

## A Rose in Winter

By Detective Writer

It is said that everything happens for a reason. Does it actually? What possible explanation could there be for everything going wrong and completely changing someone's life? It all began on a chilly day in Casper, Wyoming on April 18th of 1994, to where a twenty-four year old woman named Jessica Stanhope would have the biggest terror filled moment of her life in an instant.

Her day had started the same as anyone else, Jessica had woken up early, she got up to shower, brushed her teeth, got dressed, got some breakfast, and was on her merry way to work at the local restaurant called "The Cozy Soup." However, the minute Jessica had gotten into her car, she couldn't help but notice there was a strange man with extremely baggy clothes, he had one droopy left eye and his right eye a mysterious blue with a shining blue pupil nearly blinding that is not hard to see, standing a few feet away from her car and staring directly at her. Not trying to allow the man's piercing gaze nerve her, Jessica quickly turned on the car ignition and got the car started. Yet, as Jessica made sure to pull her car out of the driveway, the strange man who kept on staring at her made a fast approach to stand in front of the car just as Jessica was out. Quickly sighing, Jessica then turned to move her car a few inches to the right, when once again the man went in front of the car, blocking her exit. This process would continue to happen several times more, Jessica attempting to move the car in a new direction and the man blocking it once more, despite her numerous horn honking. Realizing she was already running for work, Jessica knew she had to do something to leave, even if it meant actually confronting this unusual man.

“Hey! Hey! Listen mister! Can you just move already?! I’m already running late to work because of you! Can you just go somewhere PLEASE!!!!” said Jessica.

“No, just why should I? There’s a beautiful lady in my eyes and if anything, you’re blocking me doll face,” said the man.

“Just leave me alone you creep. And if you don’t move, I’m calling the cops for harassment!” said Jessica.

“Fine, fine sugar. I’ll move but only because I know that I’m gonna see you again sweets. I just know I’m gonna make all your dreams come true too very soon,” said the man with a wink and blowing an air kiss to Jessica and walked out of Jessica’s path.

Slightly stunned with a flabbergasted expression, Jessica gave a slow shudder as she did not wish to imagine anything more that man had thought of her. As if she would ever go out with him! The absolute nerve! Even though she was now free to drive in any direction she chose, Jessica couldn’t help but think about the man’s last words. What could he have possibly meant when he said that he could make her dreams come true very soon? Quickly deciding that it was just some random creep, Jessica chose not to make a big deal and go about her day as planned.

Once she entered the parking lot of The Cozy Soup and saying numerous apologies to her boss Alexa for being late and simply receiving a glare in return, Jessica immediately donned her chef’s uniform and set off into the kitchen.

“Hi guys, sorry I’m late. There was a crazy guy who kept getting in my way every time I kept trying to drive away from him, he just kept getting in the way,” said Jessica.

“Oh, I hear you girl. Some guys just don’t know when to quit. Sometimes you just gotta give them a good talkin’ too or a good smack and then trust me, they’ll leave you alone,” said Aisha, Jessica’s coworker.

“Yeah, just a few weirdos out there. But nothing to fret about,” said Jessica.

“That’s the spirit!” said Aisha before resuming to work. As Jessica and Aisha began to work in the kitchen and chopping vegetables, they couldn’t help but overhear the noise of the television that was hanging on the wall upstairs.

“Breaking News Update: ‘the body of a man was just found a few feet away from the local pier off of Highway 16. None of his belongings were stolen; however, he was found with a small black rose on his chest. He has not been identified yet. Although, the discovery of the body has lead the police into a homicide investigation,’ said Tyler, the news anchor.

“Ooh, somebody got in trouble but at least he’s resting in peace now,” said Jessica while stirring the pot of chicken stew. Several hours had passed, Jessica continued to cook and plate dishes, only stopping for a quick water break and a few bites of an energy bar as she tried to work hard and fast to keep up with the lunch rush. Various hours went on, eventually reaching to six thirty in the evening, which was usually the beginning of the dinner rush at the restaurant. By then, Jessica became nearly wiped out by the stress of the lunch rush that once her replacement Shane entered the kitchen to take over for her shift, she was set to leave as soon as possible.

