

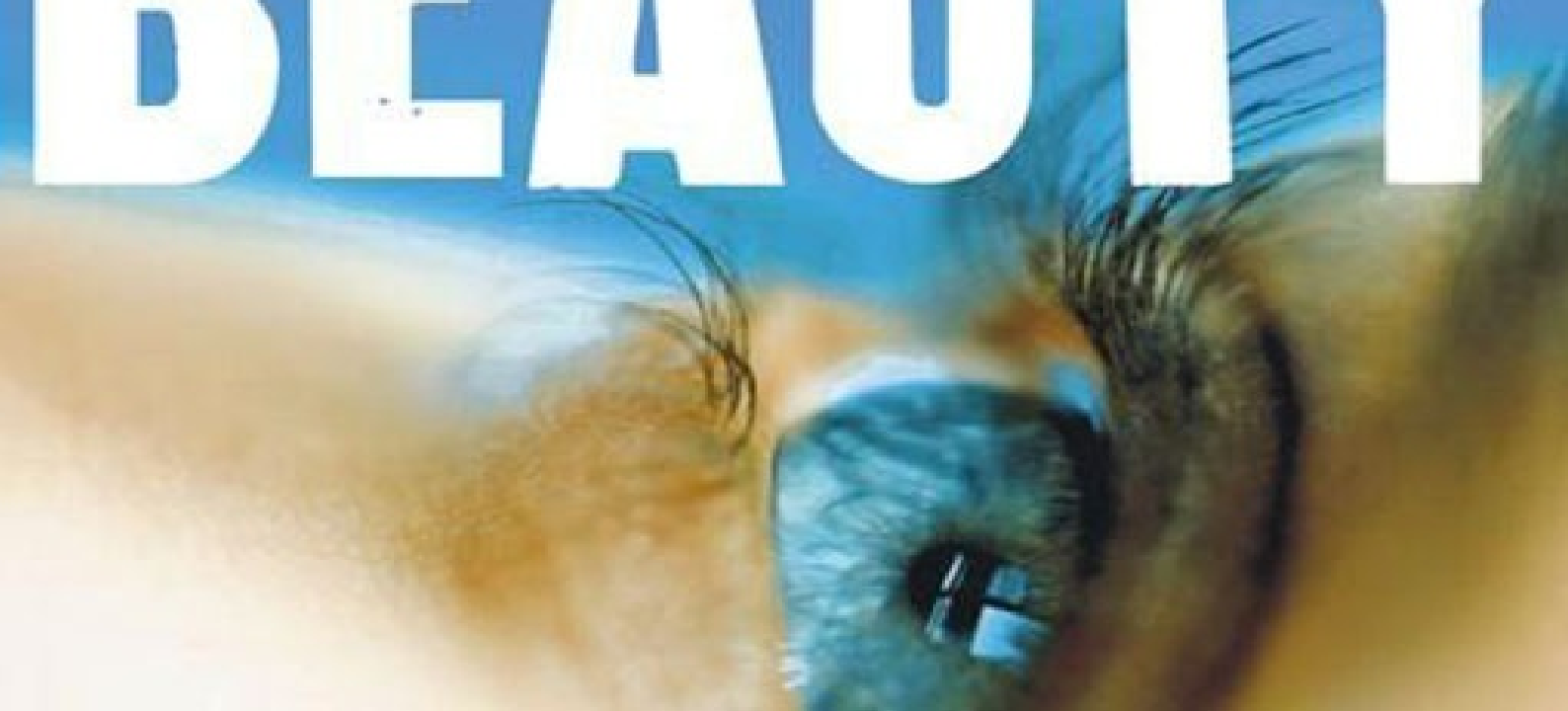
PHILLIP

MARGOLIN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF TIES THAT BIND

**SLEEPING
BEAUTY**

**INCLUDES AN
EXCERPT OF
WORTHY BROWN'S
DAUGHTER**



Sleeping Beauty

Phillip Margolin

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For my folks, Joseph and Eleonore Margolin.

I couldn't ask for better parents.

