

A brutal crime keeps them apart...  
...before they've even gotten together

# CONFLICT OF INTEREST

A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVEL

JAE



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# **DEDICATION**

For all survivors.

# CHAPTER 1

“I’M GOING TO THROW UP,” Dawn Kinsley said, rubbing her nervous stomach.

“No, you won’t.” Her friend and colleague Ally just grinned. “Come on, you’re a therapist. You’re used to talking to people.”

“Not to one hundred cops who would rather be elsewhere and who won’t give me the time of day.” Dawn knew what the police officers sitting on the other side of the curtain were thinking. Most of them would view her lecture as a waste of time.

Ally rolled her eyes. “A psychologist with glossophobia. I wonder what the APA would say about that.”

“I’m sure the American Psychological Association would be much more concerned about a psychologist with your lack of compassion,” Dawn answered, now with a grin of her own. Usually, she didn’t have a problem with public speaking. She had held her own in front of gum-chewing high school kids, earnest college students, and renowned psychologists twice her age, but cops were a special audience for her. It was almost as if she was expecting to see her father sitting in one of the rows and was trying to impress him. *Oh, come on. This is not the time to start analyzing yourself.*

“Touché,” Ally said.

Both of them had to chuckle, and Dawn felt herself relax.

“There are a few techniques that can help in these situations, you know,” Ally said.

“Let me guess—picturing everyone in the audience naked?”

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Dawn grinned at her friend. “And how would that help with my nervousness?”

Ally shrugged. “Well, maybe it won’t.” She peeked out from behind the curtain, letting her appreciative gaze wander over the men in the first few rows. “But it might be nice nonetheless.”

“Maybe for you, but how would it be nice for me to picture a room full of naked men? Hello?” Dawn gave a little wave. “Did you miss the office memo informing everyone about my sexual orientation?”

“Office memo? Is that what they call it nowadays when spotted kissing your girlfriend in the office parking lot?”

“What?” Dawn sputtered. “I never did that!”

Ally rubbed her forehead and pretended to think about it. “No? Must have been Charlie, then.” She pushed the curtain aside to glance at the audience again. “There are also a few female officers down there. You could look at them.”

“All two of them?” Dawn joked but stepped closer to follow Ally’s gaze. There were more than two female cops in the audience—but not that many more.

“Pick one,” Ally said.

Dawn nudged her with an elbow. “I’m here to give a lecture, not to pick up women, Ally.”

Ally ignored her protests. “Pick one and concentrate on her during your lecture. Ignore the rest of the crowd. It’ll help with the nervousness. So?” She pointed to the seated police officers.

*Well, it can't hurt.* Dawn craned her neck and peeked past the taller Ally. Her gaze wandered from woman to woman, never stopping for long until... “Her!” she said, pointing decisively.

In the very last row, between a tall African American man in his forties and a younger man whose posture screamed “rookie,” a female plainclothes detective was just taking her seat. She had short, jet-black hair, and a leather jacket covered what Dawn could see of her tall, athletic frame.

“Ooh!” Ally whistled quietly. “Nice choice! Didn’t know you liked them a little on the butch side, though. Maggie isn’t nearly—”

“Compared to Maggie, even you look butch,” Dawn said.

“Dr. Kinsley?”

Dawn looked away from the detective and turned around. “Yes?”

One of the seminar organizers stepped up to them. “Here are your handouts.” He handed her a stack of paper. “Are you ready to begin?”

Dawn clutched the handouts and swallowed. “Yes.”

“Good luck,” Ally said. Behind the seminar organizer’s back, she mouthed, “Remember to picture her naked.”

*How’s that supposed to calm my racing heart?* Dawn stepped out from behind the curtain and made her way over to the microphone with a confidence she didn’t really feel.

~\* \* \*~

Aiden slumped into a seat between her partner and Ruben Cartwright. The chair next to Ruben was suspiciously empty. “Where’s your partner? Terminal back pain again?” If she had to be at this stupid seminar, so did everyone else, even hypochondriacs like Jeff Okada.

Ruben looked up from the paper airplane that had once been his seminar brochure. He shoved a strand of brown hair out of his boyishly handsome face and glanced from Aiden to her partner. “Uh, what?”

