



NEXT OF KIN

A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVEL

JAE



CHAPTER 1

“WHAT ARE YOU WEARING?” A sultry voice purred through the phone. Aiden closed the file she had been reading and tossed it on top of the others that were scattered across her desk. She pressed the phone to her ear and whirled the desk chair around, trying to obtain a minimum of privacy in a room full of nosy detectives. She cupped a hand around the receiver and lowered her voice. “What am I wearing?”

“Ooooh, Carlisle’s got an obscene caller!” Jeff Okada let out a wolf whistle.

The other detectives looked up from their desks, and she waved at them to go back to work.

“Yeah,” Dawn said through the phone. “Or rather, what aren’t you wearing?”

Aiden tipped her chair back and relaxed for the first time all day. “You’re sexually harassing a sex crimes detective at her workplace? My, my, you’re a daring woman, Doctor Kinsley!”

“Daring? No. Concerned? Yes.” Dawn gave up on her attempts to sound seductive. “I’ve seen neither hide nor hair of you for the last three days, and the mountains of mail in your mailbox tell me that you haven’t made it home since Thursday.”

She hadn’t. Aiden sighed. “I’m sorry—”

“I didn’t call to make you feel bad. You don’t have to apologize for doing your job. I just thought you could use a change of clothes. Unless, of course, the Portland Police Bureau has a new interrogation technique, and you want to get a confession just because the perp can’t stand to be in the same room with you.”

Aiden laughed for a second before sobering. “We have to catch him before we can force a confession, by offensive smell or otherwise.”

“You will,” Dawn said. “It just takes a little time.”

Time his next victim didn’t have. Still, Dawn’s belief in her felt good.

“So, do you want me to drive by the precinct later to bring you a change of clothes?” Dawn asked.

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Aiden looked around the busy squad room. It was Saturday evening, but two dozen detectives and police officers were still working on finding a serial rapist. Her relationship with Dawn wasn't a secret, but she tended to keep work and her private life separate.

When she hesitated, Dawn said, "I could pick up a change of clothes from your apartment and send it by bike courier if that would be—"

"No," Aiden said more loudly than she'd intended. "I want to see you, not some bike messenger."

At her outburst, the other detectives gave her curious stares.

Aiden wearily rubbed her face, trying to hide her blush from her colleagues.

"Okay," Dawn said after a while. "I'll be over later. I'm having dinner with my mom, and I'll stop by on my way home."

Aiden's stomach growled. She couldn't even remember the last time she had eaten anything, much less a home-cooked meal. "Tell Grace I said hi."

"I will. I love you."

"Uh." Aiden glanced around the squad room. *There goes my tough-cop reputation.* "I..."

Dawn laughed. "You don't have to say it. I know that the boys are probably listening to every word you say."

"Yeah. They're a nosy bunch."

"I'll let you go now," Dawn said after a moment of silence. "See you later."

"Dawn?"

"Yeah? Don't worry. I won't bring your sexy undies to work. I'll search for a pair of sensible granny panties." Dawn giggled.

Aiden's tense features relaxed into a smile. "I love you," she said before ending the call.

Ray leaned across his desk. "How's the li'l doc?"

Aiden looked up, a sharp retort on her lips, but when she saw nothing but sincerity in her partner's eyes, she leaned back. "She's fine." She picked up the file again.

"Don't you know that file by heart now?" Ray asked.

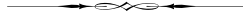
Aiden stared at the crime scene report until the print became blurry. "There has to be something we're missing." She threw down the file and trudged across the squad room to the coffeemaker. By now, only coffee, adrenaline, and stubborn determination were keeping her awake.

"Why don't you lie down in the dungeon for an hour or two?" Ray said. "If we're really missing something, you won't find it while you're this exhausted."

Aiden put down her mug. He was right. The cots in the claustrophobically small room called the dungeon weren't the most comfortable, but any rest would do. "Wake me the moment there's a new lead."

"You'll be the first to know," Ray said.

With a tired nod, Aiden headed for the nearest cot.



Dawn stepped off the elevator, surprised to see the precinct's hallway still busy even on a Saturday night. Carefully balancing her armful of bags and containers, she pushed through the glass doors that announced *Sexual Assault Detail*.

She had visited the squad room before but under very different circumstances. Six months ago, she had been one of the victims whose pictures hung on the dry-erase board. A shiver raced across her skin. Clutching her packages more tightly, she stepped farther into the room.

