undoing her hair, she reached into her backpack, grabbed a straightener, a comb, a brush and spray, and continued to go to work. When she was finally finished, and her hair implements put away, she looked into the mirror, taking in the face of this late-thirties woman that aged like wine.

“Without an outlet for expression,” she said in a low voice, “expression will rip through you like a sledgehammer.”

Was that what happened to her? She bent down, went into her massive backpack, and grabbed her I-phone from the bottom of it. She turned it on—it’d been off for the last week—and saw that she had thirty missed calls.

*Going on vacation for a week* she had told her husband one evening as the children all slept. *You won’t have a problem with that will you?*

And of course he wouldn’t. Keep her happy, so he could stay happy.

She selected her home number and put the phone to her ear. It rang twice then picked up.

“Mommy?”

*In her mind she could see the look that must’ve come over her daughter’s face when she saw her name on the caller ID.*

“Hello, sweetie.”

“*Oh, I missed you.* Stephen put dirt from the plants aaalll over the place.” There was the sound of another voice in the background and seconds later her husband was on the phone.

“*Versha,*” he said. “Are you okay?”

“Be home in a little bit,” she said, looking at her, dark-brown, ageless face in the mirror.

“Did you have a good time?” He seemed disgruntled, curious.

She wanted to tell him she had. Wanted to tell him that the man she made love to fucked like an Egyptian King. And in a way it would’ve been true. The love she had made with the man had been so good, so sweet. And as she thought about him a tear, just like the one she had seen trickle from the

famous author's eye on that fateful day, spilled down her cheek.

"It was lovely," she said.

"Couldn't get you on the phone or at your email. It was like you disappeared. I understand you needed your time, but with you not answering your phone it was like you had vanished."

The reflection of her face was grave, the round, large eyes cold as icescapes. Then the smallest smirk curved her lips.

"Well," Versha Mitchell said to her husband. "Someone *did*."