Ray leaned over to him with a grin. “There’s one thing you have to know about your new partner, rookie. His back acts up every time a seminar comes along.”

“It acts up whenever I have to sit in one of these seats designed for first graders,” Jeff Okada said as he walked up to them. Gingerly, he eased himself down next to his rookie partner.

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Aiden sighed and glanced at her watch. She had a stack of unfinished reports on her desk, and their thirty open cases didn't get any closer to being solved while she sat here. The seminar also stopped her from spending her lunch hour in the courtroom's gallery, watching her favorite deputy district attorney at work. Maybe she would have even worked up the courage to ask Kade to lunch today.

Sighing again, she wrestled herself into a standing position and pointed to the back of the conference room. "I'm going for coffee."

"If you want to live long enough to enjoy your hard-earned pension, I'd advise against that, my friend." Okada raised his index finger in warning. "In more than twenty-five years on the job, I've never been to a law enforcement seminar with even halfway decent coffee."

Ray smirked. "In twenty-five years on the job, you've never been to a law enforcement seminar, period."

Over the top of his sunglasses, Okada directed a withering glance at Ray before he turned back to Aiden. "The lack of drinkable coffee is obviously a nationwide conspiracy from law enforcement brass to make sure nothing distracts their officers from the lectures. For the same reason, you'll never encounter donuts or attractive female lecturers at a law enforcement seminar."

"Or comfortable chairs," Ray said.

Okada threw up his hands. "Now you're starting to get it."

Aiden sank back into her chair. Giving up on her caffeine fix, she pulled the now crushed seminar program out from under her. The wrinkled paper announced the title of the first lecture: Special Needs and Issues of Male and GLBT Survivors of Rape and Sexual Abuse. The speaker was some PhD named D. Kinsley.

"Great," Aiden murmured. They hadn't even hired a cop or someone who knew the reality of handling sex crimes to give the

lecture. Instead, some antiquated Freudian in a stiff suit would bore them to tears with his academic theories.

A young woman carrying a stack of handouts stepped out from behind a curtain and crossed the podium—probably the Freudian’s assistant or the poor soul who had the questionable honor of introducing the speaker. The woman tapped the microphone to test its volume and nodded. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I’m Dawn Kinsley, your lecturer for the first part of the seminar.”

Aiden’s head jerked up. That was D. Kinsley?

Nothing reminded Aiden of the academic Freudian she had imagined except the glasses on the freckled nose. Instead of a suit and tie, slacks and a tight, sleeveless blouse covered a body that was petite, yet not frail. The strawberry blonde hair wasn’t pulled back into an old-fashioned bun, but cascaded in curls halfway down to softly curved hips.

*Seems she’s the PhD, not the assistant. That’s what I get for stereotyping. Of course, looking at her instead of an old man is not exactly a punishment.* However boring the lecture might be, at least she would have something captivating to look at.

The lecture began, and to her surprise, Aiden found herself looking away from the pretty speaker to jot down interesting details about dealing with male rape victims. The lecture turned out to be informative, practice-oriented, and witty. She even caught Okada bending his aching back to take notes. The psychologist spoke with passion and sensitivity, never even glancing down at her notes.

Instead, Aiden felt as if the psychologist was looking right at her, focusing on her as if there were no one else in the room. *Oh, come on. Stop dreaming. There are a few other people in the room, you know?* Aiden listened with rapt attention to the rest of the lecture.

Forty-five minutes passed almost too soon.

“I knew I should have tried the coffee,” Ruben mumbled when



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they began to file out of the room with the last of the seminar participants. “If there’s an attractive female lecturer, there’s a chance the rest of your seminar conspiracy theory is bull too.”

Okada stretched and shook his head. “I wouldn’t bet your meager paycheck on it, partner. Some government employee obviously failed to check the lecturer’s picture, but there’s no way they would overlook a bill for Blue Hawaiian beans at forty dollars per pound.”

Someone chuckled behind them.

Aiden turned and looked into the twinkling gray-green eyes of Dawn Kinsley, their lecturer. The faint laugh lines at their corners indicated that the psychologist was closer to thirty than to twenty as Aiden had first assumed.

“Sorry,” Aiden said, pointing at Okada and Ruben. “They’re not used to being out and about. We normally keep them chained to their desks.”

