

A Lifetime of Twenty Minutes

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Inspired by the Brock Turner felony case

It was hot and stifling, but no one else seemed to mind. She had forgotten the atmosphere of college parties. Bodies swayed with the throbbing music. Skin rubbed skin. The scent of sweat and alcohol filled the fraternity house. A few girls in brightly colored bikini tops and shorts that barely covered their butts danced on top of the coffee table in the living room. The kitchen was filled with people taking body shots, and loud noises came from the upstairs rooms. Her sister was in the back hall flirting and drinking with a tall guy who wore a tight, grey shirt designed to cling to his muscular frame. She tried to slip past, but her sister caught sight of her and motioned for her to join them.

“Hey, you wanna come with us? We’re going to play pool upstairs.”

“No thanks,” she waved back. “I need some air. I’ll come up later.”

“Okay.”

Tossing her short blonde hair back, her sister took the guy’s hand and led him up the stairs. She watched her go and shook her head.

“I knew this was going happen,” she sighed.

Pushing open the screen door, she walked out to the backyard. There were only three people sitting on the back porch. They were sharing a joint, exhaling slowly. She walked farther into the yard to avoid the smoke. The air was much clearer outside. Taking a deep breath, she looked up. Silver dots sparkled against the night sky. The pounding music faded behind her as she crossed over to the hammock tied between two trees in the corner of the yard.

“I’m getting too old for this,” she murmured, sinking onto the netting.

“Too old for what?”

Startled, she turned around. A college student with unruly, blonde hair was standing behind her. His pale blue eyes stood out from his sun-burned face. He was young; he had to be an underclassman, but he was well-built with toned arms and legs.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.”

She smiled at him.

“I’m fine.”

“Come on.”

“Lela, I’m no fun at things like this.”

“You would be if you’d just loosen up some.”

Lela jumped on the bed behind her sister. Leaning her head on her sister’s shoulder, she pouted out her bottom lip.

“Please? Pretty please?”

“Can’t we just stay at home instead and watch a TV show? The new season of *The Blacklist* is on Netflix now.”

“Ugh, you’re such an old woman.” Lela wrinkled her nose. “Don’t you want to take a break? You work full time. It’s time to cut loose and live a little, girl.”

“I’ve already had like four shots and champagne. Isn’t that enough without partying every night?”

“Seriously? It’s just one party.” Lela rolled her eyes. “I thought you said that you wanted to spend time with me. I’m only home for this night before I have to go back to campus.”

“I do, but I meant time for just the two of us. Not with a bunch of immature kids. Why don’t you go party another night?”

“I have to go to this one. It’s a Kappa Alpha party, and I promised Travis that I’d be there.”

“What? He’s not even your boyfriend anymore!”

Lela shrugged and walked into the bathroom. Pulling out her lipstick, she spread the dark cherry shade over her mouth.

“Please tell me you’re not going to this party just to make Travis jealous.”

Lela glanced over as her sister came into the bathroom and jumped up onto the counter.

“I’m not. Travis and I are friends. I’m just going to have fun.”

“And pick up boys?”

Lela brushed silvery grey eyeshadow on her eyelids and frowned in concentration. She loved her sister, but she just didn’t understand. It could be hard being the younger sibling of a practically perfect sister. Ever since high-school, her sister was top of her class with a steady boyfriend. Lela, on the other hand, was a mediocre student at best and hadn’t kept a boyfriend for longer than six months. She knew that her parents wanted her to follow her sister’s footsteps, but there would be time for that later. Now, Lela just wanted to have fun and get her sister to see what she was missing.

“Look, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to, but it’ll be a lot of fun,” Lela said, finishing her makeup.

Turning to her sister, she raised her eyebrows and waited. Lela could see that she was thinking.

“You can bring Peter along too,” Lela suggested.

“He’s gone this weekend. He’s got an interview in Boston for a job.”

“Peter would probably tell you to go anyway.”

Lela’s sister ran her fingers through her long, black hair. Finally, she exhaled and threw her arms up.

“Okay, I’ll go! Might as well. Why not?”

“Really?” Lela looked up.

“Sure, you’re right. I should take some time and relax. Go out and embarrass my little sister. It’ll be fun.”

“Yay!” Lela squealed and clapped her hands. “Go change, and we can leave in like fifteen minutes.”

“What?” Lela’s sister held up her arms and looked down at her baggy yoga pants, faded purple t-shirt, and bare feet. “Isn’t this good enough?”

“Go!” Playfully, Lela smacked her sister on the shoulder. “Penny’s going to be here soon. Mom’s giving us all a ride there, and Charlie’s taking us back, so we don’t have to worry about drinking and driving.”

“Okay, fine.”

As her sister left the bathroom, Lela plugged in her straightener. Her short blonde hair didn’t take long to arrange. Reaching into her wooden jewelry box, she pulled out her silver earrings with dangling butterflies.

“Do I please your majesty now?”

Lela turned around. Her sister had changed into a tight black dress and tall brown boots with her hair pulled back in a high ponytail.

“Here, wear this.” Lela handed her sister a gold necklace with a colorful feather pendant and watched as she fastened it around her neck. “That’s perfect. You look great.”