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Book Tour

The bellman Claire Rolvag was looking for was standing next to the box with the keys of guests who parked in the hotel garage. She turned into the long, circular driveway, pulled around a cab, and parked her shiny new Lexus in front of him.

“Carlos?” she asked when he walked over to the driver’s window.

“That’s me.”

“I’m Claire. I’m filling in for Barbara Bridger, just for tonight.”

“She told me what you’d be driving,” Carlos said as he opened Claire’s door. Claire grabbed the book that lay on her passenger seat and got out.

“It’ll be over there,” he said, pointing to an area at the end of the driveway.

Claire thanked Carlos and handed him a folded bill, which he slipped into his pocket. He was driving the car to the spot he’d indicated when the doorman welcomed Claire to the Newbury, one of Seattle’s finest hotels.

There was a convention in town and the Newbury was packed with laughing, chatting people. Claire shouldered through them until she stood in the center of the lobby. She scanned the crowd. He wasn’t there. A bell signaled the arrival of an elevator. Claire cast an anxious glance at her watch, then focused on the group of conventioners that poured out. For a moment Claire did not see him. Then Miles Van Meter was standing in front of the bank of elevators. His sandy blond hair and blue eyes had been touched up in the color photograph on the back of the book jacket of *Sleeping Beauty* to hide his gray hairs, and he was a little shorter than Claire had imagined, but he was just as handsome a person as he was on television.

The lawyer-turned-writer was in his forties, five-foot-ten, broad-shouldered, and trim. He had dressed in a tailored gray pinstripe suit, white Oxford cloth shirt, and a tasteful Armani tie. Most escorts would have been surprised by the elegance of Van Meter’s attire. Male authors traditionally wore sports jackets on their tours—if they wore jackets at all—and damn few brought ties with them. You packed light and opted for comfort when you spent weeks of one-nighters, rising before dawn each day to catch another short flight to another strange city. But Miles Van Meter, a corporate attorney with a large firm of business lawyers, was used to traveling first class and dressing expensively.

Van Meter spotted Claire easily because she was holding a copy of his true-crime bestseller. He guessed that the attractive brunette was in her mid-thirties and would be peppy and efficient, as were most of the author escorts who shepherded him through his appearances in the often unfamiliar cities he visited each day of his grueling, six-week book tour.

Miles held up his hands in a mock plea for forgiveness. “Sorry, I know I’m late. My plane from Cleveland was delayed.”

“It’s not a problem,” Claire assured him. “I just got here myself, and the store is only twenty minutes away.”

Miles started to say something. Then he paused and looked at Claire more closely.

“You didn’t take me around last time, did you?”

“You’re thinking of Barbara Bridger. She owns the escort business. I’m just filling in. Her son came down with the flu and Dave—her husband—is out of town on business.”

“Okay. I thought it was someone else. You do this a lot?”

“My first time, actually,” Claire answered as they left the lobby and headed toward her car. “Barbara and I are good friends and I told her I’d be willing to help if she ever got in a jam. So...”

As Claire shrugged, Carlos spotted them crossing toward him and ran over to open the passenger

door for Miles. He knew the drill. She was hired help. Miles Van Meter was the star.

~~It was a little before seven at night when Claire pulled into traffic. Rain was falling, so she~~
switched on the wipers.

“You didn’t do Murder for Fun last time, did you?” Claire asked.

“No. I think I hit one of the superstores, Barnes and Noble or Borders. I’m not sure which. After a few days they all blur together.”

“You’ll like this store. It’s small but Jill Lane, the owner, always makes certain that there’s a big crowd.”

“Great,” Miles said, but Claire sensed that the enthusiasm was manufactured. She knew that her author had been on the road for three and a half weeks, which meant that he was probably sleep-deprived and running on fumes.

“Is your room okay?”

“I’m in a suite with a view. Not that I’ll get much use out of it. I’ve got a six forty-five flight to Boston tomorrow morning. Then it’s on to Des Moines, Omaha, and I forget where after that.”