Dawn didn’t seem offended. Her full lips curved into an easy smile that dimpled her cheeks and crinkled the skin at the bridge of her slightly upturned nose, which made the freckles dusting the fair skin seem to dance. “Don’t worry, Detective, I’ve been called worse things than attractive.”

Aiden tilted her head. “How do you know I’m a detective?”

“Oh, I don’t know, could it be the fact that we’re at a law enforcement conference?” Okada said.

Dawn smiled at him, but she spoke to Aiden. “The way you stand, walk, and talk pretty much screams ‘cop’ in capital letters. And the way you dress suggests you’re a detective. Sex crimes unit?”

Aiden nodded. “Aiden Carlisle.” She extended her hand.

“Dawn Kinsley, but I guess you already knew that.” The psychologist nodded down at her name tag. Her handshake was as genuine and warm as her smile.

“Hey, Aiden.” Ray, already halfway out the door, waved her

over. “We’re gonna make a run for the nearest coffee shop before the next lecture starts. You up for it?”

Forty-five minutes ago, Aiden would have jumped at the chance to leave the seminar room, but now she found herself hesitating. “Um, sure.” She glanced at Dawn. “Would you like to come with us?”

“I don’t drink coffee.” The psychologist laughed at the look on Aiden’s face. “Don’t look so shocked, Detective. I’m a tea drinker, and I’d love to accompany four of Portland’s finest, but regrettably, I’ve got an appointment.”

“Maybe next time, then,” Aiden said, knowing they would likely never see each other again. Not as eager to get a caffeine fix as before, she said good-bye and followed her colleagues out of the conference room.

## CHAPTER 2

**A**IDEN RAPPED HER KNUCKLES AGAINST the shiny surface of a watermelon, testing its ripeness. Then she decided that a whole melon would only spoil in her single-person household and reached for a banana instead.

When a young man entered her personal space, she looked up from the fruit, immediately aware of anyone violating a ten-foot zone around her. His gaze met hers, and he backed away. Scowling, Aiden watched him as he walked toward another shopper, who was putting apples into a shopping basket.

*Hey! That's the psychologist from last week. Buying fruit like the rest of us mere mortals—in my grocery store.* Aiden forgot about the strange young man as she studied Dawn Kinsley. Wearing faded blue jeans and a white button-down shirt, Dawn looked at least as good as she had in the neatly pressed slacks and blouse she'd worn at the seminar. Aiden tilted her head and watched as Dawn pushed back stubborn blonde strands that had escaped from her ponytail. *Should I say hello? Would she even remember me?*

She hadn't made a decision yet when the young man reached into Dawn's purse and fled down the aisle.

Dawn seemed to comprehend what had happened almost immediately. She sprinted after him at a speed that would have done any street cop proud and grabbed his shirt before he could reach the door.

The thief whirled around, towering over the small woman, and raised a threatening fist.

*Uh-oh!* Aiden sprinted toward them before the situation could escalate further. She grabbed the raised fist and turned the man's arm behind his back in one smooth movement. "That was really dumb, Dr. Kinsley," she said to the staring woman. "Brave, but dumb. You shouldn't grab someone who outweighs you by at least forty pounds—without even knowing if he's armed."

Dawn looked steadily back at her. "He outweighs you too."

Aiden straightened to her full height. "But I am armed and a trained police officer."

"Oh, shit!" At the mention of her occupation, the captured thief started to struggle in Aiden's grip.

The shop owner hurried down the aisle. "Thank you, thank you, Detective!" He wanted to shake her hands, but they were full of struggling thief, so he turned to Dawn. "I'm very sorry, Dr. Kinsley. That never happened in my store before. Would you accept some more fruit as a compensation for the scare?"

"No, thank you. What I have is enough, really." Dawn lifted her shopping basket with two apples and a banana.

The shop owner sighed. "She's another one of those one-banana buyers," he said to Aiden.

*She's single.* Aiden put the brakes on her hopeful thoughts. *Yeah, and probably as straight as they come.*

"I might only take one banana, but I buy two packets of cookies every time I come in here," Dawn said, smiling.

The shop owner called the police. Once two uniformed officers had taken the thief off her hands and she and Dawn had given their statements, Aiden allowed herself to focus on Dawn. "So, do you come here often?" She winced when she realized it sounded like a lame pick-up line.

