



Whispers Left Behind

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Category: Crime And Mafia, Thriller, Suspense

Description: From the bestselling author Kennedy Layne comes a gripping first installment in a crime fiction series that follows Homicide Detective Kinsley Aspen as she navigates a web of small-town secrets while dealing with the haunting truths of her past...

A quiet community in northern North Dakota was shattered in the aftermath of two grisly murders. The Fallbrook Killer walked free, thanks to George Aspen's unflinching defense. But for his daughter, Homicide Detective Kinsley Aspen, the acquittal is a scar that refuses to heal—on her career, her conscience, and the town's fragile sense of security.

Now, one year later, a mutilated body is found in a desolate barn—the woman's death horrifyingly reminiscent of the Fallbrook killings. Panic ricochets through the town as whispers of the killer's return spread like wildfire. Kinsley is thrust into a relentless investigation, but this time, it's more than a case—it's a reckoning. Because Kinsley has a secret. A very dark, monstrous secret—the killer they are hunting is a copycat. The real Fallbrook Killer has been dead for a year. She knows this because she was the one who pulled the trigger.

As the body count rises and the walls close in, Kinsley must face a terrifying question: how do you stop a killer when the monster might be staring back at you in the mirror?

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Chapter One

Rachel Hanson

October

Thursday — 1:33 am

The sharp claws of desperation were all too real.

Rachel Hanson choked back a sob as she stumbled over the protruding roots and rocks of the forest floor. Primal fear was the driving force pushing her forward, despite the excruciating pain in her left side. Every step forward was agony, but stopping meant death.

The darkness would have swallowed her whole had it not been for the flickering streams of moonlight. The silver beams slipped past the leaves of the tall ash trees above as if they were guiding her to safety. She followed them as quickly as possible toward salvation.

Lionel Cooper's farmhouse was just past the clearing.

If she could make it across the field without getting caught, she stood a good chance of being allowed inside before it was too late. She flinched when a low-hanging branch slapped her cheek, but she didn't dare slow down. Just a little farther. That was all she needed to gain a bit of separation.

With every sharp inhalation, it was as if she were breathing tiny shards of glass. She could barely hear anything over the blood rushing through her body. It didn't help that her heart hammered against her ribcage, intensifying the pain.

Rachel pressed a hand against her side when she was forced to come to an abrupt halt at the edge of the tree line. Though the palpable presence of death seemed to be an inescapable force, she had no choice but to waste valuable seconds evaluating her surroundings.

An eerie stillness had settled around her.

Had she stopped of discovering her location?

She bit her lip to keep from breathing too loud.

In the distance, the full moon cast slivers of illumination over Mr. Cooper's farmhouse. While his porchlight beckoned her with hope, there were many shadows in between that stretched and twisted like long, grasping fingers.

Could she make it safely to his front door?

She hesitated at the edge of the clearing, torn with a decision to make. Remain in the woods or make a run for it. Her life was in danger either way. The piercing snap of a twig startled her as it echoed off the trees.

The decision had been made for her.

Rachel ignored the wetness between her fingers as she frantically pushed off the tall, thick trunk. She began to run toward the barn maybe a hundred feet away. The blood on her hand was no longer warm. The cool, crisp air had dried the sticky substance upon contact. She didn't give her injury another thought as she focused solely on the

barn.

The large structure would offer her temporary cover.

Fortunately, the ground wasn't as rough through the field. She still hadn't anticipated the slight decline. She almost tripped over her own feet before catching herself. The brief interruption afforded her the time needed to glance over her shoulder.

No one emerged from the woods behind her.

Not wanting to take such a reprieve for granted, she forced herself to run faster until she could reach her destination. The dim silhouette of the barn enveloped her in its protection as she finally rested her palm against one of the cold, wooden beams.

There was no time for tears, and she wouldn't waste any precious seconds checking her wound. Only a little farther, and she would be able to reach Mr. Cooper's front porch.

He would call 911.

He would save her.

Rachel quietly followed the barn's length until the farmhouse came back into view. Sixty yards was all that stood between life and death. It took a moment for her to realize that the shadowed outline of the barn had shifted and morphed into a dark, looming figure. Once recognition dawned, a surge of panic slammed into her.

She spun around in an attempt to escape.

The man's hand shot out and seized her by the hair, yanking her back with such brutal force that it drove out what remaining air she had in her lungs. His other hand

clamped over her mouth to prevent her from screaming, and she struggled to draw in oxygen.

No words were spoken as he untangled his fingers from her hair before quickly wrapping a thick arm around her waist. He practically lifted her off the ground before dragging her toward the barn door. She fought with all her might, but all she managed to do was grapple with the fabric of his jacket.

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Trust, once given so freely, twisted into a choking vine of betrayal.

If he managed to get her inside the barn, she wouldn't be coming out alive. Such knowledge fueled her into frantically twisting in an attempt to reach his face. If she could hurt him enough to cause his grip to loosen, she might regain her freedom.

Rachel hadn't expected him to release her so quickly, but her feet abruptly met the ground. Briefly stunned, he managed to grab another fistful of her hair. She instinctively reached up, but it was too late. Instead of yanking her back, he slammed her forward.

The blow to her head was severe.

His response to her stunned reaction was to effortlessly haul her across the threshold of the barn. He tossed her like a ragdoll onto the dirt floor. She rolled onto her back, fully expecting him to instantly end her life.

Instead, he remained standing over her as still as a statue.

The brief respite triggered hope.

"Please," Rachel pleaded desperately, her voice somewhat distorted. Her vision was blurred, and there was an intense ringing in her ears. Her mind could still register the outline of his body from the moonlight slipping through the open barn door. "Please, don't do this."

The side effects from hitting her head were beginning to fade, and all the ways she

could escape began to surface quickly. All she needed was a split second of distraction to make another run for it. She slowly lifted herself onto her elbows, curling her fingers into the palm of her right hand. She had managed to scoop up enough hay and dirt for one attempt at freedom.

“You’re going to die tonight.” His voice lacked any emotion. Had he always been this cold? This depraved? “I’ve waited a very long time for this. Too long.”

With a slow, deliberate movement, he withdrew a knife from somewhere inside his jacket. She hadn’t been certain at first what he held in his hand until the moonlight glinted off the blade. One of the few men who she had trusted with her life was about to cut it short. She choked back another sob and scrambled backward. Clambering to her feet, she flung the debris she had gathered into his face.

Unfortunately, he had struck first.

Searing heat formed a straight line across her neck.

He had brought his arm around so fast that she hadn’t even realized the blade had slit her throat until she failed to breathe. Her feeble attempt to draw air had resulted in a faint, strangled gurgle. Her intent had been to run after blinding him, but she could no longer move her legs.

She was frozen in place.

Drowning, yet she could still make out the sharp scent of hay and the coppery tang of blood. How was that even possible?

The warm substance began to cascade down her neck. Her body eventually followed the same direction. She sank to her knees as he stood before her, slowly wiping away the dirt from his face.

Evil wore many, many masks.

Darkness threatened to swallow her whole. A chilling cold had settled into her bones by the time she fell backward. Her fingers twitched, but it wasn't through a will of their own. Her body was losing its life source and searching for an anchor.

Her heartbeat slowed to a gentle murmur.

Faded into a whisper.

Then...nothing.

Chapter Two

Kinsley Aspen

October

Thursday — 7:24 pm

“Do you have any secrets, Aunt Kin?”

Warm water trickled through Kinsley Aspen's fingers as her eight-year-old niece came to stand beside her at the kitchen sink. Lily's question had been innocent enough, yet the innocuous inquiry had struck a deep chord. It was impossible to stop the flood of complex emotions.

Hidden truths had a way of destroying a person.

“Everyone has secrets, peanut.” Kinsley cleared her throat as she squeezed the sponge. Enough white suds foamed for her to wash the rest of the dinner plate. She

held the dish under the steady stream of water to rinse off the remaining soap. If only it were as easy to cleanse one's soul. "Does your mom and dad know about the flashlight under your bed?"

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“Hey,” Lily exclaimed defensively before pursing her lips. She even crossed her arms like her father did when he was displeased with her. “How do you know about my flashlight?”

“Don’t worry,” Kinsley whispered with a wink of conspiracy. She even leaned over just enough to pretend Dylan couldn’t hear them. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Lily was an avid reader. She loved all kinds of genres, and her parents encouraged her with weekly trips to the library. The entire family was aware that Lily stayed up reading well past her bedtime. She had a tendency to fall asleep with her flashlight in one hand and a book in the other. Never once had she questioned how her book ended up on the bedside table and her flashlight tucked safely back underneath her bed.

“Thanks, Aunt Kin,” Lily whispered in return with a scrunch of her nose and a wide grin. She slowly lowered her arms and peered at her Uncle Dylan. He was going along with Kinsley’s subterfuge and feigning a little too much interest in his task of drying a fork. “Grandpa needs another garbage bag, Uncle Dylan. The big kind.”

“Coming right up.” Dylan tossed the fork into the silverware drawer before nudging Kinsley to the side. He opened the lower cabinet underneath the sink and pulled out a white garbage bag that was supposed to smell like lemons. Holding it up high enough, Lily giggled in her attempt to grab it. She was victorious on the third jump. “Make sure to save me a pumpkin. I intend to beat your dad in this year’s competition.”

The Aspen family’s annual pumpkin carving event always took place the first week of October. It had technically been Noah’s turn to wash the dishes this evening, but

Kinsley had intentionally offered to take her older brother's place so she could delay the inevitable.

She wasn't in the mood to make small talk with their father.

Given the size of their family, it hadn't taken much prodding on her part to remain inside the house and clean off the dinner table. With nine family members in attendance this evening, storing food and washing the dishes had been quite the chore.

"Dad saved you the pumpkin with the missing stem." Lily giggled again when Dylan set his hands on his hips with feigned annoyance. "He said that it matched your brain."

"You tell your dad that—"

"We'll bring out the hot apple cider in a few minutes," Kinsley stated loudly with a laugh, interrupting whatever message Dylan would have sent their older brother. "Get a head start on carving your pumpkin so you can help me with mine."

Thursday nights were reserved for family dinners.

Even after the loss of Kinsley's last grandparent, the tradition had remained unchanged. The only difference now was the location where such meals took place. George and Margaret Aspen had taken on the responsibility of hosting, and their five children wouldn't dare miss a single gathering.

Lily dashed out of the kitchen, disappearing through the open glass-sliding exit that led to the backyard. In her excitement, she hadn't closed the heavy door all the way. Laughter and low murmurs of conversation drifted in through the tiny crack.

It was obvious that Lily's energy was undiminished by the weight of any unsettling secret, and Kinsley couldn't help but wonder why her niece would have asked such a question in the first place.

Had she overheard something of significance?

Kinsley dismissed such a wary thought right away. She trusted her older brother more than anyone else in her life. Her niece was merely being inquisitive.

Lily was the spitting image of her father in almost every way. The only exception was her chestnut-colored curls, which she had inherited from her mother. Noah resembled most of the Aspen men with his tall stature, reserved manner, blond hair, and blue eyes. His wife, Emily, was the complete opposite, with a petite frame, an outspoken view of life, hazel eyes, and vibrant waves of hair.

"Spill," Dylan directed, pulling Kinsley's attention away from the backyard. He reached for the plate in her hand. She released the last dish before concentrating on rinsing out the sponge. Doing so gave her time to think. "What big secret do you have?"

"Aren't you the pot calling the kettle black?" Kinsley was older than Dylan by three years. He would never get one up on her. She placed the sponge in its holder before reaching for the sprayer on the faucet. "I haven't met the new waitress at the Plow. Is she nice? Word around town is that you didn't waste time getting to know the color of her bedsheets."

The Local Plow was a bar at the edge of town. It was a popular spot among the ranchers and farmers who preferred its down-to-earth vibe over the more polished establishments in town. It was also easily accessible via a dirt road that wound its way through farmland, but the watering hole was tucked away in the country, far enough to keep out the tourists. It also happened to be Dylan's favorite place of

entertainment on the weekends.

“As a matter of fact, it was the other way around. Cecilia wanted to know the color of my sheets.” Dylan flashed Kinsley a wayward smile as he stored the plate in its designated spot. He closed the overhead cabinet before tossing the dishtowel over his shoulder. He then leaned against the counter as if he had all the time in the world. “Seriously. You’re doing the dishes, Kin. You’d rather clean up dog shit. Don’t you think this has gone on long enough?”

Kinsley released her hold on the nozzle, letting it slam into place with a snap. It was her opinion that her siblings could let things go a little too easily, but she wasn’t about to be dragged into another debate about family and forgiveness.

“Don’t start with me, Dylan.” Kinsley snatched the dishtowel from his shoulder and began to dry the edge of the counter. “It was Noah’s turn to do the dishes, but he shouldn’t have to miss out on carving a pumpkin with his daughter. I was only being nice.”

Kinsley was the middle child, but that didn’t stop her from viewing Dylan as the same. Noah and Olivia were fraternal twins, born when their father had been in law school. Kinsley had been born right after her father’s graduation, followed up by Dylan a year later, and Owen eleven months after that.

Dylan possessed an easy charm that the others didn’t, as well as a zest for life that had taken him away from Fallbrook for quite a while. He wasn’t meant to be chained to a desk, and he certainly hadn’t had the patience for college. He had lucked out landing a job with a local rancher after returning to town a few years ago. He might be adventurous and free-spirited, but he was also a homebody.

Not that he would ever admit to such a thing.

“Would you hand me the mugs, please?” Kinsley folded the dishtowel and hung it over the oven handle to move things along. “The apple cider should be ready. Mom mentioned she turned on the crockpot a couple hours before dinner.”

“Dad was the one who made Nana’s apple cider recipe today,” Dylan clarified as he made no move toward the cupboard. He was displaying his stubborn side, and she didn’t have time for it. “He knows how much you love it. He’s trying his best, Kin.”