A young plainclothes detective blocked her way. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

"I'm looking for Detective Carlisle." She pointed at Aiden's desk.

Aiden was nowhere to be seen, but Ray Bennet stood from his desk and greeted her with a warm smile. "It's all right, Moreno. She's welcome here anytime."

The reassurance was probably meant more for her than for the young detective, and she appreciated it.

"Hi, Dawn," Ruben called from across the room. "You're a sight for sore eyes, especially after I had to stare at my partner's ugly mug all day."

Okada ignored him. "Hello, Doctor." He stepped closer and peered into Dawn's bags. "Do you come bearing gifts?"

"Yes. My mother and I combined forces to make sure Portland's finest won't go hungry tonight." Dawn set the bags on the closest desk and handed out containers of still-steaming food.

The door to Lieutenant Swenson's office opened. "What's going on?" She frowned as she glanced at her detectives, who were crowding around Aiden's desk. "Is there a new lead?"

Dawn froze. Not only was she a civilian who shouldn't be here, but Aiden had also taken a lot of criticism from her superiors for starting a relationship with a former victim.

"No, just an upstanding citizen bringing us nourishment," Okada answered, digging into his food.

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The group of cops around Dawn parted as the lieutenant stepped closer, giving her a direct view of Dawn. The frown on Swenson's face deepened. "Doctor Kinsley, right?"

Dawn swallowed and nodded.

"She's just here to drop off a change of clothes for Aiden," Ray said.

"Yeah, and having done that, I'll go and leave you to your work." Dawn started to retreat.

"Dr. Kinsley." The lieutenant's voice made her turn back around. "I think she's back there, taking a nap. I'm sure she would kill her partner if he let you leave without seeing her, so why don't you go and wake her up before her dinner gets cold?"

Dawn stared at her.

Astrid Swenson's blue-gray eyes softened as she gave Dawn an encouraging nod. "Go on." She pointed to one of the doors down the hall.

"Thank you." Dawn pressed one of her home-cooked dinners into the lieutenant's hands and hurried down the hall before Swenson could change her mind. She opened the door the lieutenant had indicated.

The room beyond was dark, so she paused in the doorway to let her eyes adjust. Finally, she could make out a single form huddled under a blanket. The way the person slept—on her back, facing the door—was typical for Aiden. She was tossing and turning, one of her hands clutching the blanket.

Dawn didn't need her PhD in psychology to know that Aiden was stressed. This case, like so many others, was getting to her.

Quietly, taking care not to stumble in the darkness, Dawn inched closer. She sat on the edge of the cot and peered down at her sleeping lover. Aiden's short, black hair was disheveled. A frown marred her face and her athletic body seemed tense, even while she slept.

Dawn couldn't resist. She bent down and gently touched her lips to the corner of Aiden's mouth.

"What?" Aiden jerked upright. She stared at Dawn, blinked, rubbed her eyes, and then looked at her again. "If this is a dream, please don't wake me."

Dawn ran a hand through Aiden's hair, combing the tousled strands into some semblance of order. "If this were a dream, I wouldn't bring you fresh underwear. I would be in *my* underwear." When Aiden didn't react to the joke, Dawn wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug.

Warm breath washed over Dawn's neck as Aiden exhaled.

They held each other for several minutes, silently reconnecting. Finally, Dawn felt Aiden's tense muscles relax against her. "Come on. Your dinner is getting cold."

Aiden moved back a few inches. “You brought me dinner, and you left it with the twenty famished cops in the squad room? Do you honestly think they’re above petty theft just because they’re supposed to uphold the law?”

“Don’t worry. I brought enough to feed the hungry hordes.” Dawn grasped Aiden’s hand and pulled her up from the cot.

Aiden arched her tall body in a catlike, sensual stretch, which Dawn watched appreciatively. When their gazes met, Aiden murmured, “Sometimes I think this can’t be for real.”

“The case?”

“You.” Aiden touched Dawn’s cheek with a single finger. “Us.”

Dawn put her hand over Aiden’s and pressed it against her face, solidifying their contact. “It is real.”

“Yeah. But you waiting around for me, playing second fiddle to my job, and instead of complaining when I don’t call you for three days, you come and bring me food and clothes. It just seems too good to be true,” Aiden said in a whisper.

“My dad, my brother, and my ex-husband were cops,” Dawn said. “I knew exactly what I was getting myself into when I made a play for you.”

“You made a play for me? Excuse me, Doc, but that’s not the way I remember it.”