Claire laughed. “You’re doing pretty well. Barb says that after three weeks on the road most of her authors can’t remember where they were the day before.” Claire checked her watch. “There’s a cooler in the back seat with soft drinks and bottled water, if you want any.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Did you get a chance to eat?”

“On the plane.”

Miles closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. Claire decided to let him relax in silence for the rest of the ride.

Murder for Fun was a mystery bookstore located in a strip mall on the outskirts of the city. Claire parked around back, next to the service entrance. She’d phoned from the car when they were a few minutes away, and Jill Lane opened the back door after her first knock. Jill was a pleasant, heavyset woman with salt-and-pepper hair. She had on a peasant dress and wore a turquoise-and-silver Native American necklace and matching earrings. Jill had retired after a successful career as a real estate broker. Reading mysteries had been her passion, and she’d jumped at the chance to buy the store when the first owner had to move to Arizona for his health.

“I can’t thank you enough for coming, Mr. Van Meter,” Jill said as she ushered Claire and Miles inside. “And you’re going to be very pleased with the audience. We’ve got a full house. All of the seats have been taken and there are people standing in the aisles between the bookshelves.”

Miles couldn’t help smiling. “That’s very flattering.”

“Oh, the book is great. And Joshua Maxfield’s appeal put the case back on the front pages. Do you know that Maxfield’s two novels have been reissued? They’re back on the bestseller lists.”

Van Meter sobered.

“I’m sorry,” Jill apologized immediately. “That was insensitive of me.”

“No, it’s okay.” Miles shook his head. “It’s just that I can’t help thinking about Casey when I hear Maxfield’s name.”

The back door opened into a storeroom/office. A desk overflowing with paperwork stood next to one wall, and cartons filled with new releases were piled against another. Stacks of books were everywhere. A table stood in the center of the room. On it were several copies of *Sleeping Beauty*. Jill pointed to them.

“Would you sign these before you leave? We’ve had requests from several people who couldn’t

make it tonight and customers who ordered off our Internet site.”

“I’d be glad to.”

Jill peeked through the office door and down the short hall that led to the front of the bookstore. Miles and Claire heard a rumble of conversation.

“Do you need anything?” Jill asked. “I’ve got a bottle of water on the podium and there’s a microphone. I think you’ll have to use it.”

Miles smiled. “Let’s do it.”

Jill led the way down the hall. Murder for Fun was dark, dusty, and crammed with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, separated by narrow aisles. The shelves were designated as the homes of “New Arrivals,” “Hard-boiled,” “True Crime,” and other mystery categories by hand-lettered signs, giving the store a homey feel that reflected Jill’s personality. A podium was standing in one corner of the store. Several rows of bridge chairs had been set up in front of it. The chairs all held customers, many of whom held hardcover or paperback copies of *Sleeping Beauty* that they hoped Miles would sign.

A rustle of applause greeted Jill’s appearance. She walked to the podium with Miles in tow. Claire moved around the edge of the crowd and settled near a musty shelf dedicated to mysteries set in exotic locales.

“Thank you for coming out on this dark and stormy night,” Jill said to scattered laughs. “I think you’ll find the trip well worth it. Tonight, we are fortunate to have with us Miles Van Meter, the author of *Sleeping Beauty*, one of the most compelling true-crime stories I’ve ever read.

“Mr. Van Meter was born in Portland, Oregon, and is the son of the late Henry Van Meter, a member of a prominent timber family. Henry took over the family business when his father died but he had many other interests, among them education. Henry founded the Oregon Academy, the elite private school where many of the terrible events recounted in *Sleeping Beauty* occurred. Miles and his twin sister, Casey Van Meter, were educated at the Academy. After high school, Miles went on to Stanford, his father’s alma mater, and Stanford Law School. He still practices business law in Portland.

“As many of you know, *Sleeping Beauty* was originally published several years ago. This new edition was just released with additional chapters that recount the startling events that occurred after the book’s initial publication. Tonight, Mr. Van Meter is going to read from *Sleeping Beauty*, and he’ll graciously answer your questions. So, please give a warm welcome to Miles Van Meter.”

