

He Was Perfect

A Novella

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ONE

His eyes were so blue, electric and deep, just begging me to look into them. His skin was olive and evidently kissed by the sun. He worked outside, I gathered, because an office job wouldn't offer that kind of exposure, and his hair was blonde enough to tell me he wasn't born that tan. The faint spots blemishing his forearms also told a sun kissed narrative. Surfer, I'd guessed initially. Denver surfers are uncommon, and I imagined he was visiting, and not a resident. On his wrists he wore a collection of organic-looking woven bracelets, the ones that shout *beach boy*. He stood at 6 feet tall, optimal height for a surfer, and the polyester t-shirts he wore hugged him quietly, hinting towards broad, sinewy shoulders and strong upper body muscles, but were loose below his pecks, indicating a slight waist. Surfer build.

He was a coffee drinker, always ordering a medium black coffee, then proceeding to add his own cream and two packets of sugar. He didn't bother with the fake sweetener. I liked that about him. He chose real. His smiles towards me while I took his order were always genuine, his striking white teeth adding more radiance to the already sun-lit coffee shop. The name he gave me when he ordered was Dylan. Dylan, traditionally Welsh, often meaning "son of the sea". His parents were probably from the coast, likely Florida. The way his American Express glinted gold when he paid for his coffee told me he came from a stable, wealthy background.

Every Sunday afternoon, I watched him enter the shop in which I work at 8am. He was never late, I liked his punctuality. It indicated to me he was responsible. I watched him sip slowly on his coffee while reading a novel. For three months he had been coming to Joe's Coffee Shop, and in those months he had finished two books; *A Catcher in the Rye* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He was intelligent with good taste.

I often tried to gather the confidence to strike up a conversation with him, but my efforts were usually squashed by my own self-consciousness. After about a month, I started wearing a name tag, begging him to learn my name and develop a curiosity towards me. I think he read the tag, and somewhere beneath his soft curls, he wondered about me, Jo Anne Thomas. With time, I knew a connection between us was there, silent and undiscovered maybe, but it was there. At some point, I began paying attention to Dylan's life away from Joe's.

He sat in his usual booth by the window until 10am, occasionally longer but never shorter, and then would gather his book and leave the shop. It was at this time I began taking my shift break. Out the back door I slipped to watch Dylan walk to a beige jeep with Florida plates. The vehicle had no alumni stickers, so he either did not go to college, or was not high on school pride.

From my perch behind the dumpster, I watched him speed away in his jeep down Kennedy Street, the rolled down windows welcoming the breeze to ruffle his soft curls. My heart swelled more with every passing week I watched Dylan enjoy his Sunday mornings. I was simply waiting for the appropriate time to properly introduce myself, to ensure he was good and ready to realize our connection, as I had already done.

TWO

I ate a cheese sandwich as I sat, covered by the shade of a pine tree, the same pine tree under which I had eaten my lunch every Saturday for the past two months. Across the street, Dylan sat in his living room doing crunches and push ups. I'd imagined it hard for him to be away from his usual hobby, stowed away in the crowded city, so far from the ease of the ocean.

But I was encouraged to see him keeping up with his workout routine. Before his living room workout, he went for a jog. He was a man of habit, taking the same route every time; down Parson Avenue where he lived, left on Leery Avenue, past the residential area all the way to the Shell on the corner, left on 16th street, another left on Drew Street, and one more left on Parson's to arrive back at his darling townhouse. I never ran behind him on his route. For one reason, I would never be able to keep up with his steady stride. And another, he deserved to enjoy his run alone. I respected his space enough to allow him that.

After three sets of crunches and push ups, he stretched, his bare torso revealing a road map of indented muscles. He ran his fingers through his curls to pull the hair from his forehead, and picked up his shirt from the floor.

With time, I began moving my post around to get a complete view of his morning routine. I started at the end of the block to watch him begin his run, then moved to the tree, then to the side alley where his bedroom window was located, and finally next to a junker car behind his house where I would watch him leave.

Dylan did not go to work on Saturdays. Instead, he would make his breakfast and drive to Granbury park. There, he and his golden Labrador would enjoy a peaceful couple of hours. Granbury park was five miles from his home, so he would drive. I never struggled to keep up with him on my bike, maintaining a reasonable distance away from his Jeep. On this day, I settled myself beneath some trees where I could easily observe Dylan and his pup enjoy a game of frisbee. I felt a buzz in my pocket. I took my phone out to see who could possibly be contacting me on my day off.

Hi Jo, the text read. It was from a coworker at Joe's. Nicole was her name. *Can you come into work and take over my shift? I seem to have caught a stomach bug.*

I rolled my eyes in an entirely over dramatic manner. My precious time with Dylan was going to be cut short, and that ruined my day. Seeming to have no choice but to leave the park, I gave Dylan one last gaze, taking a mental picture of his beauty, and crawled on my bike. As I was about to pedal away, I watched a young woman walk towards the park. She was wearing a tight tank top and denim shorts, both of which revealed her slight frame. A sleek brown ponytail pulled her hair from her face to reveal a sharp jaw and soft nose.

She's pretty, I thought, and then pedaled away without giving her anymore of my attention.

THREE

Dylan worked at a sports store on the east end of town. They sold ski gear in the winter, fishing gear in the summer, and everything else in between. I wasn't an outdoorsy person. I quite hated the outdoors in fact, but I was willing to be open-minded in order to support Dylan's place of employment. I went there only on Wednesday's because I had those afternoons free from work. He was a fantastic salesman, making every customer feel more important than the last.

I told myself many times that I would finally buy something, step out from behind the sale rack where Dylan could see me, and I would finally speak to him. The second Wednesday of August was the day I'd chosen, but when I was about to step into the shoe section where Dylan was standing, I caught a glimpse of another customer walking in his direction. I had the strangest feeling I had seen her before, but I couldn't place her. For a moment, I thought she might ask him

to show her where the running shoes were. She looked like a runner. But to my surprise, she walked to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. It was when he leaned down to kiss her cheek I realized where I had seen this woman, her high cheekbones set against a defined jaw, covered in olive skin of perfect complexion. The woman from the park.