Dawn was glad to feel Aiden’s mood shift, and she answered her smile with one of her own. “Oh, you mean that lame attempt to ask me out to dinner?”

“Lame attempt? If I remember correctly, you agreed quite willingly.”

“Aiden!” Ray burst into the tiny room, nearly running them over. “Deming called. There’s DNA evidence on the last victim. We got a name and an address.”

Aiden transformed from gentle lover to determined cop within a second. She picked up her badge and service weapon from their place next to the cot, and when she attached them to her belt, her amber eyes were filled with steely determination. “Let’s go.”

A quick thank-you and one last glance to Dawn and they were gone.

Dawn listened to their retreating steps and sighed. “Be safe,” she whispered into the darkness of the empty room.

CHAPTER 2

THE UNDERGROUND GARAGE WAS ALMOST empty. At this time on a Saturday night, most other attorneys and paralegals had long since gone home. Kade Matheson's high heels clacked on the concrete, sounding eerily loud.

The creepy feeling of being watched accompanied her as she crossed the parking level.

She clenched her fist around her car keys and strode toward her BMW as fast as her skirt and elegant pumps would allow.

A sound echoed through the garage, and she whirled around.

Nothing. The garage was still empty.

"You're becoming paranoid, Kadence Matheson," she murmured. This wasn't the first time she had felt as if somebody was watching her, but whenever she glanced over her shoulder, no one was there.

Reaching her car, she settled into the driver's seat with a sigh of relief. She stared at the car keys and remembered a very similar situation that had happened in the same underground garage.

Five months ago

After another long day in court and an even longer evening poring over witness statements, crime scene reports, and evidence lists, Kade left the office and headed toward her car.

A sound echoed through the underground garage behind her.

She turned around, expecting to see one of the DA's interns hurrying after her with just one more document she had to review before tomorrow.

Nobody was there.

Kade shivered and lengthened her stride. Leaving the office on her own and walking to her car alone in the darkness had never been a problem for her. Even after working with the sex crimes unit for two years, she was not one to be particularly afraid of being attacked. With the pepper spray in her purse, she was confident she could chase off any attacker.

But during the last few weeks, that feeling of safety had somehow vanished. There had been no threats—at least not more than usual—but lately, she often felt as if she was being watched.

Maybe it was just the trial that had started the week before. On top of her usual determination to win, Aiden seemed to have a somewhat personal connection to one of the victims, Dawn Kinsley, and that put Kade under even more pressure to get a conviction.

A steel door banged shut somewhere behind her. She fished for her car keys, not only so she could make a quick escape into her car should it become necessary but also to have some kind of weapon.

Steps sounded behind her, quickly coming closer.

She looked over her shoulder again.

When she pressed the key fob, the flash of the BMW's blinkers revealed a dark figure jogging after her. The person called something, but with the steps echoing on the cement floor, Kade didn't catch the words.

She froze.

The tall person headed directly for her, the face still shrouded in darkness.

Kade's fight-or-flight reflexes took over. Her Matheson genes weren't much for running away, so she thrust her keys into the attacker's side and used the seconds while he was cradling his ribs to duck under his arm and grab the BMW's door handle.

But her attacker was faster. A long-fingered hand prevented her from opening the door. "Ouch. Is that how you usually say hello, Counselor?"

Kade whirled around. The voice was distorted with pain but definitely female. In the grayish light down here, she could make out the features of a Latina woman of about forty. She seemed familiar, but Kade was sure they had never been introduced. "Who are you?"

The tall woman reached into the pocket of her jacket.

Expecting her to pull out a weapon, Kade reached for the pepper spray in her purse.

The woman lifted her hands, palms out. "Don't worry. I'm a cop. I just want to show you my badge."

Kade's tension vanished as she stared at the gold shield and ID identifying her "attacker" as Lieutenant Delicia Vasquez Montero. "Detective Carlisle said you'd be in touch, but the police usually come to my office to meet with me. They don't ambush me in dark and lonely places."

Lieutenant Vasquez gave her a sheepish grin. "Sorry. Not the best way to introduce myself. But your assistant said I'd just missed you and I might still be able to catch you in the underground garage. I didn't mean to scare you."

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Kade put her car keys away. “You didn’t scare me.”

“Of course not.” Lieutenant Vasquez smiled and then sobered. “Listen, can we talk?”

“Sure. If you make an appointment with my assistant, we can talk all you want.”

