

A ROMANTIC CRIME DRAMA BY

JAE

CONFLICT OF INTEREST JAE



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OF INTEREST



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**Excerpt**

*By*

**JAE**



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Book I

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# Conflict of Interest

## Excerpt

### CHAPTER 1

"**I**M GOING TO throw up," Dawn Kinsley groaned, 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 uninterested cops who would rather be elsewhere and who won't give me the time of day," Dawn protested. She knew exactly what each of the police officers sitting on the other side of the curtain was thinking. Most of them would view her lecture as a waste of time.

Ally shook her head with amusement. "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 shot back, now with a grin of her own. She knew she usually didn't have a problem with public speaking. She had held her own in front of large groups 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, Doc, this is not the time to start analyzing yourself!* she admonished.

"Touché," Ally finally conceded.

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 pointed out.

"Let me guess... picturing everyone in the audience naked?" 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 male cops? Hello?" Dawn gave a little wave. "Did you miss the office memo informing everyone about my sexual orientation?"

"Office memo?" Ally repeated. "Is that what they nowadays call kissing your girlfriend in the office's 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. "You know 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, she noticed – but not 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 rolled her eyes. "Pick one and concentrate on her during your lecture. Ignore the rest of the crowd. It'll help with the nervousness. So?" She pointed down to the seated police officers.

The mutual teasing and joking was part of their everyday life in the office. Dawn saw no reason not to humor her friend now. She craned her neck to be able to look 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.

"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 interrupted. "Besides, that detective isn't butch."

She wasn't. Not really. The detective had short, jet-black hair, yes, and the stereotypical leather jacket covered what Dawn could see of her tall, athletic frame, but she also moved with a grace that was definitely feminine.

"Dr. Kinsley?"

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

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

Dawn clutched the handouts but gave him a friendly smile. "Yes."

"Good luck," Ally said, and behind the seminar organizer's back, she mouthed, "Remember: picture her naked."

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

\* \* \*

"Where's your partner?" Detective Aiden Carlisle asked Ruben Cartwright as she slumped into a seat between him and her partner. "Terminal back pain again?" *If I have to be here at*

*this law enforcement seminar, so does everyone else, even hypochondriacs like Jeff Okada, Aiden thought grumpily.*

Ruben looked up from the paper airplane that had once been his seminar brochure. "Again?" he asked, shoving a strand of brown hair out of his boyishly handsome face.

Ray Bennet, Aiden's partner, leaned over to him with a grin. He had known Jeff Okada for much longer than just the year Ruben had been partnered with him. "It only seems to act up whenever a continuing ed seminar comes along," he explained.

"It acts up whenever I have to sit in one of these unhealthy first grader seats," Jeff Okada corrected as he walked up to them. Gingerly, the Asian American detective eased himself down onto the uncomfortable chair next to his rookie partner.

Aiden sighed and glanced at her watch. She didn't want to be here any more than her colleagues did. Not that she didn't believe in the value of further education. It was just that she had a stack of unfinished reports on her desk and thirty open cases, which didn't get any closer to being solved while she sat here. Furthermore, the seminar prevented her from spending her lunch hour in the courtroom's gallery, watching her favorite Deputy District Attorney at work. Today, she lied to herself, she would have worked up the courage to ask Kade to lunch.

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 brief but 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 doughnuts or attractive female lecturers at a law enforcement seminar."

"Or comfortable chairs," Ray added.

Okada threw up his hands in triumph. "Finally, someone's wising up!"

Aiden smiled halfheartedly and 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,' speaker: D. Kinsley, PhD.

"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, impracticable theories.

A young woman carrying a stack of handouts stepped out from behind a curtain and crossed the podium – the Freudian's assistant or the poor soul who had the questionable honor of introducing the speaker, Aiden assumed. 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's 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, and slender, but not model-thin. The strawberry blond hair wasn't pulled back into an old-

fashioned bun, but cascaded in curls down to softly curved hips.

*So, she's the PhD, not the assistant, huh? That's my punishment for stereotyping. Of course, looking at her instead of an old man is not exactly a punishment, Aiden thought, eyeing the blond speaker appreciatively. However boring the lecture might be, at least she would have something captivating at which to look.*

The lecture began, and to her surprise, Aiden found herself looking away from the pretty speaker and down to her notepad 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 admonished herself. She listened with rapt attention to the rest of the lecture.

Forty-five minutes passed almost too soon.

"Knew I should have tried the coffee," Ruben mumbled when they began to file out of the room with the last of the seminar registrants. "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."

A chuckle behind them alerted Aiden to the fact that someone had overheard her colleagues' comments. She turned around and looked down into the twinkling gray-green eyes of

Dawn Kinsley, their lecturer. The faint laugh lines at their corners told her that the psychologist was closer to thirty than to twenty as she had first assumed.

"Sorry," Aiden said, pointing at Okada and Ruben, "they're not used to being out and about. Normally, we keep them chained to their desks."

Dawn Kinsley didn't seem offended. 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 studied the gray-green eyes looking steadily at her. "How do you know I'm a detective?" It was disconcerting to think that anyone, even a psychologist, could see through her so easily.

"Oh, I don't know, could it be the fact that we're at a law enforcement conference?" Okada chimed in.

Dawn Kinsley 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 of 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, she would have jumped at the chance to leave the seminar room, but now Aiden found herself hesitating. "Um... sure." She glanced down at Dawn Kinsley. "Would you like to come with us?" she surprised herself by asking.

"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 noncommittally, knowing they would likely never see each other again. Suddenly not as eager for a coffee as before, Aiden 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-household and reached for a banana instead.

She looked up from the fruit when a young man entered her personal space. As a cop, she was 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 neared another shopper, who was busy nestling her apples into a shopping bag.