My heart dropped, and I suddenly felt as though my feet were nailed to the ground. How was it possible I had never seen this woman hanging around Dylan? I knew his whereabouts every hour of every day. I tried to console myself, tried to suppress my building jealousy. Perhaps he had met her while out on the town, a one-night stand who was just clingy enough to show up at his workplace. Yes, this was probably it. She didn't seem like his type. He was spirited and earthy and real. Her diamond earrings were tacky against his authenticity.

I stood there, gawking, not bothering to step behind the sale rack again and failing to realize I was in plain view of Dylan and this woman. He must have seen me because he averted his gaze from her and onto me.

"Can I help you find something?" He said pleasantly. I snapped out of my trance and searched for words, any words at all.

"Uh, I, um, no," I stammered, frazzled. "I was just, um, looking." At that, I turned on my heel to leave as quickly as I could, walking straight into the sale rack and hitting a mannequin on my way out. I hopped on my bike and pedaled faster than ever before. I gripped the handlebars hard with one hand, and wiped my tears with the other.

FOUR

Though I had initially allowed my emotions to get the best of me, I decided it best to not give up on Dylan. I couldn't, not until I knew more about this woman who was so bold as to disrupt his work day. I had to find out who she was and if she was wrong for Dylan. I couldn't bear to see him with a woman who wasn't fit for him.

It was Friday. I'd taken Thursday to mope around aimlessly at work, but this morning, I woke up with a new determination. I worked that morning and clocked out at 2pm. I rode my bike from Joe's to the little league baseball fields. The previous Sunday, I had overheard a phone call of Dylan's. He had agreed to help coach the little league game as part of a charity fund his work was organizing. I still admired his giving nature.

I pedaled quickly so as not to miss the entire game. When I arrived, I was quick to spot Dylan in all his baseball-coaching glory. His enthusiasm with the kids planted a warmth in me and a smile grew on my face, but I had to stay focused. I scanned the perimeter fence until I found what I hoped I wouldn't; that woman. She wore a red baseball cap, a match to the one Dylan was wearing. Her shorts were too short and her legs too tan and lean. I weaved in and out of groups of overly excited parents and tried to get a better visual. I stood behind a set of bleachers and could faintly hear the woman's conversation with a cluster of other women.

"I think it is just so amazing you spent two months in Uganda teaching those children," one woman gushed.

"You truly have the biggest heart, Ashlyn," another said. "And to be away from Dylan for that long, you two have it figured out."

“Well, it helps that he proposed before I left.” Ashlyn held up her left hand to reveal a giant diamond on her ring finger. The ladies screeched, embracing and congratulating Ashlyn in the most obnoxious manner. I was glad to be in a secluded spot behind the bleachers so no one could hear my scoff. Anger boiled up in me, and then sadness. Dylan was engaged to this beautiful woman to whom I could never compare. She was seemingly smart too, a teacher from what I had heard.

“So where will the wedding be?” a blonde, short woman asked. “Here, or in Florida?”

“We haven’t talked much about the details, but we both love it here.” She smiled as she fidgeted with her ring. It looked expensive, and it complimented her french manicure to such a perfection I wondered if she had gotten her nails done to celebrate the occasion. At the sight of hers, I began chewing on my nails.

I sat there behind the bleachers until the game concluded. I watched as Dylan made his way over to his fiancé. He threw his long, strong arm around her slight shoulders as one of Ashlyn’s friends took a photo of them. I imagined myself smiling next to him as she was, his arm around me instead of her. As I fantasized, Ashlyn took Dylan’s hand and spoke once more to her friends.

“Let’s go for drinks tonight downtown to celebrate.” The other women all nodded excitedly, and with that Ashlyn and Dylan walked to his Jeep, hand in hand. I slid away from the bleachers and retrieved my bike, and followed them.

FIVE

Ashlyn's pink dress was too pink, and too short. It was tight and revealed her collar bones where a pearl necklace rested just above them. They were probably real pearls, which was even more frustrating. I had to applaud her though, as I'm not sure how she managed to walk so flawlessly in those black, suede stilettos. I deduced she had been a pageant queen growing up, her mother obsessed with curling her hair and watching her twirl ribbons in front of judges. She probably worked in nursing homes in high school; volunteering with old, bitter ladies looks good on college applications. She was definitely the college type, obviously a teacher, and probably aspired to run for Miss America one day.

I sat in a corner booth of the Gold Bar, with a gin and tonic sitting in front of me so I appeared occupied. The corner was dark and my face was lit only by a fake candle. I took the initiative to make myself look like one of these bar-goers. I curled my hair, though I wasn't very good at it. My curling iron had been tucked away in my bathroom and had collected a light dusting. Ultimately however, I was satisfied with the job I'd done. I had put extra blush on my cheeks and even lined my lips so they looked a little bigger than they actually were. Somehow, I managed to find a nice-ish black dress in my closet. It was tight enough to be uncomfortable but I convinced myself this was the style these days. I never took photos of myself, but I almost wanted to. I decided against it, though.

Ashlyn stood at the bar-top with a few of the women who had been at the baseball fields, along with three others I had never seen before. Dylan, I'd discovered when I followed him and Ashlyn home from the game and listened to their conversation from behind a bush outside his house, was going out with the boys and they would eventually meet the girls downtown. As I sat

in the bar, I wondered anxiously how long it would be before his arrival. I hoped it would be soon. I was bored watching these giddy barbie dolls take selfies from angles that made their barely-there cleavage look believably big.

At 11:03, the doors opened and in came the golden boy, his soft curls softer and more golden than I'd ever seen, dark wash jeans hugging his strong legs and a black polo shirt that made him look lean and even taller. He smiled a blinding smile, and I smiled back at him. He walked up to my table, his blue eyes glowing above all the existing candle light.

"I thought I might see you here," he said to me, taking my hand. I wanted to stand, press myself against him, and kiss him with a burning desperation. "You look beautiful."

I blinked and shook my head, releasing me from my daydream. He embraced Ashlyn as he complimented her. I took a big swig of my gin and tonic, and then coughed, having to refrain from spitting the vile drink completely out. In my disgust of the scene in front of me, I'd forgotten my dislike of gin. And tonic for that matter.

