

## *Drowning in Doubt*

It happens all the time, that's why I was so quick to rationalize it, like some kind of instinctual response. Something learned, something I'm pretty sure all females evolve to understand. Especially how their eyes start looking just a little too long when you're so young and it doesn't quite make sense yet. But you do get used to it, it's sad but I'm being honest.

I can't even sit at a bar alone. I told Nikki not to wait up; by now she understands that means I want some space outside of work and the two-room shoebox we have been sharing for almost three years. Most of the lounges on our side of town are pretty dead during the week, but my favorite had the added benefit of an owner with excellent taste in music. A little slow jazz, a single Long Island, and uninterrupted time with my own thoughts: this has always been the solution to finding a few moments of peace after those especially busy days.

I've never had a problem here; the way I kept to myself at the corner of the bar made it obvious I didn't want to be approached. Someone was bound to completely miss it eventually.

He seemed nice at first, they usually do. I already had my drink but, typical me, I felt obligated to be polite and up for some trivial conversation. I really hate to judge and he really did look nice, I guess. I mean he looked normal if you could ever place a definite image under that description. But the more we talked the more I started to notice this... thirst in his eyes that mirrored the ones I had seen since before I could

remember. I was already thinking up an exit strategy: I'm done with my drink so maybe toss in something like I already had one before he walked up and two is my limit, or there's always the option to break away to the bathroom. But before I could say anything, he interrupted me (for about the twelfth time in less than ten minutes) about buying me another Long Island while simultaneously waving his hand towards the direction of the bartender.

I told him no, but again I was trying to be as polite and respectful as ever. He insisted.

"Hey it's just one more, baby, I'll make sure you're alright," his mischievous grin broke that promise before his actions ever could.

"No, really. I'm fine, thank you," I said loud enough for both him and the bartender to get the hint.

His smile faded instantly as soon as the bartender turned his back and left us alone again. The hunger in his eyes intensified, I could physically feel their gaze devouring my body whole in a matter of mere seconds.

"I... I need to use the lady's room, excuse me... I'm sorry," I stammered, gathering my purse and keys from the bar.

As I stood up, he extended his arm towards me and I could already tell its destination was aiming for somewhere around my waist. I held my breath as I felt his fingers touch my spine just low enough that he flawlessly missed my ass by about the

length of a fingernail. I could tell he noticed my hesitance. I could tell he couldn't care less.

I tried to laugh it off when I pushed his hand away. This happens all the time, but somehow I feel like I haven't quite perfected the laugh. It still comes off all nervous and uncomfortable to me, but to guys like him? Well I guess their overly aggressive and masculine tendencies makes them blissfully unaware at the most opportune of moments.

"Wow, what a smile. Why don't you give me another one," his voice was as rough as his hands. I pushed them away again.

"I'm sorry but I really do need to go..." I managed to get out, my words were directed at him but my body had already turned, eager to begin its journey towards the hallway that lead to the bathroom.

I was filled with relief the second I finally dared to look back and could see he hadn't followed me. And even more relieved as soon as I closed the door and realized I had the bathroom to myself. The lighting was dismal, I could tell it caused my makeup to look less faded than it actually was. I dug my powder compact and my travel brush out of my purse and patted over the oily spots on my face. After that I checked my phone for a few minutes; scrolled through my Facebook feed, updated an app or two. I was trying to kill as much time as possible because I just did not want to deal with it anymore that night. I wanted to really diminish my chances of running into him as I executed my escape.

I made it down the opposite end of the hallway and out the door into the deserted parking lot. Cars scattered the spaces designated by chalky-white lines, but the only other person I could see appeared to be a homeless man bundled up next to a shopping cart about a block away. Subconsciously, my armor came into position. I moved the largest key on my chain between my pointer finger and my thumb, gripping it tight. Then I made sure my miniature mace spray was securely tucked within my palm below. I was ready to conquer... the long walk to my car, alone.

I was only a few feet from my Honda, had barely lifted my thumb from pressing the unlock button, when out of nowhere I saw him closing in on the driver's side. He was like a ghost, but I guess he had been waiting, invisible from my view, behind the massive truck that was parked a few spaces down. I realized that he could obviously see the door to the lounge through the truck's windows. How long had he been out here? Did he see me park and go in a few hours prior? Or did he just hit the creepers' jackpot happening to hide behind another vehicle so close to my own?

I stopped and surveyed the cement playground once more. It was still just us.

"You didn't have to lie to me, you know," he broke the silence first. I tried to keep my cool, tried to act like I wasn't scared shitless.

"I really did need to use the bathroom, I just..." before I could finish he cut me off.

“Yeah, save it. What’s your problem? A man is being nice to you and you just brush me off... I bet you’re the same dumb bitch that’s always complaining... there are no more nice guys anymore, aren’t you?” his words were slurred and fractured between drunken hitches.