The lieutenant didn’t remove her hand from the driver’s side door. “There’s no time to make an official appointment. You’re already in the middle of the trial I need to talk about.”

Kade looked at her through narrowed eyes. “You’re not with the Sexual Assault Detail.”

“No. I’m with the homicide unit.”

“The case I’m trying is not a homicide.” If this lieutenant continued to waylay her, it could very well become one.

“I know. My connection to the case is not a professional one.” Vasquez’s dark eyes bore into Kade’s, sending a message of urgency.

Kade tilted her head and looked up at her. “What’s that supposed to mean, Lieutenant?”

“It means my connection to the case is a personal one. That’s why I’d prefer not to discuss it in the middle of a parking garage,” Lieutenant Vasquez said. “Have you had dinner yet?”

Kade suppressed an unladylike snort. She hadn’t even had lunch. “Not yet, no.”

“Let’s go to that little Italian place right around the corner. We can grab a bite to eat, and I can explain my connection to the case.”

Kade hated being surprised in court, so that sounded sensible. She locked her car and gave Vasquez a curt nod. “Lead the way, Lieutenant.”



“So?” Kade said without even having tasted her salad.

“Well, with what I’m about to tell you, I think I should start with a proper introduction. I’m Lieutenant Del Vasquez with the North Precinct.” She offered her hand across the table.

Kade returned the handshake with confidence.

Surprise flashed in Del’s eyes, as if she’d expected a limp handshake, just because Kade was picking at a salad while Del devoured her three-thousand-calorie pasta.

It wasn’t the first time someone had made wrong assumptions about her based on her appearance or her family. “So, what’s your connection to one of my cases?” Kade didn’t want to waste any more time exchanging pleasantries.

Del set down her fork. “I went to the club with Dawn Kinsley on the night she was raped. I want you to call me to the stand so I can testify that she never spoke to Garret Ballard.”

Kade took a moment to unfold her napkin and put it on her lap. So Del Vasquez was a lesbian—or a straight woman who liked spending time in gay bars. She studied her. With her sturdy, athletic build, angular features, and short, black hair Del Vasquez wasn’t exactly the picture of the feminine, heterosexual woman. *Don’t stereotype.*

“You can just ask,” Del said.

“What?” Kade stared at her.

Del grinned. “You’re wondering whether I’m a lesbian. If you want to know, you can just ask me.”

Kade wasn’t used to so much openness. Polite silence and spreading rumors behind other people’s backs were the norm in her circles. She quickly recovered and pierced Del with a direct gaze. “Okay,” she said, forcing herself to keep eye contact. “Did you visit the gay bar with Dawn Kinsley because you are gay?”

“I went to the gay bar because I wanted to spend some time with Dawn,” Del answered. “But, yes, I am a lesbian.”

A brief flash of admiration for Del’s casual frankness went through Kade, but she forced her thoughts back to the case. “And what’s your connection to Dr. Kinsley?”

“If that’s your politically correct way of asking if we’re lovers, the answer is no. I’m an old friend of her family. Her father was my partner on the force before he died.”

Kade leaned forward. “If I call you to the stand, opposing counsel will dig into Dr. Kinsley’s love life—and into your own. Are you prepared for that?”

Del squared her shoulders. “I’ll do whatever is necessary to put that bastard behind bars.”

Her loyalty was admirable, but it also left Kade with more questions than answers. “If you’re this determined to help put Ballard away, why didn’t you offer to testify before?”

“I offered a hundred times before. Dawn always refused. She didn’t want to drag me into this messy trial, and I respected her wishes.”

“So why come to me now?” Kade asked.

“Well, with the way the trial is going... No offense, I think you’re doing a great job as a prosecutor, but still... Too much rests on Dawn’s testimony for my comfort.” Del looked at her, the concern unveiled in her dark eyes.

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Kade accepted the explanation with a nod. “Did you visit the club with Dr. Kinsley on a regular basis?”

Del shook her head. “Neither of us is a regular. Some friends of hers talked her into going that night, and I went with them to make sure they wouldn’t abandon Dawn for some hotties with beer.”

“Did they?”

“No. I did.” Del took a healthy gulp of wine as if trying to wash away a bitter taste in her mouth.

“What do you mean?” Kade asked with the tone she used to coax reluctant witnesses into talking.

“I left the club before Dawn did because all that smoke and the flashing lights were getting on my nerves.” Del emptied her wineglass with jerky movements.