*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 the psychologist. Wearing faded blue jeans and a white button-down shirt, Dawn Kinsley looked – in Aiden's opinion – at least as good as in the neatly pressed slacks and the blouse from the seminar. Aiden tilted her head and watched as Dawn pushed back stubborn blond strands that had escaped from her ponytail. *Should I say hello? Would she even remember me?*

She hadn't made a decision yet when her trained cop eyes noticed a hand reaching into the psychologist's purse. A second later, the young man fled down the aisle.

Dawn Kinsley 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. He 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, Ms. Kinsley," she said to the staring woman. "Brave, but dumb. You shouldn't grab a thief, who outweighs you by at least forty pounds, without even knowing if he's armed!"

Dawn Kinsley 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, Ms. 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 shook her shopping bag 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 translated. 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," a smiling Dawn defended.

Aiden waited for two uniformed officers, whom the shop owner had called, to take the thief off her hands before she allowed herself to chat with the patiently waiting psychologist. "So, do you come here regularly?" She winced when she realized it sounded like a lame pick-up line.

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

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

"I live just a block down the street. You want to come with me and have the cup of coffee I had to decline last week?" Dawn Kinsley tilted her head and looked up at Aiden.

"I thought you didn't drink coffee?"

"I don't, but nevertheless I make a mean cup. Just like 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, tempting me with coffee... is she flirting?* Aiden pondered as she followed Dawn down the street. *Ha! You wish. That's just the natural warmth and friendliness of someone who's comfortable around people.*

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 leave a stranger unsupervised in her living room. Hesitantly, she stepped across a colorful rug, past overflowing bookcases and shelves full of framed pictures and potted plants.

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 children's 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 paradoxically 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 decided as she sank down onto the couch.

Within minutes, she heard the gurgling of the coffeemaker. Her hostess returned with a tray and placed coffee, tea, and

cookies on the coffee table. "Black, without sugar, right?" Dawn sat in a rocking chair across from her visitor and nodded toward Aiden's mug.

"Right." Aiden didn't ask how Dawn knew her coffee preferences. The psychologist 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 theoreticians who want to tell them how to do their jobs."

"Yeah, we just love it," Aiden admitted 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 counseling 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 someone has to do it, and sometimes you feel that you've made a difference, and that makes it worth it."

*Yeah. I guess she's someone who would really understand the job,* Aiden thought. 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?" She regarded the psychologist suspiciously.

"I know we hardly know each other," Dawn said, "and I normally wouldn't do this, but..."

Aiden's eyes became wider and wider with every word. It truly sounded like a come-on. She wasn't sure what she would do if it was.

"...I have a favor to ask," Dawn finally finished.

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

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

"Your group?" Aiden repeated.

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,'" she protested, struggling against her rising anger.

"Of course you are." Dawn rocked forward and touched her hand encouragingly.

Aiden flinched. She didn't know how or from whom, but she was suddenly convinced that Dawn Kinsley knew about the circumstances of her conception. The thought did not sit well with her. "No!" she repeated. "I can't give advice to women in that situation. I... I... I just can't, okay?"

"Okay." Dawn's gray-green eyes didn't hide her disappointment and confusion, but she accepted Aiden's rejection without pressuring her to change 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... 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, forcing herself not to look back. The door closing behind her echoed in her mind for the rest of the day.

## CHAPTER 3

**A**IDEN FUMBLED with the key for a few moments, stiff hands and tired eyes refusing to work together, before she finally managed to unlock the door. Everything was dark and silent when she entered her apartment. Only a wave of stale air, a pile of bills and junk mail, and two parched potted plants greeted her as the door closed, echoing loudly in the silence.

For the last three days, she had slept in one of the precinct's bunk beds, tucked away in 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's inhabitants had one less child molester to worry about.

Exhausted but content, she threw the mail down onto the coffee table and pressed the "play" button on the answering machine, only to be told that she had "no messages" – not that she had expected any since she didn't have many friends outside of the squad.

With a glance at the clock, which told her it was four a.m., Aiden stepped past the coffee machine and headed for the refrigerator instead. She skipped using a glass and drank directly from the orange juice container. *One of the many advantages of being single*, she told herself, trying not to think about how nice it would be to come home to a set table, a sympathetic ear, and a warm body in her bed.

She kicked off her shoes and yanked her shirt over her head while she headed to the bathroom. 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 tongue over her teeth and tasting three days' worth

of coffee and Chinese takeout, she decided a shower could wait and grabbed her toothbrush.

She watched absentmindedly as water dripped from the faucet. The sound of the falling drops 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."

"What?" Aiden mumbled around her toothbrush. Not only was the address in her immediate neighborhood, but it also sounded oddly familiar. Convinced that her tired mind made her imagine things, she returned to her brushing and gargling when 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 at the 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. That's 10-4. I'm en route; ETA two minutes," a patrol unit responded via radio.

Even knowing help was on the way, Aiden didn't stop. She had long ago learned 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 back into the night air.

\* \* \*

Aiden pulled her car into a parking space beside the squad car, whose blue and red lights were coloring the night. 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 into 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 for a second. It was Dawn Kinsley's apartment. She didn't wait for the elevator and took the steps two at a time. She stopped in front of the door to 2B, 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 unknowingly echoed his partner and stepped aside to allow her entry. Aiden could see his relief at not having to deal with the victim himself. She knew that patrol officers had little if any training in dealing with rape survivors. He followed her back in and pointed over his shoulder while he glanced down at the notebook in his other hand. "The victim's name is –"

"I know her name," Aiden interrupted. She took a second to compose herself. Inhaling deeply, she stepped into the apartment.

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 automatically, but then she stepped past the bedroom door and entered the living room, immediately spying Dawn Kinsley.