“Come over here, baby. I was only waiting to open your door for you like a gentleman, give me a chance, sexy, you’ll see...” he said, hands fumbling for the passenger handle.

Thank god my reflexes were fast enough that the door locked back before he got his grip. But like an impatient child he jaggedly kept shaking the handle up and down up and down up and down...

I panicked. I immediately scolded myself for wearing my highest pair of heels today of all days. His build was fairly athletic and the few feet between us felt like inches. He could have easily grabbed me if I tried to turn around and run, and he could have easily silenced me in a matter of seconds if I dared to scream.

It happened so quickly that some parts are inevitably blurred. I remember putting on my best smile as I coyly stepped closer, secretly... nervously, repositioning the armor that had slipped out of place as a result of the moisture sprouting from my palms. He didn’t notice, his eyes never strayed from my chest, my legs, and back up again. The stench of alcohol grew stronger as I slowly narrowed the distance.

Before he had a chance to get within a foot of my face, before his hands even grazed my skin again, I had the mace out and sprayed it straight into those piercing eyes. He stumbled back, lost his balance and slammed hard onto the concrete, and I was left with just enough space and time to unlock the car, get in, slam my door and get the hell out of there.

The whole ride home I failed miserably at rationalizing what to do next. I couldn't remember if there were any cameras in that parking lot, and even if they were there, would they have been close enough to see anything from where my car was parked? I was pretty sure I saw one actually in the lounge, up in one of the corners across from the bar... But nothing happened in the bar. Nothing any police officer would actually take seriously. I've tried to get help with similar situations in the past, but I was always met with the typical rigmarole bullshit.

*It sounds like he was just drunk, you look fine to me. Just be more careful.*

*How much were **you** drinking at the time?*

*Is that what you were wearing?*

*I don't see any marks or bruises, are you sure he actually touched you?*

*Well, just fill out this paperwork and I'll see what we can do.*

But then they don't do anything.

By the time I was on the other side of my double-locked apartment door, my strength depleted. I made it as far as the leather couch just a few yards away and collapsed into tears.

It wasn't long before I heard Nikki's footsteps coming down the hallway.

"Lynn? Lynn, oh my god what happened, are you okay?"

She got down on her knees in front of me and gently wiped away the fresh tears budding on my cheeks. I didn't know where to start. It was a few minutes before my scattered brain collected itself enough to attempt recalling the evening's events. Nikki stayed patient all the same, slowly stroking my back as she listened, encouraging me to continue each time the words got caught in my throat.

"I just, I didn't know... I don't think it will matter if I say anything so I just... came straight home. I just wanted to be here. I'm sorry I woke you up, Nikki..." I stammered.

"Don't apologize for this Lynn, you could have gotten seriously hurt or worse..." her voice trailed off; we were both thinking the same thing I'm sure, but neither of us wanted to say it.

"Well... I hate that you're right, but you are. If you tried to get a, a case on the piece of shit... I mean, all they would have is your word... even when they do get hard proof it's still pulling teeth to get anywhere," she continued.

I nodded, exhausted to the point of no longer wanting to speak.

“I guess I’m gonna at least try to get some sleep...” I said.

As we got to our feet she drew closer, wrapping her arms tightly around me. I hugged her back.

“Thanks, Nik.”



I think it had been about two weeks or so by the time that night was registered and tucked away into the back of my mind like all of the others before it, left to be forgotten until some triggering stimulus would surely bring it back again. I wanted to force myself further out of the funk I had been feeling and this particular day I felt confident would be a great one to walk the short distance to the farmer’s market rather than drive. I needed some fresh air and the weather could not have been more perfect after five days in a row of nothing but rain.

On my way I stopped in at the local coffee shop to fuel up. After the barista handed me my dose of caffeine I decided to sit and take my time to enjoy it and finally respond to all of the worried texts my dad had been sending recently. I felt bad for being such a recluse. But before I made it to his name in my contacts my phone started buzzing like crazy. It was Nikki with four frantic texts in a row, the last one distinctive from the rest by a blue link filling its bubble.

*You have to watch this NOW!!!*

*Just click link Im sending...*



*This was near the place u were at?*

Confused, I pressed my finger to the link and was redirected to a news website story featuring the gruesome headline “Body Identified in Sexual Assault Near Local Lounge: Killer Now in Custody”. An uncontrollable shudder reverberated up my spine as I scrolled down the page to the video report and pressed play.

I watched fixedly as the newscaster explained that a female body had been found naked and badly beaten inside a dumpster within a few blocks of the lounge I had barely made my escape from.

“...the young victim, Sasha Ortega, was only 24 years old and would have graduated from medical school in May. An autopsy reports she had rohypnol in her system. Her attacker, a man now identified as Lucas Jeffries, was arrested earlier this morning.”