"Often enough to get a reputation as a one-banana buyer, it would seem." Dawn winked.

Aiden had to smile. She liked Dawn's wit. "Been there, done that."

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“I live just down the street. Do you want to come with me and have the cup of coffee I had to decline last week?” Dawn tilted her head and looked up at Aiden.

“I thought you didn’t drink coffee?”

“I don’t, but I make a mean cup. Just the way you cops like it—strong enough to be considered black paint in every other occupation.”

Aiden laughed. “Now, that’s an offer I can’t resist.” *Asking me to come home with her... Is she flirting?* She shook her head at herself. *You wish.* Dawn was obviously comfortable around people and friendly to everyone she met.

Side by side, they climbed the stairs to Dawn’s second-floor apartment. “Make yourself comfortable,” Dawn called over her shoulder, already heading for the kitchen.

Aiden lifted a brow. Cop or not, she wouldn’t have left a stranger unsupervised in her living room. Hesitantly, she stepped across a colorful rug, past potted plants, overflowing bookcases, and shelves full of framed pictures. Orange curtains suffused the living room in a golden light. In the corner was a desk piled high with books, files, and magazines. Above it, a chaotic arrangement of drawings and colorful postcards fought for space with a shelf full of seashells, a piggy bank, and stuffed animals. A recliner, a rocking chair, and two mismatched chairs completed the furnishings.

It was a bit chaotic, in a charming and almost soothing way. Aiden thought about her own apartment, which was neat and nearly void of any personal knickknacks. Dawn’s apartment wasn’t overly tidy; it had a cozy, lived-in feel. It felt like a home, not just a place to eat and sleep.

*I like it.* Aiden sank onto the couch and studied the oil painting of a long-haired cat on the opposite wall. The cat’s nose was a bit crooked as if the artist hadn’t gotten it quite right, but otherwise it looked very lifelike. Had Dawn painted it?

Within minutes, her hostess returned with a tray bearing coffee, tea, and cookies, and placed it on the coffee table. “Black, without sugar, right?” Dawn sat in a rocking chair across from Aiden and nodded toward her mug.

“Right.” Aiden didn’t ask how Dawn knew her coffee preferences. She seemed to have some sort of sixth sense concerning police officers.

“So, have you recovered from all those attempts to bore you to death?” Dawn looked at her over the rim of her mug, a smile in her eyes.

“Huh?”

Dawn shook a finger at her. “Oh, come on, Detective. I’m well aware how ‘eager’ most cops are to sit in a chair all day and listen to some academics tell them how to do their jobs.”

“Yeah, we just love it,” Aiden said with a grin. “But actually, your lecture wasn’t half bad. You’re not just an academic, are you?”

“No. Maybe I’ll go into teaching someday, but for now, I’m pretty happy with what I do.”

“Which is?”

“I counsel survivors of rape and sexual abuse,” Dawn said.

Aiden looked down into her mug. “That has to be tough.”

Dawn shrugged. “As tough as being a sex crimes detective, I would imagine. But sometimes I feel that I really make a difference for some of my patients, and that makes it worthwhile.”

Aiden nodded. Their jobs had a lot in common. Silence grew between them, but Aiden didn’t find it uncomfortable.

“I have to admit that I didn’t invite you up without an ulterior motive, Detective.” Dawn didn’t beat around the bush.

Aiden swallowed. “And what motive might that be?”

“I know we hardly know each other,” Dawn said, “and I normally wouldn’t do this, but...”

Aiden’s eyes widened. Was this a come-on?

“I have a favor to ask,” Dawn finally said.

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*Okay, so it's not a come-on.* Aiden laughed at herself. *Sleeping with a woman like Dawn couldn't be considered doing her a favor.*

"I've searched for someone who could speak to my group, and it seems I've found the ideal person for the job." Dawn looked at her expectantly.

"Your group?"

Dawn nodded. "It's a support group for survivors who've gotten pregnant by rape."

Suddenly, the coffee left a bitter taste in her mouth. For once, she had been relaxed, not thinking about anything job related, and the question caught her off guard. "I'm in no way ideal for the job."

"Of course you are." Dawn rocked forward and touched Aiden's hand.