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

Aiden almost didn't recognize her: Dawn's gaze, which had always calmly rested on the person to whom she was talking, now darted around the room. One of her formerly steady hands fluttered across the side of her swollen face while the other hand clung to the blanket someone had wrapped around her shoulders to hide her torn clothing. Dawn's naturally fair face appeared even paler in contrast to the bruises on her cheek.

The woman on the couch wasn't the competent rape counselor Aiden had met a few days earlier, but a shattered rape victim.

Aiden cleared her throat to announce her presence and sat down on the edge of the couch, close enough to be an available, soothing presence, but far enough away that Dawn didn't feel threatened. "Hey, Ms. Kinsley... Dawn." She made her voice as gentle as she could.

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

Aiden swallowed. She had the sudden urge to hold Dawn's hand or lay a protective arm around her, but she kept her distance, knowing it could do more harm than good at this point. She didn't want to scare Dawn even further. "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..." Trembling eyelids closed for a second. "He raped me," Dawn whispered. She looked at Aiden in disbelief. "Detective, he... he..."

"I know," Aiden murmured. She moved a little closer to Dawn but not yet close enough to touch her. "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 when you knew the person who sat trembling across from you.

"He was tall and muscular and... heavy," Dawn said, her voice shaky. "Black hair. Angry, blue eyes."

"Good, that'll help us look for him." She touched Dawn's forearm fleetingly. "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 vehemently shook her head.

"Are you sure?" Aiden asked. She didn't like the thought of Dawn having no one be there for her. 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. There have been too many of those calls in our family," Dawn said quietly.

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

"I'd like to change, though." 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, hmm?"

"I... I can't go in there." Dawn pointed a trembling finger at the bedroom.

"It's all right," Aiden soothed. "I'll do it." She stepped over a fallen chair, shattered ceramic figurines, and books 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 dreamed about seeing the charming psychologist's underwear – but these definitely weren't the circumstances about which she had fantasized. Even harmless flirting with Dawn Kinsley was no longer a possibility. 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.

Aiden wordlessly put the clothes aside and knelt down in front of Dawn, tying the laces. "Anything else?" she asked.

"Can I brush my teeth?"

Aiden bit her lip, feeling bad that she had to deny Dawn that simple request. "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 wisely retreated to the kitchen, looked up as she entered. "She give a description?" he asked.

"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 Ms. Kinsley the one who called us?" Aiden asked. She 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 at first. 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 without destroying possible evidence and take the neighbor's statement," she ordered. "I'm taking her to the hospital."

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

Dawn struggled to her feet without answering.

\* \* \*

Aiden sat next to Dawn in a small, curtained cubicle in the Portland General Hospital emergency room, 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 had left in search of a doctor. As a rape counselor, she knew that many victims without life-

threatening injuries had to wait for their 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 the reason why she had caught this case, preferring for the moment to let Dawn believe she had been on call tonight and was here for strictly professional reasons.

"So... 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 he's 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," Dawn answered, already anticipating Aiden's next question.

Aiden's stomach twisted as she heard the clinical response to her question, once again reminded of the fact that Dawn Kinsley normally dealt with rape in a professional capacity, as Aiden did. 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," she pointed to the floor of the cubicle, "while you undress. Put your clothes in 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 not to pace 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 down into 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?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Uh... I'm not sure... maybe two weeks ago. It could be three. I'm really not sure." Dawn shrugged helplessly.

The doctor raised his brows but didn't comment when he saw Aiden's warning stare. "Have you had recent sexual intercourse?" he asked.

Dawn laughed bitterly. "That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

Aiden touched her 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," she answered.

Aiden took Dawn's hand in hers and squeezed it soothingly when she heard Dawn's defensive tone of voice. It seemed as if the matter-of-fact question had come across as if the doctor had accused Dawn of not properly "preparing" for

the eventuality of a rape. Aiden knew that some rape victims read accusations into the doctor's questions because they couldn't help wondering whether they could have done anything to prevent the rape. Aiden knew that many rape victims blamed themselves for aspects of their rape, feeling as if they hadn't been careful enough, hadn't paid enough attention to their surroundings, hadn't fought back hard enough, and hadn't found the right words to stop the rapist. It seemed that Dawn Kinsley, professional background aside, wasn't so different from other rape survivors.

The doctor put the clipboard away and opened the rape kit.

"We need two oral swabs for a DNA sample," Aiden explained, holding out the swabs to Dawn. "Do you want to do it yourself?" Aiden knew that many victims experienced the rape kit examination almost like a second violation. Once again, they didn't have control over their body. It still didn't belong to them but was a crime scene, a piece of evidence. Being intimately examined by a total stranger while telling him details that you would much rather forget was humiliating. Therefore, Aiden tried to give victims as much control over the examination as she possibly could.

Dawn took the swabs without a word and rubbed them across the inside of her mouth. She handed them back to Aiden, who sealed them into an envelope.

The doctor took Dawn's hand, and she flinched. Aiden stepped closer to her, 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," he explained.

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. She was used to being the one to help rape victims, not a victim herself.

"Just a little longer," Aiden murmured, "it's almost over." 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."

Unsteady fingers 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. She didn't look down at the half-naked body but gazed into Dawn's upset gray eyes. Her thumb rubbed circles over the back of Dawn's hand.

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 physician confirmed and rubbed over some of the stains with a cotton pad.

Dawn groaned in disgust.

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

Dawn shook her head.

He handed Dawn 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 continued. "She'll give you antibiotics to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and get blood drawn from you 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."

Dawn seemed overwhelmed with the far-reaching consequences of the rape, but she nodded bravely.

"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 the right hand as if she hadn't noticed anything wrong with them either.