“Yeah, but it’s kind of cold.” Lela’s sister rummaged through her suitcase. “Is it okay if I borrow your grey sweater?”

“Sure, if you want to look like a librarian,” Lela teased.

“I’m fine with that. Might help keep those little boys away. Do they still have braces and pimples?”

Lela laughed. Before she could retort, her phone went off.

“Oh, Pen’s waiting outside, and Mom’s already in the car. You ready?”

“Let’s go! Girls night out!”

Lela linked arms with her sister as they walked out the door.

Readjusting her hat, she stepped into the squad car.

“What’s the call?”

“Sounds like sexual assault or rape at a college campus.”

“All right, let’s get going. Hit the lights.”

Officer Irina Setter buckled her seatbelt as her partner started the car and turned on the sirens and lights.

“We’re just a few minutes out.”

Irina nodded to Officer Davenant. She could see the lights of incoming ambulances in the rearview mirror. As they pulled into the parking lot where the call had come, Irina could see a woman lying on the ground in a fetal position. The man standing next to her ran towards the police car.

“This doesn’t look good,” Irina murmured.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Davenant agreed.

The two officers hastily stepped out of their car and met the man.

“Please, follow me,” the man called out. “We can’t get her to wake up.”

Jogging behind the man, Irina glanced backwards over her shoulder. The ambulance was getting closer. Only a few minutes out now. As they approached the unconscious girl, Irina’s stomach sank, and she swallowed hard several times. The girl couldn’t be more than five years younger than her. She was filthy, and her dress had been forced well above her waist. Her white underwear with black polka dots had been tossed aside, and the exposure of her body made Irina feel nauseous. Kneeling down next to the girl, Irina felt for a pulse in her neck.

“Her pulse is weak, but still here,” she said.

The sound of sirens grew louder as the ambulance pulled into the parking lot. The EMTs raced over with a gurney already prepared.

“How is she?”

“Stable but unresponsive,” Irina answered.

The two police officers stepped back as the EMTs began to treat the girl. While Officer Davenant called in for backup, Irina turned to the man who had been standing to the side.

“Do you know what happened?” she asked.

He pointed to a group of men about fifty yards away. “He’s over there.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“It’s the guy who did this.” The man gestured to the unconscious girl. “They said that they caught him.”

“Setter, what’s going on?”

Turning around, Irina saw Officer Madlon walking towards them.

“Madlon, we need you to stay with the girl while Davenant and I go check out what’s happening over there.”

Officer Madlon nodded as Irina and Davenant sprinted over to the group of men. When they drew nearer, Irina saw that there was one guy pinned to the ground by four other men.

“Hey guys, what’s going on?” Officer Davenant greeted the men. “We received a call about a possible sexual assault or rape over here.”

“Yes sir, officer. I made the telephone call,” one of the guys replied with a thick foreign accent. “My friend and I were riding our bicycles, and we saw this man on top of that girl. She was not moving. We asked him what he was doing, and he tried to run, so we stopped him.”

“All right, can you please get off so I can cuff him?” Davenant asked.

The group of four men stood up and pulled back. Irina could see the young man they had been holding. He was wearing a white hoodie streaked with dirt and looked around wildly. The strong smell of alcohol came from his clothing and breath. As Officer Davenant began cuffing the man, he looked at Irina.

“I’ll put him in the car and take pictures. You get witness statements.”

Irina nodded. Turning back to the men, she pulled out her notebook and pen.

“Okay, I need you to tell me one at a time what happened from the very beginning. I’m going to take you separately over there. Please don’t talk to each other until after I’ve spoken to each of you individually.”

After she finished scribbling down the last account, Irina took all of their contact information.

“Thank you very much. I’m sure you will be called in soon for more questioning. Please make sure to check your messages.”

Crossing over to the ambulance which was almost ready to depart, Irina tapped one of the EMTs on the shoulder.

“How is she?”

The EMT shook his head.

“She’s conscious, but not coherent. You probably won’t be able to question her for a while.”

“Understood, we’ll contact her later.”

“Okay, we’ve got to get her out of here now.”

Irina nodded at the EMT as he jumped in the back of the ambulance. Closing the doors behind him, Irina tapped on the back of the vehicle, and the ambulance sped away. Slowly, the police officer walked back to the squad car where Davenant was waiting.

“You ready to take him to booking? I’ve already told him he’s being arrested on charges of rape. We’ll read him his rights at the Annex.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

“How’s she going to be?” Davenant jerked his head in the direction of the departing ambulance.

Irina shook her head, and Davenant’s mouth tightened. The two had been partners for so long that words were unnecessary. As Irina stepped into the car, she looked back at the guy cuffed in the back.

“I doubt this is how he planned his evening to go,” Davenant remarked.

“I doubt this is how she planned on her evening going either,” Irina returned.

Officer Davenant murmured in agreement. Turning the key in the ignition, he drove out of the parking lot. Irina looked out of the window as they passed the dumpsters where the girl had been found.

“It’s going to be a long night,” Davenant said.

Irina sighed and leaned her head back. It was going to be an even longer night for the girl in the ambulance.