Aiden flinched and pulled her hand away. She didn't know how, but Dawn must have found out the circumstances of her conception. The thought did not sit well with her. "No. I can't give advice to women in that situation. I...I just can't, okay?"

"Okay." Dawn blinked but didn't try to pressure Aiden into changing her mind.

Aiden shoved back her only half-empty cup of coffee. "I have to go."

Dawn rose with her. Her smooth brow furrowed as she followed Aiden to the door. "If I insulted you in any—"

"No," Aiden held up her hand, "you didn't. It's just... You haven't insulted me."

"All right." For the first time, it seemed as if Dawn didn't know what to say.

Aiden slipped past her, not allowing herself to look back. The sound of the door closing behind her echoed in her mind for the rest of the day.

## CHAPTER 3

**A**IDEN FUMBLER WITH THE KEY for a few moments, stiff hands and tired eyes refusing to work together. When she finally managed to unlock the door and entered her apartment, everything was dark and silent. Only a wave of stale air, a pile of bills and junk mail, and two parched potted plants greeted her.

For the last three days, she had slept on one of the precinct's cots, tucked away in the "dungeon," the tiny spare room that looked more like a storage closet than a comfortable place to rest. Today, their hard work had finally paid off. Portland had one less child molester to worry about.

Exhausted but content, she threw the mail onto the coffee table and glanced at the answering machine. No blinking red light, which meant she had no messages—not that she had expected any. She didn't have many friends outside of the squad.

Since it was four in the morning, she ignored the coffee pot and headed for the fridge instead. She skipped using a glass and drank directly from the orange juice container. *One of the many advantages of being single.* She tried not to think about how nice it would be to come home to a sympathetic ear and a warm body in her bed.

On the way to the bathroom, she kicked off her shoes and yanked her shirt over her head. Leaning against the sink, she splashed water onto her face and rubbed burning eyes. The mirror above the sink showed disheveled black hair and lines of fatigue on her face. Her amber eyes were bloodshot. Running her



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tongue over her teeth and tasting three days' worth of coffee and Chinese takeout, she decided a shower could wait and grabbed her toothbrush.

The sound of water dripping from the faucet accentuated the silence in her apartment. Out of habit, she reached up to the place where other people might store their bath radio and turned on her police scanner. She was so used to listening to the radio transmissions of the Portland Police Bureau that it became a soothing background noise while she brushed her teeth. She barely registered a domestic violence callout and two DUIs.

The scanner crackled. "...at 228 Northwest Everett Street."

That caught Aiden's attention. Not only was the address in her immediate neighborhood, but it also sounded oddly familiar. Convinced that her tired mind was playing tricks on her, she returned to her brushing and gargling.

The dispatcher's voice came through the scanner again. "I repeat: We have a 10-31 at 228 Northwest Everett Street. Unclear if suspect is still on scene. Respond code two."

She spat a mouthful of toothpaste across the sink and mirror as she recognized the address. Someone had been assaulted—or possibly raped—in Dawn Kinsley's apartment building. A sudden surge of adrenaline banished her tiredness. She tried to tell herself that there were dozens of other women living at the same address, that it probably wasn't even a rape, that she wasn't on call, but a quivering deep in her gut made her abandon her toothbrush and grab her wrinkled clothes again.

"Dispatch, this is unit one-eighteen," a patrol unit responded via radio. "That's 10-44. I'm en route. ETA two minutes."

Even knowing help was on the way, Aiden didn't stop. She had learned long ago not to question her instincts. She dressed with the automatic movements of someone who had been called out at unholy hours of the night a thousand times. Within minutes, she was on her way.

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Blue and red lights colored the night when Aiden pulled her car into a parking space beside the squad car.

A uniformed police officer stopped her before she reached the door to the apartment building. “Sorry, ma’am.” He blocked the entrance. “Do you live here? Do you have any identification?”

She silenced him by shoving her badge in his face. “Detective Carlisle, Sexual Assault Detail.”

“Wow, you guys are really fast tonight. I’m Officer Trent, patrol district eight-twelve.”

Aiden wasn’t in the mood to exchange any chitchat or to explain her fast arrival at the scene. “You responded to a 10-31. It was a sexual assault?”

“Yeah.” The officer nodded. “It—”

“Which apartment?”

“2B. My partner’s up there.”