Nothing exciting happened after that. A couple girls went to the bathroom to puke, and Ashlyn, the apparent philanthropist that she was, followed them to hold their hair back. One of the girls stayed at the bar top along with Dylan and his friends. He leaned into her to whisper in her ear. It must've been funny because she smiled and a soft giggle escaped her, and she nodded. When Ashlyn returned moments later, this girl stepped away from Dylan as though they hadn't been conversing at all.

SIX

Joe's was busy that Sunday but I was a skilled barista, and I could make a variety of drinks all while watching Dylan. I was in a bad mood. I'd stayed out too late Friday night and for what? To watch Dylan, my Dylan, dote on some stranger. He hadn't failed me this morning, though. He still showed up to order his coffee, and to my pleasant surprise, Ashlyn had not accompanied him.

As I prepared a cappuccino, the bell on the front door jingled. I looked up to see a tall blonde carrying an imitation Louis Vuitton bag; I knew it was a fake because the pattern on the bag had a partially cut off brand logo, and real Vuitton bags never cut off the brand logo. Her face caught my attention. I'd seen her before. The feeling was the same as when I had seen Ashtyn for a second time after initially seeing her in the park. The thought of Ashlyn reminded me who this blonde woman was: the woman from the bar. The same woman to whom Dylan had whispered, walked towards where Dylan was seated. She sat next to him, and he did not look surprised to see her. It was at this lack of surprise I realized this was no coincidental meeting. It occurred to me I had witnessed their scheduling of this meeting at the bar on Friday night when he whispered in her ear.

As I observed their conversation in Dylan's booth, I calmed my uneasiness by convincing myself their meeting was regarding wedding details or the bachelorette party, or maybe they were cousins. Dylan was too good to be meeting with another woman in secret, lest it was for pure reasons. My curiosity was forceful and I took a fresh paper cup from beneath the counter and walked towards Dylan's booth where a garbage can was placed only a few feet away. As I pretended to throw the cup away, I walked slowly in order to catch a glimpse of the encounter.

“Don’t worry about it, Val.” Dylan took her hand in his mildly. “I’ll call you.”

Their exchange tightened my chest and loosened my grip on the cup as it fell to the floor, the clunk of cardboard on tile spotlighting me. Dylan and Val watched as I fumbled with the cup and I shuffled back to the counter. Shortly after, Val stood and left the shop. Dylan remained only 15 minutes more, and he too prepared to leave, but not without meeting my eyes for a brief moment. My stomach leapt. It wasn’t often he looked at me, and this time I felt intention behind his gaze. Before I could remind my mouth how to smile, he was gone.

SEVEN

I’d spent the following two weeks on my usual routine; with Dylan, watching him, now as he was with Ashlyn most of the time. I convinced myself to forget what I had seen and heard in Joe’s that Sunday. Dylan was a good person. He would never be caught up in a scandal such as seeing another woman all whilst engaged. However, I had not convinced myself to forget my dismay and admitted jealousy that he was in fact engaged. I must confess, though, Ashlyn was difficult to dislike. But how could she not be, as Dylan was exceptionally likable himself.

His routine hadn’t changed much upon Ashlyn’s return from her stay in Uganda. The only main difference was instead of doing things alone or with his friends, he did them with her. With *us*. It was on a Monday night when I found no sleep, so I ventured out for a night ride on my bike and ended up in Dylan’s neighborhood. I hadn’t planned to stop at his house, only to ride by a few times, but as I pedaled by his house on Parson Avenue, I saw a soft light glowing through the kitchen window. I was quick to hide myself along with my bike against the side of the house.

I exposed myself for a moment to catch a glance through the window. Though the small window did not offer a great view, I was able to find the familiar silhouette of a perfect jaw and nose, broad shoulders, and ruffled hair. I stretched my neck harder to get a better look. Next to Dylan, Ashlynn stood with what looked like a simple journal in her hand. She pointed at the journal in her hand emphatically, as though Dylan weren't listening closely enough. He rubbed his forehead with frustration before nodding in her direction and taking the book from her hand to set the stack on the table. He hooked her waist in his arm and pulled her in with forced affection. In the darkness of my hiding spot I visibly gagged.

I needed to see more, so I took a slight step back but tripped over a branch in the process. It snapped painfully in the silence of the night and Dylan's gaze broke free from Ashlynn and towards the window. He stepped towards it to peer into the night, as if scared someone had seen their simple encounter. Ashlynn laid a manicured hand on his shoulder and urged him away from the window. The light in the kitchen was killed and the two disappeared into the dark.

I took this opportunity to reach for my bike and speed away. My legs pushed against the pedals with such urgency it is a surprise my quads didn't snap in two, but I kept pushing. I had the strangest and most unsettling feeling that I had witnessed something I was not supposed to see.

EIGHT

Work kept me busy for the next few weeks. I only saw Dylan once. He had not come to Joe's on the Sunday following the night I'd been to his house. When I heard the ding of the front door bell, my spirits were lifted and I was relieved to see my golden boy step through the door.

Part of me had wondered if his Sunday coffee routine would cease now that his fiancé had returned, but when his beautiful blonde figure entered Joe's, my heart leapt at the sight of him. He hadn't given up on our coffee Sunday's. But this Sunday in particular was different. Dylan usually floated in, beaming as he ordered his coffee from me, but on this day, he walked in slowly, apprehensive in a way as he walked towards the counter. He still smiled at me, but did not show his teeth, and I so loved when he showed his teeth.

"Medium roast, please," he said, only looking at me briefly, and then averting his gaze to the parameters of the shop.

"Sure, anything else today?" I responded far too eagerly. *Chill*, I thought to myself. He simply nodded and handed me a \$5 bill, strange because he never paid with cash. I turned and poured his coffee.

"Here you are, Dylan," I said, handing him his coffee, feeling my breath hitch. He reached for the coffee, and then stopped, his brow furrowing in concern. He hadn't told me his name for the order, and he hadn't paid with a card. And I had just called him by name. My mouth fell open, as though it was trying to say something to correct the mistake I'd just made, but nothing came out. At that, he took the coffee and turned, and instead of finding his usual booth in the corner, he found the door. He met my gaze one last time before pushing the door open and leaving in a hurry.

