

Close Calls

Mrs. Simpson's eyes were ringed and puffy from lack of sleep, but she wasn't too put out to remember common courtesies.

"I could make some coffee or tea if you'd like?"

"No, Ma'am, I'm fine," Officer Gillette declined, but there was no response from the young woman he was questioning.

Unsure what to do next, the lady looked down at her uninspired pajamas and the heavy socks she'd worn to bed.

"I guess I ought to get dressed," she said to no one in particular, smoothing her hair behind her ears.

"We'll be out of here as soon as the other unit finishes patrolling the park. If the officers stop someone, we're gonna need to ask Miss Miller here if she can identify him."

"I think I mentioned that my granddaughters are sleeping upstairs? I ought to check on them. I wouldn't want them to wake up and find the police in our home."

"We'll be more quiet," Gillette apologized, adjusting the volume on his radio.

Mrs. Simpson hesitated to leave two strangers alone in her house, policeman or not, but it was no good hovering over them either. Whatever the particulars of the assault to girl were, it was really none of her business.

"I'll be back down in a minute if you need anything."

Gillette smiled sympathetically as the older woman passed by, but his concern was entirely for Tory Miller, who sat opposite the Simpson's dining room table from him in a silent fog. The girl was small and pale and underdressed for autumn weather. She was young and could have passed for eighteen without makeup or twenty-eight with too much. The big man watched her pull unconsciously at dry leaves caught in the tangled strands of her dark hair. Up to this point she had been too frightened to fully answer questions about her attack, responding *I don't know*, or *I can't remember* to most of them, but he hoped to get more details from her while the incident was fresh in her mind.

A long, raw scrape across the knuckles of Tory's right hand caught Gillette's attention. The patrolman rested his clipboard against a knee and put his pen on the table.

"Did that happen when you fell?" he said, pointing to Tory's hand.

She turned her palm over and touched the abrasion.

"I guess it must have."

"Let's get someone here to take a look at you."

Gillette reached for his radio to request paramedics, but Tory stopped him.

"You don't need to do that. I'm fine."

Gillette shook his head. "You can't always tell right away."

"I'm not hurt...just... you know, just shaken. I should really go home."

"Can you try to answer a few more questions first?"

Tory closed her eyes, wishing the long night was over.

"Why were you in the park at 2:00 a.m.?" Gillette hoped asking indirect questions about the assault would allow her to speak more freely about what had happened, but her reaction wasn't what he expected.

Tory pressed her elbows against the table and drew her hands to her forehead, pressing her fingertips into the smooth, clear skin. She pushed her hands through her hair and tipped her chin down so that he could no longer see her face. Screened from Gillette's watchful eyes, Tory let herself remember the struggle against the yellow car as an assailant lifted her off her feet, pinning her back to his chest and slapping his sweaty hand over her mouth and nose, his breath in her ear ragged with exertion or expectation. She relived being dragged into the park; the thud of her head against the ground when he dropped her unable to keep his grasp as she struggled, kicking wildly with all her strength, and the rush of wind from his lungs when she made contact with his groin or abdomen. She had run blindly away from him, out of the dark playground and the tall trees onto the street. She ran toward the first thing she saw, the porch lights of the Simpson's house, becoming aware of someone peering out from behind a door as she neared it. That narrow crack of light was the only thing between Tory and her attacker and she ran until she reached it, throwing her full weight against the door and begging the Simpson woman to lock it behind her.

"Miss Miller?" Gillette prodded her. "Can you tell me why you were in the park so late?"

Tory opened her eyes and leaned away from the table.

"I hadn't planned to be in the park. My trunk lid opened, so I pulled over and got out to close it."

Gillette sat back in the stiff dining room chair, shifting his weight to find a more comfortable position. He consulted his notes and thought quietly for a moment before speaking again.

"So where were you headed at 2:00 a.m.?"

Tory cleared her throat.

"I was just driving. Trying to clear my head. I like to drive when I need to think."

"You needed to leave your house at 2:00 a.m. to think?"

"What difference does it make?" The muscles in her face tightened.

"Maybe none. I'm just trying to piece everything together that happened tonight."

Tory studied Gillette's broad, plain face. Crow's-feet crisscrossed the corners of his eyes, and deep smile lines curved around his mouth, only he wasn't smiling now. If he felt or thought anything about what she had told him it didn't show on his face or in his voice.

