

Marco Polo

His name's Marco. Everyone called him Polo. He was one of those mama's boys whose mama didn't realize he wasn't into girls.

I mean, he sure fooled me.

When I looked at him I felt like I was rereading some Nicholas Sparks novel that I hated the first time but couldn't resist reading again just for the silky-smooth description of the sexy love interest. Even though I know he turns out to be a douche in the end.

Please state your name for the record.

Oh, yeah, sorry about that, Detective. Hi, my name's Layla. Layla Warren.

Thanks. You can keep going. And, please, call me Claire.

Well, Claire, sometimes I wish I'd never stepped into that sleazy dive bar off Marshall Avenue downtown. But then again, in a very real sense, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I was walking past with two of my girlfriends (we'd been to a play near there, see?) and we heard the distant sound of maracas coming from the alley. I think that's what drew me in. Plus, we were three girls, in love with the night, and desperate to go home tipsy.

The door to the bar was covered with one of those hanging beaded things that makes a silent entry practically impossible. Several faces stared at us when we stepped through. Every single person was Hispanic or Latino. My friend whispered 'it must be South America night' to me and I jabbed her in the side. I was actually thinking it was time for us rich white gringo chicks to get our butts out of the joint when I saw him.

When was this?

The night at the bar? About fourteen months ago. I know what you're thinking. Love at first sight isn't real. I agree. What happened when I saw Polo that night was not that. He quit bartending and came over to talk to me. Asked if he could make me a tequila sunrise. I'm sure he saw how nervous I was. It was such a weird situation. It's like one of those moments in life when everything is telling you to turn around, but you can't move your feet.

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Bzzz Bzzz Bzzz. "Cause when the roof cave in and the truth came out / I just didn't know what to do / But when I become a star, we'll be living so large / I'll do anything for you / So tell me girl / Mmh whatcha say..."

Claire jolted awake and grabbed her iPhone off the bedside table. For the first time in her entire, insipid life, she questioned whether Jason Derulo was an appropriate ringtone for a grown woman.

"Hey, hello, what's up, Sarge?" she asked hurriedly, glancing at the clock. 5:36 a.m.

“We’ve got a body. I need you down at the station in ten.”

“You know I live fifteen minutes away.”

Click.

Great.

She threw on some black dress pants that were laying in the floor, pulled a jacket over the hole-ridden t-shirt she’d slept in, grabbed her badge, holster, and gun, and was out the door in under two minutes. She rode with the windows down even though the frosty Newark air paid no attention to her whitening knuckles. Her thin blonde hair whipped in her eyes and stuck to her teeth as she screamed along to Jay-Z and Bruno Mars. Once she set her cruise on the freeway, she pulled down the visor mirror to evaluate the day’s black bags and smeared eyeliner from the night before. It had been a rowdy one – she’d partied hard alone with a bottle of cheap red and collapsed sometime around 3 a.m. with Friends flashing shadows on the wall.

Claire should have been freaking out more than she was. Not only had she gotten under three hours of sleep, but she’d never worked a homicide before. Typically, they had her on paperwork duty. She had been promoted to detective three weeks before and hadn’t left her desk since. All the other detectives got to hit the streets. All the other detectives were men. Claire never doubted that her sergeant was a complete misogynist and, therefore, sometimes dreamed of strangling him in his sleep. She was hit with the irony of her, a cop, killing someone. She pulled into the station and parked. She licked her thumb and wiped the last black smear off her cheek. As she closed the door and forgot to lock her Wrangler, a little chuckle slipped through her lips. Then, she headed inside.

“What took you so long?” Sergeant Peters snarled at her before she’d even made it through the door.

“I literally drove 90 miles per...”

“Listen,” he interrupted. “Just do what you’re told.”

“Where’s the body? Who was it? Why aren’t we at the scene?”

“Have Jeffers brief you in the conference room. I need to find Mack,” Peters hollered over his shoulder as he walked away.

Claire asked Jeffers what the heck was going on. Apparently, a body had washed up in the bay. Male. About 35.

“I’ve got a hit on the prints!” came a shout from another room. “Our John Doe has a name!”

Marco Rodriguez.

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I didn’t even know I had a type until I saw him. I was an upright Protestant from outside Pittsburgh, and he was an opposite-of-devout Catholic living in Jersey. But when we danced, my head rested perfectly on his shoulder. His head was tightly shaved back then, like he was in the military, but I think he did it just to attract girls. We stayed the whole night in that hole in the wall. I only had two drinks, because I wanted my eyes to be sober when I looked into his. Magic. That’s the only way to describe the feeling. My two friends got drunk and just danced on strangers all night.