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

The nurse helped Dawn into a wheelchair – standard hospital procedure – and took her to the x-ray department, 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 translated. She left the rape kit with one of the uniformed officers, with strict orders to take it directly to the medical examiner, and went searching for radiology.

## CHAPTER 4

"**M**MORNING, AIDEN," Ray Bennet said as he entered the squad room on the twelfth floor of Portland's Justice Center.

At her partner's greeting, Aiden looked up from the selection of tea bags. "Morning, Ray. Sorry for calling you in on your day off. I hope you're not in the doghouse with Susan for working on weekends?"

"No, that's okay. She wanted to take the girls shopping anyway. Now, tell me why I had to miss four whining kids begging me for 150-dollar shoes or a navel piercing." Ray stepped beside Aiden and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Why did you catch a case when we weren't on call last night?"

"I heard it on the police scanner when I came home," Aiden said.

Ray lifted a brow. "And because you didn't have anything more important to do... like sleep after three 20-hour shifts... you thought you'd help out our brothers in uniform or what? Did they start a bonus program for catching two rapists in one night?"

Aiden didn't laugh. "Ray, it was Dawn."

"Dawn?" Ray looked at her, clearly not understanding about whom she was talking.

For the first time, Aiden noticed that she had thought about the psychologist as "Dawn" and not "Ms. Kinsley" since she had found her on the couch three hours ago. *Three hours*, Aiden thought as she stirred sugar into the tea. *An eternity*. "Dawn Kinsley – the rape counselor who held the first lecture at the seminar last week," she explained.

"The vic's one of her patients?" Ray asked.

Aiden pressed her lips together. "She's the victim. Someone broke into her apartment last night and raped her."

"Oh. I'm sorry." She was sure he didn't know why, but Ray sensed that this was one of those cases that affected her on more than a professional level. "Did you call Okada and Ruben? I'm sure Ruben wouldn't mind coming in on a Saturday morning for the woman who proved one of Okada's conspiracy theories wrong."

"They were here, finishing the paperwork on Barclay, when I came in. I told them we'd meet them at Dawn's apartment... the crime scene... once we'd gotten a formal statement," Aiden said as she headed toward one of the interview rooms with Ray in tow.

Dawn Kinsley still sat where Aiden had left her five minutes ago – on the edge of the chair, her hands, with one splinted finger, in her lap.

Ray kept a respectful distance. "Hello, Ms. Kinsley. I'm Detective Raymond Bennet."

"Hello, Detective." Dawn spared Ray a quick glance, and then her eyes immediately searched for Aiden. She relaxed when she saw her entering the room behind her partner.

Aiden stepped forward and set the cup of tea in front of Dawn. "Tea, not coffee," she explained with a small smile. "I hope you like it with a little sugar."

Dawn nodded, wrapping her uninjured hand around the mug. She inhaled the comforting scent of peppermint but didn't drink. She just held on to the mug as if it were a lifeline.

Aiden perched onto the corner of the table and studied Dawn. She looked as exhausted as Aiden felt. "We don't have to do this right now. There'd still be time to take your formal statement after you've slept for a few hours," she offered.

"No, that's okay." Dawn bravely shook her head. "I doubt that I'd be able to sleep, anyway."

Aiden traded a look with her partner before she sat down. She scooted her chair a little closer to Dawn while Ray chose a chair at the end of the table. "I know we've been through some of this before, but I need you to tell me what happened from the beginning," Aiden said.

"Okay. I had just fallen asleep – I think it was around three o'clock – when a noise from somewhere in the apartment woke me. I went to investigate, thinking maybe the cat had knocked something over."

Aiden nodded encouragingly but didn't interrupt to ask more questions while Ray, sensing that the victim was more at ease with Aiden than with him, kept silent and took notes.

"There was a man in my living room," Dawn said, her voice breathless and alarmed as if she was reliving the scary moment. "I opened my mouth to scream, but he pressed me against the wall with his forearm across my throat. He held a gun to my head and told me he'd kill me if I called for help or tried to escape." Dawn shivered violently.

"It's okay; you're here now, safe," Aiden said, taking her back to the present. She waited a few moments. "What happened next?"

"He dragged me back into the bedroom. On the way, he ripped the phone cord from the wall and threw my cell phone out of the window. Then he... he pushed me down onto the bed." Dawn bit her lip. "He was a really tall man; he outweighed me, and he had a weapon – I knew I stood no chance to fight him off."

Aiden swallowed hard. Just a week ago, she had told Dawn how dangerous it could be to pick a fight with someone who outweighed you and might be armed. Had she robbed Dawn of a chance to get away unharmed by telling her that trying to fight was dumb? With suddenly trembling hands, she lifted her paper cup and tried to wash down the ball of emotions in her throat with a mouthful of lukewarm coffee.

"I knew I couldn't hurt him badly enough to stop him. Maybe I should have tried... if I..." Dawn stopped herself and rubbed tired eyes. "I can't count how often I told a patient not to blame herself for any aspect of her rape, and now I..." She stopped and sighed. "Anyway, I decided struggling was useless and tried to talk my way out of the situation. After all, that's what I do for a living – talk," Dawn continued, smiling bitterly. "I told him he didn't need to do this, because he was handsome, and there should be a lot of women willing to go out with him... to sleep with him without using violence. I offered him money. I said everything I could think of. I even told him I had a contagious disease." Dawn looked away from Aiden and stared down at the table. "His answer was to unzip his pants, force my legs apart, and rape me."

For a second, everything was quiet in the room, even Ray's pen ceased to scratch over the notepad.

"He held me down with one hand while the other kept pressing the gun against my temple." Dawn tapped her unsplinted index finger against the side of her head. Aiden could hear her teeth grinding. "I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to turn my head so he couldn't kiss me, but he slapped me every time I looked away or closed my eyes – he wanted me to see who was doing this to me. I think that's the reason why he didn't wear a mask. After a while, I had the feeling of leaving my body as if I looked down at a stranger being raped... I dissociated."

