

First Impressions

She hated working on rainy nights. The hours crept by without any customers to serve making her six-hour shift seem twice as long. Not that she blamed anyone for staying in their warm, dry homes and not venturing out into the messy, uncomfortable dark. Artie, the manager and owner, sent the other server home, so Holly had it all to herself. Which without anyone to cut up with and share gossip compounded her boredom. Not that anything major ever happened in the small, western town.

A quick shift in air pressure alerted her to the front door opening as it got caught in the wind. Straightening from crouching on her elbows at the counter, she rounded the counter to greet the incomer. She encountered a person shaking their soaking wet, long, dark hair as a wet dog does. Droplets struck her in the face and rolled down the front of her t-shirt. Instinctively she stepped back, and her arms opened. She shook her hands in annoyance.

“Sorry ‘bout that. I didn’t see you,” a deep, throaty voice apologized.

Turning and reaching behind her to the counter, she

grabbed a hand towel. After brushing it down her arms and drying her hands, she held it out for him to use. She got her first look at the man. And she experienced the eerie sensation that not only her eyes viewed him, but her body, mind, and soul did. It paralyzed her momentarily. She couldn't speak. She didn't move. Her eyes absorbed him. And it overwhelmed her and downright unnerved her.

His long, wavy, dark hair fell below his shoulders. He wore a close-trimmed beard and a moustache which framed full, kissable lips. But his eyes. They were mesmerizing and haunted. An awareness of sadness overwhelmed her.

"If it's not a problem I will take the booth in the far back corner, Holly," he said.

Blinking, she tore her eyes away from him and waved her arm toward the table he requested. He called her by name. Had they met before? She didn't think so. She wouldn't likely forget meeting someone like him.

Following behind him, she watched him shake out of his wet navy jacket. He tossed it on the bench across from where he bent to sit. He wore jeans that were loose on him but hugged him in all the right places. She stared at his thighs as he adjusted and splayed his legs under the table.

Lifting both his hands, he tapped his fingers on the tabletop and drummed them. "Is the menu you are holding for me, Holly?" Turning his head and surveying the room, he continued, "Or for one of your many other patrons?"

Ha ha. Sarcastic. She loved hearing him say her name. It rumbled out of his throat and resonated throughout her. She swore he cast some spell on her which transformed her into a mute, gawking statue. She handed the menu to him. It shook from the trembling in her hand. Embarrassed, she shoved her traitorous paw into her apron pocket after he took the menu.

"Do you not have strange men frequent your little diner here? Is it only open to locals, and I've put my life at risk

entering? I suppose I could wait outside in the cold wind and rain.” He tilted his head while he spoke, his eyes fixed on hers. They were hypnotic. They were green. She believed anyway. A very dark green. They were warm, but cold. And sad. Lost.

Taking her pad and pen out of her back jeans pocket, she doodled on her pad breaking his gaze. “We actually get a lot of travelers being this close to the interstate. So, no, you have not walked into a cult territory where the residents capture strange men and use them in sacrificial ceremonies.” She realized while repeating his terminology that he referenced strange men, not strangers. But judging by the effect he had on her, he wasn’t just your average, ordinary guy.

Placing the menu on the table and sliding it toward her, he replied, “Hmm, that is disappointing. Not much out here in this region. Something a little sinister might entice those with darker proclivities to extend their visit.” His eyebrow arched and dropped. Other than the one small, brief indicator, she couldn’t determine if he insinuated something or simply attempted small talk. She couldn’t read anything in his expression. It hadn’t varied from the indifferent one he arrived with.

“What is it I can get you?” she blurted. As intriguing as she first found him, his demeanor now rubbed her wrong.

“A cup of coffee. Black.”

Grabbing the menu, she planned to hurry with his coffee and leave him be. She wished more people would come in. She only made it a few steps when he called to her.

“Holly, why is it you stay here?”

She bit her bottom lip to stop herself from telling him it was personal and none of his fucking business. “I grew up here and have family here,” she advised and rushed to the counter. Truth being—she didn’t want to be there. She had to come back, and it didn’t seem as if she would be leaving again anytime in the near future.

Danny, the cook, craned his neck under the food warming

lights in the order window watching her pour the cup of coffee and start another pot. The clinking of him clapping two spatulas had her smiling. "I would have announced it to you if there was a food order. Only coffee. Sorry. I know how much you wanted to get your kitchen all messy and have to clean it all up again for one customer."

"Well darn. You couldn't even convince him to order a piece of pie? You know Artie is closed up in his office probably stressing about not making any money tonight." Danny made a crazy face at her imitating Artie when he eventually shows his face after a slow night.

"I'd rather have no customers than the one we have," Holly muttered.

Disappearing out of view for a moment, Danny returned wielding a knife. "Do I need to pay our patron a visit?" He began performing the signature *Chucky* stabbing motion.