Aiden clenched her hands into helpless fists. It was Dawn’s apartment. She didn’t wait for the elevator and took the steps two at a time. In front of the door to 2B, she slid to a stop and braced herself, afraid of what she might find on the other side.

A loud knock brought her face-to-face with another uniformed officer staring blankly at her.

“Carlisle, SAD.”

“That was fast,” the young officer said and stepped aside to allow her entry. Aiden could see his relief at not having to deal with the victim himself. Patrol officers had little, if any, training in dealing with rape survivors. He followed her back in and glanced at the notebook in his hand. “The victim’s name is—”

“I know her name.” Aiden took a second to compose herself before she looked around.

The half-open bedroom door showed crumpled sheets, a knocked-over lamp, and random objects scattered across the floor. The detective in Aiden began to process the crime scene

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automatically, but when she entered the living room and saw Dawn, her professionalism wavered.

Dawn sat on the couch, where she had shared coffee and tea with Aiden just six days ago.

Aiden almost didn't recognize her. Dawn huddled on the couch, one hand clinging to the blanket someone had wrapped around her to hide the torn clothing, the other fluttering across the side of her swollen face. Her naturally fair complexion appeared even paler in contrast to the bruises on her cheek.

Aiden cleared her throat to announce her presence and perched on the edge of the couch, careful not to sit too close and make Dawn feel threatened. "Hello, Dr. Kinsley... Dawn." She made her voice as gentle as she could.

Dawn's head shot up. "H-hi. I'd say it's nice to see you again, but under these circumstances..." She looked away, wiping at the tears in her eyes.

Aiden swallowed. She had the sudden urge to hold Dawn's hand or wrap her arms around her, but she kept her distance, knowing it could do more harm than good at this point. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Someone broke into my apartment. A...a man." Dawn pressed her lips together. "He had a weapon, and...he hit me." Her fingers traced the marks on her right cheek.

Aiden nodded encouragingly but didn't interrupt.

"He...threw me down...onto the bed, and then he..." Dawn squeezed her eyes shut. "He raped me," she whispered. She looked stunned, as if only now realizing what had happened. "Detective, he...he..."

"I know," Aiden murmured. She moved a little closer but not yet close enough to touch. "Did you know him?"

Dawn shook her head.

"Okay. Can you describe him?" Aiden knew she had to

maintain a professional distance and ask the standard questions, but it was hard.

“He was tall and muscular and...heavy,” Dawn said. Her voice shook. “Black hair. Angry, blue eyes.”

“Good, that’ll help us look for him.” She lightly touched Dawn’s forearm. “I’ll take you to the hospital in a second, okay? Can I get you anything or do anything for you before we go? Should I call anyone?”

“No.” Dawn shook her head.

“Are you sure?” Aiden didn’t like the thought of no one being there for Dawn. Of course she would try to make the rape kit procedure at the hospital as easy as possible for Dawn, but her primary role was that of a detective, not that of a friend.

“I don’t want my mother to see me like this, and I’d rather tell her in person than scare her with a call,” Dawn said quietly. “There have been too many of those calls in our family.”

Aiden nodded but asked no questions. She didn’t want to invade Dawn’s privacy any further.

“I’d like to change.” Dawn looked down at her torn T-shirt.

Aiden sighed. “You can’t, at least not yet. I’m sorry, but it’s evidence. How about taking a new set of clothing with you to the hospital so you can change after your examination?”

“I...I can’t go in there.” Dawn pointed a trembling finger at the bedroom.

“It’s all right. I’ll do it.” Aiden stepped over a fallen chair, shattered ceramic figurines, and books and a sketchpad with torn-out pages, careful not to touch anything that might be evidence. Dawn’s glasses lay on the bedroom floor, the frame broken and one lens shattered.

Aiden picked out a comfortable-looking sweatshirt, loose-fitting pants, and a pair of warm socks. Adding panties and a bra, she bitterly shook her head. She had fleetingly fantasized about seeing Dawn’s underwear—but these definitely weren’t

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the circumstances she had imagined. Even harmless flirting with Dawn was no longer an option. Everything had changed tonight.

She returned to the living room with the bundle of clothes under her arm. Her heart lurched at the sight of Dawn fumbling with her shoes, her fingers trembling too much to manage the laces. She put down the clothes, knelt in front of Dawn, and tied the laces. “Anything else?”