It was a strange experience for Aiden to sit across from a victim who used the jargon of a sex crimes expert. Aiden wanted to comfort Dawn, but she didn't dare to use the soothing words that worked with almost every victim, knowing Dawn herself had said them hundreds of times to her patients. This time, she was the victim, and Aiden couldn't think of anything to say.

"What happened then?" Ray asked, covering his partner's silence.

Dawn cleared her throat. "He had problems... finishing. Of course, he blamed it on me 'lying there like a dead fish.' He shoved the gun under my chin and told me to stop acting as if I wasn't enjoying it. He told me to moan and act excited." She closed her eyes, a few silent tears escaping from under her lids. "I know that many rapists who have trouble ejaculating blame their victims and kill them, so I... I did what he told me to do."

*Oh, God!* Aiden wanted to close her eyes, she wanted to scream or run out of the room, but most of all she wanted to shoot the monster who had done this to Dawn. She had heard a lot of awful stories in her seven years with the Sexual Assault Detail, but for some reason this one was affecting her on another level.

It was Dawn who was brave enough to break the silence. She appeared to be on automatic pilot. "Finally, he finished, but even that didn't seem to satisfy him. He slapped me one more time, and then he went berserk on my bedroom furniture. His eyes... as he trampled on my photos and threw my books across the room... He was so full of anger and hate that I thought for sure that he would kill me. But he didn't."

Aiden noticed that she didn't sound relieved about that. Suddenly, tears burned in her own eyes. "What did he do next?" she asked as professionally as she could.

"He kicked a chair out of the way and disappeared through the bedroom door." Dawn exhaled and took the first sip of her tea, which must have been cold by now.

Aiden exchanged a glance with Ray. "We have to ask you some detailed questions now. Can we get you anything before we start? Something to eat?" she offered.

Dawn shook her head.

Rising from her chair, Aiden reached for Dawn's mug. "Another tea, then?"

"No, I..." Dawn clung to the handle of the mug. "I don't need anything, really."

Ray looked from Dawn to Aiden. "I'll go," he offered, a friendly smile on his dark face.

Without further protest, Dawn handed him the mug.

As Aiden watched the door close, she suddenly understood that Dawn simply hadn't wanted her to leave the room.

"Sorry," Dawn whispered. "I don't want your partner to think I mistrust him. It's just that I don't know him, and I feel like I know you even when I don't... not really..."

"It's okay," Aiden said with a smile. "Ray makes much better tea than I do, anyway."

Soon, Ray returned with tea and coffee, and the interview continued.

"You said he didn't wear a mask, so you did see his face?" Aiden began.

Dawn nodded. "Yes. I had the feeling he wanted me to. He turned on the lamp on my bedside table. I think he broke my finger when I tried to lay a hand over my eyes. He wanted to confront me with the reality that it was him who..."

Aiden didn't question it. She trusted the psychologist's assessment. "Could you describe him to a police sketch artist?"

A nod from Dawn.

"And how confident are you that you could identify him in a lineup?"

"I'd know him, anytime, anywhere," Dawn said without the slightest hesitation. "I'll never forget that face, those eyes." She shivered.

"You said he was tall. How tall is that, exactly?" Aiden asked.

For the first time, Dawn looked directly at Ray. "What are you, six feet?" she asked, indicating his tall, lanky frame.

"And half an inch." Ray smiled gently.

"I'd say he was a bit taller than that... six-two or six-three." Dawn suddenly hesitated. "I could be wrong, though. I know victims often overestimate the size of their attackers."

Aiden knew she was right. The rapist completely controlled the situation and overpowered the victim, so it wasn't unusual for the powerless victim to think he was taller than he really was. Still, it made her sad to hear Dawn talk about herself in such a distanced way. "You said he had black hair and blue eyes," she remembered. "Is there anything else you remember about his face? Did he have a beard, for example?"

Dawn shook her head. "No beard, just some stubble. He had a small scar on his chin... right there," she pointed to her own face, "and another one above his right eyebrow. Given his aggressiveness, I wouldn't be surprised if he had a criminal record with assault and battery."

"We'll look into it," Aiden promised. It would make their work easier that their victim was a psychologist who knew how the police worked. "Did he smell of anything in particular? An aftershave or -?"

"He smelled of sweat and cigarette smoke. And I could smell alcohol... beer, I think, on his breath." Dawn shivered as if she could smell him right now, right there in the interview room.

Aiden rested one elbow on the table and fiddled with the unused pen in her hand. "What about his clothes? You remember what he wore?"

"I didn't really see that," Dawn admitted, "but it was nothing extravagant. Just a white, sleeveless T-shirt, showing off his muscled arms." She rolled her eyes. "His pants were black, I think. I know they were dark."

"Did he speak with an accent?" Aiden continued with her endless list of questions.

"No accent," Dawn answered. "He used a bit of slang. He's street smart, but not a college graduate, I'd say."

Aiden nodded. "What about his age?"

"A little younger than me. Mid-twenties, I would guess."

*Fairly young*, Aiden thought, *maybe he's just starting out?* "Did he seem insecure... nervous?"

"Not in the least." Dawn vehemently shook her head. "He was cold-blooded, angry, and fully convinced that he had every right to do what he did. There was no room for nervousness or scruples. I wouldn't be surprised if he has raped before."

Aiden glanced at Ray to make sure he had written down that information. "You said you didn't know him, but did he say or do anything from which one could infer that he knew you or knew who you are?"

Dawn hesitated.