As she leafed through the documents, Mrs. Locklore blinked rapidly. The words seemed to be swimming on the white pages. Brushing her sleeve over her eyes, Mrs. Locklore inhaled deeply. When her vision cleared, she picked up the folder stuffed with papers again.

“Mina? What are you doing?”

Mrs. Locklore looked up in the direction of the whisper. Her husband stepped out of the darkened hallway into the living room.

“Shh,” Mrs. Locklore held up a warning finger, “don’t wake her up. It took a while for Peter to get her to relax. They’re both asleep in bed now.”

“Which is where you should be. It’s 3 am. Why are you still awake?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I was just doing some reading.” Mrs. Locklore tried to smile reassuringly at her husband, but she knew her eyelashes were still wet with tears. “Don’t worry about me, Eddy. I’m okay.”

Reaching over, Mr. Locklore took the folder from his wife’s hand and opened it. He perused the court documents and sighed.

“Mina, you have to stop doing this to yourself. It’s not going to help anything.”

Mrs. Locklore allowed her husband to pull her onto the couch. Leaning her head on his shoulder, she curled up next to him and pulled his arm around her waist.

“What are we going to do, Eddy?” she murmured.

“I don’t know.”

Mrs. Locklore could feel her husband’s fingers stroking her hair comfortingly. She nestled closer to him.

“I just feel like I have to do something.”

“Honey, there’s nothing to be done,” Mr. Locklore replied. “The verdict has been passed. You can relax now.”

“No, I can’t. The judge still hasn’t sentenced him yet. What if he lets him walk away with no jail time? Or gives him probation?” Mrs. Locklore sifted through the papers and handed them to her husband. “He’s got so many reference letters. Look at all of these. This one’s from a high school coach. Here’s a letter from his grandparents. Oh, and this one from some random lady who blames me for everything because I was the one that dropped our daughters off and let them drink at home. What if all of these character letters make the judge think about giving him a lesser sentence? What if...?”

“Mina,” Mr. Locklore interrupted his wife, “you’re going to drive yourself crazy with all of your “what ifs”. We don’t have any control over this. You’ve got to find a way to let it go.”

Mrs. Locklore shook her head. “I don’t know if I can do that.”

Closing her eyes, she clenched her jaw to keep her lip from trembling. The weight in her chest felt as if it would never leave. Anxiety and fear had drawn new lines on her face over the past few months. Her mind kept thinking and worrying until the world spun around, and peaceful sleep was just a memory.

“Please Mina, talk to me. How can I help you?”

“Oh Eddy,” Mrs. Locklore murmured. “What do I do when there’s nothing to do?”

“Come on, Gabriel! Keep up!”

Panting heavily, Gabriel stood on his bike pedals and forced his way up the incline. His friend braked at the crest of the hill and waited for him to catch up. Sweat trickled down his back and into his eyes as he reached the summit.

“You’re losing your stamina, Gabriel.”

“Shut up, Karl,” Gabriel gasped out. “The air is different here than in Sweden.”

“That’s your excuse?” Karl laughed. “Come on. You’re a graduate student studying law internationally at an American Ivy League school. You’ve got to learn to come up with better arguments than that.”

Running his fingers through his long, blonde hair, Gabriel balanced on his bicycle with one foot on the ground. His calves were aching, and he was so thirsty that even his tongue felt dry. He had emptied the water bottle attached to his bike twenty minutes ago, and they still had a mile to get back.

“Thirsty?”

Gabriel nodded.

“Here.” Karl knocked his bike’s kickstand down and climbed off his seat. Opening his backpack, Karl tossed Gabriel his water bottle. “I told you to fill up at that water fountain back by the Eamond Science Building.”

Squeezing the blue plastic bottle, Gabriel squirted a thin stream of lukewarm water into his mouth. After he swallowed several times, he wiped his chin with the back of his hand.

“And I told you,” Gabriel lobbed the bottle back to his friend, “it was a bad idea to go on a five-mile midnight bike ride.”

“Enjoy the adventure, my friend.”

As Karl placed his bottle back in his bag, Gabriel glanced up at the full moon. The silvery beams shone down almost as brightly as the fluorescent lamps lining the concrete paths. Gabriel yawned and stretched his arms up.

“I just want to get back, take a shower, and go to bed.”

“Good luck with that,” Karl answered. “We still have to study for that exam on Monday.”

Gabriel mopped the sweat off his forehead with his dark blue shirt sleeve and exhaled loudly.

“I forgot the exam was so soon,” he groaned. “We better get back and begin the reading.”

Karl nodded and hopped back on his bicycle. The two students continued cycling the course back to their apartment complex. The cool breeze rushed past Gabriel as he pumped his legs up and down. The short rest had given him a new burst of energy, and he enjoyed the feeling of gliding along the pavement.

“Let’s take a shortcut across campus,” Karl called back to his friend. “It’ll take half of a mile off our route.”

“Great,” Gabriel yelled.

Veering off to a side path, Gabriel followed Karl past a line of fraternity houses. Blaring music came from most of the small houses, and the front yards were full of loud students celebrating the weekend. Karl and Gabriel biked past several of the fraternity homes and turned down a side street. The area was still well-lit with street lamps, but the noise faded behind them.

A few people were sitting on a bench drinking beers. Gabriel nodded to them as they passed. Standing up on his pedals again, he pushed his way up a small incline.