The next Sunday, Dylan didn't come into Joe's. I watched the door intently, but every time the bell on the door sang, I was met with disappointment instead of him. My shift dragged on painfully that day, and I looked forward to Monday. I was worried about Dylan. He was a

routine man, and him not showing up for his morning coffee was a bigger deal than someone who didn't know him would think. But I knew him.

Monday offered no comfort, Tuesday either, as Dylan was not at work those days. He wasn't at the park with his dog and he wasn't out for a run. By Thursday, I gave up my efforts to go to the grocery store; microwave popcorn had been my dinner the past two nights and my cupboards and my stomach begged for better.

Bags of groceries in hand, I turned to leave the store, but not before my attention was caught by the bulletin board next to the exit. A missing person poster, freshly pinned to the wall, showed a portrait of a brunette girl with a sharp jaw and soft nose. Ashlynn. Ashlynn was missing.

NINE

Ashlynn Cowell was Miss Teen Colorado when she was 16, and before that, she held a variety of *Miss* titles. She had gone to college at Florida State and graduated with a degree in public relations. It was there she met Dylan Mitchell during a charity surf event. She was organizing a fundraiser for a beach clean up and Dylan was competing in the surfing competition. That, apparently, was that. After a year, they were engaged and soon after that they both moved to her home city of Denver. I gathered all of this and more from Ashlynn's facebook page. It may as well have been a blog; every detail of her picture-perfect life was posted for everyone to swoon over. I was thankful for it now, as it helped me with my investigation.

Dylan did not come from money as I had originally suspected. From what I could tell based on Ashlynn's excessive status updates and his lonely-looking instagram page, his father

was not a part of his life. The Tallahassee Yellow Pages provided that his mother worked as a social worker.

The further I dug into Ashlynn's background, the more I found out about her family. Her father owned Cowell Developers in Country Club Colorado, the biggest real estate development company in Colorado. Her mother, Deborah, was the manager of three different philanthropic organizations: Tiaras of Change, Pageants for Peace, and Miss United. I paid no mind to the first two, and not much more to the third. However, I did find out that Ashlynn went to Uganda to bring feminist education to young girls as part of the Miss United movement. I cringed at the philanthropy of it all.

My research began to feel useless. I didn't know what I was trying to gain by diving into Ashlynn's backstory. Maybe I thought by knowing more about Ashlynn, I could help him, support him, through a painful time. I shut my computer, rubbing the strain from my eyes. My day off led me to Joe's of all places to conduct my investigation. I stood from my corner booth, Dylan's corner booth which had begun to feel abandoned, and turned for the door. With my head down and my mind elsewhere, I forgot to look where I was going and I collided hard with a customer entering the cafe. My bag and computer went one way and my glasses went the other.

"Wow, I'm so clumsy." A calming voice rang through my ears. "Let me grab those." Dylan's strong hand handed me my glasses, and as I met his eyes, I forgot where I was and who I was.

My mouth dropped open but nothing came out, no matter how hard my brain worked to muster a response.

“Jo, right?” he asked. I nodded. He knew my name? He knew my name. To him I probably looked like a deer in the headlights, but on the inside I felt like a Nicholas Sparks novel.

“I’ve seen you here a few times,” he said easily.

“I’ve seen you too,” I spit, far too quickly. “Like, um,” I babbled. “Well, I think I recognize you, like kinda.” I wished I could punch myself in the face.

“Look,” he said, looking past my stupidity like the pure human he was. “I’ve been going through some stiff and could use a friend. You seem like a super interesting girl, so, like, would you wanna have coffee sometime?”

“Yes,” I blurted, and then to correct my eagerness added, “I probably could do that.”

“Sick.” He smiled. We exchanged phone numbers and tentatively agreed to have coffee Sunday morning at Joe’s. I was so elated, I forgot completely about Ashlynn, and the fact that she was still missing.

TEN

“So, I guess I just don’t know how to handle it all,” Dylan said as he sipped on an Americano. “One day she just went off the radar. I haven’t heard from her in two weeks. No one has.” I looked deep into his eyes as he told me about Ashlynn’s sudden disappearance, and I had to remind myself to listen to what he was saying, as his looks were mesmerizing enough to transport me away from our conversation. I nodded with concern as he continued:

“Her parents already have the police involved. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t blame them. I mean, I’m sick about it. But I also know Ash.”

“What do you mean?” I cut in.

“She has tendencies to be, well, up and down. Temperamental, I guess. She sometimes just decides to take off. She went to Miami for a weekend without telling anyone one time. I found out through snapchat. Vacations and shopping sprees are her coping mechanisms.”

I was reassured that Dylan was referring to his fiancé in the present tense. It was like he *knew* she was fine, like she would show up any day now. But I saw a desperation in his eyes. How could the woman he loved just leave him like this? He deserved so much better. And I could be the one to show him that.

“Surely the police have found a trail by now?” I asked, lending some optimism. He shook his head.

“Nothing. It’s like she fell off the edge of the earth. I guess her bank statements showed that she withdrew a few hundred bucks in cash the day before she disappeared. That’s it, though.” In a bold move, I reached across the small table and set my hand on his.

“From what you’ve told me, I bet she’s sorting some things out, setting the reset button. Getting married is a big thing, probably just triggered some stress.” I offered him a crooked smile, trying not to look too cliché. It worked, because he smiled back.

“Jo, you really do have the biggest heart.” He placed his other hand atop mine and gave it a light squeeze. “I wish we had become friends sooner.”

Friends. We were friends.

ELEVEN

As the days passed, I almost forgot about Ashlynn. It was easy to do with Dylan's reassurances that she was fine. We had coffee, took his dog to the park on Saturdays, and even went to the movies occasionally. I had once dreamt of us doing these things, but now, I was with him, not watching him from afar.

"I think I'd like Florida," I said, popping a grape into my mouth.

"It's hard not to." He said, sitting next to me atop a blanket. We picnicked in Granbury Park. "I'll have to show you around sometime." He smiled simply, and I feared he could see my pulse through my skin. Dylan was comfortable with me, and I was good at pretending to be so with him. I began to feel as though he liked me, really *liked* me.