The newscaster was replaced with an image of the attacker. My face distorted in horror as I stared into the eyes that I had pepper sprayed just weeks before. The phone slipped through my fingers and found its final resting place on the hard tile below.

The sound echoed through the small shop; it was nearly empty but somehow I still felt as if I were suffocating. It took everything in me to lift the phone, my purse, and myself up and back out the door into the world.

As I began to walk, a million thoughts flooded my conscience at once. *That could have been me. That was almost me. I should have reported him. This is my fault. This is literally*

*my fault. If I would have reported him, maybe someone would have listened to me this time. If I wouldn't have stuck to the fucking coy act and brushing him off in the lounge it would have never escalated. He only thought it was okay to keep trying because I fucking let him. I should have shoved him the very first time he touched me at the bar. I should have screamed so he would have been embarrassed. I should have done something... more.*

My body felt heavy under such questioning and I found myself pausing to sit on one of the benches near a bus stop. This was crazy. I felt like I was in a nightmare trying to make sense of it all. Trying to come up with some valid reason why I shouldn't feel guilty. But it's always funny how feeling like you're at the bottom actually just means there is nowhere left to go but back up again.

It wasn't long before, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a girl sitting alone a few benches away. I guess I had been in such a panic I walked right past her without even realizing it. There was a man sitting within arm's reach and the more I slyly started to peek the more I realized her body language was one I could instantly recognize. Ever so slightly, she appeared to be shrinking herself further away from the man, and then ever so slightly he seemed to be pressing in closer. Her mouth was moving and I strained to catch what she was saying.

"...listening to my headphones, sir. Sorry, but I'm really not in the mood to talk..." she never even looked in his direction as she was speaking, but he persisted.

“I’m not tryin to be mean, darlin, what are you listenin to? It won’t do nothin to ya just talkin to me, will it?” By the time the question left his mouth he had moved close enough that I’m sure she could feel him breathing.

The realization came crashing down all around me. It happens all the time, but I can still do something. I couldn’t change what happened to the girl from the news, but I could damn well give every effort I had to never hesitate or rationalize this shit ever again.

Without a second thought I walked right up to her, standing directly in front of where she was sitting. Sure enough, the moment he saw someone getting closer his demeanor shifted. He slid his body back down the bench, watching me suspiciously.

“Is this guy bothering you?” I asked, loud and clear.

The girl glanced in his direction, then, shielding her eyes from the sun, she looked up at me and nodded. I turned to face the man directly.

“Either you walk away right now or I’ll call the cops. I’m not kidding,” I said, phone in hand.

The guy looked mortified and then angry beyond belief. He muttered some obscenity before standing up and walking away. I sat down next to the girl and asked if she was okay.

“Yeah... I think so. I don’t get it. I was really trying to be polite, but he wouldn’t listen. Why can’t people just take the hint?”

"I ask myself the same thing multiple times a week," I replied, and she nervously laughed at the sentiment.

I got the feeling she was still uncomfortable and so I offered to sit with her until her bus arrived.

"Really? Are you sure you wouldn't mind? Cause I still have about another ten minutes or so..." she explained.

"I don't mind staying," I assured her.

"Wow, well thanks. I really appreciate it..." her tone trailed off as if asking a question.

"Oh! Lynn, it's Lynn!"

"I really appreciate it, Lynn. I'm Elayah. It's good to meet you," she said, extending her hand.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Elayah," I replied, extending my own to meet hers.

In one swift motion she stretched out her opposite arm, covering the other side of my hand so that it was encased between hers.

"I... I just wanted to say I almost lost my sister after she was attacked walking home alone and..." she paused to bite her lip as if she was unsure whether or not to continue.

Our eyes met and I nodded in her direction, encouraging her to keep going.

“I almost lost her... but even though she’s still here she isn’t the same. What happened to her... what that monster did, it feels like he took a piece of her with him and I guess, I guess I want you to know how much I appreciate what you did just now...” Elayah explained.

It must have been apparent that I was speechless, and so she cleared her throat and went on.

“Lynn, I have to tell you, I think if enough of us stood up and said enough is enough... if someone would have stepped in that night with my sister, it really could have helped, you know? They really could have made a difference.”

She gave my hand one small squeeze before releasing it back to me as the bus slowly crept and came to a halt.

“Hey, Elayah? There’s a great little shop around the corner, Franco’s? Do you want to have a coffee with me... same time next week?”

She smiled.

“I don’t think I have anything planned, let’s do it!”

We stood up and gave our brief goodbyes.

I planned on going home, but after Elayah left I felt... lighter. I turned around and headed back in the direction of the farmer’s market, my anxious mind finally, for the moment, at peace.