The applause was immediate and heartfelt. Jill stepped aside and Miles took her place at the podium. He sipped some water and arranged his papers while he waited for the ovation to die down.

“Thank you. Receptions like this made it possible for me to go on during those dark years that followed Joshua Maxfield’s brutal attack on my beloved sister, Casey. As you might guess, talking about what happened to Casey is not easy. To be honest, writing this book was not easy. But I began this project because I felt that it was something I had to do to keep Casey’s memory alive. And I also wanted to keep these terrible events in the spotlight to force the authorities—the police, the FBI—to hunt down Maxfield and bring him to justice—not just for the horrible crimes he committed against my family and the family of Ashley Spencer, but for all the other people whose lives were fouled by his inhuman acts of murder and torture.

“So, I wrote *Sleeping Beauty* and I went around the country, and when I started, I can tell you that I was depressed, because the outlook for Casey was bleak and Joshua Maxfield was still at large. But everywhere I went people like you told me how real my book had made Casey seem, and you told me that you were praying for her. That raised me up in my darkest hours, and I want to thank you for that.”

The audience erupted again. Miles looked down at the podium to collect himself. After a moment, the applause stopped and Miles held up a copy of his book, on which was affixed a gold stamp emblazoned in raised letters with SPECIAL EDITION.

“I’m going to read the first chapter of *Sleeping Beauty*. After my reading I’ll stay to answer any questions you have and I’d be pleased to sign your books.”

Miles opened *Sleeping Beauty*, took a sip of water, and began to read.

“Why do we fear serial killers so much more than other murderers? I believe we fear them because we cannot understand why they kill and torture helpless people against whom they cannot possibly bear any rational form of malice. We know why angry husbands and wives slay each other. We can see a cause-and-effect relationship when a gang eliminates a rival gangster. We feel safe when we know that a murderer has no reason to harm us. But we feel at risk when someone like Joshua Maxfield is at large, because no rational person can fathom what motivated him to perform his horrible acts in the Spencer home one cold March night during Ashley Spencer’s seventeenth year on this earth.

“On that fateful evening, Ashley was a junior at Eisenhower High School in Portland, Oregon. She was a pretty, cheerful girl with bright blue eyes and straight blond hair she wore most often in a ponytail. Ashley looked solid and powerful because she had trained hard for years to be a top soccer player. The training had paid off. In the fall, she had been the star of her high school soccer team and first team All-State. After the high school season, Ashley played on an elite club team. Earlier that day, F. C. West Hills had won a close match against a tough rival and the coach had hosted a pizza party for the team.

“Where did Joshua Maxfield see Ashley for the first time? Was it in the pizzeria? Was he lurking in the crowd at the soccer game? The police have examined home movies of the soccer match and the pizza party, and there is no trace of Maxfield in the frames. Maybe theirs was simply a chance encounter on the street or in a mall. In the end, how they met is not as important as the horrific consequences of that meeting for the Spencer family and for my family.

“Sometime around two A.M. Maxfield entered the Spencer home through a sliding door at the rear of the house and crept up the stairs to the second floor. Norman Spencer was sleeping alone in the master bedroom, because Terri Spencer, Ashley’s mother and a reporter on Portland’s daily newspaper, was on assignment in eastern Oregon. Norman was thirty-seven when he died. He had taught junior high school for several years and was well liked by all who knew him.

“Maxfield attacked Norman Spencer first, stabbing him repeatedly as he slept. Then he moved down the second-floor landing. Staying with Ashley was Tanya Jones, a slender, African-American honor student, who was All-State honorable mention. Tanya was Ashley’s teammate and best friend. They had both scored goals that day, and Tanya’s mother had given her permission to sleep over. Ashley’s door squeaked a little when it opened. We can guess that the noise awakened Tanya. When Ashley opened her eyes, she saw her friend sitting up in bed, and the silhouette of a man in her doorway. Then Tanya arched back and

collapsed sideways onto the floor. Ashley had no idea what had happened to her friend until she leaped out of bed and was hit by Maxfield's stun gun.