"Why did you leave?" I asked.

"Ash wanted to be close to her parents. And being here gave me a better opportunity to learn about her dad's business."

I thought for a moment. "You're gonna take over his company?"

He let out a small laugh. "Maybe someday."

Dylan looked at his watch and let his head fall back. "Time moves too fast, I already gotta go." He had told me he was now working the afternoon shifts at the sports store. "I'll text you." He squeezed my hand, a gentle gesture which sent my heartbeat into a frenzy. "Lucy, c'mon!" he called, and the yellow lab came running.

I beamed as he glided away through the park. My stare was broken by a vibration next to me. Dylan had forgotten his phone. I had planned to give it back to him, to chase him down without any interference. But the caller on his phone caught my attention. It was Deborah

Cowell. I thought of Ashlynn. Dylan's reassurances convinced me that she had taken a retreat for her mental health.

"She actually called me yesterday," he had told me just three days before our picnic. "Said she needed to clear her head of all the marriage talk, and she's not sure if she wants to come back." He had sounded defeated, but used to it, almost as though he had seen it coming. He wasn't worried about her. He knew where she was, she was okay.

I watched the screen until the call went to voicemail, and when it did, the lock screen appeared with a list of notifications. Along with some emails from the sporting goods store and the missed call from Deborah Cowell, there was a text from Valerie Simon.

What's the situation w/ your girl? Call me.

Valerie? Who was Valerie? Val. Val, from the coffee shop and the bar. I'd repressed the memory of their meeting which now seemed like so long ago. So, they still talked, and why was she asking about the situation with Ashlynn?

"That must have fallen out of my pocket." Dylan's voice made me jump, as I clicked the phone off frantically.

"I was, ju- just gonna bring it to you, was uh, just picking it up." I pushed the phone towards him uncomfortably.

"Yeah, thanks." He looked at the phone for a moment and then looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Quickly, his face lightened and he showed a closed smile. "See ya, Jo." With that, he left me in the park for the second time.

TWELVE

I tried going home after the picnic, but there was no way I could sit in my studio apartment with all that was on my mind. After watching a pathetic episode of *Gilmore Girls* on my laptop, I hopped on my bike. I had a pit in my stomach, over what I'm not sure, but something pulled me to Dylan, though I had only just seen him. The ride to the sporting goods store made my quads burn. My biking miles accumulated more and more because of Dylan and I was beginning to get in great shape. He really was good for me in so many ways.

The jeep I had expected to see in the parking lot was nowhere to be found, nor was the boy who drove it. He was not behind the counter, or in the men's shoe section, or by the dressing rooms.

"Can I help you find something?" a short, blonde haired girl asked me.

"Um, I'm just looking for someone actually." I bit my lip. "Is Dylan here?" It was risky to ask, I didn't want him to know I'd followed him, but I needed to know. And maybe he would think it was sweet that I cared so much as to make sure he'd made it to work safely.

"Oh, sorry. He doesn't work here anymore." I didn't thank her, she didn't offer me any help anyway. I turned on my heel without another word.

My legs pushed down on the pedals of my bike harder than they ever had. My calves and quads were on fire but I paid more attention to the burning in my stomach. Had Dylan lied to me? A snake! No, Jo, he wasn't a snake. He had a reason, he *had* to have a reason. Perhaps, that employee was confused; she didn't look very bright.

I hadn't made a plan as to where I was going, I simply just pedaled and somehow my legs brought me here: the Cowell house. More of a mansion really, with grand gates and a perimeter fence too high for any sane person to climb. Not knowing what I would accomplish by being

here, I wanted to turn around, act like I was never here. But I rode nearly 7 miles to get here, and it'd be a waste of time to leave now.

The crunch of tires on asphalt forced me to take cover under a nearby hedge. Three police cars filed down the road and the grand gates creaked open without hesitation, as though the vehicles were expected. From my post, I watched as a brunette woman in white slacks and an expensive looking blouse stepped through an obnoxiously large front door. A tall man with silver hair accompanied her. He wore golf clothes; not the kind my father would wear, or even dream of owning, but the kind a celebrity would wear in a benefit golf match. Unpractical.

My hope was that the meeting between the police officers and who I assumed to be the Cowell's would take place outside where I had an existing chance of eavesdropping. But these people were smarter than that, and they retired inside.

Defeated, I pedaled home, much slower than I had come. When I made it back to my apartment, it was well into the evening and I cursed myself for not adding a headlight to my handle bars. There was no elevator in my Godforsaken building, and the four flights of stairs which led to my floor were daunting after my treacherous day of biking. By the time I reached my door, the burning in my legs turned into numbness. I dug into my pocket to find my key was gone. A quick search revealed it was nowhere to be found. I praised myself for hiding a spare under the doormat.

I crumpled onto my bed and the old metal frame signed under my weight, threatening to collapse at any time. After admiring the water damage on the ceiling for too long, I picked up the hand mirror which rested on my nightstand. I held it in front of my face and tucked my hair behind my ears, displaying the acne on my unremarkable face.

I didn't fit Dylan's picture, and I surely didn't fit Ashlynn's. My hair was a dull auburn, broken on the ends from wearing messy buns too often, my teeth weren't straight because my dad couldn't afford to get me braces, and clothes didn't hug my hips as they did Ashlyn's. She was the epitome of what a fiancé should look like, and he was out of a magazine. I didn't belong in his life, I knew that somewhere deep down. What kind of girl would leave a guy like Dylan? How could Ashlynn abandon him? I would never leave him in such a way. I would never leave him. I hoped, somehow, he would realize that.

THIRTEEN

A vibration on my nightstand nudged me awake and I rolled over to find my phone ringing. Dylan's name on screen dragged me from a morning grog into full vigilance.

"Hello?" My voice was forced, and too enthusiastic.

"Hey, Jo. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"What, no, are you kidding?" I laughed nervously. "I've been awake for hours. Just, uh, got back from a run," I lied as I looked at the clock, realizing it was 10:13am.

"Look, I felt bad about dipping out on our picnic a few days ago and I wanted to make it up to you. Meet me in the park? Eleven o'clock?"

"Yes!" I bit my lip, frustrated with my giddiness. "Um, I can make that work," I corrected myself, nonchalantly.