What were your friends’ names?

Shannon Roberts and Caroline Taylor.

We were inseparable in college. God, everyone must’ve hated us. We went to a small Christian school near Pittsburgh. The kind where everyone’s nose is up everyone else’s butts. We were the Phoebe, Monica, and Rachel of the town. We cracked jokes when we should’ve

prayed, and we winked at the senior boys when we should've been scared. But boy, did we have fun. We broke all the rules but still went to church on Sunday. But Shannon liked to push the limits. I'm pretty sure she slept with her public policy professor and only got a B minus out of the whole thing.

Just pretty sure?

Ha, listen. I'm no snitch, but when you're about to not graduate senior year because you're failing a required class, you need an intervention; and, somehow, Shannon got her intervention. It was spring break senior year when we took that trip to Jersey. Funny how I turned out to be the one who never graduated.

What happened?

Polo. Polo happened. Polo with his broad shoulders and Cuban accent. Oh, did I mention he was from Cuba? His family fled to the US when Castro was in power. Polo was thirteen when his family made it up to Jersey. He started high school and got a job picking blueberries. He'd be up at 4 a.m., pick until school at 8, go back from 4-7 p.m., and wake up and do it all over again. That's all he ever told me about his life. My god, sometimes I lay awake at night and wonder why I didn't ask more questions. I'm such an idiot. I thought I knew so much, but I know so little.

He always made it seem like his life stopped and restarted once he met me. I know mine did.

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Claire was, in fact, not really working the homicide. Like most cases, she'd been called in to "man the fort," as Peters put it. She wandered aimlessly as people, men, with real tasks, bustled around the station doing important things. Whenever another detective unearthed a tidbit

of information, Claire tacked it to the profile board. Cause of death: drowning. Time of death: Saturday. Family: none. Job: none. Address: none. Phone records: most calls went to a Layla Warren.

“There’s our lead!” screamed Claire, nearly jumping with excitement. “She must know what happened!”

“Been there, done that,” said Jeffers. “She’s his ex. Told me they called it off a week ago. Pretty much a dead end. Poor guy must’ve thought he couldn’t live without her.”

“Just another Mexican who should’ve stayed where he belonged,” mumbled Peters. “If you’re going to use your body as human pollution, have the decency to do it in your own country.” The investigative team laughed.

“So that’s it?” Claire stood, shaken.

By 5 p.m. that day, the team had declared the death a suicide. To Claire, nothing added up, which, to Sergeant Peters, meant everything added up. He and Jeffers agreed there was no more investigating to be done and both went home to have dinner with their wives. Claire couldn’t manage to peel her eyes off the small scribble under Layla’s name, posted on the board. Shallowford Road, Apartment 4C.

The devil on her shoulder whispered she’d never amount to anything. She was born to disappoint. Her mother. Every guy she’d ever tried to date. Her life was meant to be lived behind a desk. An electric collar around her neck, tying her to the station. She wasn’t allowed to have a hunch. She was born to tack things to a board.

The angel spoke otherwise. She was a detective. She was born to solve crime. To track down justice and lock bad guys behind bars. She was a warrior princess who should be taken

seriously. Treated as an equal. No, as more than that. As a leader. As a force to be reckoned with. She was allowed to have a hunch. She was allowed to listen to herself.

The sun was just setting as she pulled down the gravel drive. Claire knocked. Nothing. Then, footsteps.

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Have you ever been in love, Claire?

Um.... Yes. Once.

How do you know?

I guess... It didn't feel like anything I'd felt before.

Exactly. That night, with Polo, was unlike anything I had ever experienced. In the days that followed, I saw the world in a whole new light. We explored and talked and held hands. He told me about how he planned to open a nightclub of his own and how he wanted me to a part of it. My eyes twinkled with stars. When he wasn't at work, we spent every waking hour alone together. My friends went back to Philly. I stayed in Jersey. My friends called to check in on me. I quit answering. One night, after we went out dancing and had way too many, I'm pretty sure we went to the courthouse and got married. But, to tell you the truth, I'm not really sure. It didn't matter. I woke up in the morning with a shred of a paper towel tied around my finger, and nothing felt finer. We were broke as hell, but I still had a ring.

And, did you tell your family?