“Can I brush my teeth?”

Aiden bit her lip. “No, sorry. That could destroy evidence. I have to talk to the officer for a minute, okay? It won’t take long.”

The cop, who had retreated to the kitchen, looked up as she entered. “She give a description?”

“Tall, muscular, black hair, blue eyes. I’ll have her work with a sketch artist later, but for now give out a BOLO for a suspect fitting that description to all precincts.”

The officer nodded and took a few notes.

“Are there any witnesses, or is Dr. Kinsley the one who called us?” Aiden looked back to the couch to make sure Dawn was still okay on her own.

“A neighbor called it in,” the officer answered. “He saw her lean out of the open window and thought she was suicidal. Turns out she wanted to retrieve her cell phone. The perp threw it out the window. It’s dangling from the fire escape.”

Aiden’s brow furrowed. Breaking into the apartment, ripping out the phone line, throwing away the only other means to call for help—that sounded like a planned attack, but the destruction in the bedroom didn’t speak of a controlled offender. *Time to think about that later. Dawn’s the top priority right now.* “Secure the premises and take the neighbor’s statement,” she said. “I’m taking her to the hospital.”

She crossed the room toward Dawn, making some noise as she approached to avoid startling her. “Are you ready?”

Dawn struggled to her feet without answering.

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Aiden sat next to Dawn in a curtained emergency room cubicle at Portland General Hospital, which was busy even at five a.m. The emergency personnel hadn't tried to make them wait in the corridor when they saw the gold shield clipped to Aiden's belt and the grim expression on her face.

"I guess I was really lucky that you were on call tonight," Dawn said after the nurse left in search of a doctor.

As a rape counselor, she probably knew that many victims without life-threatening injuries had to wait for treatment and were often questioned about the rape in the middle of the corridor while nurses and doctors rushed injured patients past them and worried family members paced nearby.

Aiden tilted her head in a vague nod. She didn't want to discuss why she had caught this case, preferring to let Dawn believe she had been on call tonight and was here for strictly professional reasons. "I know it's hard to talk about, but..." She found herself uncharacteristically reluctant to question Dawn about something that would be painful for her. "I have to ask you some specific questions about the attack so the doctor will know what kind of evidence to look for. Let's start with the easy part. I know you didn't shower, brush your teeth, or change your clothes after the attack, right?"

Dawn nodded.

"Did he penetrate you?" Aiden asked quietly.

Another nod. "Vaginally, nothing else, but he kept trying to kiss me. I don't think he wore a condom."

Aiden's stomach twisted at the clinical response. It seemed as if Dawn was trying to get through this by acting as if she were talking about one of her patients and not about herself.

The nurse returned to their curtained-off cubicle. She handed Dawn a blue hospital gown. "Please stand on this sheet of paper,"

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she pointed to the floor, “while you undress. Put your clothes into the paper bag on the table.”

Dawn sighed. “I know the routine,” she said, still looking at Aiden. She seemed almost afraid to let Aiden out of her sight.

“I’ll be right here, outside the curtain, waiting for you, okay?” Aiden stepped back but kept eye contact.

Dawn exhaled and closed the curtain behind her.

Aiden turned her back to the cubicle and bobbed up and down on the balls of her feet in an effort to avoid pacing back and forth. She heard the rustling of paper and then, just for a second, quiet sobs. Helplessly, she pressed her lips together.

After a minute, Dawn reappeared, looking even more fragile in the blue paper gown than she had before.

Aiden gazed into her stormy gray eyes. “You okay?”

Dawn nodded.

The nurse guided Dawn to the examination table.

Silently, Aiden took up position beside her.

A doctor with a clipboard came in and started asking questions while the nurse took photographs of the bruises on Dawn’s face and body. “When did you have your last period, Ms. Kinsley?”

“Uh, I’m not sure. Maybe two weeks ago. It could be three. I’m really not sure.” Dawn shrugged.

“Have you had recent sexual intercourse?” the doctor asked.

Dawn laughed bitterly. “That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?”

Aiden touched Dawn’s hand with a single finger. “He means voluntary sexual intercourse.”

“No.” Dawn bit her lip. “No, I haven’t.”

The doctor scribbled some notes on his clipboard. “What form of birth control do you normally use?”