"Great, see ya soon."

I got ready in record time, though my shirt had come from the dirty laundry pile and my jeans were veined with wrinkles. I was able to rid my hair of its cowlicks at the very least. Granbury Park was a 30 minute ride from my apartment; the park was in a nice, well kept neighborhood. My apartment was not, but Dylan didn't know this.

When I arrived, I propped my bike behind a tree, out of sight. I felt a self-consciousness about my bike around Dylan. Bikes were so lame, especially compared to the car Ashlyn drove: a white Porsche, her Instagram had told me. The comely boy leaned against an oak tree and my heart leapt at his sunlit frame.

"Hey, you." I said, as smoothly as I knew how. He turned around to reveal a bouquet of daisies in his hand. His face was wide with a smile, deep smile lines revealing it was genuine.

"For you."

"What're these for?" I smiled back at him, trying to smooth the shake in my voice.

"Well, truth is I didn't go to work the other day. I actually was going to pick these up for you, but I wanted it to be a surprise." My heart swelled and threatened to hop out of my chest and throw its arms around Dylan. Instead, I pulled him into a soft hug.

"Thank you," I whispered, afraid my voice might break.

"I should be thanking you. You've been such a rock with everything going on with Ashlyn, and to be honest, I really like you, Jo." My brain was running circles inside my skull, my heart was somersaulting, I was overflowing with joy.

"I think," he continued, "maybe Ashlyn leaving me was meant to happen. It made me realize who was truly right for me." The next few moments felt like slow motion. His hand reached for my face and gently held my jaw. He leaned down to level his mouth with mine and

gently kissed me. I had never kissed anyone before. Could he tell? I watched a lot of Nicholas Sparks movies, so I knew the basics of how it was supposed to look, but I hadn't the slightest idea on how it was supposed to *feel*. I realized I was standing there, stiff as a board, but just as abruptly as it had begun, the kiss was over. I did my best to hide the fact that I had been holding my breath and was now desperately light headed. Dylan smiled and I smiled back. He held my hand and we walked through the park, and it took everything in my power not to cry tears of joy. This was the happiest day of my life.

FOURTEEN

The basket on my bike was stuffed with a bag of freshly baked cookies and two of Dylan's favorite movies: Avatar and Life of Pi. When he'd mentioned these films, I took it upon myself to watch them both three times. I was on my way to Dylan's house to surprise him for his birthday. Surely, Ashlynn hadn't called to wish him a happy birthday, and he did not mention that his mother would be in town, so I decided it my responsibility to make this day special for him.

Dylan's house stood quietly in the afternoon breeze and it appeared Dylan was not home. Observant as I was, I knew where he hid his house key. I retrieved it from beneath the flower pot next to the back door and let myself in. I convinced myself that he wouldn't mind. He would find it flattering that I put so much effort into his birthday. His house was different from what I had pictured it to be. It lacked wall decor. Actually, it lacked much of anything. It was clean, but to such an extent it felt sterile. I should have brought him a plant, or something to liven the place up. Next time.

Peering at my watch, I assumed Dylan was at work, but quickly reminded myself he had quit his job. Where could he be? To kill time, I peered around the kitchen to find a plate for the cookies. I organized the platter and the movies into a quaint presentation atop the counter so Dylan would see the gifts upon returning home.

Manners told me to sit in the kitchen and wait patiently for Dylan to come home, but curiosity persuaded me to have an innocent look around. I had assumed there would be some remnants of a female in the house. I doubted that Ashlyn never kept belongings here, even if she had been in Uganda, it was unlikely she took everything with her. Ashlynn had left a bad taste in Dylan's mouth when she left him so coldly, so maybe he rid himself of every reminder of her. For that, I couldn't blame him.

Two closed doors sat in the hallway. The one on the left was locked, so I cracked open the door on the right to find an office, piles of papers overwhelming a desk. I slipped into the room, eyeing the papers. One stack appeared to be receipts. It wasn't tax season but perhaps Dylan was starting early. Next to the papers were two identical, leather-bound ledgers. Feeling bold, I slid them open. The contents were similar, but not duplicates. I squinted at the minor discrepancies. The dates matched, so did the items, but the numbers did not. A door closing startled the books from my grip and I praised the carpet for muffling the thud. Panicking, I placed the books on the desk and prepared to convince Dylan I was looking for the bathroom.

I measured my steps as I confronted Dylan. His back was to me as he stood in the kitchen, admiring the shrine of gifts. I straightened my hair and composed myself.

"I, uh, wanted to surprise you for your birthday." My voice threatened to break under nervousness.

“How did you get in?” His voice wasn’t suspicious, but rather it was monotone, void of anything at all. He also didn’t seem concerned about where I had been and what I had been doing.

“The back was unlocked.” I’d seen him leave without locking the door a few times in the past, so the lie was believable. He stood motionless and I held my breath, afraid exhaling would somehow shatter the special moments we could have and the ones we already shared. Finally, he turned around, cookie in hand, a smile on his face.

“Which movie should we watch first?” he asked. The weights which had been sitting on my chest slowly dissolved and happiness returned to me once again. As we settled on the couch to the opening credits of *Avatar*, my mind wandered back to the office and the things I had found there. I tried to ignore the useless papers and records, and pretended Dylan was simply a well-organized man with a knack for record keeping. But for once, I couldn’t convince myself that this was true.

FIFTEEN

I rarely watched the news, but as I was channel surfing in boredom, a story stopped my finger from skipping to the next channel.

We are being told police have located a burn site in the woods by Anderson lake. After DNA findings around the area were tested, authorities have confirmed this is where the body of Ashlynn Cowell was burned. The homicide investigation is well underway to find the individual who committed this heinous act.

A portrait of Ashlynn flashed across the screen as the story continued into her life, followed by a clip of her parents giving a statement in front of the press. Her mother was suppressing tears and patting a tissue to her well-powdered nose while the man next to her spoke.

“We will stop at nothing to find justice for our baby. This monster will pay.”

My eyes were glued to the screen, dread rising in my gut. All the true crime podcasts in my library taught me one thing; the boyfriend is almost always guilty. *No, not this time*, I thought. *Not Dylan*.