“Even if you had personally seen Dr. Kinsley home, it wouldn’t have changed a thing,” Kade said, giving in to the sudden urge to comfort her.

Del stabbed at her pasta. “I know.” She sighed. “But at least I could have told the jury that Dawn never talked to Ballard the whole time she was in the club. Now I can’t attest to that.”

“We can work around that,” Kade said. “A witness who can testify that Dr. Kinsley never talked to Ballard when she entered the club is better than nothing. And if you are an old friend of the family, you can also testify to the fact that Dr. Kinsley identifies as a lesbian and would never consider a one-night stand with a man.”

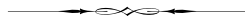
Del nodded.

“All right.” Kade pushed her almost untouched plate away and laid down a legal pad in its place. “Then let’s go over the questions I’ll ask you on the stand.”

When they left the restaurant an hour later, Del insisted on seeing Kade to her car.

Kade settled into the driver’s seat and gave her a nod before reaching out to close the door.

“Oh, Counselor?” Del waited until Kade looked up. “Next time,” she said, pointing at the car keys dangling from the ignition, “aim for the eyes.”



A light tap on the driver’s side window brought Kade back to the present. She jumped and whirled around, clenching her fingers around the car keys that were still in her hand.

A security guard stood in front of her car. He gestured for her to roll down the window. “Everything okay, ma’am? I saw you sitting there without moving and—”

“I’m fine,” Kade said, embarrassed at having been caught daydreaming.

“All right.” He took a step back. “I just wanted to make sure.”

“I appreciate it. Good night.” She rolled her window back up and shoved the key in the ignition. “There’ll be no next time, Del Vasquez,” she said and started the car.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN DAWN ENTERED THE OFFICE'S small kitchen, she found her colleague Janet digging into a piece of cheesecake with almost orgasmic delight. Dawn rummaged through the cabinets in search of tea. "Tough case?"

"Aren't they all?" Janet answered around a forkful of cake.

Dawn shrugged and joined her at the table while she waited for the water to boil.

"So, what's got you smiling all morning?" Janet asked when she had eaten every last crumb.

Dawn grinned. *An uninterrupted Sunday in bed with the incredible Aiden Carlisle.* Aiden and her colleagues still hadn't caught the serial rapist they'd wanted to arrest on Saturday. By the time they arrived at his apartment, he had disappeared. Lieutenant Swenson had sent her detectives home since there was nothing else they could do at the moment. That gave Aiden and Dawn a chance to spend a lazy Sunday with each other, the first uninterrupted time in weeks. "What, I'm not allowed to smile on a Monday morning?"

Janet threatened her with her fork. "Don't try that with me."

Dawn schooled her features into an innocent expression. "Try what?"

"Answering questions with questions," Janet said. "I don't let my patients get away with it, so you're not allowed either."

Dawn spooned sugar into her tea. "No professional courtesies?"

"Nope." Janet flashed a grin. "So tell me, who's the new guy?"

Dawn froze, the cup of tea halfway to her mouth. "New guy?" She'd thought Janet knew she was dating a woman. Wasn't that why Janet had asked her to join her practice and to take on the teenage patients struggling with their sexual orientation?

"You're doing it again—answering a question with a question," Janet said. "Don't think I didn't notice. So?"

Oh, boy. Dawn had gotten back in touch with her old friend from college only four months ago. In what little time they had in between sessions, they

just talked about work-related things, so Janet apparently thought Dawn's romantic interests lay with men, as they had in college.

"Come on, admit it," Janet said. "It's that hot detective that seems to be in and out of here every other day."

Dawn blinked. Was Janet talking about Ray, Aiden's partner? "I'm dating a hot detective, yes, but—"

Janet groaned. "You've seen the ring on his finger, right?"

"Detective Bennet's wife has nothing to fear from me. It's his partner I'm interested in."

"His p—" Janet's eyes widened. "You don't mean...? You...?"

"I'm in love with Aiden Carlisle." She held her breath while she waited for Janet's reaction.

Janet sat there and dazedly shook her head. Finally, she cracked a smile. "So I guess you finally found out why you weren't happy in your marriage, huh?"

"That would be one of the reasons, yes," Dawn said.

"Well, in that case..." Janet stood, shoved her chair back, and knelt in front of Dawn.

Dawn white-knuckled her cup of tea. "W-what are you doing?"

Janet laughed. "Don't worry. I'm not proposing marriage or anything. I'm merely groveling for a favor."