Aiden looked into the cloudy gray eyes. Dawn had answered every other question without delay. What was it about this particular question that made her think twice? Aiden was sure that Dawn's reaction was not an attempt to hide something from them. She had seen countless victims, witnesses, and suspects squirming in their chairs, reluctant to admit something damaging or embarrassing to them. What Aiden saw now was not a woman who didn't want to answer, but a woman who wasn't sure whether she could give an accurate answer.

"He didn't say anything like that, and I don't know why, but somehow, I got the feeling that he didn't break into my apartment by chance." The fingers of Dawn's uninjured hand nervously played with her mug. "But that's only a feeling; maybe I'm just paranoid."

Aiden shook her head. "Never doubt your instincts, Doctor. At this point, even a paranoid feeling could turn out to be a valuable lead."

Dawn smiled timidly. "Thanks."

"Did anything unusual happen in the last few days?" Aiden wanted to know.

"Unusual?" Another almost-smile from Dawn. "I'm a psychologist, Detective; unusual things happen in my life every

day. But if you mean did I notice any strangers lingering around the building or receive any hang-up calls, then no, there wasn't anything unusual."

"You didn't notice anyone who didn't belong in the building?" Aiden asked again. "Maintenance personnel, meter readers, the cable guy...?"

"Not that I remember."

"Does your building have a doorman?" Aiden asked.

"Yes, but he leaves at midnight." Dawn grimaced. "Cost-saving measures."

Aiden crushed the empty paper cup in her hand. "You said you had just gone to sleep when you heard him... had you been out or did you stay home the whole evening?"

"I'd been out with some friends. I came in pretty late and just fell into bed." Dawn looked down onto the table as if her decision to go out that night had somehow led to the rape.

"Did anything unusual happen while you were out? A particularly persistent guy hitting on you or anything like that?"

A ghost of a smile flitted across Dawn's face. "No, nothing like that happened. I didn't talk to anyone but my friends the whole night, and I'm sure no one followed me home."

"Did anything look out of place when you came home?" Aiden continued.

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. I was so tired when I came home that I really didn't look around," Dawn admitted.

"Okay." Aiden rubbed the back of her neck. "You said something, some kind of noise, woke you up. Any guesses to what it might have been? Was it a door opening or the shattering of glass or...?"

Dawn shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. Nothing as loud as the shattering of glass, though."

"Did you lock the door when you came home?" Aiden asked.

A determined nod came from Dawn. "I always do."

"What about the windows?"

"God!" Dawn moaned and buried her face in her hands. "I opened the damn window! I let him in! I always leave one window open whenever my cat's not home when I'm going to bed. I practically invited him in!"

"Hey." Very gently, Aiden touched her shoulder. "You didn't 'invite him in.' Unless you gave him a written invitation, he had no business coming into your apartment even if every door and every window would have been wide-open."

"Still..." A dozen what ifs stood in the room.

Aiden sighed and decided to break the awkward silence with the next question. "Did he take anything with him? A necklace, a bracelet, rings... anything?"

"He wasn't interested in jewelry or money, Detective. This was no burglar who came across a sleeping woman by chance and took the opportunity!" Dawn's voice got louder.

Aiden raised a calming hand. Like a lot of rape victims, Dawn seemed to shift between blaming herself and being angry with the world and its unfairness. "Most rapists take something with them that belonged to the victim. For the most part, it's not financially motivated, but –"

"A trophy," Dawn said, a lot calmer now.

"Yes."

Dawn pressed her uninjured fingers against the bridge of her nose and thought about it. "I didn't notice anything missing, but it's hard to say with all the destruction in my bedroom."

"And did he leave anything behind?" Aiden asked.

"Like what?" Dawn asked warily.

Aiden shrugged. "A piece of clothing, a tool, a weapon..."

"No. He didn't undress, and he took the gun with him when he left."

*The gun.* Aiden threw Ray a quick glance. They both knew how difficult it was to get a reliable, detailed description of

weapons from a civilian. "Can you describe the gun? Was it a revolver? Did it have a breech?"

"No, it wasn't," Dawn answered without a trace of hesitation. "He had a semiautomatic, a nine millimeter with a grip made of black polymer plastic – a Glock 17."

Ray and Aiden exchanged incredulous glances. *How come a civilian with a nonviolent job can answer a question about weapons with such precision?*

Ray finally voiced their thoughts: "How can you be so sure?"

"I come from a family of cops," Dawn said with a small but affectionate smile. "My father and my older brother were on the job and some of my friends still are. Most of them had Glocks. I grew up around them."

*Were on the job?* Aiden noticed her use of the past tense but decided not to ask. Dawn had enough sadness to deal with for the moment.

With a glance at her watch, which read ten a.m., Aiden asked a few more questions about Dawn's daily routine: Which restaurants, gyms, and clubs did she frequent? Where did she buy her groceries? Which pharmacy and laundromat did she use? They would compare her answers to those of other rape victims. If they were lucky, there might be a connection, a common place where the rapist first noticed his victims.

Finally, Aiden stretched and looked down at a yawning Dawn.

Ray closed his notepad and threw down the pen. "We'll have the written statement for you by this afternoon. You should read it carefully to make sure everything's accurate and then sign it."

Dawn nodded.

"Do you live with anyone?" Ray asked, and when Dawn shook her head, he continued, "Do you have family or friends you could stay with for a few days?"

"I think I'll stay with my mother for a while," Dawn answered quietly.

Ray nodded. "Good. We can have a unit drive you there," he offered.

Aiden stood up and rounded the table. "I'll drive her home, Ray."

"That's not necessary, Detective. I can take a cab," Dawn protested bravely though it was easy to see that she wasn't looking forward to driving anywhere with a male stranger.

"It's no problem. I really don't mind," Aiden said.