I had to find Dylan, to make sure he was okay. This is what I was telling myself.

I think I knew Dylan wouldn't be home, but yet my bike led me to his house. Perhaps this is *why* I went to his house. I was looking for something. *Dylan needs you, he's a good person*, I repeated in my head, as if the more I rehearsed it, the more truth it would hold. I tucked my bike in the alley, trotted up the back steps to find no key under the flower pot. Flustered, I paced before remembering the kitchen window. It was always cracked to let a breeze in. Was I really going to crawl through a window to simply reassure myself of Dylan's character? I didn't give myself time to ponder the question as I was already snaking through the small window.

I didn't know where Dylan was, part of me was glad of that. His house was eerie in the dim evening quiet, and it felt even more empty than it had just two days ago when I had come over. I went straight to the office. The ledgers sat atop the desk where I'd last seen them. I fidgeted to open them, and shuffled through the pages. I became frazzled as I noticed small rips in the bindings where pages had been torn out. The only pages remaining were blank. I flipped forward and back in a frenzy, my breath matching the rhythm of the pages sliding through my

fingers. Defeated, I slammed the books shut and looked around the office. The desk was cleared of all the receipts and papers. It was empty, as was the rest of the room.

I gave up in the office and though common sense guided me towards the front door and told me to leave the house, instinct or curiosity, I'm not sure which, led me up the stairs. Anxiety gripped me, squeezing my chest so tight each breath was cut short. Dylan was with Ashlynn's parents, grieving with them. He had to be. No amount of self-consoling could keep me from going into Dylan's room. It looked like a typical bedroom, however cleaner than I would have expected from a male. I sat on the corner of the bed, exhausted and defeated. As my weight sunk into the mattress I heard a crunch, like the sound of shoes atop leaves on the sidewalk. I lifted the mattress to find a collection of items skewed across the box frame.

My hands trembled as I picked up a small sealed bag, the contents so tiny I had to squint in the growing darkness. Strands of hair were situated neatly in the bag, long, auburn hairs. My hand wandered up to clutch my own long, auburn hair. Holding my breath, I reached for another bag. It too held strands of hair, these ones almost invisible as they were platinum blonde. My whole body was shaking now, and I wondered if I should tuck the bags of hair away in my pocket. I didn't know if they were of any significance to me or Dylan, but I couldn't find a good reason to take them, not without a burning uneasiness. As I placed them back on the box frame, I was almost able to resist the urge to pick up a folder which was among the bags, but I didn't succeed and I shoved the folder under my arm. I gave my best effort to situate the bed as it had been before my investigation.

I barreled towards the stairs, taking the steps two at a time, but the last step creaked unusually loud under my foot and I stopped, stepping over it again, feeling my weight rock the

step back and forth. I knelt beside it and pulled the lip of the wooden step towards me, and with some coaxing, it released itself from its base. There, beneath where the step once was, a hollow cubby held a cell phone. I stared at it for a moment but the hum of a car engine jolted me to a panic. I seized the phone without a thought and replaced the wooden slap over the step. In a flurry, I was out the back door, on my bike pedaling as hard as I could.

SIXTEEN

A pounding on my door jolted me from a light sleep. The banging didn't stop until I opened the door to three police officers who did not look like they wanted to have a simple chat.

"Jo Anne Thomas?"

"Um, yes?" I squeaked.

"You're under arrest for the murders of Valerie Gallagher and Ashlynn Cowell."

I didn't hear my Miranda rights because my pulse was deafening in my ears. I felt as though I were in a dream, one where I wanted to run but my feet forgot how to move. The officers stuffed me in the back of their car, and on the ride to the station, I thought about the folder and the cellphone sitting on my nightstand.

SEVENTEEN

A light hand on my cheek woke me from my bad dream. My eyes fluttered open to find Dylan's glowing figure leaning over me, a gentle smile gleaming across his face.

"I'm sorry I didn't call." He brushed my hair off my face and behind my ears. "I should have."

“You don’t have to apologize,” I responded, still groggy.

“How special you are, Jo Anne,” he said as he leaned in to lay a soft kiss on my lips. I closed my eyes to embrace the moment when a firm hand tightened around my neck and I struggled to breathe. I tried to scream but nothing came out, not even air.

A sharp gasp woke me from the dream only to remind me of the nightmare I was currently living. I found little sleep in my cell at the courthouse, and when I did, it brought unwelcome dreams which felt far too real. Four days in the cell left me exhausted, yet my mind would not unwind enough to allow me rest. I was staring at the wall when a young-ish looking man in a suit appeared in the hallway.

“Hi, Miss Thomas,” he said as the guard unlocked my cell and let the man in. “I’m Martin Yates, your court appointed lawyer.” I’m not sure if he expected me to shake his hand or greet him with a smile; I did neither; I wasn’t much of a people person under normal circumstances, and especially not under this one. He sat on a stool across from my block of a bed.

“Okay, let’s cut to the chase. The evidence is mounting, and it doesn’t look good.”

“What evidence?” My concern was genuine.

“Miss Thomas—“

“Jo,” I interrupted.

“Jo, your hair was found at both crime scenes. So was this.” Martin held up a small evidence bag which held a key. The apartment key which I had lost after watching the movie at Dylan’s house.

Martin must have read the shock on my face, because he continued slowly.

“They also have a fairly solid motive.”

“Motive?” I snapped. “I didn’t even know either of those girls! Why would I want to kill them? I’m not a killer, I’m a barista for God’s sake!”

“Well,” Martin continued, keeping his composure far better than I, “they are building the case that you had a deep interest in Dylan, and you were jealous of the girls.”

I scoffed. “Being *interested* in someone doesn’t turn a person into a killer.” Of course I couldn’t deny my interest in Dylan, but what of his interest in me? I was beginning to doubt it had ever existed at all. I still had not heard from him; I was sure my arrest had been publicized so he must have known I was sitting in a jail cell. I sure as hell wasn’t going to call him, but I thought he would show up, demand to see me. But he never did.

“Mr. Mitchell is going to testify against you. He’s going to claim you were stalking him.”

That’s when it hit me.

All those months, watching Dylan, getting to know him. He was getting to know me too.