Kinsley was grateful her parents had a large kitchen. It afforded her the ability to concentrate on plucking the cinnamon sticks from a mason jar while keeping her back to Dylan. He was pushing the issue even after she had made it perfectly clear she didn’t want to have this conversation.

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After setting aside nine cinnamon sticks, she took her time fastening the silver lid. A part of her hoped Lily would return inside and drag her uncle out to the backyard. Kinsley could ladle the apple cider out of the crockpot and into the mugs herself.

She preferred to do a lot of things by herself lately.

“It’s been a year, Kinsley.”

She gritted her teeth in response to Dylan’s statement.

Shoving the mason jar back into place, she made sure the glass container was evenly lined with the others. Her mother had spent a great deal of time decorating her kitchen after the extensive remodel. She had miraculously managed to maintain its rustic charm, and Kinsley wouldn’t be the one responsible for any untidiness.

Her parents had purchased the old farmhouse the same year Kinsley had been born. Their one prerequisite had been for their home to have enough bedrooms to accommodate a large family. They had not only succeeded, but they had also accomplished some major renovations over the past few decades. The most recent project had been her mother’s dream kitchen, with state-of-the-art appliances, grey granite countertops, and plenty of storage space.

The perfect home for an imperfect family.

“And yet it still feels like yesterday,” Kinsley murmured honestly. If Dylan wanted to have this conversation, so be it. She was tired of walking on eggshells. She turned around and leaned against the L side of the counter. “Dad used me to acquit a man

who murdered two women. Two women who were born and raised in this town, Dylan. I'm still lucky to be a homicide detective."

"You and I both know that you're damn good at your job," Dylan replied, doing his best to back up the conversation. He didn't get to have his way this time. "It wasn't even your fault. That crime tech—"

"My scene. My case. My responsibility."

Kinsley could still hear the gavel hit the sound block. She suffered from nightmares every single night. Flashes of the shocking newspaper headlines, the intense trial, and the damning testimony that had allowed a killer to walk free would forever be imprinted in her mind. There wasn't a second from those trying days that didn't still haunt her.

"A forensics technician allowed a freelance journalist access to the crime scene for five hundred dollars." Dylan crossed his ankle over the other. Again, it was as if he believed this discussion would last a while. "You did your job to the best of your ability. Dad was just doing his, Kin."

Kinsley could have remained in the kitchen arguing with her brother. She could have brought up for the thousandth time that her dad had used information that he had obtained from a phone conversation. A private discussion she had been having with her partner on the back patio during a Thursday night family dinner. She had foolishly believed at the time that such boundaries between professions were respected.

Kinsley and her father understood early on that their careers would cross paths—or at least, that was what she believed at the time. After all, he was a local defense attorney, and she was a homicide detective for the Fallbrook Police Department.

“I have one question for you, Dylan—do you believe Calvin Gantz brutally murdered those two women?”

Dylan was saved from answering when Kinsley’s phone gave off a muffled ring from inside her purse. He sighed audibly and tilted his head back in resignation. He agreed with her about Gantz’s guilt, but they had been raised in a family who respected the justice system.

Everyone deserved a defense—even the guilty.

Pushing off the counter, she made her way to the foyer. She should have worn a jacket, but she hated anything bulky. Her purse was hanging from one of the wrought-iron hooks. It took her more than a few seconds to retrieve her phone, but she managed to answer before her partner disconnected the call.

“Perfect timing.” Kinsley had greeted Alex Lanen after catching sight of his name on the lighted display. She lowered her voice so Dylan wouldn’t overhear her side of the conversation. She’d been there, done that, and had promised herself never to let it happen again. “Even if you’re only calling to say that you’re going to be late tomorrow, I’m telling my family that we have a case.”

Each division within the police station had a Fantasy Football league. Though North Dakota didn’t have their own NFL team, most everyone in homicide supported the Minnesota Vikings. Seeing as they were playing the Chicago Bears tonight, it wouldn’t come as a shock to anyone if most of the detectives came strolling into work late tomorrow morning.

Unfortunately, the silence on the other end of the line suggested that Alex wasn’t calling about the football game. By the time he began to speak, Dylan had opened one of the cupboards. Even with the distance between them, the clinking of the mugs he had collected for the hot apple cider drowned out her partner’s words.

“Alex, you’ll have to repeat that,” Kinsley replied cautiously as she dug her keys out from the depths of her purse.

She had to have been mistaken about the information he had provided, and she chalked up her misunderstanding due to her unsolicited conversation with Dylan. She revisited her past every night in her nightmares. There was no need to discuss her transgressions in the present, and she shouldn’t have allowed it to happen in the first place.

“Where am I meeting you, Alex?”

Kinsley’s pumpkin would have to be carved another time. She palmed her keys and settled her purse strap over her shoulder. Dylan was already ladling the apple cider into the mugs. He raised a hand to indicate that he would let the others know she had caught a case.

“Old man Cooper’s farm.” There was another long pause before Alex repeated his earlier statement. Bile hit the back of her throat. “Did you hear me before, Kin? It’s bad. Real bad. I think...well, everything points toward Gantz being back in town.”

Kinsley wasn’t sure how she made it out the front door of her parents’ house without losing her stomach contents. Fortunately, the crisp air helped her to contain the unwanted physical response. She managed to disconnect the call without Alex any the wiser, but she found she couldn’t make it to her Jeep.

She lowered herself slowly until she was sitting on the porch’s top step.

Each breath seemed to take more effort than the last, and it had nothing to do with the thick smoke from the burning firewood out back. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her knees tight to control her breathing. No amount of meditation could keep the memories from flooding her mind.

The media had dubbed Calvin Gantz the Fallbrook Killer.

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It had taken Kinsley and Alex close to eighteen months to apprehend him, and only then due to an offhand comment during a third round of interviews from a patron at a local diner. Gantz had been overheard asking a waitress out to dinner. According to the witness, Annie Parron's denial of such a request had prompted an unusual response. The odd depiction had led Kinsley to dig further into the confrontation.

There was no doubt in her mind that Gantz had lured Parron to an abandoned barn and slit her throat. He had also remained with her to witness the life slowly drain from her body. Savannah Veloso had met the same gruesome fate shortly thereafter. Kinsley had collected the physical evidence needed to back up her arrest.

Unfortunately, the jury had only heard the circumstantial evidence.

During the investigation, there were many decisions and outcomes that Kinsley would have given anything to change. She hadn't had such power, and the jury's acquittal had all but been written in stone.

Gantz had walked away from the courthouse a free man.

The last anyone had seen or heard from him was one year ago this month. Now, her partner believed Gantz had returned to Fallbrook.

All Kinsley needed was one minute to compose herself. She couldn't allow herself to show up at a crime scene without being in control of her emotions. Alex would ask her too many questions, just as he had last October.

Kinsley hadn't lied to her niece earlier this evening.

Everyone had secrets.

Hers?

She had murdered Calvin Gantz in cold blood.

Chapter Three

Kinsley Aspen

October

Thursday — 8:24 pm

The Jeep's tires effortlessly navigated the winding gravel road. The bright headlights carved an even greater path through the moonlit shadows, illuminating more of the desolate landscape that lined the path on both sides. Once-thriving fields were now barren, and even the horse stables had been reduced to worn-down structures from years of neglect.

Time stopped for no one.

Kinsley slowly drove past the wooden gate of the old Cooper farm. The frame had been discarded off to the side, and some of its planks had splintered and scattered over the ground. In the distance, swirling red and blue lights highlighted an old, weathered barn. Three police cruisers had parked at an angle out front, but there was no sign of the forensics team.

Pulling behind one of the patrol vehicles, she killed the engine. Alex was near the entrance of the barn, speaking to two officers. Her partner must have already taken Lionel's statement, because the older man was nowhere to be found.

Kinsley had taken longer than a minute to compose herself back at her parents' house. She should have arrived on scene at least ten minutes ago, but she and Alex had been partners long enough that he understood her family dynamics.

She could easily shift the blame for her tardiness onto Dylan.

Wanting to ensure that Alex wouldn't notice the tension in her shoulders, she stretched her neck muscles by tilting her head from side to side. In doing so, she caught her reflection in the rearview mirror.

Her light blue eyes were rather dull from stress, and the tight lines of stress around her mouth didn't help with her endeavor. While she took after her father with her blonde hair and blue eyes, everything else had been inherited from her mother—her diamond-shaped face, full lips, and even the tiny dimple near the left side of her mouth.

“You look like shit,” she muttered to herself in dismay before pinching her cheeks. Such pressure did little to restore their usual color. Giving up, she reached back and removed the clip from her hair. She shouldn't have gotten additional layers at her last hair appointment. Some of the strands kept escaping, and she didn't like anything touching her face when she was working. As she fixed her hair into a more secure position, she noticed Alex had finished giving instructions to the two officers. The way he was staring in her direction gave way to his impatience. “Yeah, yeah. I'm coming.”

Kinsley had done everything she could to keep Alex in the dark about Gantz. She wouldn't have involved anyone that fateful night had she physically been able to drag Gantz's body to its final resting place by herself. If she were being honest with herself, the call she had made had been out of sheer desperation. Her older brother had answered, as he always had...and would...for a family member in need.

Noah's reward?

He was now an accomplice to murder.

Kinsley didn't need to view her reflection in the mirror to know that she had changed drastically in the past twelve months. That type of strain took a toll on a person. It never ceased to amaze her how easily one could rationalize away such appalling choices. Shouldn't she have experienced some measure of remorse for taking a life?

Shame?

Guilt?

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Sadness?

Her sole regret was that she had placed such a heavy burden on Noah's shoulders. She had always considered herself a good person. One who always made the right decisions, exhibited high morals, and set high standards for herself.

Yet she couldn't summon a single ounce of regret for pulling the trigger.

Staring down at her right hand in contemplation, she softly rubbed her thumb and index finger together. There wasn't an indentation or a mark to be found, yet it was there all the same. Whatever awaited her in the barn was not the of Calvin Gantz.

He was at the bottom of Terrapin Lake.

After exiting her Jeep, Kinsley maintained a brisk pace across the packed dirt. She nodded toward Officer Blake. He was standing away from the others with an electronic tablet in his hand. He was undoubtedly entering her name into the log of individuals accessing the crime scene. After last year, everyone had gone to great lengths to ensure their jobs were done to the best of their abilities.

Officer Blake didn't respond to the dispatcher coming through loud and clear over his radio announcing a domestic disturbance in one of the apartment buildings on the east side of town. One of the unassigned patrol units would respond to the call.

While most of the homicide cases were closer to the heart of the city, Kinsley and Alex had their fair share of investigations in the sticks. Most murders out this way were the result of domestic disputes. The vast stretch of farmland just inside the

county line fell under Fallbrook's jurisdiction. The other homicide detectives preferred not to get their shoes muddy, though.

“Where’s your jacket? Or that thing you call a sweater?”

“Left it at the house.” Kinsley came to a stop in front of her partner. She kept her focus on the woman’s body lying on the ground in the middle of the barn. Alex would eventually come to the determination that dinner with her family hadn’t gone so well, and she wouldn’t do anything to convince him otherwise. “I’ll be fine. ID?”

“Maybe. While there was no identification on the body, Cooper recognized her right away—Rachel Hanson. Apparently, her grandfather owns a dairy farm up near Halliday.” Alex pointed toward the wooded area to the west. “There is a backroad that cuts about twenty minutes off the driving time from Fallbrook. I already sent Hendricks in that direction. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find her vehicle abandoned on the side of the road. Forensics is on their way, but they’ll have to wait until morning to canvass the area more thoroughly. There’s no telling how much ground she covered between there and here.”

Kinsley didn’t recognize the name of their victim. She turned away from the barn to examine the different routes Rachel Hanson could have taken to end up dead in a barn. If Hanson had been running away from someone in the woods, chances were she had spotted the lights shining from Lionel’s farmhouse and tried to seek safety.

“Everything go okay at dinner?” Alex asked warily after observing her for a moment. She could count the times she had caught him looking less than stellar on one hand. He took pride in his appearance, and there wasn’t a single black strand on his head that was out of place. “I know that Gantz is a sore topic between you and your father. Did you tell him that—”

“I didn’t tell him anything. We shouldn’t jump to conclusions, Alex.” Kinsley did her

best to soften her tone, not wanting her partner to take her reply out of context. “Fallbrook is surrounded by farmland. There are bound to be murders with similar causes of death. I take it that her throat was cut?”

“That about sums it up.”

“What do we know about Hanson? Married? Single? Any domestic disturbances come up when you ran her name through the system?” She doubted that Alex had time to learn anything of significance about Hanson, but Kinsley’s inquiries kept them off the topic of Gantz. “Criminal record? Drugs, maybe?”

Compared to larger cities, Fallbrook had low gang activity and a below-average crime rate. Out of the four hundred officers on staff, only twelve were dedicated to handling homicide cases. The rest were assigned to various divisions such as patrol, traffic, vice and narcotics, community service, and a range of other departments that focused on the two hundred thousand residents who called Fallbrook home.

“I only got here twenty-five minutes ago, Kin. Once I realized what we were dealing with, I called you before taking Lionel’s statement. Dispatch stated the victim had no outstanding warrants.” Alex glanced down at his notebook before tilting it to the side. The headlights from the cruiser offered him better clarification. He rattled off an address, and it was located in one of the wealthier neighborhoods. “I’m waiting to hear back from dispatch for more details. We have a long night ahead of us. I’m guessing time of death occurred sometime late last night or very early this morning.”

“Last night?” Kinsley asked in confusion, turning her attention back to the body. Forensics would be on scene shortly to confirm Alex’s suspicion. They would set up a few generated-powered lights, photograph and tag anything of substance, as well as canvas the surrounding area at dawn. The barn itself would take hours. “Why didn’t Lionel call this in earlier?”

