



Short Story from the Vault

Wireless Connection

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It was the eyes, I thought as I watched the man ordering his Iced Venti Caramel Macchiato at the counter. I would have recognized them anywhere. Blue, vivid, with lashes and a smile that showed them off. Even if it wasn't for that, though, the voice would have given him away. When he requested the extra shot, I had to force myself not to smile.

In high school it had been Mountain Dew. Three to four a day. He had practically vibrated when he walked.

But that had been almost thirty years ago.

Shifting my gaze back to the screen in front of me, I tried to concentrate on the deadline of this novel. My name was across the bookshelves, my paycheck provided by the publisher who expected this book on their desk in less than two months. Four chapters from the end with the edits waiting, this morning the busy Starbucks had seemed like a better idea than the quiet house at home. Archie Leech, my cat, was good company, but he wasn't helping get these last chapters done.

And now, watching Dillion Sanders wait at the service counter, his back to me, what little concentration I'd had on this beautiful spring day evaporated. Excitement

raced across my nerves alongside the anxiety that he was here, in this room, ordering a drink when I hadn't seen him in more years than I could count.

He hadn't noticed me, which was good. I wasn't sure I wanted to deal with all the small talk that came from running into an old classmate. Only Dillion hadn't been just an old classmate to me. He had been much, much more. The breath caught in my chest and I had to ease it back out. My laptop sat open on the wooden table, my Caramel Frappuccino drunk half way down.

What if he did notice? Would he even know it was me after all these years? Would it hurt if he didn't? Feel good if he did?

My hands remained poised over the keyboard, the hard plastic texture under my fingertips, but not one more letter appeared on the screen. All I saw were the nice fitting faded 501's on an ass that shouldn't belong to a mid-forty, MIT graduate. He wore a long-sleeved, stripped, blue, button down shirt, the cuffs rolled up to show off tanned wrists.

I sighed hard and looked back at the screen, trying to reread the last sentence I had written while he picked up his drink and the closest *LA Times* and moved to one of the over-stuffed chairs on the other side of the room. He didn't move out of my line of sight, though, which was just too damn bad.

Memories of eighth grade math class flooded my mind, as vivid as if they were happening now. Our instructor, Mrs. Wagner hadn't used seat assignments based on the ABC's and Dillion had ended up right behind me.

It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship, I thought, my best Humphrey Bogart accent falling short. We had watched *Casablanca* for the first time together on a late show in the basement of my parent's house.

I closed my eyes, the memories coming faster than I could file.

Ninth grade, when I had to play basketball for P.E. and Chuck Brewster had stuck his foot out to trip me on purpose. In the small class with similar shorts and shirts on, Dillion had been furious. But he wasn't one for direct retribution or physical violence. He took his revenge out on the court, whipping Brewster's butt in points and not fists. Brewster, class jock, had been humiliated--even more so when he tried to bully Dillion and this kid from Math Club had won again.

Last I heard, Dillion had used his Master from MIT, magna cum laude, thank you very much, and gone into cyber-crime with the FBI.

Focus, I thought, letting out a hard breath and taking a sip of my drink, I reread the last page I had written, thinking it wasn't so bad. But I couldn't think of one word to add to it while Dillion sat a mere fifteen feet away scanning the Sports section.

Say "Hi" one voice said. Let it alone said the other. Enjoy seeing him look so good. Enjoy him looking healthy and happy and let it go.

The book, I thought. The book had to be done in so few weeks. Sighing out loud, I went back to work--while the memory of a relationship that never had the right timing engulfed me and made my chest hurt. We had been best friends for five years. No girlfriend could be closer to me; and no bud closer to him. But we never had gotten our timing right. When he was interested in me as more than a friend, I had been with someone else. When I had wanted more from him, it was the same thing.

Until senior year. Sharon Baker. AP English. His relationship with Sharon had ended it all.

Conflict. Jealously. He couldn't commit to either of us. He had wanted us both and I had forced him to choose. We had been standing in the hallway by the locker we had both used when I had playfully punched him in the stomach and said. "Call me and let me know what you decide."

