

Mary Jo LoBello Jerome

Dermis
(Excerpt)

I avoided Dev's side of the lab and timed my exits so I wouldn't leave when he did. "If you ever need a ride home, it is no problem. We can carpool," he said almost everyday those first six months, bowing his head slightly, so annoying like I was upper class. He followed me to the break room. He watched as I went to the Ladies or the copy room. It grew worse over the months, and I started to expect to see him everywhere, not just at work. I was sure I had seen him walking through my neighborhood a few times, so I'd have to change directions, cross the street, duck into the nearest store. I was afraid he would pop up on my porch or that I'd see him peeking through my windows. I kept the shades drawn. I looked over my shoulders in the supermarket, sensed a presence skulking near. I felt obsessed and then constantly irritated at myself for thinking about him all the time. I dreamed about him and woke sweating. I used to try to meet guys and date. Now I hid at home. Not even one year into the job, I had no choice but to make a formal complaint, and to compound it, the bureaucracy made me feel evil. So many questions: Had he ever been rude? Had he ever made sexual innuendos or jokes? Had he ever touched or threatened me?

"God, no. He just bothers me. Constantly. He's too sweet."

The HR manager scribbled on a yellow pad, and I squirmed, thinking somewhere in the files were the words: *She thinks he's sweet*. Human Resources issued Dev a warning, and that memo soothed some of the annoyance, but not all.

I ran into him at the mall a few months after the warning. I'd been working at the lab for just over a year by then. I was leaving Starbucks, looking down to find the sipper on the plastic top, heading for a seat in the atrium. Out of nowhere, he was there. Directly in front of me.

"Hi, Marie Anna. Are you having coffee?"

I stepped back. He had scared me. His eyes were wide. "What are you doing here?"

He held up a red bag from Macy's and shrugged. "Can I sit with you and have coffee? Can I buy you a Danish cake or a muffin?"

I tried for a second to convince myself that seeing him there was a coincidence. You ran into people at Starbucks on a weekend. Lots of people shopped on Saturdays. I had missed my mother's birthday a few weeks back, so I bought her a scarf at Lord and Taylor's, which was at the opposite end of the mall. It probably was just chance running into him. But he was shifting from foot to foot and his eyes were so wide and his lips were tight. His nervousness crept up on me like a column of ants. "Actually I was just getting ready to go. I'm not staying," I said, taking a too-big sip of burning coffee. I flinched and reacted, spluttering the steaming coffee onto the floor.

Dev cried out as if the roof of his mouth was scorched. He reached toward me but wavered. His hands fluttered in front of my face like a jittery magician.

I pulled back, wiping my chin, angry but controlled. "It's okay, Dev. Chill out. I'm fine."

“Please, it’s too hot. Don’t hurt yourself with coffee, Marie Anna.” He turned toward the Starbucks kiosk. “Someone should tell them not to make it so hot for all the people. This is dangerous.”

“No. Don’t bother.” I held the dripping cup out to my side.

“Are you sure? Please, have a seat. We can talk together.” He gestured like an usher towards the benches. “I’ll get some ice water and a cake.”

“No. I’m going,” but I added, “thanks,” my politeness a habit, and I immediately regretted my softness. I hated feeling weak.

“I will please walk you to your car. I can carry your bag. I can . . .”

His insistence clinched it: this meeting wasn’t a fluke. “Nope. See you Monday.” I walked away but knew he was following and I turned, straining to control my voice.

There he was, just a few feet from me. “Dev. Get back. I want to walk by myself.”

“But I have to go that way, too.”

“Really?” I looked past the crowds down the hall. “You want to go into the linen department at JC Penneys?”

“Yes. I have to get some linen.”

I pointed in the opposite direction, sloshing coffee onto the tiles. “Then I’m going that way.” I started but when he moved toward me, I said more quietly as if speaking to a child, “Now what did I just say?”

He looked ashamed. “You said, do not follow me.”

“Good.” I turned away again, and ignoring his protests, I quickly stepped into the moving crowd, the blaring music of the shops drowning out his sing-song voice. I pivoted once, quickly, to try to catch him behind me, but he wasn’t there. Unlocking the car, I scanned the parking lot. Is he near? Is that him? I was worked up. Damn him. Damn him! I’d only wanted to kill part of the long weekend at the mall, window-shop, try on daring dresses I’d never buy, and now because he had ruined my day, I was heading back to my empty apartment too early. Damn him, that little creeper. I threw the stick into reverse, but before I backed up, I twisted and searched the rear seat, then immediately felt idiotic. He couldn’t be there. I felt crazed. Look what that little fucker was doing to me.