“Cooper had a doctor’s appointment this morning. When he was done, he stopped in at the Legion for a burger. The guys talked him into staying for a few hands of poker. It wasn’t until he was driving back up the lane that he noticed the barn door open.” Alex didn’t need to refer to his notes. He was a stickler for details. “He claims that he never leaves the door open. Thought that maybe a mountain lion or black bear was poking around. Anyway, about seven-thirty this evening, he made his way down from the house to find this shitshow.”

“That’s a lot of blood,” Kinsley murmured in agreement, grimacing at the carnage left behind. She noticed Officer Blake was no longer standing near his cruiser. He was busy conversing with the two other officers gearing up to canvas the rest of the property. She held her hand out toward Alex. “Give me your cell. I left mine in the Jeep.”

Alex rubbed the side of his jaw, indicating that he wanted to steer the conversation back to Gantz. She couldn’t very well reveal to him that Gantz was dead, which left her with little option but to consider his theory. She wasn’t fond of heights, and she hated walking such a tightrope.

“Kin, there are similarities that—”

“I’ll keep an open mind, Alex.” Kinsley finally met his gaze. “Phone?”

“I can do one better.” Alex reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small flashlight. She would have headed toward the body not stopped her. “Wait.”

Alex also pulled out a pair of gloves, as well as blue shoe coverings. She took them, grateful that he hadn’t roasted her over not being prepared this evening. She hadn’t planned on getting too close to the body to disturb evidence, but she would now that she had the proper gear.

Once her ankle boots were covered, Kinsley carefully edged around the dirt at the barn entrance. It was easy to recognize that some scuffle had taken place between their victim and her attacker. Even if Hanson had screamed at the top of her lungs, chances were that Lionel wouldn't have heard her cry for help. There was simply too much distance between the barn and his house.

“Tell Blake to—”

“Lionel's boots are already bagged and in the trunk of Blake's cruiser. And let me tell you, Kin...the man has a thing about his boots.”

Lionel would have strolled right across the packed dirt without any idea that something worse than a mountain lion awaited him inside the barn. He had probably brought his shotgun with him, as most farmers tended to do when protecting their fields. In all likelihood, forensics wouldn't be able to get much from the packed dirt at the entrance.

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Kinsley took her time examining the edge of the door. She couldn't make out anything unusual. After giving the exterior another brief perusal, she aimed the bright beam directly in front of her.

She approached the body with measured steps.

The coverings of her black ankle boots couldn't soften the crunch of discarded hay and dirt that remained on the floor of the barn. The air was thick with the metallic tang of blood. The crimson spray covered a vast area, which prompted her to veer in a relatively wide arc. She only approached the body once she was confident that she wouldn't disturb any debris.

Kinsley edged close enough to kneel next to the victim. She took her time in examining the woman's wounds and the direction of the blood splatter. There was no doubt that Rachel Hanson's throat had been sliced open while she had been standing in the middle of the barn.

It was understandable that Alex would conclude that Calvin Gantz had returned to Fallbrook. He had killed two women in the same manner and type of location.

The wound was precise and deep. The edges revealed no hesitation on the killer's part. Such brutality indicated cold calculation. The killer had expertly sliced through skin and muscle, leaving nothing but a gaping hole.

There was also blood on the victim's left side.

A second stab wound?

“Her killer stood directly in front of her.” Alex hadn’t moved from his spot near the entrance, though there was no need for him to raise his voice. The echo of the barn had accomplished that task. “You can determine the killer’s stance from the angle of the injury.”

Kinsley remained silent as she remained in a kneeling position. She continued to examine the victim’s body with the beam of the flashlight, eventually bringing the light to a stop maybe a foot away from the victim. The same area where the killer would have needed to be to make such an incision.

He would have been sprayed with her blood.

“Gantz slit the throats of his victims from the same position, Kin. We assumed at the time that he wanted to watch the lifedrain from their faces, and I still believe that.” Alex stopped speaking when the sound of an engine broke through the night air. He didn’t have to announce the forensics team’s arrival on scene. “We need to get ahead of this. Put out an APB.”

“There’s no need for an all-points bulletin.” Kinsley stood, grimacing when her knee popped from an old softball injury. She was mindful to retrace her steps, holding out Alex’s flashlight for him to take. “Someone wants us to think Gantz is back in town. Did you notice the imprint of the killer’s shoes? I’m guessing this perp wears a size twelve. Gantz wore a ten and a half. He also didn’t waste time stabbing his victims in the abdomen. One slice to their throats. That was his MO.”

Kinsley winced internally when she had inadvertently spoken about Calvin Gantz in the past tense. Fortunately, the slipup had been in the middle of her conclusion. Alex hadn’t seemed to notice one way or the other.

“And if a lock of hair is missing?” Alex inquired as he monitored the progress of the forensics team. Monica and Bobby had already exited the van and spoken to Officer

Blake. The duo was currently unloading the generated-powered lights from the back. “We won’t be able to ignore the similarities then.”

It had taken a week after the trial for anyone to notice that Calvin Gantz had gone missing. While her father had managed to get the man acquitted of murder, some residents weren’t sure of the man’s innocence or guilt. Those close to him had sworn that he could never have hurt those women, but his disappearance had planted seeds of doubt. Most everyone assumed that he had skipped town.

As for the locks of missing hair, Gantz had taken souvenirs. Unfortunately, that evidence had been tossed along with the murder weapon after the discovery that a journalist had accessed Gantz’s home after the warrant had been issued but before the technician had bagged the evidence.

Kinsley had to remind herself that Monica and Bobby were the most experienced technicians on staff. They never would have compromised their integrity in such a manner. Not only were both of them meticulous, but they were also excellent during cross-examination in court.

“We’ll deal with it,” Kinsley responded vaguely as a cold gust of wind came across the open field. She had changed into jeans and her favorite knit pullover sweater right after her shift. It hadn’t been too cold when she left her townhome to drive over to her parents’ house, but the temperature had dropped quickly throughout the evening. “Where is Wally? He’s usually the first one on scene.”

Alex shot Kinsley a sideways glance.

“Thursday,” Kinsley muttered as she glanced down at her smartwatch before crossing her arms to preserve some of her body heat. “Kickoff was about fifteen minutes ago. We have a while before Wally pulls himself away from the game.”

Walter Elm was not only the Chief Medical Examiner of Fallbrook, but he was a walking, talking contradiction. He lived for his job along with anything and everything related to science, yet he was obsessed with Fantasy Football and strawberry daiquiris. As a diehard Minnesota Vikings fan, he never missed a game.

“Yeah, well, you might want to steer clear of him,” Alex advised as he began to stroll toward his black Camaro. After removing the blue shoe coverings, Kinsley followed him, but she wouldn’t remain on site for long. She would be the one to notify Rachel Hanson’s next of kin. Whether that turned out to be the victim’s grandfather remained to be seen. “Your wide receiver scored on the opening drive.”

Given that the game had only just started, Alex would have received that information from the dispatcher. Death didn’t prevent others from living, and Kinsley had to remind herself of that fact often.

“Shit. I’m playing Wally this week, aren’t I?”

Kinsley was back in her element.

Nothing had changed in the past twelve months.

Gantz was dead, everyone assumed he had left town, and she had no choice but to put one foot in front of the other. This case was like any other, and the evidence would prove to her partner that someone else had brutally murdered Rachel Hanson.

Everything remained the same.

Kinsley needed it to stay that way.

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“I’ll see you in the morning.”

She didn’t have to give Alex a play-by-play of her actions over the next hour. He never notified the next of kin. Ever. He would remain behind with Wally, oversee the processing of the scene, and then stay on site until everyone was gone.

Their routine had been that way since the trial.

“And Alex?” Kinsley had already veered off toward her Jeep, but she stopped and waited for her partner to do the same. She wanted to hammer in one more nail to keep her partner on solid ground. “I’m confident that we’re dealing with a copycat.”

“And why is that?”

“Gantz never would have forgotten to close the barn door.”

Chapter Four

Alex Lanen

October

Friday — 8:12 am

The elevator's new-age melodylacked rhythm or soul, and the volume was too high for such a small space. The person in charge of choosing the music should be fired, effective immediately.

Alex hadn't bothered to remove his sunglasses after entering the station. His head was pounding, his eyes burned, and it was as if someone had taken an ice pick to his right shoulder blade. He was basically suffering the effects of a hangover without the previous night's enjoyable proclivities.

How was it that he couldn't pull an all-nighter on a case at the age of thirty-nine? Every muscle in his aching body screamed in protest as he shifted the strap of his workout bag. Starting this afternoon, he was heading back to the gym.

The elevator doors parted, releasing him onto the fourth floor. The homicide division was in its usual morning chaos, and Alex didn't need to be reminded it was a Friday morning. The rancid odor of tofu had him lifting his forearm to his nose in hopes of staving off the stench.

"Damn it, Haugen!" Alex regretted raising his voice immediately. He stifled a groan before walking around the glass partition separating the hallway from the main bullpen. "I thought your mother-in-law went back home."

"Next week," Detective Samuel Haugen replied after wiping his mouth with a napkin. He patted his slightly protruding stomach in satisfaction, reminding Alex that he wasn't nearly in as rough shape as his colleague. "I might retire, pack my bags, and go with her."

"Good riddance," Alex muttered as he walked past the man's desk.

Sam's mother-in-law was from Taiwan and came to visit her daughter and grandchildren three months out of the year. It was impossible not to know when she arrived based on the smell of the office every single Friday. The woman was the absolute sweetest, but some of those dishes of hers could curl a man's toenails.

"Morning, Lanen."

Alex merely nodded a greeting toward Haugen's partner, Laura Mitchell. She didn't bother to take her attention away from her computer, but she had a sixth sense. She had caught his gesture, which was confirmed when she placed one finger on a greeting card and slid it to the edge of her desk.

"It's Wally's birthday next week. You and Aspen need to sign the card and pitch in ten." This time around, Laura stared right at him. "Each."

Haugen's laughter followed Alex through the open area after he grabbed the card and headed toward his desk. He and Kinsley had claimed the entire back area through some very clever wagering with two seasoned detectives last year—Dobbs and Crosby. There would be no more poker games until the other two retired from the force.

"You're in earlier than I expected." Kinsley didn't hesitate to reach for the cupholder he carried in his left hand. Considering that she had an addiction to caramel creamer, he always made sure the cups were labeled correctly. "I told the captain you wouldn't be here until noon."

The nice thing about having their desks tucked in the back was not just the additional space, but the large whiteboard attached to the wall. With their desks facing one another, the whiteboard was centered perfectly. The position of their workstations also afforded them a side view of the bullpen.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who pulled an all-nighter." Alex dropped his gym bag to the floor as he scanned the board's information that she had spent most of the night collecting. "Catch me up, and then we'll fill in the captain."

"I drove home and got around five hours of sleep." Kinsley paused to sip her coffee while raking her gaze over his face. "More than I can say for you. How is it possible to look like shit and not have a strand out of place on that big head of yours?"

Alex refrained from replying that Kinsley shouldn't talk out of turn. The harsh fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, and the stark brightness wasn't kind to anyone. The pallor of her face wasn't as noticeable this morning, and the stress lines around her eyes were less pronounced than when she had shown up at last night's crime scene. She had also changed into one of her usual blazers. The material was more durable than those usually worn in an office setting, yet she still managed to pull off a professional appearance.

Currently, her blazer was slung haphazardly over the back of her chair.

"It's all in the product, Kin. You'd know that if you ever bothered to walk down that aisle. I also caught a nap in the car while Monica and Bobby separated the field into grids." Alex's gaze was once again drawn to the whiteboard. Rachel's photograph was front and center, and Kinsley had managed to put together quite the timeline. There were also pictures of other people arranged in a horizontal line near the top of the board. "Any chance you figured out who killed Hanson? I wouldn't mind taking the rest of the day off."

Alex tossed the greeting card on his desk. He took his time studying the photographs as he shrugged out of his jacket. No one stood out.

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Unlike Kinsley, Alex preferred a clean work area. He took his time hanging his jacket on one of the hooks of an old coat rack. He had found the aged piece in the back storage room a couple of years ago, but he was the only one who used it.

Alex reached for the cupholder on her desk before sitting across from her. He removed his coffee before tossing the cardboard holder into the garbage can underneath his desk. If he didn't help keep her space clean occasionally, her desk would resemble the inside of a dumpster.

"I'm good, but not that good." Kinsley's phone must have been set to vibrate. The surface of her desk hummed with an incoming call. She reached out and pressed the side button to stop the annoying reverberations without checking the display. "Rachel Hanson. Twenty-six years old. Married with no children. Works in the finance department over at the car dealership on the west side."

"The one with that annoying clown commercial?"

"One and the same." Kinsley frowned and gestured toward him with her coffee cup. "Take those sunglasses off. It's like I'm talking to myself."

Alex groaned in protest, but Kinsley was like a dog with a bone when she wanted her way. He had learned over five years ago that life was easier for him when he picked his battles. Since there was a good possibility that Calvin Gantz's name would be brought up sooner rather than later, sunglasses weren't part of his battle plan.

"Though the family is originally from Halliday, Hanson's mother moved her two children to Fallbrook after her divorce ten years ago," Kinsley explained, but only

after Alex had set his sunglasses on his desk. He caught her wince when she noticed his bloodshot eyes. “I broke the news to Louise Baird and her fiancé last night.”

“Not the victim’s husband?”

“Sebastian Hanson was conveniently out of town,” Kinsley replied as she inched her chair backward to open the top drawer of her desk. Within seconds, she was tossing him a small bottle of eye drops. “He drove back to town late last night. We’re slated to speak with him this afternoon.”

“Where was Hanson conducting business?” Alex asked, wondering if the man had enough time to drive or fly home, murder his wife, and return to whatever hotel he was staying at for work. Alex was still reserving judgment on whether Gantz returned to town, but he wouldn’t turn a blind eye to the facts, either. “And did you speak to him over the phone?”

“Bismarck. He’s in sales.” Kinsley tilted her head slightly, acknowledging that an eighty-mile drive was nothing in the grand scheme of things. “Louise Baird called Hanson while I was at her residence. Sebastian and Rachel were high school sweethearts, and Louise had nothing but praise for the man. As far as I could tell, there is no bad blood between the two.”