"My boyfriend... well, we broke up a few days ago, and I haven't been able to sleep. Everything in the house reminds me of him. So, I needed to get out for awhile."

"Were you looking for drugs?"

"No! I told you I was just driving, I wasn't doing anything illegal. I'm not the bad guy here!" Tory flashed him a furious look that said he had gone too far.

"It's not unusual for drug deals to happen in a park at this hour."

"I wouldn't know."

"Do you want me to contact your boyfriend? Tell him about the assault?"

A wry smile tugged at her lips and Tory fairly snorted with disregard.

"If he was still with me and I told him what happened tonight, he'd say I made it up to get attention."

Her voice broke and Gillette thought the tears were going to start, but she kept her composure.

"He was such a liar. And mean. It's crazy I know, but I miss him."

"Maybe you should talk to a crisis counselor."

"Maybe, but not tonight. I'm done in."

Gillette could see that there was no point pushing her more. Maybe in a day or two the girl would be more willing, or able to talk about what she'd been through. If she would agree to it, a female officer might be able to coax more details from her.

"Let me finish up with the other unit and then we'll get you out of here."

Gillette called softly to Mrs. Simpson, to let her know they would be leaving. "Ma'am, I'm going to take another look around outside before I take Miss Miller out. Just a few more minutes, alright?"

"That's fine." The tired woman came halfway down her stairs, trying to appear alert. She had changed into jeans and a blouse and had combed her hair and applied lipstick.

The patrolman gestured toward Tory. "If you could, I think Miss Miller needs a Band-Aid for her hand."

"Of course. Down that hall, Dear. Let's clean you up." Mrs. Simpson fussed as she hurried down the last steps to help.

Gillette stepped out onto the Simpson's front porch, swinging the beam of his flashlight across the leaf covered yard. He walked the perimeter of the oversized property, listening for sounds in the night. Lights were on up and down the streets as homeowners waited for the police to secure their neighborhood again. A dozen calls had come in about a girl heard screaming in the community park, and he was sure those lights would stay on all night for weeks.

The second patrol unit pulled up to the curb in front of the Simpson's house. Gillette walked to the passenger side, leaning into the window to give the limited details from his conversation with Tory to the two officers inside.

"We checked the bathrooms and dumpsters. Nothing there. No one parked in the lot either," the younger of the two men reported.

"I'll run the names of sex offenders in the area tonight," Gillette said, satisfied that there was nothing more they could do at that hour. He told the other patrolmen goodnight and went back to the Simpson's door, making a perfunctory knock before entering.

"Ma'am, we'll be going now. Another unit will patrol the neighborhood tonight, but here's my card if you need anything. I appreciate your assistance."

"I'm just glad I was home." Mrs. Simpson turned to Tory and smiled, grateful that the ordeal was over for both of them. She slipped an arm behind Tory's narrow shoulders and pressed her hand against backbones visible through the girl's shirt. "Take care of yourself, alright?"

Tory allowed the other woman to touch her briefly before stepping away.

"You too," she mumbled, unable to think of more to say.

Tory followed Gillette to the front door, with Mrs. Simpson walking a polite distance behind them. The officer held the door open for her, and their reluctant hostess bid them good luck, but as soon as the pair stepped outdoors they heard the rapid click of the Simpson's lock turn behind them. Darkness settled around her and Tory began to shake.

Her little yellow Mazda was parked down the street where she had been dragged away from it. The driver's side door was open and the overhead light glowed dimly inside, bringing the entire night rushing back to her. Gillette felt Tory trembling as they neared the car and slipped his fingers protectively in the crook of her arm, guiding their way with his flashlight.

"I can drive you home if someone will bring you back for your car tomorrow."

"I don't want to have to explain coming home in a police car to my neighbors. It would be like going through it all again if I had to tell them."

"Maybe it's better if you don't drive tonight, though."

"I'm alright," Tory said, pulling her arm away from him.

Gillette stopped her.

"How about we compromise and I follow you home? Make sure you get there safely."

"No, really, I'll be okay," she said, this time walking away from him.

Ignoring her assurances, Gillette caught up to Tory and stood next to her open car door, looking into the backseat to make certain it was empty. The keys were still in the

ignition and he waited for the engine to turn over in case the open door had weakened her battery.

"Buckle up," Gillette reminded her. He closed her car door and prepared to go back to his patrol unit.

"Just a minute," the officer called out, reaching into his pocket. He waited for her to unroll her window then handed her his card.

"You call me if you remember anything you want to add, Okay?"