Once again, the camera flashed, and Dawn closed her eyes. “I don’t use any.”

At the defensive tone of voice, Aiden took Dawn’s hand in hers and squeezed it soothingly. The matter-of-fact question must

have felt like an accusation, as if Dawn hadn't properly "prepared" for the eventuality of a rape.

"We need two oral swabs for a DNA sample," Aiden said. "Do you want to do it yourself?" Many victims experienced the rape kit examination like a second violation. Their bodies still didn't belong to them; instead, each body was viewed as a crime scene, a piece of evidence. Aiden tried to give victims as much control over the examination as she possibly could.

Dawn took the swabs from the doctor and rubbed them across the inside of her mouth. She handed them back to Aiden, who sealed them into an envelope.

When the doctor took Dawn's hand, she flinched.

Aiden stepped closer, both for comfort and to hold a sheet of paper under her hand while the doctor scraped underneath Dawn's fingernails and then cut them. Her gaze still on Dawn, Aiden put the clippings and scrapings into another envelope and sealed it.

"Okay. Could you lie back and spread your legs a little, please?" The doctor placed a towel under Dawn's buttocks and combed through her pubic hair, searching for foreign hairs. "It will hurt for a second—I need to pull some of your pubic hair as a control sample."

Soon, another envelope was sealed and labeled.

The physician took two more swabs and stepped between Dawn's bent legs.

Dawn jerked.

Aiden enclosed Dawn's trembling fingers gently in both of her larger hands. She kept her gaze on Dawn's face, not looking down to watch what the doctor did.

Dawn squeezed her eyes shut and moaned. "I can't believe this is happening to me," she whispered.

"Just a little longer. It's almost over." Aiden rubbed Dawn's



## Conflict of Interest

hand. With relief, she watched the doctor step back and make a smear on a glass slide.

The doctor turned off the light. “I need you to open the gown a little bit, please.”

Dawn wrestled with the laces that held the gown closed.

“Need help?” Aiden asked. She didn’t move until Dawn nodded. Gently, she untied the laces and stepped back. Instead of looking at Dawn’s half-naked body, she kept her gaze on Dawn’s face and her upset gray eyes.

The doctor turned on the UV light and moved it above Dawn’s abdomen and thighs, showing bright blue fluorescent spots.

Dawn looked down at her bruised body. “Is that...?”

“Seminal fluid,” the doctor said and rubbed over some of the stains with a cotton pad.

Dawn groaned.

The doctor turned the light back on and waited for Aiden to help Dawn close her hospital gown. “Are you allergic to anything?”

Dawn shook her head.

He handed her two white pills and a small plastic cup of water. “That’s Plan B, an emergency contraceptive pill. You have to take them in two doses—one pill now and one more in twelve hours. You might have some nausea or dizziness after taking them. If you want, I can prescribe you some Dramamine to help with that.”

Dawn took the first pill and swallowed it without comment.

“The nurse will be in shortly,” the doctor said. “She’ll give you antibiotics to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and get blood drawn to test for STDs and HIV. The test results will be back within twenty-four hours. You should be retested in three and six months just to make sure that everything is all right.”

Visibly shaking, Dawn nodded.

“The nurse will also take you to get your hand X-rayed,” the doctor said, pointing at the nurse who had been taking the photos during the examination.

Aiden immediately let go of Dawn's hand. "Her hand is broken?"

Dawn looked down at her left, then at her right hand as if she hadn't noticed anything wrong with them either.

"Her right index finger might be broken," the doctor answered. "It's hard to tell with all the swelling, so I'd like to do an X-ray."

The nurse helped Dawn into a wheelchair—standard hospital procedure—and took her to radiology, leaving Aiden alone with the ER doctor. "What does the evidence tell you?" Aiden asked when Dawn was out of earshot.

The doctor locked the envelopes in the rape kit box, sealed it, and handed it to Aiden. "Bruise marks on her arms and thighs, which might be consistent with restraint, and about the pelvic and pubic area. Teeth marks on her breasts. Evidence of penetration and seminal fluids."

Classic signs of rape. Aiden swallowed. She left the rape kit with the uniformed officer who had been waiting outside, giving him strict orders to take it directly to the medical examiner, and went searching for radiology.

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