“Happy marriage?”

“Yes, according to Louise.” Kinsley’s phone vibrated again, but she just as quickly disregarded the call. “She did mention that Rachel was having difficulty becoming pregnant while also pointing out that the delay hadn’t been such a bad thing since Sebastian had just received a promotion.”

“So, the husband didn’t want children?”

“Not sure, but that’s an avenue worth exploring,” Kinsley said as movement from the middle of the bullpen caught their attention. The captain had made an appearance, but he had stopped at Laura’s desk. “I heard downstairs that Hendricks located Rachel Hanson’s car.”

“We had to bring in Izzy to reconstruct the crash.” Alex tensed when the discussion between the captain and Laura became somewhat serious. The way she held her coffee cup gave way to the fact that she was tense. Kinsley’s slight cough brought his focus back around. “It appears as if Hanson was run off the road. The front end of her car was smashed into a tree. No other skid marks were left on the pavement. The car is with impound now. Might be a few days before we get any results, but if the other vehicle left any paint behind, we might have something to go on.”

“Wally make it out to the crime scene?”

“Yes, and he scheduled the autopsy for noon today.”

“Give me a heads up if you decide to request a new partner,” Kinsley replied wryly, snapping Alex’s attention off Laura. He rubbed his eyes and chided himself for such a slip-up. “Something I should know?”

“You want to share with me who you’ve been sending to voicemail?” Alex shot back after downing half his coffee in oneshot. Given his lack of sleep, he tempered his irritability as best he could. He began to unscrew the cap on the bottle of eyedrops. “We were able to follow Hanson’s path from her car through the woods. The blood on Hanson’s right side came from shrapnel after the airbag exploded upon impact. There was blood in the car and on some trees where she must have pushed off to help with her momentum.”

“Anything of significance left behind by whoever chased her through the woods?”

Alex relaxed somewhat when Kinsley didn't push the issue regarding his interest in the captain's conversation with Laura. He shook his head in response before tilting his head back.

One drop.

Two.

He blinked a few times to clear his vision.

"Nothing except the imprint of his shoes." Alex noticed their captain approaching and didn't waste time squeezing the bottle to drop the solution into his other eye. "Eleven and a half, by the way. Not twelve."

"Not ten and a half, either," Kinsley quickly countered before smiling at their superior. Not wanting to appear divided in their opinion, he kept to himself that it was common for men to wear shoes of a different size depending on the designer. "Cap, we're on our way out to speak with Tobias Zayn. He is the grandfather of our victim. She was..."

"Most likely on her way home from visiting him last night when someone intentionally ran her off a back road. Hanson smashed the front end of her car into a tree," Alex said, filling in the rest of Kinsley's briefing. They didn't have much to go on yet, but that would change after some interviews and the findings from the autopsy. "From what we can piece together, the victim ran from the crash site. Her attacker pursued her through the woods toward Lionel Cooper's property. The chase ended at the barn."

Captain Dale Thompson tossed a newspaper onto Kinsley's desk. The frown lines embedded in the man's forehead had become permanent over the years from the stress of his job. The skin didn't even so much as smooth out when Thompson was in

a good mood, but that was almost certainly due to his overexposure to the sun. Everyone was aware that when Thompson wasn't at the station, he was either hunting, fishing, or camping.

“I only want one answer.”

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Thompson had broad shoulders. If he was having a bad day, it was as if a rod had been inserted into his spine. It was clear he wasn't in the best of moods this morning. Alex peered down the aisle toward Laura, but she was no longer at her desk.

"Is Gantz back in the city? And spare me the details. It's a yes or no."

Kinsley's phone vibrated on her desk.

"No," Kinsley replied without consulting Alex. She was fixated on the front page of the newspaper. Oddly enough, it was as if Gantz was staring back at her. Alex closed his eyes, immediately wishing he hadn't done so. The drops hadn't done shit. "Someone wants us to believe that Gantz came back to Fallbrook. Muddy the waters, I guess."

"Lanen?"

"We'll know more after the autopsy." Alex was mindful of his words. He stuck to the basic facts, giving Thompson the impression of unity. "Some imprints were left in the dirt just inside the barn. A size larger than Gantz."

Thompson nodded, seemingly satisfied with that minuscule detail. Given that the man's shoe size was at least a thirteen, maybe he didn't have trouble the way Alex did in finding a good fit.

"I like that version, so let's keep it that way."

Thompson left the newspaper on Kinsley's desk as he retreated to his office. Gantz's

mugshot was front and center. The article posed two possible scenarios—had the Fallbrook Killer returned to town, or had the jury been right to acquit Calvin Gantz?

“Let’s go.”

Kinsley abruptly stood before grabbing her blazer. Once she had slid her arms through the sleeves, she opened her desk drawer and withdrew her holster. She clipped it to her belt before picking up her cell phone. She only ever carried a purse when not on duty. Everything she needed during the workday was tucked into a small leather pouch sewn into her phone case.

“We need to grab breakfast on the way.” Alex had spent maybe three seconds debating whether to push the Gantz angle. Whether Kinsley liked it or not, one of them needed to confirm that he hadn’t returned to town. “I haven’t eaten since last night.”

Kinsley’s desk phone rang, and Alex noticed she hesitated to pick up the receiver. If he had to guess, she was avoiding her father’s call. Who else would be so persistent in trying to reach her? Giving her additional time to make her decision, Alex pushed his chair back in an effort to collect his jacket.

“Aspen.” There wasn’t too much of a pause after Kinsley answered the phone, but the way she sought out his gaze meant that it wasn’t her father on the other end of the line. “Would you have someone bring them up? Room Two.”

Kinsley replaced the receiver, but her hand lingered on the phone. Alex’s stomach protested the anticipated change in schedule.

“Looks like Sebastian Hanson made it safely back from Bismarck,” Kinsley revealed, reaching for her weapon. She tucked it safely back inside the drawer. Firearms were prohibited from being worn during interrogations, though Room Two wasn’t

necessarily reserved for suspects. It was an area usually meant to provide comfort to witnesses while giving their statements. In this particular case, to put one at ease in hopes that such an illusion caused an individual to speak more freely. “He’s not alone, either.”

“I’m not getting breakfast, am I?”

Chapter Five

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 8:44 am

The persistent buzz of Kinsley's cell phone confirmed the caller wasn't giving up anytime soon. She didn't need the display on her phone for identification, either. It was best to have the conversation sooner rather than later.

“Sebastian Hanson can wait a few minutes.” Kinsley sank back in her seat while keeping the wheels in place with the soles of her boots. “There are donuts in the break room.”

Alex afforded her a silent acknowledgment as he pushed his chair forward so the arms were even to his desk. She didn't miss his glance in Detective Mitchell's direction, though the woman had exited the area five minutes ago.

It was no mystery that rumors about the two of them had been circulating throughout the precinct. It was speculation that Kinsley had staunchly ignored up until recently, but Haugen had started a pool earlier this week. It wasn't that the detective had inside information about his own partner, but rather intel from a patrol officer who had

spotted Laura's vehicle parked a block from Alex's apartment building.

Kinsley had planned to speak with Alex this morning while catching up on some paperwork. His call last night and the subsequent assigned case had pushed back such a chat. She would make sure to bring it up later this morning during their drive out to Halliday.

Pressing her cell phone to her ear, she waived the formalities.

"Now isn't a good time, Dad." Before he could speak, she continued to answer his unspoken question. It wasn't a stretch to believe that was why he was reaching out to her. She could count on one hand the times he had called her in the past year. "It's not Gantz."

The long pause only created more tension between them.

"Your mother saw the paper this morning. She's concerned, and I gave her my word that I would check in with you today."

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If anyone had asked Kinsley about her father a year ago, she would have responded that George Aspen was a family man first and a lawyer second. He had given her cause to question such a belief. As a seasoned defense attorney with decades of experience, he had built a reputation for being one of the best in the field. He was capable of making compelling arguments that could sway even the most stubborn minds.

In her opinion, her father had tarnished any such credibility.

It hadn't been his controversial decision to defend Calvin Gantz that had her viewing her father in such a negative light, but the fact that he had used her private conversation to aid in the man's defense. Unlike her reasoning, some residents still harbored resentment because they couldn't understand why George Aspen would willingly represent the Fallbrook Killer.

After all, the man had taken the lives of two local women.

George had made a public statement on the courthouse steps to convey a message that everyone deserved a good defense. He even went so far as to point out that Calvin Gantz was also a resident of Fallbrook. Though his parents, Mary and Frank, had passed away years ago, they would have wanted their friends and neighbors to give the benefit of the doubt when it came to charges brought against their son.

"I'll give Mom a call later tonight," Kinsley responded, matching her father's precise tone. In the middle of the bullpen, another detective was carefully tying the bag from Sam's garbage can to prevent any odor from escaping what was left of the tofu. It would be hours before the stench faded from the area. "I've got to go."

“You should know that Lily saved you a pumpkin for next Thursday.”

The olive branch wasn't even remotely thick enough.

Dylan's words from last night echoed in her mind. It wasn't that she couldn't discern how deeply her father wanted to make amends. It was the consequences of his actions that she had a difficult time forgiving this past year. While he couldn't have known that by helping Gantz walk free, she would essentially be in a mental prison for the rest of her life.

“I'll see you then.”

Kinsley disconnected the call with a press of her thumb. Her chest tightened at the emotional distance between them, and a part of her wished she could confide in him. Maybe slip him a dollar to hire him as her attorney. He would be bound to keep her secret, but he would also have many more questions than she was willing to answer about that night.

Her gaze landed on the grainy monochrome photograph that dominated the newspaper's front page left on her desk. Gantz stared back with hollow eyes that seemed to cast judgment.

Ironic, really.

Kinsley hadn't known the man's mother, but residents recalled her being a cordial woman who tended to her rose bushes with delicate care. A widow who had lost her husband in a tragic farming accident, she had succumbed to cancer over a decade ago. Before her death, she had sold the family farm and moved into one of the middle-class neighborhoods of Fallbrook. The homeowner's association had taken to tending the lawn for the sake of appearances after Gantz's disappearance. Considering that everyone believed he had left town of his own volition, no one could force a sale until

such time back taxes forced the issue.

The air had turned quite stagnant in the bullpen. Kinsley found it rather difficult to breathe, and she instinctively grabbed the newspaper and tossed it in the small garbage can on the other side of her desk. She removed her jacket, tossed it over the back of her chair, and set her phone face down on her desk. There was no need to tempt fate and have it result in another family member calling to check in on her.

She made sure to collect her electronic tablet before crossing the bullpen. The station had finally stepped into the technological era, and she couldn't be more grateful. Alex, on the other hand, preferred to type his written notes after the fact. He was currently standing in the hallway, shoving half a donut into his mouth. Neither one of them said anything on their stroll to Room Two.

The only difference between the interrogation room and where Sebastian Hanson waited for them was a single painting on the wall and a small coffee station. The table and chairs were the same, and the sterile environment needed a lot more décor to be considered pleasant.

"Looks like the drops finally worked," Kinsley offered up as they came to a stop in front of the door. Alex was no longer blinking three times a second. "And was that your workout bag I saw you bring in earlier?"

"I shouldn't have taken a break from the gym after our flag football season ended," Alex complained as he rotated his right shoulder. "I hit forty in four months. I'm getting too old for these types of all-nighters, Kin."

Kinsley wisely remained silent, though she would need to address the rumors about him and Mitchell circulating at some point. Right now, it was imperative to solve this case so Gantz's name was taken out of the spotlight. A part of her understood the selfishness of such a wish, but her spot in hell had probably already been solidified. A

few minor sins wouldn't make much of a difference.

"How do you want to approach this?"

"We'll take our cues from Hanson." Kinsley made sure her tone betrayed none of the anxiety that churned beneath her calm exterior. "Hanson came into the station voluntarily. Had he not and then waited for us to seek him out this afternoon, I would have put him at the top of our list."

"Who are you kidding?" Alex muttered as he wiped the corners of his mouth with his fingers. "The spouse is always at the top of the list."

Kinsley reached out and turned the handle. She was grateful that her partner hadn't brought up any more theories on the Gantz angle. They needed to follow the facts of the case and not chase ghosts of the past. With a single push, she entered the room first.

"Mr. Hanson, I'm Detective Kinsley Aspen, and this is my partner—Detective Alex Lanen." Kinsley set her tablet on the table before offering her hand. She waited until the man accepted her gesture to establish eye contact, intentionally avoiding the other man's interest. "You have our deepest condolences."

Sebastian Hanson was quite tall. Kinsley gauged his height to be at least three inches over six feet. His back had been to the door as he paced in measured strides behind the table before turning to greet them. He had a runner's body, as was evident by the unkept fabric of his dress shirt. His tie hung loose and skewed, and his jacket was nowhere to be found.

Grief was written all over the man's features.

It appeared that Alex wasn't the only one who hadn't gotten any sleep last night. She

would reserve judgment on whether Sebastian's reaction and subsequent appearance were genuine or just an act.

"Have you found the bastard?" Sebastian asked desperately, his voice huskier than Kinsley had expected, given his lean frame. He hadn't glanced in Alex's direction. "Please. Tell me you know who—"

Sebastian's voice broke.

“Come on, Bass. Take a seat.”

The man standing beside him pulled out a chair. It didn't take more than the touch of a hand for him to basically collapse in the seat. The two men had similar square features and dark brown eyes, so she wasn't surprised by the connection when it was verbally confirmed with another handshake.

“Jack Hanson,” he introduced before pulling out the second chair. “Sebastian's brother.”

Alex strolled over to the coffee station. The two of them had an unspoken rule when entering an interview room. When the individual in question focused and appeared at ease with one of them, that person took the lead. In this particular case, Sebastian had heard Kinsley's name from his mother-in-law. It was understandable that he would subconsciously address her, seeking answers.