“We’re almost there. Just down this hill and four more blocks,” Karl said over his shoulder.

While they coasted down the hill, Gabriel rested his fatigued legs and looked around. He knew they were nearing their apartment complex, but he was not familiar with this area. A single fraternity house, Kappa Alpha, was at the bottom of the decline. Karl led the way through an empty parking lot to cut across to the street in front of the fraternity house. The two bikers halted before the road as several cars passed. As Gabriel waited for the last vehicle to cross, he noticed a flicker of movement to his right. Glancing over, he saw two figures behind a green metal dumpster. The side of the fraternity house behind them was deserted except for the couple who was lying on the ground.

“Hey, you ready?”

Gabriel jerked his head back around. The street was completely empty now, and Karl was ready to move forward. His friend turned to see what had distracted Gabriel.

“I suppose some people are getting their exercise in other ways,” Karl commented, raising his eyebrows.

“I guess so,” Gabriel replied.

“Come on. Let’s leave them to it.”

Slowly, Gabriel remounted his bike and pedaled across the street alongside Karl. Looking back over his shoulder, he caught one last glimpse of the two forms. The guy was on top of the girl and appeared to be fumbling with his pants.

“Gabriel, stop staring at them. You’re being kind of strange.”

Turning back, Gabriel shook his head. “Something doesn’t seem right.”

“Yes, there’s two people having sex back there and you keep looking at them.”

Gabriel ignored his friend and began slowing down. An uneasy sense passed through him. Finally, he stopped his bike and put one foot on the ground to balance. Karl halted next to him, puzzled.

“What is it?”

“I am telling you that something about those two wasn’t right. I really feel like we should turn back and check on them.”

“Gabriel, that’s going to be really awkward, and I thought you wanted to get back home soon,” Karl protested.

“I do, but I just have a feeling in my gut that we need to turn around.” Gabriel looked into his friend’s deep brown eyes. “Please, Karl. It won’t take that long.”

Karl hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “All right, if you feel like we should.”

Riding back in the direction of the fraternity house, Gabriel pedaled quickly. The street was clear when they reached it, and Gabriel could see the couple was still behind the dumpster. As he drew closer, Gabriel noticed that the woman was very still. Her dress was filthy, and her long hair was spread all over the dirt. The well-built man wearing a white hooded sweatshirt was still moving, but she was limp underneath him.

“You’re right. That looks strange,” Karl murmured.

Frowning, Gabriel jumped off his bike and knocked down the kickstand. The woman remained motionless and seemed as though she was asleep. One of her hands was flung out to the side, laying limply in a heap of brown pine needles.

“Hey man!” Gabriel yelled. “I think she’s unconscious!”

The man didn't respond and continued thrusting his body upon the girl. Gabriel began running towards the two with Karl following closely behind him.

"Hey you!" Gabriel shouted again. "Stop! What's wrong with you? Can't you see that she's unconscious?!"

While the two graduate students drew closer, the man slowly stood up. When they were a few yards away, he leapt away from the girl and began running. Instantly, Gabriel took off after him while Karl bent over the unconscious woman. Adrenaline rushed through Gabriel's body as he ran, reenergizing his exhausted legs. His feet barely seemed to touch the ground while the cool air blew his hair back. Sprinting across a concrete basketball court, Gabriel gained rapidly on the man until only a few feet separated them. Swiftly, he jumped forward and scythed his legs around, hitting the man in the back of the knees and knocking him to the ground.

"What were you doing to her?" Gabriel demanded.

Without answering, the guy pushed himself back up. Gabriel could tell he was going to run again. Quickly, he tackled him around the waist and shoved him down again. Straddling the man's body, Gabriel pinned his arms down. The guy began fighting back, kicking out with his legs. Gabriel gritted his teeth and pushed down on the man's wrists as hard as he could.

"Hang on, Gabriel! I'm almost there!"

Gabriel could hear Karl's shout from across the basketball court. Sweat was dripping down his arms making his hands slippery. He barely managed to hang on to the man who was thrashing violently. With a surge of power, the guy threw Gabriel off to the side. Gabriel landed on his back with a grunt. Before the man could jump up, Karl leapt in on top of his legs. Forcing himself up, Gabriel wrestled the man back down.

"Are you guys okay? What's going on over here?"

Glancing up, Gabriel saw a group of three men approaching them. Karl hastily explained the story. Immediately, one of the men went back to check on the girl while Karl called the police. The other two helped Gabriel hold down the boy who had stopped struggling. The police finally arrived after what seemed like an eternity to Gabriel. Rising, he watched as one of the officers cuffed the man and took him to the police car.

“I’m going to need witness statements from all of you individually. Why don’t we start with you?”

Gabriel obediently followed the police officer to a more private area and told her what happened. As he began recalling the still form of the woman, Gabriel felt an empty hollow forming in his chest.

“Will she be all right?” he asked anxiously.

“We don’t know yet. She still hasn’t regained consciousness. Please continue, sir.”

Gabriel took a deep breath. The memory of the girl’s lifeless hand lying in dirty pine needles made his stomach feel queasy. His eyes began stinging, and Gabriel blinked hard several times. Clearing his throat, he finished his testimony and rejoined the group of witnesses. After Karl spoke with the officer, he returned to his friend.