"You know, people like you are responsible for the rumor that psychologists are a bit wacky themselves." Dawn nudged her. "Get up off the floor, you goof. What favor?"

Janet climbed to her feet. "On my way to the kitchen, I caught a glimpse of my newest patient in the waiting room."

"You have a patient waiting, and you're sitting here, eating cheesecake and interrogating me about my love life?"

"She's half an hour early," Janet said.

Dawn knew those power games well. Coming in early, late, or not at all was often a patient's attempt to show the therapist who had the control over their sessions.

"Mrs. Phillips said her mother dropped her off, probably glad to be rid of her for a while," Janet said.

"Rebellious teenager?"

"Poster child for rebellion," Janet said. "Leather jacket, tattoo, thumb ring, the works. And I have a feeling she would be more interested in your sweetheart than in Detective Bennet too."

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Dawn smirked. “You’re not stereotyping at all, are you?”

“Maybe. But I’d rather err on the side of caution. You know there are studies indicating that therapy is more effective for a gay patient when the therapist is homosexual too.”

“You’re not just saying that because you want to stay in here and eat cheesecake instead of trying to talk to a troubled teen, are you?” Dawn fixed her with a mock stern gaze.

“One piece of cheesecake is enough for me, thank you very much. Some of us are still searching for Mr. Right.” Janet patted her belly. “But seriously, if you have the time, I have a feeling you’d be better equipped to reach this particular patient.”

Dawn glanced at her watch. Usually, she’d have Mrs. Clanton in a few minutes, but that patient had recently moved away and she hadn’t replaced her with a new client yet, so she did have enough time for an intake interview with the teenager. “All right. If it’s okay with the girl, I’ll take her off your hands.”

“Thanks.” Janet smiled. “Maybe I’ll eat that second piece of cheesecake after all.”

“So we’re okay?” Dawn asked, studying her colleague. “You’re okay with—”

“With you being gay?”

Dawn nodded.

“Well, it’s a bit of a surprise, but when I think about it... I can see you with a woman, and that female detective is no slouch in the looks department.”

“She sure isn’t.” An image of Aiden’s tall, muscular body, her strong face, and her soft amber eyes flashed through Dawn’s mind. She put her empty cup into the dishwasher and went to get the patient’s intake form from Mrs. Phillips, their office manager.

Evan Whitfield was scrawled across the top of the sheet of paper. The date of birth told her that her new patient was sixteen. The girl had checked only the option “other” in the list of problems she was having and had filled in *shrinks* on the line where she was supposed to describe that other problem. The names listed under *previous therapy/counseling* read like the who’s who of Portland’s psychologists.

“Thanks a lot, Janet,” Dawn muttered. She straightened her shoulders and walked over to the waiting room. “Ms. Whitfield?”

The only patient in the waiting room didn’t look up. The dark-haired girl’s head was bobbing up and down to the loud music blaring out of her mp3 player.

Dawn walked over and pulled one of the earbuds from her ear.

“Hey!” The girl shot up from the chair that she’d tipped back against the wall. She glared down at Dawn from under shaggy, black hair, cut short except for her long, rebellious bangs. Evan Whitfield obviously enjoyed the fact that she was already taller than Dawn.

“Hello, Ms. Whitfield.” Dawn extended a hand. “I’m Doctor Kinsley.”

Evan ignored the offered hand and folded her leather-jacket-clad arms across her chest. “So?”

“Why don’t you come with me to my office and take a seat?” Dawn continued, ignoring the provocation.

“Take a seat? I thought I was supposed to lie down on the couch.” Evan smirked but at least followed Dawn as she led the way to her office.

Dawn shrugged. “Whatever works for you is fine with me, but personally, I like to look people in the eye while I’m talking to them.”

The girl didn’t answer. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her baggy jeans and took in the office.

Dawn suppressed a smile. *Not what you expected?* Her office didn’t have much in common with the neat, clinical offices of other psychologists. On her old, marred desk, mountains of paperwork warred for space with toys, chocolates, and photos. Her diplomas hung side by side with children’s paintings. “Why don’t we sit?”

Evan walked around the yellow beanbags and plopped down in the chair in front of the desk, forcing Dawn to sit on the other side, with the desk as a barrier between them.

Dawn took a seat and studied the teenager. Most patients expected her to start asking questions right away, and they were eager to fill the awkward silence. She had learned the power of silence a long time ago, so she merely sat and watched Evan.