“May we get you some coffee?” Kinsley settled in the chair across from them. Sebastian covered his face with his hands in an effort to compose himself. “Water, perhaps?”

“No,” Sebastian replied curtly, dropping his hands until his knuckles hit the table. “All I want is for you to tell me you made an arrest.”

“Bass, you should have some coffee,” Jack intervened before demonstratively patting his brother on the back. “It's been a long night, and we need to get back to Louise's house after this.”

Kinsley made the compassionate decision to give Sebastian the time to process his emotions. The weight of grief for a loved one's passing was all-consuming, and it was obvious from his body language that he was well past the denial stage.

The man was angry, and he wanted answers.

Alex delivered the first two mugs to Sebastian and Jack before returning to the coffee station. It wasn't long before a mug was set in front of her, the rich aroma of the dark beverage filling the space. Anything was better than being constantly accosted by the rancid odor of Haugen's breakfast.

The chair's legs scraped against the tiled floor as Alex pulled out his seat. He didn't bother to edge closer to the table but, instead, remained far enough away that he was able to rest his elbows on his knees. He held the steaming mug in his hands as he waited for Kinsley to set the tone.

"Mr. Hanson, do you know of anyone who would want to hurt your wife?"

"No one would want to hurt Rachel," Sebastian replied, his voice thick with emotion. He dropped his gaze to his coffee. "She was...beautiful. Sweet. Generous. Kind."

Sebastian used the back of his hand to wipe his nose.

"A month ago, Rachel brought traffic to a halt over on Third Avenue for a turtle. She was on her way to work, and she braked so hard that the car behind her didn't have a chance to stop. She literally got out of her car and picked up the turtle, all the while some guy was screaming at her. She carried it across to the pond behind the auto dealership. She always did the right thing, regardless of how it looked to other people."

"Did Rachel have any plans on Wednesday evening? I know that you were out of

town in Bismarck for business, but maybe she mentioned needing to go somewhere later that night?” Kinsley had deliberately inserted his business trip into her inquiry. It wouldn’t do to have him go on the defensive so early in the interview process. “The location where we discovered your wife’s car was on one of the backroads toward Halliday.”

“I spoke to Rachel around six o’clock on Wednesday night.” Sebastian might not have caught on to Kinsley’s tactic, but his brother certainly had if the narrowing of his eyes was anything to go by. “She said that she was going to make herself something for dinner, stream a movie, and then turn in early. The finance department at the dealership had a conference call scheduled with their headquarters in Detroit at eight o’clock the next morning regarding some software update.”

“Do the two of you usually talk every day when you’re out of town on business?”

“Always.”

“Did it strike you as odd, then? Not hearing from her at all yesterday?”

“I don’t know where this is going, but—”

“Jack, it’s fine,” Sebastian interjected, never once taking his focus off Kinsley. “Yes. Look at her phone records. I called my wife back on Wednesday night to say goodnight. It was a little after eleven. She didn’t answer, and I assumed that she was asleep. As for yesterday, I was in meetings all day, with an important group dinner scheduled at six o’clock. I left multiple messages. I assumed that she was busy at work. I didn’t...”

“You couldn’t have known, Bass.” Jack attempted to ease his brother’s guilt, but he wasn’t even remotely successful in that endeavor.

“I spoke with Tobias this morning. He swears that Rachel didn’t drive out to see him Wednesday night. So, whatever or whoever got my wife on that road is the person who killed her.” Sebastian zeroed in on Kinsley as he began to pepper her with questions. “Did you find her cell phone? Can you trace the call? Maybe find out if someone lured her out to the country? What about street cameras? There might not be any on those backroads, but there are some on the path from our house to the turnoff she usually takes to drive up to Halliday. If she was on her way to the farm, and she didn’t make it to—”

“Your wife appeared to be driving toward home when she was run off the road, Mr. Hanson.”

Kinsley hadn’t been going to offer up any such details in the case thus far, but there were times it benefited from following the respondent’s lead. What she didn’t mention were the several warrants submitted for approval to search his residence, vehicles, and property.

“Can we just cut to the chase?” Jack turned his attention to Alex, who had straightened in his chair. “All anyone can talk about on the news is the Fallbrook Killer. Did Gantz come back to town? Or was he never the guilty party? If Calvin Gantz didn’t murder those two women last year, that means you let whoever it was slip through your fingers. Now Rachel is dead.”

Sebastian pressed a fist to his mouth in response to his brother’s statement.

“We did not—”

“We’re aware of this morning’s headlines, Mr. Hanson,” Alex said, cutting Kinsley off before she spoke out of turn. She took the reprieve to redirect her anger. “While we can’t speak to the specifics of last year’s investigation, there is evidence not consistent with those murders. We don’t believe the cases are related in any way.”

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“Are you serious?” Jack asked before emitting a hollow laugh. “A barn in the middle of nowhere, her throat slit and left to bleed out...what more proof do you want that the Fallbrook Killer is back?”

Both Kinsley and Alex remained silent while Sebastian pushed away from the table. His coffee sloshed over the rim, but he didn’t even notice. He had turned away, placing his hands on his head as a myriad of emotions took hold.

“Bass, I’m sorry,” Jack muttered as he grabbed the napkins that Alex had quickly snatched from the coffee station. “I shouldn’t have—”

“If you have evidence that someone else murdered Rachel, then you should be close to making an arrest,” Sebastian stated after swinging back around. His gaze sought out Kinsley. “Right?”

“We’re still waiting on forensics, and an autopsy is scheduled at noon today,” Kinsley replied as she held his stare. It was no longer required for people to identify the remains of a loved one due to the advances in forensics, though most family members requested to view the body anyway. “We still have questions for you, Mr. Hanson. Would you please sit back down?”

Now that the interview was back on track, Kinsley continued to pose specific questions, each with a different weight of importance. Sebastian appeared genuine in his responses, giving Kinsley and Alex a clearer picture of their victim. Rachel loved to cook, visit local wineries, and had a close relationship with her family. Her biological father wasn’t in the picture.

Nearly ninety minutes passed before Kinsley began to draw the interview to an end. One topic hadn't been broached, and she still needed clarification on another.

"Mr. Hanson, you mentioned that Rachel got into a fender bender when she rescued a turtle near her place of employment last week." Kinsley turned off her tablet. She would finish inserting the details when she returned to her desk. "Do you happen to have the name of the man who confronted your wife?"

"I'm sure I have his name somewhere," Sebastian replied with a frown. He pushed away his empty coffee cup until it was in the middle of the table. Alex had filled the mug twice during the past hour and a half. "We had to turn the damages into our insurance company. Are you suggesting that—"

"We just want to be as thorough as possible." Kinsley met Jack's stare, waiting for some wry comment about the police's ability to do their jobs. It was apparent that he didn't have much faith in the justice system. "I would appreciate you calling us later today with a name and phone number."

Kinsley retrieved one of her business cards tucked in behind her tablet. She then slid it across the table. Only when Sebastian picked up the card did she mention the last thing on her list to discuss.

"Rachel's mother mentioned the two of you were having trouble conceiving," Kinsley said, softening her tone so as not to offend him. She had worked at establishing a rapport with him during the course of the interview, and she wasn't ready for that superficial bond to be broken quite yet. "I'm truly sorry for your loss."

Sebastian pressed his thumb and finger to his eyes to stem the tears. She hadn't expected a verbal response. A specific reaction was what Kinsley had hoped for, but it hadn't come from Sebastian. Jack, on the other hand, stilled the motion of pushing his chair back from the table. The slight hesitation had piqued her interest.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Hanson,” Kinsley said as both she and Alex stood to indicate the interview had finally come to an end. “We’ll keep in touch throughout the investigation.”

“Rachel wanted children more than anything.” Sebastian slowly stood, taking the time to slide her business card into the pocket of his pants. He no longer maintained eye contact. “I was on board with the idea until my promotion. We had already been trying for two years. What was so wrong with waiting one more?”

“I’ll escort the two of you down to the lobby,” Alex replied as he opened the door. The horrible stench had been replaced with the delicious scent of bacon. Someone must have used the microwave in the breakroom. “Here is my business card, as well. If either of you can think of anything else that...”

Kinsley followed behind, but she stopped just outside the doorway. As they continued down the corridor, her gaze dropped to their shoes. Both men appeared to wear sizes eleven and twelve.

One detail that she had discovered over the years as a homicide detective was how killers never remembered to get rid of their shoes. They were such odd items to forget.

Clothes? Burned in a fireplace or a backyard.

Weapons? Thrown in a dumpster or a lake.

Shoes? It was as if the thought never even crossed their minds.

Kinsley expected the search warrants to come through any minute. She also added cell phone records, financial transactions, and medical records in her submission. Obtaining any warrants for Jack Hanson would be a little more challenging, given

that there wasn't enough evidence pointing toward him as a viable suspect.

“Aspen!”

Kinsley turned to find the captain resting a hand on the glass partition. The manner in which he swung his reading glasses in the other told of his irritation. Such an observation might have been a little misleading. The bulging vein in his temple indicated anger. The other detectives in the bullpen didn't bother to hide their curiosity.

“Patrol just received a call about a possible break-in,” Captain Thompson revealed, not bothering to soften the blow. “Looks like your version about Gantz was wrong. He's back, and I want him found.”

Chapter Six

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 11:48 am

“It's like déjà vu.”

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Kinsley hadn't meant to utter those words aloud, but they still somehow managed to escape her lips. She couldn't prevent the acceleration of her heartbeat or the slight sheen of perspiration that formed on her palms as Alex slowly pulled the unmarked cruiser to a stop behind a patrol car.

The mere sight of the small two-story house belonging to Calvin Gantz caused an enormous wave of nausea to hit her. A passerby never would have guessed that a killer had lived in such a charming home. After his mother had passed away over ten years ago, Gantz had kept up with the flowerbeds and yardwork, going out of his way to blend in with his neighbors. Those same flowerbeds were now overgrown, but the beautiful, full-grown trees drew the eye away from the thick vegetation. It was as if nature wouldn't allow evil to grow roots.

The bountiful leaves from the large trees had turned from vivid shades of greens into various hues of fiery reds and oranges. The fallen leaves blanketed parts of the lawn that the homeowner's association tended to on a bi-monthly basis. Considering the house siding was white with black shutters, the contrast was exquisite. When the time came that the homeowner's association could force a sale of the property, the only bump in the road would be disclosing the previous owner's history.

How could something so beautiful have harbored someone so vile?

Without a word, Alex killed the engine and opened the driver's side door. Neither of them had spoken on the drive from the station. He hadn't been pleased to hear about movement at the Gantz residence. She figured he was peeved at her for not issuing an APB on the man last night. Either that, or he was angry with himself for backing up her claim that Gantz had nothing to do with Hanson's murder during the interview

with her husband.

Kinsley desperately needed enough physical evidence to prove someone else was responsible for Rachel Hanson's death. Otherwise, unwanted questions would continue to swirl. She couldn't allow that to happen.

She dragged her gaze away from the house to focus on Alex. He had joined the two patrol officers near their cruiser. One of them even pointed toward the residence to the right. From her understanding, a call had been placed by a neighbor who had noticed Gantz's interior door standing wide open. Believing that someone might have broken into an empty house, the resident then placed a call to the police.

The weight of Kinsley's secret pressed down on her until she couldn't sit still any longer. She needed fresh air. Opening the door, the staple scent of burning wood did little to ease her apprehension.

Rachel Hanson's killer had set the stage, attempting to frame the Fallbrook Killer for the woman's murder. It was the only scenario that made sense. He had no idea just how muddy he had made the waters in her life.

Kinsley slammed the door shut a little harder than necessary. Time was not her friend. With every passing second, the chance grew that someone would figure out Gantz hadn't left town of his own volition. The crunch of some dry leaves underfoot near the curb couldn't overshadow the ringing of her cell phone. She pulled it from her blazer pocket to find Noah's name on the lighted screen.

Just as she had earlier with her father's phone calls, she relegated her older brother to voicemail. Before joining Alex, who was now waiting for her in the driveway, she composed a quick text that said nothing more than she was working a case and couldn't speak to him at the moment. She tacked on a suggestion—he should stop by her townhome later this evening to pick up Emily's lasagna dish.

Noah would understand the meaning behind her invitation.

Kinsley slid the phone back into her pocket. Sweeping her gaze over the house once more, she did her best to suppress any anxiety that might have made its way to the surface.

“Morning,” Kinsley greeted the officers as she continued past them until she could fall into step next to Alex. “Did the neighbor add any other information in her statement?”

“Nothing of note.” Alex unfastened the button on his suit jacket. He wouldn’t want anything in the way if he needed access to his firearm. “Neighbor was on her morning walk. She noticed the interior door open. Since Gantz hasn’t been around for the past year, she walked up to the porch and called out his name. He didn’t come to the door, and after a while, she became uneasy. Dialed 911 to report a possible break-in. The officers arrived on scene and then walked the perimeter before clearing the house. The lock on the front door displays signs of being jimmied, but they aren’t sure if the marks are recent.”

Given the circumstances, there had been enough probable cause to support the officers’ decision to enter the home. Had the woman not called the police and chosen to close the door in a neighborly fashion, fully believing Gantz had left it open by mistake, no one would have suspected a break-in. The rumor alone would be enough to solidify the belief that Gantz had returned to Fallbrook.

“Anything missing?” Kinsley asked, keeping to her role. It was something she would have inquired about had she no idea that Gantz was dead. “Damaged?”

“No.” Alex came to a stop at the bottom of the porch steps. Kinsley observed the painted planks, but nothing stood out. “Forensics are on their way.”

Alex proceeded up the steps, crossed the porch, and then leaned down to study the handle on the screen door. He pulled out a pair of gloves, holding one of them up for her. She didn't complain when she noticed it was the left one.

"We'll do a quick walk-through. Maybe we'll notice something out of place." Alex stood to his full height and pulled on the door. This time, it was Kinsley who leaned forward enough to examine the interior door jamb. She spotted where the wood was slightly marred, though she was mindful not to touch it as she pointed toward the damage. "Here. What do you think? A screwdriver?"