“Do you know who she was?” he asked in a subdued voice.

“No.” Gabriel looked at the departing ambulance which was carrying the girl. “But I doubt I’ll ever forget her.”

She waved to Lela from the front porch of the fraternity house. Her sister nodded back as she walked away with her friends. The night air was growing cooler. Zipping up her jacket, she

decided to return to the backyard to wait for Lela. Her head was spinning in circles, and she gripped the bannister before she stepped down unsteadily.

“Hey, let me give you a hand.”

She looked up into the blue eyes of the student who had approached her earlier in the backyard. His strong, sinewy hand supported her shaky steps. She could hear that he was still speaking, but nothing seemed to make sense. The words floated around her head like misty clouds. His face seemed to be lifting higher and higher into the air until it touched the twinkling stars. Then she felt that she was falling and sliding down into a pit with no way to stop her descent. Something was pressing down on her body, stifling her. She reached out blindly and tried to push the weight away, but her hands had no strength and fell to the ground limp. She was smothering in heavy darkness as her mind slipped into nothingness.

Screaming broke the night’s stillness. Peter leapt up from the desk in the living room. The screen of his laptop provided enough light for him to run to the bedroom in the back. His girlfriend was thrashing violently on the bed, tangled up in the blankets. Her cries rent the air. Quickly, Peter jumped on the bed and gathered his girlfriend in his arms.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. You’re okay, sweetheart,” he murmured soothingly. “It was just a dream.”

She clung to him and buried her face in the front of his white V-necked shirt. Rocking her back and forth, Peter tried to still her trembling.

“I’m here, all right. Nothing’s going to hurt you. I promise.”

Slowly, Peter was able to calm his girlfriend until she steadied her breathing enough to speak.

“I was smothering,” she whispered. “He was on top of me, and I couldn’t breathe.”

“He can’t hurt you. He won’t ever touch you again.”

Peter stroked his girlfriend’s silky hair. She had cut it short a few weeks ago, and the thick strands fell over her face. Gently, Peter brushed back a few locks and caressed her cheek with his fingertip. Pain swelled in his chest, blocking his throat up and making it difficult to breathe. He wanted nothing more than to give his girlfriend a dreamless night. She hadn’t slept quietly since that terrible night. Kissing her forehead, Peter leaned back against the pillows and pulled her next to him.

“I took you from your work,” she said, her voice shaking slightly. “You have to turn it in tomorrow.”

“It’s okay. I can finish it later.”

Peter rested her head on his chest and put his arm around her shoulders. She curled up in a small ball next to him. The warmth of her body spread over his skin, and he pulled up a blanket over both of them.

“You don’t have to stay. I’ll be okay now.”

“No, I needed a break anyway.” Peter yawned and settled down farther into the pillows. “I’ll go back in a little bit.”

“You mean after I’ve fallen asleep.” She cuddled closer to Peter. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you from working.”

“It’s not your fault,” Peter replied.

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry. I’ve made you stay up late for weeks. You left your job interview early to come back for me.”

“I chose to do that. You didn’t make me.”

“I never meant for this to hurt you.” She lowered her head. “I’m just so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Peter asked bewildered.

“I’m sorry for being so clingy. I’m sorry for needing you to stay with me every night. I’m sorry you have to leave a light on for me like a child before I can sleep. I’m sorry that I can’t go out with you anywhere. I’m sorry that you had to sit in court and watch me try not to fall apart.”

“Stop!” Placing a finger under her chin, Peter tilted her face up so her bright green eyes met his hazel ones. “Don’t ever apologize for any of that again. You understand? None of that is your fault. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Tears trickled down her face as she nodded slowly. Peter clasped her small, soft hands.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he repeated.

Softly, Peter opened his girlfriend’s hand, kissed her palm, and placed her open hand against his face. She closed her eyes and leaned forward so her forehead was resting against his.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

Laying her back down, Peter tucked the blanket around her. He held her hand, waiting for her breathing to become deep and steady. A bright teardrop shone on her cheek, and Peter brushed it away without waking her. She seemed so young and innocent when she was asleep. A rush of anger swept over Peter as he thought of the man who had done this to her. Clenching his fists, he spat out a few foul names under his breath. She stirred in her sleep, and Peter stopped muttering until she grew still again. The flash of hatred burned out quickly and left only the heaviness of guilt. Peter buried his face in his arms. Nothing that he said or did would make a difference at this point. If only he had been there that night. If only his interview had been scheduled for a different weekend. If only his flight had been canceled. If only...

Gingerly, she picked up the filthy black dress and put them into a plastic bag. Sealing the zipper, she placed the bag onto the counter.

“I’m going to leave your clothes right here, okay?”

The girl nodded without saying a word.

“My name is Melinda, but everyone calls me Lin. I’ll be the nurse who is taking care of you.”

The girl silently nodded again. Lin tried to smile encouragingly, but she could feel the corners of her mouth trembling. The girl was close to the same age as her daughter, and her vulnerability, as she stood in the middle of the room completely naked, touched Lin’s heart. Her slender body was trembling slightly while Lin and Clarisse measured the multicolored contusions and abrasions on her legs and buttocks. Lin kept speaking in a calm, measured tone even though she knew the girl could not process her words. After Clarisse took photographs of every injury, Lin picked up a soft flannel blanket and wrapped it around the girl.