She took in the long legs lazily sprawled in front of Evan, the stubborn jaw, the leather jacket, and the confident, cautious gaze of the brown eyes. *My God!* Her new patient resembled the way Aiden had looked at her age.

She stared at Evan for a second longer, then called herself to order. *Oh, come on. You’d think you were over that infatuated stage where everything and everyone reminds you of Aiden. Get your mind on the job!* She gently cleared her throat. “So why don’t you tell me a little about yourself?”

Evan continued to stare out the window as if she hadn’t spoken.

So that was why she’d had so many other therapists—she’d refused to talk to them. “Okay, I received your message loud and clear. You don’t want to be here.”

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“Damn right, Doc!”

Dawn didn't react to the cursing or the abbreviation of her title that was meant only to provoke her. “Here we are anyway. Why not cut this childish crap and talk like adults?”

For a second, surprise and reluctant respect glimmered in the teenager's eyes before the mask of anger was back. “Do they allow you to talk to patients like that?”

“They?”

“The guys on the ethics committee,” Evan answered, her words a silent threat.

How long had she been handed from therapist to therapist to have learned about the ethics committee at the tender age of sixteen? “They want me to use the language my patients do so that they'll feel more comfortable talking to me about their problems.”

“I don't have a problem,” Evan shouted. “I'm not crazy! I don't need a shrink!”

“Good thing I'm not a shrink,” Dawn answered softly. “I'm a psychologist. I work with people who are unhappy with some aspects of their lives.”

A heavy boot kicked against her desk. “I'm not unhappy!”

“Then why are you yelling?” Dawn kept her voice low and gentle, emphasizing the contrast between their modes of communication. Actually, she didn't care if Evan was yelling as long as she was talking to her. Patients had whispered their most painful secrets in this office, and they had yelled at her at the top of their lungs. In Evan's case, it meant she had succeeded in piercing the cool, bored façade to reach the swirling emotions beneath.

“I'm not—” Evan shouted, then stopped and lowered her voice. “I'm not yellin'. I just don't wanna be here.”

“I know. But since you're here, let's try to make the best of it, okay?”

Evan rolled her eyes and didn't answer.

“So,” Dawn said, “whose idea was it to send you here?”

Evan ignored her.

“Your mother's?” Dawn asked.

“She's not my mother!” Evan's long legs tensed as she got ready to jump up. *Bingo.* “She's not?” Dawn asked in a neutral tone.

“No.” Evan gripped the armrests as if barely keeping herself in the chair.

A change of subject was in order, or her patient would run from the room and never return. “Before we start, I think you should know our sessions will be completely confidential. Unless you're planning to hurt yourself or someone

else, I won't discuss anything you tell me with your family, your teachers, or anyone else."

Evan snorted. "Right. Like I believe that even for a second."

"Any particular reason for your distrust?" Dawn asked.

Evan regarded her coolly. "Maybe I just don't like you."

"Listen, Ms. Whitfield." She stopped herself. Calling Evan by her last name didn't feel right. It was just one more barrier Evan could hide behind, and she wouldn't allow that. "Can I call you Evan?"

Evan flashed her a wolfish smile, and for a second, Dawn was once again reminded of Aiden as a teenager, the way her mother had portrayed her in the painting in the bedroom. "Only if I can call you..." Evan craned her neck to be able to read the name on the diploma hanging on the wall. "Dawn." She met Dawn's gaze, clearly expecting her to back down.

Dawn hesitated, then made a decision. She needed to employ some unusual methods to establish a connection. "All right. You can."

Again, an expression of surprise flashed across Evan's face before it was quickly hidden.

"On one condition," Dawn added.

Evan groaned. "I should have known. What condition?"

"You use my first name with the same respect that I address you with," Dawn said.

Evan stared at her. "You're one weird shrink, Doc."

Doc. Not Dawn. Her new patient didn't want to be respectful toward her. "About the confidentiality I promised you... I mean it. Unless you put yourself or others in acute danger, I won't repeat anything you tell me to another person."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Evan leaned back with her trademark bored expression.

"Try me."

Evan looked up. "What?"

"If you don't believe me, try me. Tell me one thing about you. If your...the woman who dropped you off doesn't chew you out about it, you'll know you can trust me."

Evan narrowed her eyes; then her lips curved up into a grin. "You want to know something about me? How about this: I just finished fucking this girl before I came to your office. That personal enough for you?"

Dawn forced herself not to react. *Congratulations, Janet. Your gaydar is working just fine.* "So the woman who is not your mother, she doesn't know about this relationship?" she asked, careful to keep her tone neutral.