There was no question that the officers had done their due diligence. A more inexperienced officer might not have noticed the faint scratches and misinterpreted them as normal wear and tear.

"Something thinner."

Alex stepped over the threshold. His shift in movement caused a rather oppressive odor to escape. Even though the door had probably been left open for hours, it hadn't been enough to air out a house that had been closed up for an entire year.

Kinsley held her breath as she navigated the same steps Alex had taken inside. She placed the back of her hand to her lips in an effort to stop the nausea that threatened to release if she didn't get a hold of her emotions.

Work the case, Kin.

"I'll take the second level." Alex made his way over to the staircase, and Kinsley fought the urge to stop him. He flipped the light switch, but there was no electricity. "Don't forget to check the garage."

Was Alex becoming convinced that Gantz was responsible for Hanson's murder? A

year was a long time to be gone, and there was a chance someone would suggest that Gantz had lost the keys to his house during those twelve months. She mentally shook off her trepidation as she scanned the living room furniture.

The interior of Calvin Gantz's house was a time capsule, each room a homage to the decade of dial-up internet and grunge music. The floral-patterned sofa, the heavy drapes that swallowed what little light managed to seep through the windows, and the bulky CRT television—all relics of the '90s. Calvin hadn't changed a thing after his mother had passed away, the décor a shrine to her memory, untouched by time or taste. While Gantz had gone to great lengths to maintain the exterior in an effort to conform, he had intentionally kept his personal space for some type of comfort.

Kinsley made her way over to the drapes and carefully drew them apart, the natural sunlight brightening the living room. Her footsteps were muffled by the worn carpet. It was evident from the thin layer of dust that nothing had been disturbed in quite some time.

A year, to be precise.

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There were even wisps of abandoned cobwebs between the knick-knacks displayed on the shelves. The spiders had vacated their homes long ago.

“I wouldn’t want to live here, either.”

Kinsley had whispered the words as she retraced her steps toward the half-bath tucked in between the living room and kitchen. The kitchen blinds hadn’t been closed when they had first arrived with a warrant, and they weren’t shut now. The additional sunlight made it easier to search the residence.

There was nothing out of place until she entered the kitchen. The sight of what awaited her brought her up short. A single glass had been turned upside down on a hand towel next to the sink. She cautiously scanned the rest of the kitchen. The officers probably hadn’t given any thought to a lone glass.

Only it hadn’t been there when she had broken into the house that fateful night to grab some of Gantz’s clothes, shove them into a large duffel bag, and stuff his belongings in the trunk of his car before rolling it into a large lake twenty miles north of the city.

Kinsley's heart hammered against her ribs as the memories flashed before her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing to diminish her fear.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Kinsley lifted her lashes and cleared her throat.

“Alex!” It didn’t take her partner long to appear. She gestured toward the glass. “Forensics will want to bag that, along with the towel and sponge. The glass wasn’t out when the officers searched the house after getting the call to conduct a wellness check. I remember the details in the report. I still need to search the backyard and the garage.”

“Kin, if it’s Gantz—”

“Gantz didn’t break into his own home. He also wouldn’t have left the inside door wide open,” Kinsley stated tersely. She finally allowed some of her pent-up anger to seep out. “Someone is playing us, Alex. Forcing us to concentrate on Gantz while taking the focus off him.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, but we need to handle this case with kid gloves. In case you didn’t notice, a media van just pulled up outside. It won’t be long before the other stations arrive.” Alex walked over to the refrigerator. They both turned their heads when the stench was almost too much to tolerate. No one had been around to clean it out. “I’ll take the backyard. You take the garage. And Kin?”

Kinsley had already crossed the kitchen to the door that led to the garage. She turned back around to give her full attention to Alex. The softening of his features told her that he wasn’t going to fight her on this.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t believe Gantz came back to town, either. We still need to cross our Ts and dot our Is on this one, though. Okay?”

Kinsley nodded her understanding, doing her best to hide her relief. It was bad enough that Gantz was going to be talked about by every single individual in Fallbrook. Having his name be so prominent afforded ample opportunity for someone to want to dig deeper...such as those journalists pulling up outside. It was good to know that she didn't have to continue to worry about her partner's train of thought.

It didn't take them long to inspect the backyard and the garage. Kinsley waited for Alex in the living room. She spotted the forensics van pull in front of the patrol car through the window. The two officers were currently instructing the media to remain across the street on the sidewalk.

"Nothing," Alex stated as he finally made an appearance. "Whoever came inside didn't venture out the back at all. I'll have Officer Galanis start knocking on doors. Maybe someone has a doorbell or driveway camera that captured a video of a vehicle or person during the middle of the night."

"Forensics just pulled up, along with two other news vans," Kinsley advised as she lifted her wrist to note the time. "We're going to need to split up. You take the autopsy, and I'll drive out to Halliday to speak with Zayn. If the victim's brother is there along with the grandfather, all the better."

"I requested that Sebastian Hanson give us a list of Rachel's close friends. We can start those interviews tomorrow." Alex had been slowly canvassing the living room during their conversation. Needing something else to focus on, Kinsley debated on whether she should bring up Laura Mitchell. Unfortunately, Alex forged ahead before such a discussion could take place. "I always thought the way Gantz disappeared after the trial was odd. Did it ever cross your mind that one of the fathers took matters into his own hands? Killed Gantz and buried his body somewhere?"

Kinsley pressed a hand to her stomach. She was grateful that Alex had already walked over to the front door. While he reexamined the lock, she concentrated on

dispelling the jolt of distress from her body.

Before Kinsley was forced to answer his question, a forensics tech had appeared behind the screened entrance. Monica and Bobby wouldn't be on shift until later tonight, so Alex was required to fill the tech in on last night's crime scene and what needed to be achieved this morning. Kinsley used the distraction to slip out the door while they inspected the latch strike plate.

"Alex, mind getting a ride back to the station with one of the patrol officers?" Kinsley ignored the crowd across the street after stepping out onto the porch. "I'd like to get a head start to Halliday."

She took the keys, grateful that Alex was distracted enough not to notice the tremor in her hand. She really needed to get her shit together. If such a thought about Gantz's fate had crossed her partner's mind, the same had occurred to others.

Fortunately, she wouldn't need to give any type of statement to the press just yet. Given who her father was, she and Alex had agreed a long time ago that he would give any and all interviews to the press. Plus, seeing as the officers had successfully managed to move the journalists and reporters across the street, she was able to settle behind the steering wheel without incident.

As Kinsley turned over the engine, she took time to scan the faces of those standing to the right of the news vans. Most appeared to be neighbors, and they were all talking amongst themselves. No one stood out. The same couldn't be said for the media. There was a male subject standing off to the side. He didn't act as if he were with a news crew, and he just so happened to be staring directly at her.

There was something vaguely familiar about him, too.

By the time Kinsley had pulled the car away from the curb, she had put his face to a

name—Beck Serra. She had met him once at the Bucket, the local pub across the street from the station. The muscles in her shoulders relaxed somewhat now that she was driving away from the intense interest of the media.

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Rather than making a U-turn that would draw attention from the gathering crowd, she continued to drive through the quiet neighborhood. She headed towards the back exit of the addition. She planned to take the back road to Halliday, anyway. Doing so would give her time to inspect the accident site, as well as process her emotions. It was difficult for her to reconcile the fact that she had stood in the middle of the living room of a man she had killed...and experienced no remorse whatsoever. She had been more concerned with keeping her criminal actions from her partner.

How did that make her any better than Calvin Gantz?

Chapter Seven

Beck Serra

October

Friday — 12:29 pm

The cool, crisp October air had Beck Serra sliding his hands into his coat pockets. The sun did its best to temper the slight breeze, but the rays simply weren't strong enough. It wasn't the chill that had him shifting his weight in discomfort, but the faint scent of cigarette smoke drifting from the group of voyeurs maybe twenty feet away.

Five months was how long he had been without a cigarette.

“...same way as the two women he killed last year.”

“Think they’ll call in the feds?”

Beck stood on the sidewalk across from Calvin Gantz's residence. The neighborhood's tree-lined streets were ablaze with color, but no one paid any attention to the vibrant leaves. Instead, everyone's focus was currently on the front door of one specific house owned by none other than Calvin Gantz.

A flock of crows cawed as they flew overhead, but not even their unsettling presence fazed the gathering crowd. Two officers had instructed the media to stand on the sidewalk across the street. It hadn't been long after that two more crews had joined in the fray, hoping for a soundbite during their noon slot.

Beck had arrived just a few short moments ago, but he had overheard enough to know that Homicide Detectives Kinsley Aspen and Alex Lanen were inside the home. Some of the neighbors had speculated that Gantz had returned to town, spotted by a neighbor. Others claimed there was a dead body inside. One couldn't take too much at face value without first having confirmation from an inside source. He had yet to secure one, but that was high on his priority list this weekend.

Given that Beck was due back in Bismarck next Wednesday, he didn't have much time to waste. It had been sheer luck that he had overheard a diner at the café next to the police station talking about a call that had officers responding to Gantz's residence. The rumors had swirled, and it was no different now as he stood apart from the news crews.

“...was brunette, and she was discovered in Lionel Cooper's barn. I heard the scene was just like...”

“...be ready to record if one of them exits the house, especially Detective Aspen. Her father was...”

Beck was privy to all the public details regarding Kinsley Aspen's relationship with Calvin Gantz's defense attorney—George Aspen. It was no secret that they were father and daughter. They had faced each other in court multiple times. However, George always made sure that someone else from his legal team questioned Kinsley when she was on the stand. Despite attempts by prosecutors to have him removed from trials, the man's impeccable record spoke for itself. He never allowed their personal relationship to affect his professional duty to defend a client.

“Movement!”

Two of the cameramen swung the large devices on their shoulders to capture someone exiting Gantz's home. Unlike the other reporters at the scene, Beck was an investigative journalist, and his sole interest was Kinsley Aspen. He studied her as she navigated the lawn with an unwavering sense of purpose. She didn't bother to use the thin path that led to the driveway.

There was no denying Kinsley was a beautiful woman. She was in her early thirties, had blonde hair that she normally pulled back in a clip, and piercing blue eyes that could be seen even from his spot across the street. She couldn't be five inches over five feet, and yet she had a solid athletic frame that spoke to years of rigorous training and physical fitness.

“Detective Aspen, any comments on the case?” shouted a reporter, eager for a soundbite that would never come.

Kinsley had ignored the question, her stride deliberate and efficient. He had noticed from his research that she didn't speak to the press. She allowed her partner the honor of doing so when a statement needed to be made. Beck observed the set of keys in her hand, so it was obvious that her destination was the unmarked police car parked behind one of the patrol cruisers.

“Hey, you're not from around here, are you?” The question had been posed to him by one of the reporters. She was probably in her mid-twenties, ten years his junior. Her press credentials revealed that she worked for one of the local stations. Her name was Nadine. “New?”

“No.” Beck never took his focus off Kinsley. “Bismarck. I’m an investigative journalist. Freelance.”

“Ah, you heard about the body found in that barn last night,” she said, clearly undeterred when he didn’t turn his attention toward her. “The victim’s name was Rachel Hanson. I’m here to cover the Gantz sighting. My colleague is over at the Hanson residence hoping to get a quote from the husband.”

The lack of respect for the dead was one of the reasons that Beck had left the industry. Granted, he still wrote investigative pieces, but he did so on his terms. He had been on the other end, and he wouldn’t wish those packs of vultures on anyone else.

“I heard another body had been discovered last night, and I thought it might be worth the drive.”

The young reporter had already taken her focus off him. She had determined that he was of no use to her, and her gaze scanned the scene hungrily for any tidbits of information she could gather from her fellow journalists. When she had spoken of her colleague, Beck understood right away that Nadine wasn’t the station’s first choice when it came to the crime beat. It was obvious she was trying to poach whatever dirt she could find on Gantz, hoping to make a name for herself.

Uninterested in engaging further, he turned his attention to the unmarked police vehicle. Kinsley had settled in behind the wheel. Through the tinted window, he was surprised to find her staring back at him.

Was she recalling their first and only meeting?

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During the Gantz trial, Beck had finagled an introduction with her at the Bucket. She had unfortunately been leaving when said encounter had taken place, so he hadn't been able to make any inroads into the subject matter that had brought her to his attention in the first place.

Kinsley Aspen was more than just an intriguing subject for his ongoing investigation—she was the key to unlocking the truth behind Calvin Gantz's disappearance.

Beck quietly observed her pull away from the curb and drive slowly down the neighborhood street. He could have gotten in his own vehicle and followed her, but he didn't want to play his hand quite yet. He had been patient for the past year, and he would continue to do so until the time was right.

He had originally returned home after the trial to spend time writing an in-depth piece on how a town had turned its back on one of its own. After scoring an exclusive interview with both George Aspen and Calvin Gantz, Beck had several calls from those at national papers and online sites bidding for the said article. Such a sale had afforded him a nice cushion in his checking account, but he was now aiming for a lot more. But his objective had changed since then.

Calvin Gantz had left town.

Vanished without a trace.

Simply disappeared into thin air.

Beck had reason to believe such departure wasn't by the man's own volition.

His rationale was two short sentences handwritten on a thin piece of paper. Eleven measly words that had haunted Beck for the past twelve months and had prompted him to spend the past year investigating Calvin Gantz's disappearance.

The message had all but imprinted itself in Beck's mind.

If you've received this note, I'm dead. Kinsley Aspen killed me.

Chapter Eight

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 1:11 pm

The tires of the unmarked police cruiser crunched over the gravel as Kinsley drove through the gates of Tobias Zayn's dairy farm. She should have stopped at the station to switch out vehicles. She was always more comfortable in her Jeep, especially on the winding back roads from Fallbrook to Halliday.