Holly chuckled. "I don't think it's necessary." She couldn't delay delivering the coffee to Mr. Dark and Delicious.

Nô, no, no. She shook her head and mouthed to herself. It didn't matter how delicious he might be—the dark in him overshadowed it. Lowering the coffee cup in front of him, she sighed and forced herself to ask, "Anything else?"

"You know I heard you sigh. Were you attempting to conceal it? Or do you prefer allowing others to interpret your emotions so easily, Holly?" He cocked his head at her again, assessing her and her reaction.

She sighed again. Louder and evident. "Why do you keep saying my name?"

His lips softened but didn't form a smile. His eyes didn't brighten but turned lighter. Straightening his pointer finger, he tapped it on his chest. She watched him without understanding. She stared at him. "Your name tag says Holly. Is that not your name? If not, that's a damn pity. Such a pretty name." He lifted his cup to his mouth and sipped.

Damn he frustrated her. She honestly couldn't think straight—or at all. “You aren't wearing a name tag, so I don't know what to call you. You enjoy repeating my name so much, maybe I can return the sentiment.”

His eyes darkened again, and he switched his focus to his coffee. “I am not a sentimental man. I do appreciate a good title... or name, and you have one.”

Hearing him say something as basic as appreciating her name generated a notion of gratefulness in her. And not for the compliment itself, but in the mere fact it seemed as if he shared something intimate with her by revealing a personal detail. “Thank you,” she paused and waved her hand palm up at him gesturing she expected him to provide his name. When he didn't acknowledge her and continued his stare-down with his cup, she continued, “I suppose I should thank my mother for my name. I was a Christmas baby, and she chose it.”

“You aren't wearing a ring. Do you have a significant other?” he inquired.

Did he just come out and ask her that? Damn nosy-ass dude. He wanted to know a lot about her, make cracks about where she lived, and how transparent he found her, yet didn't reciprocate. She had neither the patience nor the interest in it. “Just call for me when you need a refill or need anything.”

Again, she took one or two steps away from him when he decided to voice his intrusive insistence. “Are you seeing anyone, Holly?”

Marching back to his table, she leaned forward and whispered, “That is none of your business... you, you Mister who can't share his name.”

He chuckled. It came without a smile or any visible trace of one, but she heard it. “Come and sit with me. You can call me Ash.”

Ash. It suited him. The way in which he spoke and moved were languid and impassive. It was as if his body were present

and nothing else. A shell of a man. Possibly a man who burned bright at one time until something consumed him leaving nothing but ash. Ash. "I'm on the clock, Ash. Sorry," she offered as her rejection.

"I assume Arthur Dillard is in. Go and bring him to me. I feel certain he can spare you for, what I hope, is a short amount of time," he pressed.

Obviously, he knew Artie. That explained a lot. He must be some friend and she met him when he came through before. Still, why did he want her to involve her boss to coerce her into sitting with him? That should be up to her. Odd. The entire interaction and situation made her extremely uneasy. She would just tell Artie she didn't want to sit with his friend.

Well, that didn't go as she expected. Artie did not know Ash. He had never met him. But when Ash threw several hundred dollars on the table and requested Holly be given a break and sit with him, Artie's eyeballs almost popped out of his head. Of course, he looked to Holly for her acceptance, but how could she say no? Hell, she hoped he gave her some of the cash. She brought it in. She deserved it.

Nodding at Ash, he grabbed the cash and went to the back leaving her alone with Mr. Mystery Man.

"I have an offer for you. And before you go overreacting and discounting what might prove beneficial to both of us, hear me out." He began his eccentric plea before her ass met the cold plastic bench.

An offer. Nothing about it gave her the warm fuzzies. He must be some sort of sadistic sex freak and figured a down and out waitress could use his charity. Not her. There were plenty of women and agencies who could provide weird shit for him.

His arm darted across the table, and he gripped her wrist before any thought of escaping, much less movement to do so, entered her radar. He held onto her, but not in a threatening

grasp. He had a warm hand, and he loosened his hold when she yielded and relaxed.

“What happened to your face?” he snarled.

Did she have something on her face? She swiped her free hand over her mouth and under her eyes. If he didn’t like the way she looked, he shouldn’t have arranged to have her sit with him.

“The shiner, Holly. Who the fuck mistreated you?” he seethed.

She forgot about the fading bruise. She covered it up with makeup. No one else asked about it.

He squeezed her wrist. “Do not lie to me.”

She didn’t want to talk about it. No one talked about it. Not her mother. Not her brothers. She yanked her arm trying to free herself from his clutch. He wouldn’t release her. He held tighter until she winced and started writhing in her seat.

“I bumped into an open cabinet door. I’m clumsy,” she answered, jerking free of him and molding her body to the bench out of his easy reach.