I closed my eyes tight. It was a call he never made. He had never called me again. He never used my locker again.

It was the one regret I had never really gotten over. How could I have been so stupid not to see? The words on the screen blurred as I shoved down the hurt I never let out.

Sharon and Dillion had been married right out of high school. She had gone with him to Cambridge, Massachusetts for school. At last count, I heard they had two boys.

He looked totally relaxed. His hair still dark, his face tan, his gaze scanning left to right.

With a sudden movement he slapped the newspaper down on the table by his drink and stood up.

Disappointment mixed with my relief. With him gone, the memories would slip back to where they belonged and I could get back to work.

He left his drink on the table and headed out to a blue Charger parked in front.

Cool car, I thought while staring at his drink, trying to figure out why he would have left an almost full cup. He opened the car door, reached in, pulled out a black bag,

and then came back to his chair, taking a sip off the straw before opening the computer bag to pull out a PC.

I had to smile as I looked back to my screen.

He had always liked the Stones. Me, the Beatles.

He had liked Jeannie while I had liked Samantha.

He had liked The Munsters while I preferred The Addams Family.

He was a PC while I was a Mac.

Some things never changed.

He put his feet up on the table in front of him and made himself very comfortable, the laptop balanced on his thighs.

I smiled a little, wishing for a little more courage to go over there and say "Hi", but we had hardly said a word at the ten year class reunion. What could I say now to make a difference? I wasn't going to get any more work done. Not on this book. Not with him setting up shop for who knew how long.

Moving the cursor to the lower left hand corner, I pulled up the "shut down" link. Holding my finger over the mouse, I thought of how I could salvage the day to make the rest of the week run smoothly. Archie Leech needed his favorite food, but there was time, and the cat was too spoiled anyway. He still had four cans left. My own food stores could use a little padding, but there was always tomorrow. How many more times in my life was I going to be able to sit across from Dillion Sanders and think of nothing expect how good it had felt to have him by my side all those years ago when a close friend was the best asset a kid could have in school?

I opened the Internet, checked my e-mail and brought up my Facebook page to scan the latest comments.

All the while he narrowed his eyes, his lips pursed and his fingers flying over the keyboard.

For fifteen minutes neither of us touched our drinks. I knew because I watched him. He worked totally oblivious to his past sitting so close while I remembered the billiard games at my house, the pool parties at Janice's house, the lunch time pranks at the same table we ate at every day in the cafeteria.

In the upper left hand corner of my screen, an Instant Message popped up.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Want to explain why I'm going grey and you still look like you are twenty-seven? What? Did you find a secret you never bothered to share with the rest of us?"

I stared at the message for a full minute, my chin tilting, my jaw working back and forth. My gaze darted up to him, but he didn't seem to have noticed me. I looked back at the message.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs? He had to be kidding. There was no way in for hell for that to be his screen name. Not when thirty years had separated us, with different careers, different interests and different goals. I glanced back up at him, but he was leaning back in the chair, totally relaxed, his gaze fixed on the screen. He reached over to take another sip off the coffee, but he never gave any indication he knew I was here.

TriXR4Kids: Excuse me?

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: ;) Hey Jen. You still look good.

I looked at him. The smile on his lips was crooked and cute all at the same time. He still didn't look at me.

TriXR4Kids: How did you get this addy? This is my private addy. No one has this addy.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Cyber Hound for living. Learn a few tricks.

I smiled. MIT. FBI. A lot of initials came after his name. He could probably find whatever he felt like.

TriXR4Kids: What are you doing in LA? Last I heard you were an east coaster.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Moved back about twelve years ago. San Diego. Moved back to Valley last month.

I looked at the words. Looked at him and tried to think of a clever comeback. I made my living with words. Why the hell couldn't I think of something to say?

TriXR4Kids: How is the family? Boys must be ... what?

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Zack 24. Married. Baby on way. Jamie, 22. Just finishing up UCLA with History. No plans on how to use it.

TriXR4Kids: You? A grandfather? How long ago was high school?