The vast stretch of Tobias' farm was a patchwork of grass-covered pastures where dairy cows ambled and grazed about under the overcast sky. Thick clouds had gradually rolled in during her commute, though there was no hint of rain in the forecast. Beyond the fields was a solitary horse near a weathered fence, its tail flicking away at the pesky flies.

As Kinsley drove closer to the farmhouse, she noted several outbuildings—a large barn painted red with white trim, a milking parlor, a squat silo, a coop teetering on

ancient foundations, and a tool shed that looked as though it had been there since the land was first tilled. Unlike Lionel Cooper's farm, this one was working at full capacity.

At the end of the drive to the left was a beautiful farmhouse, its white clapboard siding and forest green shutters faded from the elements. A wraparound porch hugged the structure with inviting rocking chairs lining each side. In the front yard, an old dog lay sleeping, completely undisturbed by Kinsley's arrival.

She killed the engine, the ticking of cooling metal breaking the silence. The back road she had intentionally taken to reach her destination had revealed something interesting—whoever had run Rachel off the road had patience. The route had no escape route for a good two miles. Given the area where the crash had taken place, the guilty party would have been monitoring his target for quite some time.

Had the killer followed Rachel from Fallbrook to her destination and then back toward home? Or had he picked up her trail near Halliday? Either way, such behavior was premeditated and extremely calculated.

As Kinsley opened the car door, the hinges creaked softly. The old dog had waited until she exited the vehicle to slowly make his way over to her. She leaned down and gave him some attention, estimating that he was at least ten years old from his coarse hair and graying snout.

“I take it you haven't found the bastard who killed my granddaughter?”

Tobias Zayn had emerged from the house. He was a tall man, his frame wiry by years of labor. His weather-beaten skin appeared to be as tough as boot leather, too. Silver hair peeked from beneath a cap that had seen better days, but his narrowed eyes told her that he was sharp as a tack.

He was also grieving, as was evident by his bloodshot eyes.

“Not yet, Mr. Zayn.”

Tobias carried two steaming mugs of coffee. She had called ahead, so it wasn't a surprise to find him waiting for her. The screen door slammed behind him as he made his way over to a small table nestled between two rocking chairs.

“Well, take a seat.” His voice was as gravelly as his driveway. She also heard a hint of anguish. “What do you want to know?”

By the time Kinsley had ascended the porch steps, Tobias was already in one of the rocking chairs. He didn't sway it. Instead, he carefully took a drink of the steaming beverage while monitoring her motions over the rim of his mug.

“First, you have my condolences,” Kinsley said softly as she took a seat in the rocking chair. It was sturdy, and if she had to guess, Tobias had made it with his own two hands. “As I said on the phone, I'm Detective Kinsley Aspen. I'm truly sorry for your loss.”

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“Thank you.” His words were sparse, carrying a sorrow that was as much a part of him as his own flesh and blood. He was old school, and he would never allow a stranger to witness his vulnerabilities. Tobias gestured toward the coffee. “Help yourself.”

Kinsley wrapped her fingers around the mug, the warmth seeping into the palm of her hand. She leaned back, mindful not to spill her coffee.

“People are saying the Fallbrook Killer is back.” Tobias set his coffee on the arm of his chair as he turned his full attention her way. “Any truth to that?”

“There is evidence that points us in another direction.” Kinsley had carefully chosen her words. While Tobias lived in Halliday, his daughter resided in Fallbrook. There was a good chance that he had already been informed about movement inside Gantz’s residence. “We don’t want to close the door on any potential leads, though. It’s the reason I’m here, actually. Did you see Rachel on Wednesday?”

“No. She came by the farm last weekend, though.” Tobias firmly pressed his thin lips together, as if attempting to rein in his emotions. After visibly swallowing, he continued. “My Rachel always came by once a week. No matter what, unlike her mother.”

“Was Rachel upset?” Kinsley would circle back around to Tobias’ relationship with his daughter. Louise Baird had mentioned last night that she was close to her family. Why would she lie about something so easily discredited? “Did Rachel say anything to give you the impression that she was in fear for her life?”

“Do I look like a man who would allow my granddaughter to leave my farm if she thought her life was in danger?”

Tobias raised a fist to his lips as he covered a slight cough. Once he had cleared his throat, he picked up his mug and took another sip of his coffee. For a moment, his eyes glistened. He blinked, clearing away any moisture before setting his mug to the side. It wasn't long before he began to push the rocking chair with his work boot in agitation.

“Rachel was happy the last time she was here. Smiling, laughing, and playing the guitar for me like usual. My Rachel has a beautiful voice. Can sing like an angel. Rachel is...was...kind and loyal. I adored my granddaughter, but I also wasn't blind to her faults. Loyalty was part of her problem, too.”

Kinsley took a sip of her coffee. Out in these parts, an individual partook in the pleasantries or one could seethemselves to the door. She needed information from Tobias, so that meant drinking his coffee, which just so happened to be the best she had enjoyed in months.

“How so?” Kinsley inquired, having already gotten the sense of who Tobias was about to reference. “Or rather, who? Her husband?”

“Never cared for the man,” Tobias admitted as he reached into the pocket of his work shirt. He pulled out a tin can and thumped it against the palm of his hand. “Sebastian traveled for his job, leaving Rachel home alone more often than not. I understand about having a work ethic, but that man would sell an imaginary bridge if he thought it would make him money. He is faithful only to the person next in line who can offer him something in return.”

“Was Rachel aware of your feelings about her marriage?”

“Rachel was happy.”

Kinsley took his response to mean that Tobias kept his mouth shut. His generation was certainly different than hers. While Rachel would have had a sense of Tobias’ reservations regarding her husband, she wouldn’t have brought it up out of respect for her grandfather.

“Happy enough to want children,” Kinsley finally said after taking another sip of her coffee. She placed her mug next to his so that she could also gently rock the chair. Between the soothing motion and the crisp breeze coming in off the pasture, there was a peaceful quality to the open land. “It’s my understanding that Rachel and Sebastian were having trouble in that area.”

“Does it matter? My Rachel is dead.”

The brief respite of tranquility had evaporated, and there was little Kinsley could convey to ease the man’s grief.

“Rachel was run off the back road leading away from Halliday toward Fallbrook. Do you have any idea why she would have been out driving in the middle of the night?”

“None. Like I said, Rachel hasn’t been here since last weekend.” Tobias’ gaze swung out toward a male subject approaching from one of the outbuildings. “That’s my grandson, Gage. Hasn’t said much since...well, let’s just say that he and Rachel were close. He’ll be driving to his mother’s place shortly. A dairy farm doesn’t run on its own.”

Gage Baird came to a stop at the porch steps, but he made no move to join them. His eyes were just as inflamed as his grandfather’s. Rachel’s brother was tall like their grandfather but quite muscular. Kinsley assumed it was from working the farm. She had pulled his information this morning before leaving the station.

Gage was twenty-eight years old with brown hair in need of a trim. No criminal record. Not even a parking ticket.

He nodded curtly at Kinsley, acknowledging her presence.

“Detective Aspen is here asking questions about Rachel.”

“Is it true that Gantz killed Rachel? That he came back to town to flaunt his freedom?”

Kinsley was getting really tired of that assumption.

“The evidence so far suggests otherwise.” Kinsley brought the rocking chair to a complete stop. “When did you last speak with your sister, Mr. Baird?”

“Wednesday.” Gage’s stare fixated on his grandfather. “She called me in the morning to say that she wanted to talk about something, and she would be by the farm before the end of the week.”

“Do you know what Rachel had been referencing?”

“No.”

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“Why didn’t you mention this to me, Gage?” Tobias asked grimly. He clearly wasn’t pleased with being kept in the dark.

“I was in Leeds, Pops.”

“Did you see her Wednesday afternoon?” Kinsley asked quietly, wanting verification of an alibi. Gage was smart enough to understand the reason behind her inquiry. He might have been in Leeds earlier in the day, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t driven home that night. “Or evening?”

“No. Like I said, I was in Leeds, securing some bull semen.”

Gage’s alibi was easy enough to verify. As for Tobias, Kinsley had noticed the man’s limp. It would have been physically impossible for him to have chased Rachel from the back road through the woods and onto Lionel Cooper’s farm. Add in the cough that seemed to plague him, he also wouldn’t have had the energy to finish the job.

“Mr. Zayn, are you close with your daughter?”

“I love my daughter, if that’s what you’re asking.” Tobias had taken some tobacco out of the tin can and stuffed some of the contents behind his lower lip. Once the container was tucked back into his shirt pocket, he gave a little more insight into their relationship. “Louise and I don’t always see eye to eye on things. She would have had me sell this farm years ago, but she doesn’t understand that this land is our family’s legacy.”

Gage shifted so that he had a view of the farm. Kinsley had difficulty reading his

body language. Did he agree with his mother or his grandfather?

Kinsley continued to ask both men similar questions to those posed to Sebastian Hanson, not coming up with any different responses to aid in the investigation. She concluded her inquiries, thanking both men for their cooperation. She tacked on additional appreciation for the coffee before shaking Tobias' hand. As she made her way down the wooden porch steps, she noticed that Gage made no move to join his grandfather in the house.

It wasn't until Kinsley heard the screen door slam and had closed the distance to her vehicle that she caught sight of Gage making his way over to her. The older dog wasn't paying attention to either of them. Palming her keys, she leaned against the side of the car.

"I didn't want to say anything in front of my grandfather." There was concern and something else in the man's voice that she couldn't identify. "He's been...off."

"How so?" Kinsley asked, wanting more clarification on such a claim.

"Not himself. I don't know. Just...distant."

Gage appeared reluctant to share something he believed was pertinent to his sister's death. After all, he had deliberately sought her out. She waited patiently, hoping that Tobias wouldn't decide to rejoin them.

"It's not what you think, Detective," Gage hesitantly replied, taking a moment to peer over his shoulder. He sighed in resignation and ran a hand through his hair. "Pops had a gambling problem. Or I should say...he has for years. It's the main reason why there is tension between him and my mother. Pops almost lost the farm twice that I can recall, but he's always managed to dig himself out of the hole. I thought he finally learned his lesson the last time. Now? I'm not so sure."

“And why is that?”

“Pops has been making some unexpected trips into town these past few months.” Gage grimaced, as if his grandfather leaving the farm was a rarity. “Ever since a farming accident a couple of years ago, Pops usually has me run the errands. Truthfully, I think the boredom is getting to him.”

“Are you suggesting that Tobias took money from someone?”

Halliday wasn't the place where a bookie would run his business. The town was lucky even to be marked on a map. Tobias would have had to go into a larger town or city for that type of action.

Had Tobias gotten involved with the wrong people?

Kinsley couldn't fathom such information having anything to do with Hanson's murder. Bookies and their muscles for hire wouldn't care about staging a murder. They wanted their point made loud and clear.

“Pops loves this place. Lives for it. If he thought Rachel's death was on him...”

“I appreciate the information. I'll make sure to look into it.” Kinsley shifted until she could tug on the door handle. Before Gage could step back, she hoped to receive one more answer. “Mr. Baird, who is the man standing near the barn?”

Gage appeared surprised at the question, but not apprehensive. He didn't even take time to peer in that direction, though the old dog had certainly taken an interest in the individual. It was Kinsley's experience that dogs were fantastic judges of characters.

“J.J. Callahan. He helps out around the farm now that Pops has taken a step back.”

Kinsley would have closed the car door and requested to speak with J.J., but the chime of her cell phone cut off her directive. She pulled her phone from her pocket to find a message from her partner. Any more questions would have to wait. Wally was in the middle of performing Hanson's autopsy, and Alex was requesting she head back to the city immediately.

There was a break in the case.

Chapter Nine

Alex Lanen

October

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:20 am

Friday — 4:06 pm

The autopsy of Rachel Hanson revealed enough evidence to support that someone other than Calvin Gantz was responsible for her death. No locks of hair had been removed from the victim. Alex had immediately notified Kinsley. While they weren't any closer to apprehending the guilty party, such confirmation by the medical examiner meant they could now focus on someone other than Gantz.

Alex fixed his gaze on the stainless steel slab. Its cold and unforgiving surface usually reflected the harsh fluorescent lights above, but Rachel Hanson currently lay claim to the table. A sterile white sheet covered her body from the neck down. The peaceful stillness of her pale features contradicted the brutality of her death, and it was as if she would lift her lashes at any moment.

"Kinsley's gonna crush me in Fantasy Football this weekend," Wally muttered from his place in front of the sink. Water splashed over his large, calloused hands. His thick frame, once accustomed to the grind of college football practices, now leaned heavily against the basin. "And I can't figure out how. She doesn't have any decent running backs and her tight end's stats are laughable. I should have joined Public Relations' Fantasy Football League. Did you know they pick players based on their color jersey?"

Alex dragged his gaze away from their victim.

"I'm up against Izzy," Alex replied as he pulled out his phone. Kinsley had texted to say that she was pulling into the station's parking lot around back. "You'll get no sympathy from me. Izzy is leading in total points, and it's not even close. I think

she'll take the pot at the end of the season."

"All it takes is one injury," Wally claimed optimistically as he reached for the roll of paper towels hanging from a silver bar. Once he had dried his hands and tossed the used paper towels into the trash, he strolled over to the laptop secured to a rolling tray. He entered a few notes before exiting the software. "The season is far from over. Anyway, I'll send over my final report later today."

"And there is no doubt about your findings?"

"I resent that question." Wally closed the distance to the slab and gently lifted the white sheet until the material covered Rachel Hanson's face. "Forgoing the lock of hair...unless Gantz was using stilts, he isn't your killer."

Wally had been privy to the details of Gantz's case and had even been cross-examined by Kinsley's father. Though there hadn't been any DNA evidence on the bodies themselves, the murder weapon and locks of hair discovered in Gantz's house had all but made the case open and shut.

At least, that was what they had all believed at the time.

"The angle of the cut suggests that your perp is at least four to five inches taller than Gantz's five-nine frame." Wally rubbed his chin in thought. "Do you believe Gantz skipped town?"