Her partner studied Aiden for a few seconds before he nodded. "Okay. Meet us at the cr... at Ms. Kinsley's apartment as soon as you're finished."

\* \* \*

Aiden parked her car in front of Grace Kinsley's house and turned off the ignition. She got out of the car and waited patiently until Dawn had done the same. "A locksmith is going to change the locks in your apartment," she said, silently wondering how often she had told other rape victims the exact same thing, "and a psychologist will call you to make..." She stopped when she remembered that Dawn was a psychologist, too.

"...an appointment," Dawn finished for her and smiled sadly. "Standard procedure, right?"

Aiden shook her head. Nothing about this case was "standard" – not for her and certainly not for Dawn. When they stopped in front of the apartment building where Dawn's mother lived, Aiden took one of her cards, wrote something on the back, and handed it to Dawn. "Those are the numbers you can reach me at – the precinct, my pager, my cell phone, and my home number. Don't hesitate to call me – anytime, day or night, okay?"

Dawn looked at the card, then at Aiden. "Thank you. For everything." She took a deep breath and turned to look at the house.

Aiden had seen the same hesitation dozens of times before: Dawn was afraid to go in and tell her family what had happened to her. "I could come with you and talk to your family if you want me to," she offered quietly.

"No, thanks, I'll manage," Dawn said but didn't sound convincing.

Before Dawn could reach the door, it swung open. "Dawn!" An older, heavier version of Dawn stood in the doorway. "Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you the whole..." The woman's gray eyes widened when she looked at her daughter and saw the bruises on her face. "Oh, my God! Dawn, what happened?"

Dawn stared at her with a mixture of emotions – wanting to be left alone so she could pretend nothing had happened and equally longing to be held in motherly arms. A tear rolled down her cheek as she searched for words.

When Dawn didn't answer, her panicked mother turned to Aiden and repeated, "What happened, Detective?"

*Another Kinsley woman with built-in copdar.* Aiden thought absentmindedly. She said nothing, waiting for Dawn to find her voice. She knew how important it was for Dawn, for any rape victim, to say the words on her own. She rested a supporting hand on Dawn's elbow and waited.

"Mom," Dawn said, her voice a rough whisper, "I was raped last night."

Mrs. Kinsley blanched. "What? Oh dear God!" She reached for her daughter.

Dawn's cool, controlled façade crumbled immediately. Sobbing loudly for the first time, she sank into her mother's embrace.

Suddenly feeling like an intruder, Aiden stepped back. She wanted to turn her head and give them some privacy but found that she couldn't look away from the comforting caresses and the consoling whispers. Aiden had loved her mother, and she was sure that her mother had loved her in her own way, but she had never known the level of motherly comfort that she was witnessing now. It was a healing experience and hard to look at, at the same time.

With one last glance, she turned and walked toward her car.

\* \* \*

Aiden ducked under the yellow crime scene tape. She looked around Dawn Kinsley's apartment, where a crime scene specialist and her fellow detectives were already hard at work. It didn't appear to be the same cozy apartment where she'd had coffee with Dawn just a week ago. The warmth and innocence had been destroyed.

She crossed the living room and tried to slip on her detective persona along with her latex gloves. "Any luck with prints?" she asked.

The crime scene technician looked up from his work. "I've lifted a few from the bedroom door, the phone, and the window," he said. "Could belong to the victim, though."

"You should check for prints on the cell phone," Aiden suggested. "The perp threw it out of the window, so we know he had it in his hands."

"Will do." The crime scene tech continued his dusting.

Aiden entered the bedroom, where Ray was busy sealing evidence bags. "Hey, Ray," she greeted him. "Found anything?"

"The usual – semen stains, hairs, and fibers on the bed. Already photographed and bagged it." Ray sighed. "Doesn't look like he left anything else behind, not even a condom

wrapper. No signs of a struggle or forced entry in the living room. Ms. Kinsley was right; the window seems to be the point of entry."

They walked through the apartment to reconstruct the sequence of events. "He must have climbed up the fire escape at the back of the building, found the half-open window, and climbed in. I think in the darkness, he crashed into the side table." Ray pointed to the piece of furniture half in front of the window. "That's probably what woke the victim up."

"Ms. Kinsley," Aiden corrected. She didn't really know Dawn, but she couldn't think of her as just another nameless victim.

Ray nodded. His nostrils quivered as he suppressed a yawn. "Right. So, I'm thinking he's someone who doesn't have access to the building and who's never been to the apartment before, otherwise he would know the layout of the furniture and not bump into it."

"Hey, boys and girls," Okada said as he entered the apartment with his partner.

"Neighbors were a complete waste of time – no one saw anything." Ruben shook his head in frustration.

"Except for Mr. Bundy, the one who called us," Okada threw in.

Ray looked up. "His name's really Bundy?"

Ruben shrugged his slim shoulders. "Yeah. Not everyone's entitled to a nice unique name like Bennet," he teased. "Some have to share a name with a mass murderer or a shoe seller."

"Did Mr. Bundy tell you anything other than his name?" Aiden interrupted their joking. She had no patience for it at the moment.

Okada raised his eyebrows. "Someone is missing her beauty sleep," he mumbled.

"We could all use a few hours of sleep," Ray intervened before Aiden could answer. "So let's get this over with, okay?"

"Mr. Bundy was walking around the block with man's best friend at about four a.m.," Okada explained. "When Fifi started barking, he looked up and saw Ms. Kinsley hanging halfway out of the window. He begged her not to jump." Okada curved his lips into one of his cynical half smiles. "Little did he know she didn't want to end her life but her phoneless state –"

"...until she called down to him to call 911 because she'd been assaulted," Ruben said.

Aiden rubbed one of her tense shoulders. "He didn't see our perp?"

Okada shook his head. "Neither hide nor hair."