He sighed, chewed the inside of his cheek, and lowered his chin as if completely disappointed. Rising from his seat, he reached across the table, and she scurried out of the booth. He shook his head as if she were a misbehaving child as he reached for his jacket. “Too bad, Holly. I asked you a question. A serious question and advised you not to lie. And you did. Cabinets do not leave knuckle impressions.”

Her chest ached. His displeasure with her and his regret over her indifference to whatever he wanted to offer her were tangible and mutual. A sense of grief and loss overcame her. She felt what he did. She felt too much in his presence. It terrified her and captivated her.

“What is it you want from me? You and—” she sputtered and backed away from him as he exited the booth. She bumped into a table and the screeching of the metal against

tile echoed throughout the empty diner. She hadn't realized how tall he was. Definitely over six feet. "This conversation is beyond weird."

He shrugged. "What can I say, I'm a weird guy. Why live your life safe and ordinary when you only have one and your options are endless?"

For him maybe. He probably had money. Lots of it. Enough to have thrown hundreds on a dinky diner table.

"What if you had money, Holly? How would you spend it? Would it make your life better... and to what lengths would you go to attain it?"

He read her mind. How else could he know she was thinking about money? But she didn't believe in that kind of thing.

"Holly, I am a rich man. Financially anyway. I had a flat tire a few miles back on the interstate. The tow truck dropped me off here while he has it repaired or locates a new one as I didn't have a spare. I chose to drive my '67 Mustang on this trip and forgot I never put one in the trunk. I'm usually not the superstitious type, but I never drive that car long distance. I never would have come in here and met you if I hadn't." He shook his jacket and began putting it on. "I decided I was in a position in which I could make a highly irregular proposal which could be beneficial to both of us." He leaned forward and stretched his neck until his face came beside hers. The edge of the table wedged just below her ass didn't allow her any retreat. He whispered, "So, I tried. I suppose it's not such a bad day when I hold on to two-hundred-thousand dollars."

Her head turned. Did she turn it? No, it turned on its own. Her cheek rubbed against his face. The softness of her bare skin combined with the prickling of his beard provided opposing sensations from her face to her core. He smelled different. If he wore cologne, it had long worn off. She detected pure masculinity, raw lust, and risk. More like danger.

Alarm bells exploded in her head. Her fingers twitched and her arm lifted to touch his long, unruly hair—she stopped it. Flinging her arm back down to her side, she swung her body to the right and away from him and his mystical influence over her.

“I assume you haven’t completely rejected my proposition. Not when it involves a decent sum of money which you either need or just simply want. Neither matters to me. I did see some shabby inn a few exits back. I will stay and present you with a contract in the morning. What time do you work tomorrow?”

“Eleven,” she uttered.

“I will arrive, contract in hand, at ten forty-five. You will either sign it or not. If you wish to have your own attorney review it, I can accept that. But I don’t believe you will want anyone reviewing its contents and offering what would be judgement on choices that are yours and yours alone.”

“What is this? Some *“Fifty Shades of Grey”* bullshit? Or *“Indecent Proposal”*?” Two-hundred-thousand dollars. What wouldn’t she do for that amount of money? Her mother and her brothers would be free of her dad and his gambling debts. She could go back to school. But could she, would she freely participate in a form of exploitation? This decision rested with her.

“Please. Grey was a pussy. And as far as I know, as you never answered, you aren’t married. Will there be sex involved? Absolutely.” He lurched at her, and his arm encircled her waist hauling her into his chest. She lifted her head and gazed into his dark, green eyes. “Your body expresses it won’t have issue with it. It’s your mind issuing reluctance. In this instance, let’s adopt the body over mind stance.”

She could get lost staring into his eyes. There were varying shades of green and black. Abysses which on the surface incited warning and avoidance, but the longer and deeper you

looked you perceived loneliness and sorrow. Opening her mouth to speak, her words came out uncertain yet deliberate. “Why would I agree to having sex with you? Regardless of the money.”

His upper lip lifted. She barely noticed it because it swiftly came and went. “Your body doesn’t lie. Your mouth does. The payment isn’t for the pleasure of fucking you. It’s for your surrender. In all its forms. For one week.” He pressed his lips to her forehead. They were hot and smooth as she imagined. Even more so. He held them there. And once again, she wondered if such a sweet gesture symbolized something more. The something being a bizarre forewarning.

“Are you going to hurt me?” she whispered, but she needed to know, so she asked hoping he heard her, but dreading the answer.

“Nothing permanent. Nothing lasts forever.” He spoke into her skin. “Go home and sleep, Holly. I will see you in the morning.”

She heard and felt his inhale as he withdrew his lips, hands, and his body from her. Without his warmth, a chill overcame her. She shivered and watched him walk away and out the door.