“Maxfield was on Ashley immediately. Before she knew it, she was bound hand and foot and Maxfield was carrying Tanya Jones next door to the guest bedroom. Ashley struggled against her bonds but was unable to break them. Moans of pain came from the guest room. The sudden sounds paralyzed Ashley.

“Tanya Jones's autopsy report recounts in detail the horrors that she endured at Maxfield's hands. To Ashley, Tanya's ordeal seemed to go on for a long time, but she probably suffered only fifteen minutes or less. The medical examiner concluded that Tanya was beaten and partially strangled, then raped and stabbed violently and repeatedly. Many of her knife wounds were delivered in a fury after she was dead.

“Ashley lay on her bed waiting to die. Then the door to the guest bedroom closed and Maxfield, dressed in black and wearing a ski mask and gloves, was standing in Ashley's doorway. She believed that he had come to rape and murder her. Instead, after watching her for a few seconds, he whispered, ‘See you later,’ and went downstairs. Moments later, Ashley heard the refrigerator door open.

“We must assume that Joshua Maxfield temporarily spared Ashley because he was exhausted and famished after raping and murdering Tanya Jones. That would explain why he took a break from his ghastly tasks to go to the Spencer kitchen, where he drank a glass of milk and ate a piece of chocolate cake. Eating the snack would land Maxfield on death row, and writing about it would cause another tragedy.”

Midnight Snack

Six Years Earlier

Chapter One

Ashley Spencer's childhood ended the night her father died; the moment before she fell asleep was the last time she experienced unadulterated joy. Ashley and her best friend, Tanya Jones, were still pumped up from their 2–1 victory over F.C. Oswego, a perennial state soccer power. Both girls had scored, and the victory would give them a shot at the top seed at the State Cup. They had gotten into bed after watching a video, then talked in the dark until a little after one o'clock. When Tanya went to sleep, Ashley closed her eyes and pictured her goal, a header that had boomed past Oswego's All-Star goalie. She was smiling as she drifted off.

Ashley had no idea how long she'd been asleep when a sudden movement on Tanya's side of the bed woke her. Tanya was sitting up, staring at the open doorway. Ashley, groggy and not completely certain she was awake, thought she saw someone walking toward Tanya. She was about to say something when Tanya grunted, twitched, and toppled to the floor. The man turned as Ashley leaped out of bed, extending his arm like a duelist. Ashley's muscles spasmed as a bolt of electricity surged through them. She fell sideways onto the bed, confused and unable to control her body. A fist smashed into her jaw, and she tottered on the brink of unconsciousness.

Tanya's head rose over the far side of the bed. The intruder was on her instantly. Ashley saw his fists and legs moving. Tanya fell back on the floor and out of Ashley's sight. A roll of gray duct tape appeared in the man's hands. He tore off several strips and knelt next to Tanya. Moments later, he walked around the bed. A black ski mask covered his face. He wore gloves and dark clothing.

A vise-like grip closed on Ashley's throat and her pajama top was ripped open. She made a feeble attempt at self-defense but she couldn't control her muscles. A leather-covered hand squeezed Ashley's breast until she screamed. The man hit her hard before sealing her mouth with a strip of tape. The intruder rolled Ashley onto her stomach and taped her wrists and ankles together. His face was close to her and she could smell his breath and body odor.

Once she was bound, the man slipped his hand inside her pajamas and caressed her buttocks. Ashley bucked and received a blow for resisting. She tried to squeeze her legs together but stopped when he grabbed her ear and twisted. A finger slipped inside her, probing, rubbing. Then the finger disappeared and he lowered himself onto her. Ashley's body trembled violently for a moment more. Then the sexual assault stopped and the oppressive weight disappeared. Ashley turned her head and saw Tanya being dragged into the guestroom that was next to her bedroom.

Ashley strained to hear what was going on. Bedsprings squeaked. Tape sealed Tanya's mouth but Ashley could still hear her friend's muffled scream. Ashley was gripped by a fear different from anything she had ever known. It was as if a stifling gray fog had settled over her, cutting off her air and paralyzing her limbs.