“Did you sign the rape victim papers?” she asked gently.

“Yes,” the girl spoke in a quiet, hoarse voice.

“Okay, you can’t put your clothes back on because the police are going to need those, but I’ve got some other things for you to wear if that’s okay.”

Opening a cabinet, Lin pulled out a pair of grey sweatpants and a dark blue sweatshirt. She helped the girl slip into the clothes before reaching into a drawer and taking out a comb. Clarisse held out another plastic bag as Lin began pulling filth from the girl’s hair.

“What is it?” the girl whispered.

“What’s that, honey?” Clarisse asked.

“What is it?” the girl said. “What’s in my hair? What is it?”

Her voice grew louder and more frantic as she continued speaking. Frantically, she clawed at her head pulling out a handful of hair with pine needles. Lin stopped cleaning the girl's long, black hair and stroked her face lightly.

"It's nothing, sweetheart. Just flora and fauna," she said in the most soothing tone she could muster.

"Just flora and fauna," the girl repeated.

"That's right. Just flora and fauna."

Lin kept up her comforting words until they had combed all of the debris out of her hair. Using a warm, wet washcloth, she cleaned the dirt from the girl's face and hands. The door opened softly, and an intern entered the room with a tray.

"Thank you, Jesse. You can put that on the table," Lin instructed.

Clarisse helped the girl sit on the bed while Lin handed the two sealed bags to the officer standing outside the door. Coming back into the room, Lin rejoined Clarisse and the girl.

"I have to go take care of another patient. Are you good here?"

Lin nodded, and Clarisse left the room. The girl leaned back against the pillows and curled her legs close up against her body.

"Do you think you can eat something?"

Lin picked up the tray and brought it closer. The girl shook her head, but Lin picked up a bowl of oatmeal and handed it to her.

"Can you try to eat just a few bites? It might help you feel better."

Picking up the spoon, the girl stirred the thick oatmeal. Slowly, she ate a small bite and swallowed.

"That's great. See if you can eat some more."

After she had eaten half of the oatmeal, the girl looked up at Lin. She seemed to have collected herself, and when she spoke, her voice was composed and steady.

“Can I leave?”

“Yes, I’m sure the police will be contacting you soon. For now, go home and rest.” Lin patted the girl on the back. “I know that it sounds impossible too, but try to go on with your life. I promise you that it will get better one day.”

Picking up the girl’s shoes, Lin knelt down and pulled the boots on her feet. After she zipped up the sides of the boots, Lin picked up the girl’s gold necklace from the counter and fastened it around her neck.

“Thank you.”

With a practiced nurse’s touch, Lin helped her off the bed and through the hospital waiting room to the exit where Clarisse was standing with a tearful college student.

“We found your sister,” Clarisse said. “She’s been looking for you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” the young woman wept.

“Hey, hey, it’s going to be all right. It’s not your fault.” The girl looked over her sister’s head at Lin. “I’m going to be okay. It was just flora and fauna. Now come on. Let’s go home and get some sleep.”

Choking back the last of her sobs, the younger sister dug through her purse for her car keys.

“Charlie loaned me his car so I can take us home.”

The girl turned back to Lin and Clarisse.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Of course, honey. Take care of yourself, all right?” Clarisse answered as she hugged her.

Lin wrapped her arms around the girl. She wished with every fiber of her being that she could hold her close enough to erase that terrible night and all the pain that would soon follow.

“Stay strong,” she whispered in the girl’s ear.

As the two sisters left the hospital, Clarisse sighed. “That poor child. At least, she’s got smarts though. She’ll be able to think things through quicker than most.”

“Maybe.” Lin gazed after the girl. “But knowing something in your head is different than knowing it in your heart. She’s got a long, difficult journey ahead of her.”

“Shots! Shots! Shots! Shots!”

Throwing his head back, Barrett downed his shot of vodka and slammed the glass on the table. The fiery liquid traveled down his throat and warmed his stomach. Barrett could feel the heat rising to his face. He whooped loudly and high-fived the other people standing around. After multiple beers and a few shots, he was feeling reckless and bold. The pumping music roiled through his blood with the alcohol. Barrett began swaying with the music. A few girls were dancing on the table in the center of the room.

“Hey, you should join them!” Vince clapped Barrett on the back. “Go on, man!”

Jumping up on the table, Barrett moved behind one of the girls with short, blonde hair. She was dancing with a group of her friends, her back turned toward him. Placing his hands on her hips, Barrett pressed his body against hers and moved slowly from side to side. The blonde girl pulled herself away from him and crossed to the other side of the table. Barrett grinned wryly to himself. So many girls liked to play hard to get nowadays. He followed the girl and began dancing in front of her. She rolled her eyes at him as she hopped down and walked across the room.

“Lela, come back!” Her friends waved to her, but she shook her head at them and stayed where she was.