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *How did you want to count that? Chronologically? Lifetimes? Achievements, Ms. Well Known, World Famous Author?*
TriXR4Kids: *How is Sharon?*

I shouldn't have asked, but I did. And his response came right back.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *The boys tell me she is doing real well. She remarried about ten years ago. Moved to Northern California. He is a great guy, but I got to admit, there were more times while we were married that I wish I had picked up the phone our senior year and made a phone call.*

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, my heart raced. I tried to read a secondary meaning into what he said, but the pieces wouldn't fit. I didn't know he had gotten divorced. No one had ever told me he had gotten divorced. I didn't know what to say. A minute ticked by. Then a second. I glanced at him, but he kept staring at the screen. The smile, gone.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Sorry. Too abrupt. I have great boys. No regrets on that. Only on the rest. I missed you.*

I leaned back in my chair, my hands in my lap. They started to shake just a little. Across the room, his feet hit the floor and he leaned a little forward, his shoulders stiff. His expression had changed. It was all serious now with no smile.

But he still didn't look at me.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Too much, too quick. Sorry. Maybe I should take off and let you get back to work. Looking forward to next book. But--*

TriXR4Kids: *What?*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Can I call you sometime?*

I could let it go now, or hold on for a little longer. I swallowed hard, needing him across the room if only for a few more minutes.

TriXR4Kids: *I write romance. You are going to tell me you read romance?*

He relaxed, leaning back in the seat again, but he kept his feet on the floor, a slight tension still evident.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Of course I am not going to tell you that. I'm a tough, macho, FBI guy. I would never read romance. But I would read your books.*

TriXR4Kids: *I don't believe you.*

But I did and damn that felt good. He had read every short story, every paper, and every poem I ever wrote in school. It had been his encouragement that had kept me going. I became a writer because he told me I could.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Every hero of every book you have ever written has been left handed with his watch worn on the inside of his right wrist.*

I glanced up at him, seeing from here the watch on his right wrist with the face against the pulse on the inside of his arm.

TriXR4Kids: *Pretty observant for a computer nerd. Even my agent and editor have never picked up on that.*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Maybe they weren't looking for it.*

TriXR4Kids: *And you were?*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *No one likes to be forgotten. Even if they deserved it because they were a jerk.*

TriXR4Kids: *You thought I forgot you?*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Not after your third book hit the shelves.*

TriXR4Kids: *Mr. FBI, cyber guy with a few tricks--you had this addy in less than fifteen minutes. You could have said something years ago.*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Actually, I was writing my Mom her Sunday e-mail. I've had this addy for seven years. Have your phone number, too ... um ... <sulk> ... maybe an address. Never drove by, though I have thought about it since I was back in town.*

I paused. I thought about his address book—no--he an Android or an iPhone --I thought of my info typed in. Maybe an old photo of us together?

TriXR4Kids: A person in my position and profession might consider that fan stalking.

He smiled across the room.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Well, yea. Maybe. If you hadn't made out with me on the bleachers after the homecoming dance our senior year.

TriXR4Kids: Don't know if I am terrified or flattered.

I knew, though, Dillion was one of the good guys. Always had been.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: I can help you decide.

TriXR4Kids: You taught me how to make lemonade from real lemons. You helped me pass ninth grade math when there was no chance. You helped me set up my first hi-fi system when I got it for my birthday.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: You got your driver's license first and came and picked me up the night I got too drunk on Bacardi to get myself home. Man, I was freezing that night. Ice blocking in November even in California wasn't the best of ideas. Curse Ted and his brilliant ideas.

TriXR4Kids: LOL ...

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: You really do look good, Jen.

He was the only one who had ever called me Jen. I had never allowed anyone else. It always reminded me of him. It still sounded so natural, like I could still hear his voice in my head when it was only letters on the screen.

TriXR4Kids: How would you know? You haven't looked up once.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: You really think that? Hum ... let's start at the bottom and work our way up. White sandals. Almost red, but not quite, toe nails. Capri jeans. Which, btw, I might add, fit real nice--

TriXR4Kids: I am sitting down and have been since you walked in that door.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: FBI. Lots of training. We can tell these types of things. Should I keep moving up?