“Mr. Yates,” I interrupted his spiel about something to which I had long stopped paying attention. “There’s something I need you to get from my apartment, and I think it’s important. Really important.”

EIGHTEEN

Days later, Martin brought the folder and the phone to my cell and I explained to him where the items came from, how I got them, and everything in between. I had wrestled with the idea of telling anyone about the items I had taken from Dylan’s house. I still felt a certain loyalty

to him, a deep tug of infatuation wanted to pull me away from turning him in, but the more logical side of me and what little sense I had left convinced me it was the right thing.

“Wow,” Martin rubbed a hand back and forth on his forehead. I had been taking shallow, nervous breaths for the duration of our meeting, nervous that what I had found, rather stolen, was nonsense and irrelevant. I was no accountant, but I was observant, and what I’d found in that folder looked peculiar.

“You were right,” Martin continued upon flipping through the last few pages in the folder. “This is important.”

Martin confirmed my suspicions: the pages within the folder, which had been torn from the ledgers I’d initially found in Dylan’s office, showed transactions from the multiple Cowell nonprofit organizations, however these transactions had been carefully covered up with a mock ledger. Dylan was embezzling money from Ashlynn’s parents.

The phone contained a slew of text messages between Valerie and Dylan. Neither came from money, and from what we gathered from the text exchanges, their desperation led them to source money from Ashlynn’s family. Somewhere along the way Ashlynn must have learned too much and Dylan decided her fate.

I remembered the text I had accidentally seen on Dylan’s phone; *What’s the situation w/ your girl?*

Ashlynn was the situation. My stomach turned over a hundred times as I imagined Dylan as a killer. A guilt washed over me, a feeling of betrayal. But I rehearsed reassurances in my head; I had done the right thing. I was suddenly embarrassed by my infatuation with Dylan and by my naivety.

Martin brought the evidence to the district attorney's office the following day and without a hiccup, I was released. From my endless hours of binging Law and Order, I expected my freedom to be a longer process but Martin assured me the evidence was insurmountable. Martin warned me of the possibility I may be subpoenaed to testify during Dylan's trial, but to my great relief the order never came. I didn't keep up with the trial, even after everything, I still felt too much betrayal to sit in that courtroom and face Dylan. I hoped he wouldn't find out the evidence against him came from my doing, but then again, how could he not?

What I did know was Dylan had pleaded not guilty to the murder of Ashlynn, claiming they had insufficient proof that she was dead at all. It was sad to see this desperation, as his pride, and perhaps sanity slipped so far away from him that he was insistent the girl was to blame. Ultimately, he was convicted of both crimes.

NINETEEN

I was packing up my apartment on a Tuesday when the call came. My presence was requested by an inmate at the Colorado State Penitentiary. My heart jumped into my throat as I tossed around the idea of actually going. How could I be face to face with Dylan after I turned him in? Even worse, how could I be face to face with a killer? I still could not bring myself to call him such a thing out loud, out of the guilt I felt from my long held ignorance of his doings, and the fact that I still wanted to have feelings for him. I paced around my half empty apartment for another day before climbing on a bus to the prison.

Dylan's hair was longer than I had ever seen, and his curls looked more like knots. His unshaven face turned him into a worn down man instead of a beautiful boy. He was still far too handsome to be an inmate, but the stubble on his chin gave him a subtle darkness. When he sat down, facing me from behind a glass wall, I said nothing, nor did I breathe. He lifted the phone on the desk and motioned for me to do the same. I hoped he couldn't see the phone trembling in my hand.

"I'm surprised you actually came." His voice was unfamiliar, the charm lost. I couldn't reply.

"Jo Anne, you have to understand why I had to involve you."

"Understand?" I squeaked out, my voice threatening to break. "How could I?"

"It wasn't me. Well, it was, but I had no choice." I scoffed and he continued more frantically. "It's Ashlynn. It was all her idea. She wanted to steal the money and then fake her death to get away from her parents, and she wanted to frame it on Valerie. But, then you were there and she thought you knew too much. She thought you were onto her. At the coffee shop, you saw me with Val. At my job you knew I had quit. Hell, you were at my house the night Ashlynn came up with this whole thing. I tried to convince her you were harmless, and then you found those ledgers in my house, and I had no choice. Ashlynn made me frame it on you!"

My head throbbed with the weight of Dylan's spiel. Dylan had only been locked up a few weeks and his sanity was already slipping. I couldn't ignore the heartache that was flooding my system. The months we had spent together, the months that felt so special to me, it was all just a scheme to figure out what I knew. A scheme to frame me for *his* crimes. Heartache turned into anger towards his audacity to blame Ashlynn. In that moment I realized how easily Dylan

had charmed and tricked me, and I knew Ashlynn must have fallen for it too, but I was lucky enough to escape the same fate she had suffered. And Valerie, a woman I had never known, was just an unfortunate pawn in Dylan's dark game. The room began to spin and I dared not blink as the tears threatened to overflow down my cheeks.

"Jo, you have to believe that Ashlynn is still alive. I didn't kill her. I need you to find her. If you find her, then I can get out of here. We could start over, Jo, you and me."

For the first time, I looked at him without any feeling at all, numbness wiping away any sympathy I once had for him. I stared deep into his eyes, my gaze unwavering as I calmly set the phone down with finality.

Goodbye Dylan, I thought as I stood and walked out.

TWENTY

Every now and then, my mind tries to wander to Dylan. My new job at The Rock Coffee Shop in Tallahassee elicits memories of where I used to be, but it also brings about a sense of pride in how far I have come. I curl my hair once in a while and I have gotten quite good at it. With my most recent promotion as assistant manager at the coffee shop, I was able to buy a moped, abandoning my old bike.

As I reminisce, I step up to the counter to help the next customer. I tap her order into the computer and then look to get her name. She removes her sunglasses and the world around me disappears as I feel like my insides have sunken to my feet. The sharp jawed, soft nosed woman in front of me has blonde hair and obvious brunette roots. Her smile is unwavering, though I am sure she notices my shock.

French manicured fingers lay a ten dollar bill on the counter. “Keep the change,” Ashlynn says as she winks and slides her sunglasses back over her eyes.