“Oof, Shane you’ve got a heavy duty in front of you. Best of luck pal,” said Jessica.

“Thanks, love. Have a good night,” said Shane to an already sleepy Jessica. Once Jessica left the restaurant, got in her car, she was headed straight to bed. Trying desperately to keep herself up, Jessica began to turn on the radio as well as grabbing her cellphone out of her purse to

be held by the phone holder and the minute she hit a red light, she began to scroll through the news. Remembering the news she heard earlier that day, she began to search for it and once she found the breaking news update. Suddenly, jumping up and down out of her seat in a fright with a loud, booming scream “AAAAAAAHHHHHH!!,” she simply couldn’t believe it. The same weirdo with the freaky eyes she had threatened to call the police on was the same guy the police found dead today.

Holy crap! I mean I didn’t like the guy and I’m sure no one did. But to have killed him? He was killed right by my house in cold blood. And with a black rose? Who would do something like that?,” said Jessica, once the red light changed to green, and she was clear to continue driving. No matter how much she tried to stop herself from thinking about it, Jessica couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe someone was out to get her next. If someone was willing to murder someone right by her house, who’s to say the killer wouldn’t try to get her too.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, ohhhh...” said Jessica who continued to get such tight knots in her stomach. ‘I mean whoever did it is probably out to get me too just for even talking to him. But I told him to move and it was for less than ten minutes and mostly likely he pissed someone off and that got him to buy the farm, nothing to do with me. So Jessica RELAX!” she said. Taking slow deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling, and forcing her hands to stop shaking, unless she hoped to get in an accident, Jessica gradually felt herself beginning to calm down. She was beyond relieved to see her front door from a few feet away, drove into the parking lot, quickly put the car into park, and hopped out. Simply a tad curious, Jessica couldn’t help herself but take a peek into the spot she had first seen the man that morning and was a bit

surprised to see a few drops of blood. Swiftly shaking her head and deciding not to follow the drops any further before she found something she would not like to see...

“Stop it. Stop it Jessica, it happened and it’s over. Now just get upstairs, take a shower and go to bed,” she said. Jessica then made her way towards her house, grabbed her key, went inside, and shut the door with a quiet and fast turn of the locks. As she slid against the door in relief, no matter how many times she would begin to reproach herself for that, Jessica couldn’t help but think about the person responsible for the strange man’s death. Will he be caught? Will the police find out his identity before someone else gets hurt? Why was the man a target? Making a choice fast to have a glass of wine before she made herself panic with utter fear before going to bed was soon calling her name and Jessica slowly made her way to the small kitchen, grabbed a bottle of Pinot Noir, and turned on her television to watch “The Golden Girls” for the rest of the night.

The next day, Jessica once again woke up early, get dressed and had breakfast before heading out to her car for work. However, before she could enter her car, she found herself brushed up against a man with a small scar above his left eyebrow, a big forehead, and dark brown hair.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t see where I was going,” said Jessica.

“No no it’s alright. Really it was my fault, I shouldn’t have been blinded by a truly beautiful woman,” said the man. With a slight burn on her cheeks, Jessica quickly remembered she couldn’t stand all day and flirt with a cute guy, she actually had to go to work.

“Thank you and well I should get to work now. Nice to meet you Mr...” said Jessica.

“Oh Ashton, I’m Ashton Cooper,” said the man.

“Jessica and again it’s nice to meet you,” said Jessica before getting into her car and beginning to drive away while giving Ashton a quick wave goodbye. Within fifteen minutes, Jessica found herself arriving to work and after giving a quick greeting to Alexa who simply waved her two fingers in response, she made her way into the kitchen. After donning her chef outfit and giving Aisha a brief hug, Jessica sets right to prepping the vegetables for the daily soups and stews. After about two hours have passed, Aisha lightly taps Jessica’s shoulder as she is chopping garlic and begins to wonder just why she is stopped from doing her job. Aisha is holding a nearly empty plate of food.