There were more moans and screams from Tanya, but the man who had invaded her home worked in silence. Ashley's heart was pumping furiously and she couldn't get enough air through her nose. She tried not to think about what was happening to her best friend and concentrated on breaking her bonds. It was impossible. She wondered whether her father was dead and the thought galvanized her. If Norman was dead then she couldn't count on anyone to rescue her. She would have to save herself.

In the next room, the man uttered a primal roar of release and Ashley shuddered. He'd finished raping Tanya; next he'd be coming for her. For a moment, the only sounds from next door were

Tanya's muffled whimpers. Then Ashley heard an animal snarl and the sound of a blade slamming into flesh. Tanya made a strangled cry that was followed by silence. The stabbing continued. Ashley was certain that Tanya was dead.

The door to the guest room slammed shut and the intruder emerged, ghostlike, out of the darkness. Only his eyes and lips showed through his ski mask. Ashley's breath caught in her chest. The man savored her terror. Then he whispered "See you later," and walked downstairs.

Ashley collapsed from relief, but the feeling was short-lived. "See you later" meant that he was coming back to kill her. She struggled to sit up and scanned her room for something she could use to cut her bonds. Downstairs, the refrigerator door opened. The thought that he was going to eat something horrified Ashley. How could he eat after what he'd done? What kind of thing was he? The refrigerator door closed. Ashley grew desperate. She was going to be raped and killed if she couldn't get away.

A sound from the doorway brought her around. Something covered with blood was dragging itself across the floor. With a great effort, the thing raised its face and Ashley almost blacked out.

Norman Spencer crawled toward his daughter. There was stubble on his bloodstained cheeks and his hair was in disarray. In his right fist was his Swiss Army knife, the long blade out. Ashley fought the nausea and horror that threatened to disable her and rolled onto the floor. She turned her back to her father and presented her bound wrists. Norman had almost no strength left and he did not speak. He sawed at the tape with feeble strokes. Ashley wept as he worked the knife. She knew that she could not save her father and that he was using all that was left of his life to save hers.

The tape parted. Ashley grabbed the knife and freed her ankles. Then she ripped away the tape that covered her mouth and started to speak. Norman shook his head and jabbed weakly toward the hall to warn her that the intruder might hear. There should have been fear in his eyes since his death was certain, but he looked triumphant as he touched her lightly on her cheek. Ashley shook with silent sobs as she knelt beside her father. She held him. Norman whispered, "I love you." Just the effort of speaking cost him dearly. He coughed blood and a shiver went through him.

"Daddy," Ashley moaned. She felt so helpless.

A plate rattled against the kitchen table. "Go," Norman said, the words barely audible. Ashley knew she had to flee or die. She cried as she kissed her father's cheek. His body trembled, he closed his eyes, and stopped breathing.

Another sound from the kitchen brought Ashley to her feet. If she died, her father would have given his life for nothing. She wrenched open her bedroom window. Wood screeched against wood. To Ashley, it sounded like she'd set off an alarm.

Feet pounded up the stairs. It was a two-story drop to the ground, but Ashley had no choice. She crawled into the chill night air and hung from the ledge. The drop terrified her. A broken ankle would leave her helpless. She felt the strain in her arms. Then she heard a bellow of rage from her room and she let go.

The impact with the ground stunned her. Ashley lay on her back in the wet grass. A masked face stared down at her from her bedroom window. Ashley's eyes locked with the killer's for a moment. Then she was up and running, her breath slamming in her chest, legs pumping, running faster than she ever had before—running for her life.

Ashley sat in Barbara McCluskey's kitchen. Despite a borrowed sweat suit and the heat in the house, she hunched forward as if chilled to the bone. Her eyes, bloodshot from crying, stared blankly at the tabletop. She was so numb that she didn't feel the bruises and cuts that a medic had treated a short

time before. Every once in a while she would raise a mug of hot tea to her lips. Sipping the tea to every ounce of strength she could muster.