Next of Kin

“Who said it’s a relationship?” Evan faced Dawn with a challenging gleam in her eyes.

“It isn’t?” It was clear to Dawn that Evan wanted to shock her, but she wasn’t sure if she had really slept with a girl or was just bragging.

Evan’s leather jacket creaked as she crossed her arms behind her head, looking like a lazy, satisfied cat. “Just a bit of fun. I don’t do relationships.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I buy a cow if all I want is milk?” Evan drawled.

Dawn leaned forward, trying to bridge the distance between them. “Let’s try not to hide behind lame statements like that while you’re in here, okay?”

Evan scowled and removed her arms from behind her head to cross them in front of her chest again.

“So the woman who dropped you off...if she’s not your mother, who is she?” Dawn asked, hoping Evan would answer that question now that she had started to talk.

Evan made a show of examining her fingernails.

All right. Let’s try a little provocation of my own. “She’s not that one-night stand you just told me about, is she?”

A strand of black hair fell onto Evan’s face as her head shot up. “Are you crazy? What would I want with a pushy, old broad like that?”

I’ll take that as a no. Dawn just looked at her and waited.

Evan tried to stare her down for a long minute before relenting. “She’s foster mother number thirty-seven.”

That was probably an exaggeration, but the meaning was clear nonetheless. Evan had grown up in a number of different foster homes. All her rebellious bravado was just an attempt to hide how lonely and rejected she felt.

“How long have you lived with her?”

A casual shrug. “A while.”

“And what’s so horrible about it?” Dawn asked.

Evan looked at her with brooding dark eyes. “I never said it was.”

“You called her a pushy, old broad and foster mother number thirty-seven instead of just using her name,” Dawn said. “Sounds like she’s not your favorite person.”

Was there anyone in Evan’s life that she allowed herself to like? Dawn wondered what had made her close herself off from people.

“She just gets on my nerves.” Evan tugged on a tear in her jeans.

“About what?”

“Everything!”

This is going to be a long fifty minutes. Dawn suppressed a sigh. “Can you give me an example?”

Evan threw up her hands. “She’s constantly naggin’ me about school, the way I dress, and who I hang around with.”

“Sounds like the same stuff every teenager fights over with her parents,” Dawn said.

“They’re not my parents!”

Dawn studied her, well aware that her next question would most likely not be answered. It needed to be asked anyway. “Can I ask why you don’t live with your biological parents?”

“You can ask,” Evan said in a condescending manner. “Doesn’t mean I have to answer.”

“I know this might be a difficult topic for you—”

“You don’t know anything.” Evan leaped to her feet so fast her chair tumbled to the floor. “You don’t know anything about me.” She prowled around the office like a caged panther.

Dawn stayed where she was. “You’re right. That’s exactly why I need to ask you these questions. I have to get to know you before I can help you. Now would you please pick up the chair and sit down again?”

Evan stopped in midstride to glare at her.

“Please.” Dawn pointed at the chair, her voice soft, but her gaze firm and steady, not giving an inch.

Evan picked up the chair but didn’t sit down. She stood behind the chair, her hands clenched around its back. “Why do you think you can help a fucked-up kid like me when all the other shrinks couldn’t? You think you’re the Mother Teresa of mental health or what?”

Dawn couldn’t help smiling. Evan was more intelligent than she let on. She could probably be a straight-A student, but of course that would ruin her tough-girl image. “Because I don’t think you’re fucked-up or a kid. You’re an intelligent young woman, and you want me to help you.”

Evan snorted. “And you’re delusional, Doc. What makes you think I want your help? The way I treated your office furniture?” She barked out a laugh, a sound devoid of humor.

“No. The fact that you stayed here and talked to me for the last thirty minutes.” Dawn turned the small clock on her desk around so Evan could see the time.

Evan stared at it. Her eyes held an almost panicked expression when she noticed she had, in fact, been lured into a conversation during the last half hour.

Next of Kin

“So now that we’ve established you’re not fucked-up and I’m not the enemy, do you think we can give each other a chance and see if we can work together?” Dawn offered her hand again.

Evan ignored the gesture as she had before, but she sat back down. “If I stay, it’s only because I’m bored. There’s nothing on TV, and I ran out of weed yesterday.”

Dawn just smiled and made a mental note to ask Evan about her drug habit later. “So tell me a little about foster mom number thirty-seven. Does she have a name?”

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