TriXR4Kids: LOL ... no!!!

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *No? Because I was just getting to the interesting part. Is that a tat peeking out from under your--*

TriXR4Kids: *You know what?*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *LOL. What?*

TriXR4Kids: *I think you should have made that call. Probably not when we were seniors, but—< sigh >--sometime.*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *I know. I've known for ten years. Are you seeing anyone? Married with four kids? Anything you need to tell me?*

TriXR4Kids: *I have a cat. He likes me a lot.*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Does he get jealous? Take up too much of the bed? Get annoyed if you have over-night visitors?*

My heart beat picked up speed. My palms went a little moist. The anxiety in my gut sky rocketed. And all of it felt too damn good.

TriXR4Kids: *No—but--*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *What?*

TriXR4Kids: *Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm going to take off now. I'm feeling a little--overwhelmed.*

He paused. His lips pursed and I saw him let out a long, hard sigh.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *I understand.*

TriXR4Kids: *But you know how to get a hold of me now.*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *Actually I've known for eighteen years. Just didn't think I should while I was still married to Sharon.*

TriXR4Kids: *But you said --*

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: *I said I've had this address for seven years – you got it seven years ago.*

TriXR4Kids: *You know, you're sort of creepy in a 'I really missed you' sort of way. :)*

He didn't have to type it. I heard his chuckle from across the room. It was low and I doubted anyone else in the noisy cafe had picked up on it, but it was a sound I had been too used to for so many years.

TriXR4Kids: And your screen name?

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Hey, you had your favorite cereal. I had mind--or maybe <guilt> I might have gotten the idea--I don't know--seven years ago ... ;)

I smiled and I laughed and I missed him so much it hurt. He was so close but a life time away.

TriXR4Kids: Bye Dillion.

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: By Jen.

TriXR4Kids: Maybe you will make that call sometime?

Cucko4CoccoPuffs: Maybe I will.

I sighed hard and closed my laptop without shutting down any programs. I looked up and stared at him direct. He didn't look my way. He only closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the back of the overstuffed chair. The smile on his face was of satisfaction. And he was right; they had made-out for over an hour after the homecoming dance, right before he met Sharon. It was an experience I had never forgotten – oh he could kiss when he hadn't had any experience. I didn't even want to think what he was capable of now. He wasn't the first boy I had ever allowed the privilege, but he was the first boy to touch me in those places no one had ever touched before. None of them too improper, but my proper mother would have still been horrified if she had known when I got home. I had thought Dillion and I had finally come to the same place at the same time.

Two days later, Sharon had transferred in.

I loaded up my laptop and let go of the hurt I had carried around for too many years. I stirred my Frappuccino with my straw but it was hopelessly melted and a lost caused. I didn't care. The conversation had been good. If I heard from him again, that would be better. If I didn't, we had at least healed a few old wounds.

Picking up my computer bag, I put my purse on my shoulder and got up to leave, walking right passed him. He didn't open his eyes. No one in the whole place had ever known there had been a conversation going on from across the room.

Dillion Sanders, I thought as I tossed my ruined drink into the garbage by the door and walked out into the sunshine. I looked at his blue Charger, thinking how him

it was; then glanced at my yellow Mustang thinking how me it was. Cool cars for cool people who a lifetime ago had depended on each other to get through the evil teen years.

Today had been a good day, I thought as I got to my car. One of the best I'd had in a long, long time. And I rarely had a bad day.

By the time my bags were in the passenger seat and I had the key in the ignition, my cell phone was ringing. I pulled it out of my purse, reading the dial. "Unknown Caller" was all it said. Before picking up, I glanced up. Dillion stood by the Starbucks door, his computer case in one hand, his own phone to his ear. He was smiling ear to ear.

My thumb hit the green button. "What?"

"I was wondering. You doing anything for the rest of the day? Maybe dinner? Maybe we'll see after that?"

The End