Ashley's flight had taken a random route through the neighborhood and ended in the bushes of the McCluskeys' backyard. The cold and rain had eventually driven her to pound on her neighbor's back door. While she was hiding, Ashley tried to imagine ways in which she could have averted the horrors that had befallen her father and her best friend. In every scenario the outcome was the same: if she stayed behind she ended up dead. Yet that didn't stop her from feeling guilty for running away.

A policewoman sat beside Ashley. There were other officers in the McCluskey home. Logic told Ashley that the man who had murdered her father and her best friend was long gone. She also knew that she would fear his return every minute of every day as long as he was at large.

The police had set up barricades on either side of the Spencer home to keep away the neighbors and the reporters who stood behind them, staring at the officers moving through Ashley's yard and in and out of her house. Every once in a while, the short, intermittent bark of a siren would signal the arrival of another police vehicle that was working its way through the crowd. Ashley paid no attention to anything that was going on outside. She had too much going on inside her head.

The policewoman stood up. Ashley caught the motion out of the corner of her eye and jerked back violently. She was holding the mug, and tea splashed on the tablecloth. A man was standing next to her. She had been so self-absorbed that she hadn't noticed him enter the kitchen.

"It's okay, Miss Spencer. I'm a detective," he said, holding out his identification. The detective's voice was calm, and he had a pleasant face. He was dressed in a brown tweed jacket, gray slacks, and a striped tie. Ashley had only seen detectives on TV, and he did not fit the stereotype. He wasn't handsome or rugged-looking. He just seemed ordinary, like her teachers or her friends' parents.

"May I sit?"

Ashley nodded, and the detective took the chair the policewoman had vacated.

"My name is Larry Birch. I'm with Homicide and I'm going to head the investigation into... into what happened at your house."

Ashley was touched by the detective's consideration.

"We've called your mother and she's on her way home. She'll probably be here by dawn."

A wave of sadness overwhelmed Ashley as she pictured the life her mother was about to lead. Her parents were still in love. Sometimes they were like teenagers, displaying a closeness around her friends that often embarrassed Ashley. What would Terri do now?

Birch saw Ashley's chest heave as she fought to control her tears. Gently he placed his hand on her shoulder, then went to the sink and returned with a glass of water. She was grateful for the kindness.

"I'd like to talk about what happened tonight," Birch said after a moment. "I know that's going to be rough for you. If you don't want to discuss it, I'll understand. But the more I know, the faster we'll be able to arrest the person who did this. The longer I have to wait for information, the better the chance that this man will get away."

Ashley felt sick. So far, no one had asked her to discuss her ordeal in detail. She did not want to remember her father covered in blood or Tanya's screams. She wanted to forget the sound of the intruder's shuddering orgasm and the way he'd eyed her from the doorway of her room. But she owed it to Tanya and her father to help the police. And she wanted to be safe and would only feel safe when Detective Birch caught the monster that had destroyed her family.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything you remember. For instance, who was in your house tonight before everything

happened?"

~~"Dad was home and Tanya was with me. Tanya Jones. Is she...?" Ashley asked, irrationally hoping that her friend had somehow survived.~~

Birch shook his head. Ashley started to cry again.

"She was my best friend," Ashley said with such despair that the detective had to fight to keep his composure. "We were teammates."

"What sport?" Birch asked to distract her.

"Soccer. We both played varsity for Eisenhower and we started for our club team. The team was doing really well. We have a chance to get to the Regionals in Hawaii. Tanya's never been to Hawaii. She was really excited."

"She was good?"

Ashley nodded. "She scored the winning goal today. Her mom said she could sleep over. That's why...why she's dead."

Ashley's shoulders shook, but she choked back her tears.

"We fell asleep," she continued after a moment. "I know it was around one. Then I woke up. He was in the room."

"What did he look like?" Birch asked.

"I don't know. It was dark. He never turned on the lights. And he was wearing dark clothes, a ski mask, and gloves."

"Could you tell his race? Was he Caucasian, African-American, Asian?"