Barrett stepped down from the tabletop and gazed at the girl called Lela. She was standing against the wall by herself. Slicking his blonde hair back, Barrett gulped down another beer. She was probably just waiting for him to approach her in a more private area. Freshman girls were usually shy about flirting with guys in front of their friends. Barrett waited until Lela had turned her back before he made his way to her. Leaning against the wall behind her, he put his arm around the front of her waist, turned her towards him, and brought his lips close to her face. Just as his mouth was getting ready to touch hers, Lela pushed him back and stalked off. Barrett shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t want to waste his time on a tease anyway. Maybe her friends would appreciate his attention more. One of the girls with curly red hair was falling off the table. She managed to catch herself at the last moment.

“I think that I need to sit down,” she slurred.

Quickly, Barrett ran over and held up his hand to help the girl down. She grabbed onto his arm and dropped to the floor. As soon as she reached the ground, Barrett pulled the girl off to the side. She was holding a hand over her stomach.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I don’t feel well.”

“See if you feel better after this.”

Leaning forward, Barrett fastened his lips onto the girl’s mouth. Immediately, he felt her body jerked away from him. Lela was standing in front of the red haired girl, glaring at him.

“Come on, Shara. Let’s take you back to your room.”

Barrett watched as the blonde girl took Shara back to her friends. They walked over and opened the front door to the porch. Huffing in frustration, Barrett followed the group of girls outside. None of the women at this party were interested in actually being romantic. They just liked to lead guys on. Barrett slammed the door behind him. He'd just go back to his room and go to bed alone then. Looking out at the front yard, Barrett growled under his breath. Lela and Shara were with their friends leaving the party. They were waving at a girl who was standing on the front porch. She had clearly had too much to drink and was stumbling down the steps in a haze. Barrett was starting to pass her when he realized he had seen her earlier that night. She was the one in the backyard who had been swinging in the hammock. He remembered the way she had tossed her long, black hair away from her face so she could see him better. Running back up a few steps, Barrett took her arm and steadied her.

“Hey, let me give you a hand.”

She looked up into his face, and Barrett could see her green eyes definitely brightened as she recognized him. Leading her down the stairs, Barrett drew her close to his body. She smelled strongly of alcohol and swayed unsteadily.

“Hey, do you wanna go back to my room?” Barret asked.

The girl groaned and staggered again. Barrett placed his arm around her waist and began leading the way to the side of the fraternity house. From there, they could climb a small hill and reach his dormitory. When they had gone about halfway up the hill, she collapsed again. Barrett tried to catch her, but his foot slipped, and the two slid down the grassy slope. Laughing, Barrett rolled over on top of the girl. Her eyes were shut with her head tilted to one side. A strand of black hair was lying on her neck. Barrett brushed it away. His fingers tingled as he touched the soft skin of her throat, and the sensation continued all over his body.

Quickly, Barrett glanced around. He couldn't see anyone, but he lifted the girl's body and carried her over behind a green, metal dumpster by the side of the building. Setting her down on the pine needles, he straddled her body with one knee on either side of her hips.

Just a few kisses couldn't hurt anything. Barrett pressed his lips against her mouth. He was sure he could stop himself from going too far. Besides, he knew she wanted him. His hands began exploring her skin. She had practically asked him to take her to his room. In the backyard earlier in the evening, they had all but made-out. His fingers roamed her body. If he had asked her when they had first met, she would probably have said yes. She basically pursued him by setting herself on the front porch where she knew he was going to be coming. Unfastening his pants, Barrett looked down at the girl's closed eyelids.

It's not like she was going to remember anyway.

The gavel slammed down on the tall, wooden desk. Dina slumped down in her chair, her breath caught in her throat. Behind her, the prosecution's family was protesting angrily while the judge continued banging the gavel down. The defense attorney and defendant were walking past out of the courtroom. Inhaling deeply, Dina looked up at her client. The girl's eyes were wide in shock.

"I'm so sorry," Dina apologized. "I can't believe this happened."

The girl's hand was trembling as she clutched the tin foil wrapper of the chocolate her grandmother had smuggled into her earlier. Dina placed her hand on her client's arm. Gently, she lifted her up.

"Hey, why don't you go home with your family? I'll finish up here and join you tomorrow to explain everything."

“But...but he...”

The girl’s voice trailed off in disbelief. Dina tightened her mouth to keep her lips from trembling. She cleared her throat before speaking.

“There’s nothing more to be done. I’m sorry.”

Slowly, the girl rose and joined her family who were waiting angrily by the door. They walked out together, leaving the courtroom empty. As the door slammed close, Dina sank back down in her seat. Her hands automatically began gathering her papers and placing them in folders, but her mind was still on the case. What had she done wrong? Was her closing argument too weak? Had her witnesses not been convincing enough?

Dina snapped her briefcase closed and locked the clasp. Leaning back in her chair, she massaged her temples with her fingertips. Some days it seemed as though she could not sigh deeply enough. Her head was aching. The two aspirin that she had swallowed earlier seemed to have taken no effect. The pounding of the gavel echoed in the back of her head. Picking up her leather briefcase, Dina stood up and exited the room. The front steps of the courthouse were still crowded with people from the trial. The defendant’s family and friends glared at Dina while she descended the stairs. A few of the people who had been sitting in the gallery started to approach her, but Dina shook her head and waved them off. She was not in the mood to discuss the case with anyone.