Are you kidding? They would have killed me. Polo was the kind of man my father warned me about when I was little. Shannon and Caroline told my parents I'd stayed in the city for a love interest. Knowing Mom and Dad, they probably came looking for me at some point. Telling this story makes me sound like a disrespectful rebel. Like I hated my parents. Like I lived with

unhealthy reckless abandon. That's not it at all. It's hard to put in words. It's like... It's like for the first time, in my entire life, I smelled the sweet perfume of my own individuality. Like my whole life I had been a poser. I wasn't someone else when I was with him. I was myself. And I loved who I was.

He had a job bartending. I got a job waitressing. We were making ends meet and everything felt right. I was living out a romance movie. I came to find out, though, that in movies, the whole thing is scripted.

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The door inched open. A small, round, fragile face peered around the cheap aluminum doorframe. Slowly, as if afraid to touch sunlight, the face's body emerged until it was totally exposed. Claire had pictured Layla as being older. She'd assumed Layla's age would match Marco's 35 years. Not so. The woman who stood before her was young, early twenties at the oldest. Bedroom slippers padded her feet and juxtaposed the mini skirt above them in almost abhorrent fashion. The woman wore a man's sweatshirt, and her ombré hair fell to her waist. She was undeniably, unequivocally, unfathomably beautiful. Dangerously so.

"Layla?" Claire almost whispered.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm with the police. I'm here to ask you some questions about ..."

"They were already here." Layla spoke slowly. Her shoulders hung heavily.

"Can... can I come inside?"

Layla motioned for Claire to come in. The detective took her shoes off at the door. Not because the floor was abundantly clean and she was worried about making a mess, but because Layla carried herself in such a way that wherever she stood seemed like holy ground. Layla

asked if she wanted tea, and Claire couldn't help but say yes. She sat at the kitchen table and watched her work. Claire thought Layla's posture was perfect and she moved with such elegance and...

"That Detective Jeffers sure is –"

"Rude?" Claire interjected. Layla turned around and smiled.

"That wasn't going to be my *specific* word of choice," she chuckled, and the room lit up.

"So, tell me, Detective...?"

"Phillips. Claire Phillips."

"So, tell me, Detective Claire Phillips, how bad did Jeffers screw up in order for them to have to send out round two?"

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We'd both been working for six months before I noticed the money disappearing. Or, rather, it just wasn't adding up. I was making eight bucks an hour, plus tips. I was building up a savings account. Polo was working seven hours a night and banking half of what he should. I ignored it for a while. When I finally asked about it, he said he was investing it. I was so in love that I believed it. I ate it hook, line, and sinker. I believed he was investing it and I believed he was investing it wisely. College teaches you so much. So much crap. Nothing about budgeting, nothing about relationships, nothing about how to tell when someone is lying to your face.

It was two weeks ago when the credit card bill came. He must have run out of cash and not realized that the credit card company would mail us a statement of all the expenses. All the money had gone to a gay bar I'd never heard of. I thought there was a mistake, that someone had been stealing his money, that something was wrong. In hindsight, I think I knew the truth.

Deep down, I knew. That's why I went to the bar alone one night when Polo was supposed to be at work. (Excuse me... I need a tissue...). Anyways, I wanted a miracle, but I found reality.

Please, keep going, if you can.

To be honest, I've blacked out most of that night from my memory. I remember walking in. I remember seeing Polo and another man making out in the corner. I remember screaming. I remember ripping off my paper towel ring, spitting on it, and mashing it onto his face. He followed me into the street. He was crying. He was apologizing. He said he loved me. I told him words were worthless. I cried, too. I've cried quite a lot this week, as you might imagine.

Layla, I am so, so sorry. Did you see him after the breakup?

Yes. We met up on Saturday. I told him I was going to bring him his things. Since I had more money, the apartment became mine.

Saturday? That was the day Marco died. Did you tell Jeffers that?

No.

You brought him his things.... But... Wait... He didn't have anything with him when his body washed up....

...

Why didn't you take him that sweatshirt you're wearing? It's obviously his.

...

Layla, did you push Marco into the bay?

Does it matter? I killed him either way.

What do you mean?

Claire, Polo drowned. Of water or of guilt. Either I pushed him into the water because I was mad at him, or he threw himself into the water because I ruined his life. I have to live with one of those options the rest of my life.

Which one is it, Layla?

It seems to me, Claire, that the choice is yours.

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“Technically, Jeffers didn’t screw up. I’m here because I think you have more to say than what Jeffers said you said,” Claire replied with a wink.

“What do *you* want me to say, Detective?”

“I want you to speak candidly and from the heart. I don’t want you to think about death or suicide. I want you to tell me about the man you loved. I am going to set the audio recorder on the table so I can transcribe it later. Take your time. Start whenever.”

Layla took a deep breath and a sip of tea.

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