"I don't know, really."

"Okay, what about height? How tall was he?"

Ashley thought about that. Most of the times she'd seen him she had been on her back and he seemed like a giant, but she knew the angle had distorted her perspective. Then she remembered that she'd been standing when the killer shot her with his stun gun. She closed her eyes and pictured the scene.

"I don't think he was very tall, like a basketball player. I'm five-foot-seven. I'm pretty sure he was taller than me."

"All right. That's good. That's something."

Birch made a note on a small spiral notebook he had opened.

"Can you tell me the color of his eyes?" he asked next.

Ashley strained to remember but it was no good. "I saw them but it was dark and...." She shook her head. "I can't remember the color."

"That's okay. You're doing fine. Tell me what happened after the man entered the room."

Ashley told Birch how the killer had used a stun gun to subdue her and Tanya and how he had beaten and bound them before taking Tanya into the guest room. Then she described the sounds that he told her that Tanya was being raped, then murdered.

"Did he do anything to you after that?" Birch asked quietly.

"No. I was certain he would but he didn't. Not then. He would have. I know he would have. But he...he...."

Ashley shuddered.

"What, Ashley? What did he do?"

"He went down to the kitchen. I couldn't believe it. He'd just raped her and killed her. I couldn't hear it. And he went to get something to eat. How could he do that?"

"How do you know he ate something?" Birch asked, working hard to hide his excitement.

"I heard the refrigerator door open. Later I heard a dish clatter on the table."

~~"Okay, Ashley. This could really be important. You know what DNA is, right?"~~

Ashley nodded. She watched detective shows and read crime novels. And they'd covered genetics in biology class.

"We can get a person's DNA from bodily fluids like saliva. If he ate some food in your kitchen he may have left something on a fork or a glass. Now let me ask you, was anyone at your house last night other than you, your friend, and your father?"

"No."

"And you ate dinner at home?"

"No. There was a pizza party to celebrate our win. My dad came to the game, ate with us, then took Tanya and me home."

"Did you, Tanya, or your father eat anything at home?"

"I don't think Dad did. He's on a diet. Mom would have been pissed that he ate three slices of..."

Ashley stopped. It was too much. Mom was always getting upset when Dad sneaked a cookie or a bowl of ice cream. Now her father was dead and there would never be any more playful bickering about his diet.

"I know this is going to be tough for you, Ashley," Birch said after an appropriate silence, "but I'd like you to come back to your house...."

Ashley looked up, alarmed.

"You won't have to go anywhere upstairs. Just the kitchen. I have to know if you can identify something this man ate, or a glass he drank from, a utensil he used. If you can, we may be able to get him. Do you feel up to it?"

Ashley nodded. It was a chance to do something. The policewoman was Ashley's size. Detective Birch asked her to give Ashley her heavy coat and to pull a car into the McCluskeys' driveway. He wanted to protect Ashley from the elements and the press.

When the car was as near as it could get, Birch led Ashley out a side door. A few reporters noticed the exit but Ashley was in the car before they could bother her. The policewoman turned on the bubble lights and used the horn and siren during the short drive to the Spencer home.

It was still raining, and Birch opened an umbrella over Ashley.

"I won't see the bodies, will I?"

"We're just going in the kitchen," he assured her.

Birch had been in the house earlier and he knew the way to the kitchen, which was adjacent to the stairs that led to the second floor. A photographer was snapping shots of the area. Birch shooed him out of the room.

"Take your time, Ashley," the detective said. "Look around all you want."

Ashley stood in the center of the room and turned slowly before focusing on the kitchen table. There were two folded paper napkins and a small spot of milk. She walked over to the sink. Then she opened the dishwasher.

"This is wrong," Ashley said.

"What's wrong?"

"When we got home Dad emptied the dishwasher. Mom was gone and he wanted the place to be clean when she got back, so he ran a wash before he came to the game. Then he put the dishes and glasses in the pantry."

"Okay."

"Tanya and I had some chocolate cake and milk when we watched this movie we rented. Mom"

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