Tory took the card and smiled, finally offering Gillette a hint of gratitude.

"You sure you wouldn't like me to follow you home? Check your house before you go in?"

"No, you've done enough," she insisted, locking her doors and closing the window between them.

She pulled her car away from the curb, leaving the policeman behind her. Gillette saw her glance in her rear view mirror and lifted his hand to wave goodbye.

Anxious for the safety of her house, Tory drove over the speed limit along the seven mile route home, but not so fast as to bring about another meeting with the police. She rolled into her driveway and depressed the garage door opener, waiting an eternity for it to slide completely open. She pulled the car inside, hit the garage door remote again, and waited in her locked car for the creaking hinges to lower the door all the way down.

"Oh, my God," she breathed out loud, and got out of the car on shaky legs.

Tory stepped to the back of the Mazda and leaned over the trunk to rest for a few moments. The surface of the lid was smooth and cool against her forearms, but the air in the garage grew too cold to linger there very long.

Finally she stood up, not quite sure what she was supposed to do. Fumbling for the car keys shoved in her front pocket, she held them up to find the electronic buttons on the fob. With a press of her thumb, the trunk lid opened effortlessly.

Tory leaned into the dark space, pushing aside a garbage bag to get a better look at the body beneath it. The lifeless form of her ex-boyfriend was tucked inside the trunk in a fetal position, as pale and motionless as a stillborn baby. Lividity had formed along the left side of his face where she'd repeatedly slammed a tire iron against it, and dark clots of blood had hardened in his wavy hair. Once so in love with the tanned and handsome face, Tory could see nothing except the source of her anger in his frozen features now.

"You see what you did? The kind of stuff you put me through?" Tory paced the width of the car, voicing her frustrations loudly.

"A freak in the park and a cop to the rescue; it's like you planned it," she accused the dead man. "Too good to turn up in a park bathroom are you? Well, now what am I supposed to do with you? Liar! Cheater!"

When no answers came to her, Tory tucked the plastic bag around her loved one's body again and closed the trunk lid with just enough force to make sure the latch connected. She turned the light off in the garage and made her way to the kitchen, determined not to leave the house again until she could invent a new and better plan.

Think! Tory told herself as she paced the floor. She walked in wide circles around the kitchen table concentrating so completely, so deeply on ridding herself of her lover's

body that she missed the first chimes of the doorbell. The tones of the second bell registered like an explosion in her brain. Adrenaline shot through her core, knocking her heart against her chest in an uncertain rhythm.

Tory stood still, trying to slow her breathing and control her thoughts. The lights were on in her kitchen and anyone who had come up the walk could see her through the gauzy curtains hung in the window. She could not pretend she wasn't home.

"Miss Miller, it's Officer Gillette. Can I speak with you?"

Tory hesitated, took a step, then stopped. Why was he here? She tried to imagine if Gillette could have seen her in the garage with the trunk lid open, but quickly reasoned that of course he could not have. He had obviously come because of the assault. It had to be that they caught the pervert who had grabbed her and Gillette wanted her to come and identify the man. She took a deep breath and forced herself to relax and answer her door.

Gillette stood in the entry, his big frame taking up most of the space, blocking light from the street lamp behind him.

"Miss Miller, I need to ask you something." His tone was serious and there was a hardness in his expression she hadn't seen earlier.

"It's so late, Officer. Can we do this tomorrow?" She spoke to him as if they were old friends.

"Here's the deal, Tory. I ran the plates on the car you're driving and it turns out belonging to Paul Michael Riley. Is that right?"

Tory swallowed involuntarily, but her throat was dry and it made her cough.

"It belongs to both of us."

"That's the boyfriend you mentioned?"

"My ex."

"Well, there's a warrant for his arrest for failing to report to his probation officer, but I think you know that, don't you?"

Gillette pressed his hand against the door and pushed the opening between them wider, peering over her head into the dim room. He leaned closer to her and lowered his voice.

"Do you know where I can find him, Tory?"

Her eyes grew round and she stared unblinking at him, telling him what he needed to know.

"He's here, isn't he?"

Gillette waited for her to answer.

"Come on Girl, he's not going to love you more if I have to get a search warrant. Aren't you better off without him?"

Gillette's face was near enough to hers to kiss. She backed away from the policeman slowly, silently allowing him inside. Gillette unholstered his sidearm and stepped cautiously into the room, uncertain of what he would find, but sure she needed help.