"Speaking of hairs..." Ray brushed his hand over the legs of his pants. "There has to be a feline roommate hiding somewhere around here – there are cat hairs everywhere, and I found a litter box in the bathroom."

"Okay, guys, why don't you head on home?" Aiden suggested. "There's nothing we can do until we have some lab results."

While Okada and Ruben headed for the door without hesitation, Ray didn't move. "And what are you gonna do?" he asked.

Aiden stripped off her latex gloves with tired movements. "I'm going to catch a few hours too."

"A few hours?" Ray raised a mocking brow. "You look like you could use a three-month hibernation, not just a few hours of tossing and turning."

"I could," Aiden agreed with a sigh. "But seeing as how I'm not going to get three days, much less three months, I'll take a nap and then head back to the station to let Ms. Kinsley sign her statement."

Ray studied her. "I get the feeling this one's personal for you."

"Yeah. I guess it is." Aiden shrugged and looked around the apartment as if in search of an explanation. "She works

with sex crimes too, Ray. She's almost one of us. She didn't deserve this."

Ray nodded. "No one does."

Side by side, they trudged down the stairs.

**This Ends the Excerpt**

## About The Author

**I** GREW UP AMIDST the vineyards and gently sloping hills of southern Germany. I spent most of my childhood with my nose buried in a book, earning me the nickname "professor" before I even finished elementary school. The writing bug bit me at the age of eleven. The very first piece of fiction I ever wrote was a thirty-page western story that I still have somewhere (well-hidden because it alternately makes me cringe and laugh when I read it today). I wrote two dozen mostly novel-length stories (westerns, adventure stories, historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction - you name it, I've probably written it) in my "baby years" as a writer, but no one but my poor twin sister ever got to read them.

That changed when I discovered the Internet and the wondrous world of FanFiction and online stories. My parents belatedly got their wish - I took my nose out of my books and started to spend my time glued to the computer screen instead. Soon after, I wrote my first FanFiction, a Star Trek: Voyager story. Don't bother to search for it on the web; even if there was still a copy in circulation somewhere, it's in German. Back then, I would have taken a thousand oaths that I would never, ever be able to write more than a grocery list in English. Then I took an intensive, free online language course - almost eight years of constant fanfic reading. Let's just say that I learned some words I later had trouble explaining to my friends why I would know such expressions.

So in the beginning of 2006, I finally put my newly acquired knowledge of the English language to good use and wrote a series of three Law & Order: SVU fanfics in English. As my confidence grew, I wrote a longer FanFiction and then my first English historical fiction. In some ways, I've come full circle, because "Backwards to Oregon" takes place on the

Western Frontier. Other than the setting I promise that it doesn't have much in common with my first childish attempt at writing.

I still live in Germany, where I work as a psychologist. When I'm not working or writing, I like to spend my time reading, cooking for a bunch of friends, spending time with my nephew and niece, and watching way too many crime shows. I also enjoy learning new languages (Russian is my latest project. I haven't found any lesbian online stories using the Cyrillic alphabet to help me learn, though).

## Other Titles By This Author

**Backwards To Oregon** – Lesbian: Historical Fiction, Romance

### Summary

"LUKE" HAMILTON has always been sure that she'd never marry. She accepted that she would spend her life alone when she chose to live her life disguised as a man.

After working in a brothel for three years, Nora Macauley has lost all illusions about love. She no longer hopes for a man who will sweep her off her feet and take her away to begin a new, respectable life.

But now they find themselves married and on the way to Oregon in a covered wagon, with two thousand miles ahead of them.

\* \* \*

**Next of Kin** – Sequel to Conflict of Interest

### Summary

SEX CRIMES Detective Aiden Carlisle is slowly getting used to being in a committed relationship with Dawn Kinsley — a relationship that isn't always easy since Dawn is not only a psychologist but also a former victim in one of Aiden's cases. Aiden's private and professional lives collide when Dawn's newest patient gets in trouble with the law. Will she be able to stay objective enough to solve the case without pushing Dawn away?

The same case also throws Deputy District Attorney Kade Matheson's well-ordered life into chaos. In the last few years,

Kade has taken case files and law books, not lovers, to bed. She has been focused only on her career and fought hard to win cases like Dawn's, but now the case forces her to finally face her attraction to women. She suddenly finds herself with two secret admirers — but which one is more dangerous, the threat to her life or her heart?

\* \* \*

## **Second Nature** – Lesbian: Shape-Shifter Romance

### **Summary**

**N**OVELIST JORIE Price doesn't believe in the existence of shape-shifting creatures or true love. She leads a solitary life, and the paranormal romances she writes are pure fiction for her.

Griffin Westmore knows better — at least about one of these two things. She doesn't believe in love either, but she's one of the not-so-fictional shape-shifters. She's also a Saru — an elite soldier, investigator, and if need be an assassin with the mission to protect the shape-shifters' secret existence at any cost.

When Jorie gets too close to the truth in her latest shape-shifter romance, Griffin is sent to investigate — and if necessary to destroy the manuscript before it's published and to kill the writer.

## Back Cover Summary

**Conflict of Interest** – Book I – Lesbian: Romance, Crime

**W**ORKAHOLIC detective Aiden Carlisle isn't looking for love... and certainly not at the law enforcement seminar she reluctantly agreed to attend. But their first lecturer is not at all what she expected.

Psychologist Dawn Kinsley has just found her place in life. After a failed relationship with a police officer, she has sworn to herself never to get involved with another cop again, but she feels a connection to Aiden from the very first moment.

Can Aiden keep from crossing the line when a brutal crime threatens to keep them apart... before they've even gotten together?

\* \* \*

**T**hank You for Reading the Excerpt of  
**Conflict of Interest.**

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