Crossing down to where her car was parked, Dina clicked her key fob. The doors unlocked, and she stepped into the front seat. As she pulled away from the courthouse, she wished she could drive on forever and just escape the whole mess. Pressing a button, Dina turned on her favorite CD. Soft, instrumental music began pulsing through the speakers. Dina tried to focus on the melody and forget the disappointing end to the last few stressful months. When she

parked in her driveway, Dina leaned her forehead against the steering wheel. She was so tired she could sleep for a week. Yawning widely, she climbed out of the car and walked to the front door. Before she could unlock it, the door swung open.

“Hey honey, how are you? How’d your case go? What happened?”

“Ugh, one question at a time,” Dina answered. “I’m exhausted.”

“I thought you might be, so I already fixed dinner. It’s waiting inside. I figured you’d be hungry after an entire day in court again.”

“Thank you, Matthew.” Stepping inside and setting down her briefcase, Dina kissed her husband. “You know me so well.”

Matthew grinned and pulled out a chair for his wife. Kicking off her heels, Dina sat down and began eating the pesto chicken and green beans.

“You want a drink?”

“Yes, please.”

Holding out her glass, Dina watched the red wine pour downwards in a steady stream. As Matthew sat back down, he raised his eyebrows. Dina knew that he was waiting to hear the result of her case.

“Remind me why I thought being District Attorney would be a good idea,” she said.

“Rough day?”

“The worst.”

“What went wrong?”

Shrugging, Dina sipped her wine. “I have no idea.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Dina hesitated for a moment, then shook her head. Matthew nodded understandingly, and the two finished their meal in silence. After she had emptied her glass, Dina began gathering the dishes.

“Don’t worry about that,” Matthew spoke up. “I’ve got the kitchen. You just get ready for bed.”

“Are you sure?”

Matthew took the plate from his wife’s hand and gently pushed her towards their bedroom. Turning back, Dina caressed his cheek with her hand.

“I love you, Matty.”

Picking up her shoes, Dina walked back to her bedroom. She dropped her heels in the corner and rummaged through the drawers for her pajamas. After she slipped into the silk tank top and shorts, Dina brushed her teeth and washed the makeup from her face. The warm water was soothing on her skin and helped the throbbing in her head subside somewhat. Hanging up the rag, she dried her face on a fluffy towel and crawled into bed. Matthew entered the bedroom and smiled down at her.

“Feeling better?”

“A little.”

Dina reached out and took Matthew’s hand. He sat down on the bed next to her and smoothed her dark hair back. Closing her eyes, Dina tried to fall asleep, but her mind was still whirling over the day’s events.

“It was such an obvious one,” she whispered.

“What?”

Dina sat up and leaned against the bed's wooden headboard. "The case. It was so obvious. The jury found him guilty on all three counts. That's three felonies, and the judge only gave him six months. He'll be out in half the time for good behavior."

Throwing back the covers, Dina stood up and began pacing back and forth on the carpet.

"All that time and tension for six months. That poor girl and her family have sat for hours in a courtroom for this. She has been forced to relive the worst night of her life over and over again. Her most intimate details have been combed through and put on display for people she doesn't even know. She had to sit and listen to the defense attorney twist her words against her. And after all of that, he gets six months!"

"Dina, it was out of your control," Matthew replied. "You did your best with this case, and you did get a guilty verdict."

"But she didn't get justice!" Dina covered her face in her hands. "I didn't get her justice."

Standing up, Matthew crossed over to his wife and took her hands in his. Dina's chest heaved with pent up emotion as she leaned on his shoulder.

"Matty, what do I do? How can I make things right with her? The defense argued that twenty minutes shouldn't ruin his life. But that twenty minutes will be with her and everyone else involved in this case for a lifetime."

She loaded the last box into the trunk of her silver Sedan.

"Is there anything else?"

She started slightly and turned around. Peter was standing behind her with an armload of clothes. Carefully, he laid the garments on top of the other boxes.

"That's it. I can't believe we got it all in here."

“Okay.” Peter slammed down the trunk lid. “Your family is waiting inside to say goodbye.”

Taking her boyfriend’s hand, she walked back inside to the living room where her mother, father, and younger sister were sitting.

“All right. I’m all packed and loaded. Peter and I are set to head to Boston.”

“Are you sure that you’re ready?” her mother asked anxiously.

“Mina, it’s time. You have to let her go.”

“I know that, but I’m her mother, so I still have a right to freak out a little.”

Throwing her arms around her daughter’s neck, Mina hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek. As soon as she pulled away, Eddy stepped in and embraced his child.

“Keep in contact,” he said. “And be safe.”

“I will.”

She reached for her sister and wrapped her arms around her tightly. Lela squeezed back, and as the sisters parted, she forced a smile on her face.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” she replied.

Opening the door, she followed Peter to the car. Her family came behind her and continued saying farewells as they pulled out of the driveway and down the street. She turned around in her seat and waved until she could no longer see them. Gently, Peter placed his hand on top of hers.

“Are you okay, Kellie?”

Shifting back, Kellie looked forward down the long stretch of road before her.

“I’m fine.”