“Yo girl. Who’s that hot guy checking you out?” said Aisha.

“What are you talking about? What guy?” said Jessica.

“Dude that guy giving you that look and who asked to give his compliments to the chef,” said Aisha who holds the plate closer to Jessica’s face. She then brings a tiny note attached that says “Hello my beautiful Jessica. Won’t you please give me some time to speak to you and have dinner with me tonight?” With both cheeks burning by the minute and a soft smile, Jessica slowly looks up from the note to the small window that allows kitchen staff to view the restaurant and sees Ashton raising a glass and giving her a wink and winning smile. Giggling softly and as she shakes her head, Jessica smirks a little to Ashton and mouths “yes,” much to Aisha’s delight. As only a few moments pass, Jessica unties her apron and changes out of her uniform and goes to talk to Ashton at the table about dinner.

“Hey stranger. So, you want to take me out?” said Jessica.

“Oh of course gorgeous! Do you like Italian? There’s a really good Olive Garden near here,” said Ashton as he holds out his hand for Jessica to take. Slowly, they leave The Cozy

Soup for Olive Garden. They both drive out in their own individual vehicles and soon meet up at the restaurant. The pair soon head inside for their date and after engaging in conversation with dinner and drinks, Jessica has had such a good time with Ashton that she can't help but immediately agree to head back to Ashton's place to talk more. After Ashton pays the bill, once again, the two head to their respective vehicles while surprisingly managing to drive without heavy traffic and reaching Ashton's apartment until less than twenty minutes. The moment they both went inside the elevator to the third floor and step inside the apartment. The minute the pair get settled in, share a bottle of wine, and start to talk about their lives, goals, and hopes for the future. Although, despite how comfortable Jessica feels in that moment, she knows she can't ignore the bathroom issue and excuses herself to the restroom. After Jessica freshens up in the restroom, something stands out to her through the corner of her eye. She wonders as to why there is a thin line of blood splattered on the wall. Letting her curiosity get the better of her, she begins to rummage through Ashton's things and is extremely shocked at what she finds next: a black rose! Remembering the strange man was found with a black rose on his chest, she is completely traumatized by what she has found that she stands in total silence until she hears a knock on the door.

"Jess, are you alright in there? You've been in there for quite a bit," said Ashton.

"Yeah, no worries. I'll be out in a second," said Jessica as she tries desperately to control her breathing and relax her rapidly beating heart.

"Are you sure? I mean if you need help or anything I'm here, you know," said Ashton as he swiftly opens the door.

“NOOOOO wait don’t PLEASE!” said Jessica. But it’s already too late, Ashton has already opened the door as Jessica made the mistake of not locking herself in.

“Wait. What’s going on in here? Why do you have that black rose?” said Ashton.

“I think I should be the one asking *you* that question, why do you have it? Do you have some kind of obsession with black flowers?” said Jessica.

“I guess the cat’s out of the bag. Yes, I killed that strange, smelly man. But only because I saw him bothering you and I knew I had to do something about it. No man should get away with harassing a nice girl such as yourself,” said Ashton as he slowly shakes his head.

“So, you just killed that poor man in cold blood because of me?” said Jessica.

“Haha, no my dear I did it because of you and me. So, we could have a shot together but now you know what I did and I’m sorry to say it, but I just can’t let you live now,” said Ashton gradually taking slow steps towards Jessica.

“I won’t let you get away with this. Everyone will know what you did,’ said Jessica as she slowly backed away from Ashton.

“I’m sorry my dear. I really do like you but I’m afraid you don’t have that choice anymore,” said Ashton as he took the black rose from Jessica’s hand. Little did either of them know that the sudden rush of a winter snowfall coming down on the quiet town of Casper, Wyoming would soon become Jessica’s undoing. Not even the volume of her screams could compete with the howling of the strong wind.