Kinsley wasn't the only one experiencing déjà vu today. That specific question had been on Alex's mind a lot lately. So often, in fact, that he had posed it to her this morning.

"Think about it," Wally suggested as the ding of the elevator bank could be heard from down the hall. "Gantz had a ticket to the big leagues with those interviews lined

up after the trial. All the national news agencies wanted to sit down with him one-on-one. From what I heard, they were offering quite the figure, too. Why run off?"

"I think Gantz is probably six feet under by now. If it were my daughter...sister...mother...whose killer had walked free, I'd be tempted to take matters into my own hands, too." Alex shrugged in indifference. "After Gantz's employer called into the station requesting a welfare check, patrol entered the residence. His clothes were missing from both the dresser and closet. No wallet. No passport. No vehicle. All evidence pointed to him leaving town."

"And now that a year has gone by without any word from him?"

"No one has officially reported Gantz missing, and it's not a crime to walk away from a job," Alex reminded Wally as the sound of heavy footsteps drew closer to the doorway. "Looks like you have another case. I'm heading back to the station to meet up with Kinsley. I won't say a word about her lack of running backs."

"Hello, gentlemen," Haugen called out in a booming voice as he walked through the open door. He slapped Alex on the back with a hearty thump that reverberated around the room. "Got anything for me on the stiff from yesterday, Wally?"

The momentary distraction allowed Alex to slip out, deliberately seeking out Sam's partner. Sure enough, Laura Mitchell was standing in the hallway on her phone.

"Half past five." Laura's voice was soft, but it still carried down the long corridor. She lifted her head instantly, as if sensing she wasn't alone. "Make sure you're ready, kiddo."

There was no mistaking who was on the other end of the line. Alex remained silent, respecting Laura's decision to keep her daughter in the dark about dating a fellow detective. No one was aware of their relationship. Not even Kinsley.

In theory, it needed to stay that way.

Only Alex was getting tired of all the sneaking around and not being able to live like normal adults. Something needed to change, and he had given a lot of thought to transferring out of the department. He hadn't reached a conclusion yet, but it was definitely getting to that point.

"Like I said, we'll grab something to eat on the way." Laura paused to listen to her daughter. "Yes. That's fine. See you then."

Laura took her time lowering the phone.

She took just as long to disconnect the call.

"Does Thompson know about us?" Alex asked cautiously, positioning himself in front of her while giving them views of both ends of the hallway. "If Cap is going to make a—"

"Hess is retiring." Laura didn't soften the blow. It wasn't in her nature to hold someone's hand, and that was only one of the many things that had attracted him to her. "I passed my exam, Alex. There's a good chance I'll get his spot."

There was no denying such a promotion was well deserved. Laura had been eyeing a sergeant's position, and Alex had been behind her all the way. He had expected Ritchie from Robbery to turn in his badge first. Hess just happened to be in homicide.

"Congratulations." Alex was genuine in his praise, but he didn't need to be a detective to figure out the direction of this conversation. He wasn't one who usually made snap decisions, but his hand was forced. "I've been thinking about it, and I could put a transfer into Vice. I didn't want to say anything until—"

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“Alex, it’s over.” Laura brushed her bangs to the side. Sam’s voice drifted out from the open door. Once she had assured herself that her partner was still otherwise occupied, she continued while Alex was still grappling with the ease in which she could end things between them. “We had some fun, but we both knew it wasn’t going anywhere.”

That wasn’t the case, but Alex wasn’t going to debate his feelings on the matter. He had been honest with her from the start, and never once had he ever indicated he believed their relationship was casual in any sense of the word.

“Mitchell! You’ve got to see this!”

“Coming,” Laura called out while making no effort to join her partner. “Alex, it never would have worked out between us, and you know it. I’m ten years older than you with a daughter in college. We’re at different stages in our lives. You want diapers, and I want to focus on my career.”

“And I told you that I was willing to forgo—”

“Please, Alex.” Laura reached out and touched his arm. “I need for this to be a clean break.”

Alex didn’t take his gaze off the scuff marks on the wall behind her, and he remained silent as she walked away. He was running on little sleep, hunger had basically burned a hole through his stomach, and now his emotions were as raw as the hamburger meat sitting on the top shelf in his fridge. It was best not to say a word.

He slowly made his way to the elevator before jabbing the top button. He had been willing to make concessions. There hadn't been any need to compromise on her part. Removing himself from the department wouldn't have been ideal, but he would have done it for her.

He had only ever been willing to make such a concession once before. Unfortunately, that relationship had pretty much turned out the same. He was batting a thousand, and he didn't even like baseball.

It didn't take him long to ride the elevator to the lobby and make his way out of the building. The overcast sky pretty much matched his mood, and the chill seeped through his jacket as if it were trying to leech what warmth remained in his bones.

He hated this time of year.

He entered the police station and found Kinsley waiting for him on the other side of the metal detector. With a nod to Earl, whose back injury had relegated the officer to a desk position, Alex emptied his pockets and placed his firearm in the grey bucket. It didn't take him long to walk through the opening and collect his belongings.

"Anything come out of your interview with Tobias Zayn?" Alex asked, clipping his side holster to his belt. If he kept their conversation to the case, there was a chance she wouldn't notice he was off his game. "By the way, in addition to the lack of missing hair, Wally is certain our perp is taller than Gantz."

Kinsley was wearing one of her long sweater coats that she preferred over a jacket. The temperature would have to drop close to freezing before she would cave in and switch to heavier apparel. They were complete opposites when it came to the seasons. He would rather be anywhere else in the winter. If he were being honest with himself, he would give half his pension to be anywhere else but Fallbrook today.

“I know I said this earlier this morning, but you look like shit.”

Alex stepped back when the elevator doors slid open. The three officers inside apparently weren't in a hurry, and their casual departure gave him time to curb his temper. It hadn't gone unnoticed that the tension had eased from Kinsley's shoulders, and that was no doubt due to confirmation regarding Gantz's noninvolvement in their investigation.

The fallout from last year's trial had created a lot of tension between Kinsley and her family. She believed that her reputation within the department had been tarnished after the ruling, and Alex had witnessed her slow recovery from that dark time. Having Gantz's name uttered around the watercooler again wasn't conducive to regaining popularity among the masses.

Alex could only imagine her anxiety over the possibility of Gantz's return. It was the only reason that he checked his response. His bad mood didn't give him the right to drag her down along with him.

They both entered the elevator at the same time.

“Have you given a statement to the press yet?” Kinsley asked as she pressed the button for the fourth floor. “The sooner that's done, the faster we'll have some breathing room.”

“Not yet.” Alex leaned his head back against the paneling and closed his eyes. When Laura's face materialized in the darkness, he forced himself to straighten and pay attention to the conversation. “I'll draft a press release and email it to Bridget in Public Relations.”

The elevator hummed as it ascended, the red numbers above the doors changing slowly. Kinsley shifted her stance so they were facing one another. He raised a hand

to let her know that he understood the urgency of clearing any misconception the media had concerning Gantz, but Kinsley surprised him by changing the subject altogether.

“There is an office pool going around on whether you and Laura are hot and heavy. It’s only a matter of time before Thompson hears about it, so you might want to—”

Alex's hollow laugh bounced around the small enclosure. This day kept getting better and better. He pressed his fingers against his eyes, but the effort for relief only made the burning sensation worse.

"They're wasting their money," Alex muttered, thankful when the elevator chimed their destination. “Trust me. You’ll want to take the other side of that bet.”

The elevator doors parted, and Alex pushed away from the back panel. He didn’t bother waiting for Kinsley as he exited before sidestepping the glass partition. The bullpen wasn’t busy, which meant a lot of the detectives were either on calls or coming in for the late shift. He would take advantage of the lull, type out the press release, and then call it a day.

Not bothering to remove his jacket, he pulled out his chair and took a seat while simultaneously moving the mouse to his computer. By the time Kinsley had taken her seat across from him, he was already typing in his password.

While waiting for his email to update, Alex leaned forward so that he could access his wallet. He pulled out a crisp twenty. With a quick scribble, so both of their names were included, he shoved the money and card back into the blue envelope.

“Want me to spill coffee on her keyboard?” Kinsley was staring at him intently from across their desks. “Slash her tires?”

Leave it to Kinsley to lighten the moment. This was the old Kinsley who he hadn't seen a lot of in the past year.

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“I’ll take a drink at the Bucket, but it’s going to have to be tomorrow night.” Alex appreciated that Kinsley hadn’t asked him for any details. They had always respected each other’s boundaries. “I’m going to faceplant in my bed and not move until tomorrow morning.”

Kinsley shed her sweater and then began to log into her computer. Once she had hit enter and sat back in her chair, she removed the clip from her hair. There was a slight wave to the blonde strands from being contained, and they fell just below her shoulders. He was often asked if the two of them had ever blurred the lines between their professional and personal lives, but she was more like a sister to him than anything. Being an only child, it was nice to have that type of relationship in his life.

“Guess what just landed in our laps,” Kinsley said with a bright smile. She even rubbed her hands together as she stared at her screen. Her eyes skimmed the contents of her email. Once she had finished, she finally shared the contents. “The background checks came in for Sebastian and Jack Hanson.”

Alex held his hands up, and she didn’t hesitate to toss him the eyedrop bottle. The liquid coolness did nothing for his discomfort. His only relief would come with sleep, which prompted him to cap the bottle and toss it back. She caught the small plastic container with one hand.

“Jack Hanson was a suspect in a domestic violence eight years ago.” Kinsley opened her desk drawer and stored the bottle of eyedrops in the side. “He was never officially charged, but I have the name of the woman who placed the initial call. I meant to bring this up earlier, but did you notice the brother’s insistence that the Fallbrook Killer was responsible for Rachel’s death? Or his reaction when I mentioned Rachel

and her husband trying to conceive a child?”

“I noticed,” Alex said as he rolled his chair closer to the wall. Both of their monitors were to the side so that they could converse freely without something blocking their sight. He opened the template for the standard press release. “Do you want to ask Jack Hanson to come back into the station? Ifso, let’s make it for nine o’clock first thing Monday morning. We still need to interview the victim’s friends and coworkers. Blake and another officer took statements from the Hanson’s neighbors today. We’ll need to comb through those, as well.”

“I’m thinking we should pay Jack Hanson an unexpected visit,” Kinsley proposed as she leaned forward in her chair to concentrate on her screen. “Oh, and I want to re-question Louise Baird now that she’s had a chance to process her daughter’s death. I have questions for her about her father.”

“Care to share?”

Alex pecked at the keyboard, entering the appropriate information into the press release form while Kinsley caught him up on the interviews she had conducted up in Halliday. He stared at the information box, debating on how much information to divulge to the public. One concise sentence should be enough to convince the press to back off and allow the police to conduct the case with little to no interference. He reread the statement before completing the rest of the form.

Evidence obtained thus far during the investigation into Rachel Hanson’s homicide has led our department to officially rule out any involvement by Calvin Gantz.

Chapter Ten

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 7:41 pm

The gentle strumming of a steel guitar drifted from the television speakers and filled the living room with a classic country tune. Alex hadn't been the only one who needed to decompress after such a grueling day, but Kinsley had chosen some soothing music and a good beer to top off her evening instead of sleep.

It wasn't like she had slept through the night for the past year anyway.

Since Alex had declined her invitation to hit the Bucket after work, she had taken time to stop by the convenience store to buy a six-pack of dark ale. She had also purchased a steak and cheese sub in the sandwich shop next door. She considered both to be appropriate sustenance for the hours she had planned to comb through Rachel Hanson's social media.

The rapid knock on the door accompanied by the chime of her doorbell came an hour after Kinsley had devoured her sandwich and was nursing her second beer. She set the tablet on her coffee table next to the crime scene photos, taking a moment to turn them over. Her brother didn't need to witness such graphic pictures. She had forced him to deal with enough already.

"Coming!"

The doorbell pealed a second time, echoing loudly around the open layout of her townhome. She was now second-guessing her belief that her brother was on her doorstep. There wasn't an impatient bone in Noah's body, and he would have caught the six o'clock news regarding the police's press release. She took time to look through the peephole before reaching for the deadbolt.

“I need your off-the-shoulder red sweater,” Lydia Tarper exclaimed as she breezed through the entryway without stopping. She made her way to the staircase without hesitation and ascended the steps to the second level before Kinsley had a chance to close the front door. The sweet fragrance of her perfume lingered in the air. “The one that I gave you for your birthday last year.”

“You don’t look good in red,” Kinsley called out as she returned to the couch. Lydia wouldn’t be staying long. Not on a Friday night. “And wear your hair up!”

Her best friend made it a habit to rifle through her closet. The two of them had been inseparable since kindergarten, the Aspen clan taking Lydia into their fold without question. As an only child, she had yearned for siblings. She had claimed Kinsley’s brothers and sisters as her own a long time ago....except for Dylan.

Those two were like oil and water.

Kinsley left the crime scene photos face down. Lydia didn’t have the stomach for graphic television shows, and Kinsley wasn’t going to be responsible for ruining the woman’s evening. She clearly had a date.

“Do I need to call you at eleven?” Kinsley asked loud enough for her words to carry up a level. The bathroom was right in line with the staircase. “Or is this a planned hookup?”

“Planned.” The chaotic sound of rummaging told Kinsley that Lydia was searching through the makeup drawer in the vanity. “Where is—”

“Bottom drawer!”

Kinsley learned a long time ago that most of the gifts that Lydia purchased were based on her own style. Clothes, makeup, accessories, and the whole gauntlet. It was

easier to go with the flow.

Lydia was one of the most nurturing people Kinsley had the honor of knowing, and the woman would give someone her last penny if she thought it would help them. Going into education and teaching at the elementary school had been a logical choice, but she also had a wild streak that such a mundane profession couldn't satisfy.

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“...Freddie at the Plow. You remember him, right? A class ahead of us? Anyway, I ran into him at...”

Kinsley continued to scroll through Rachel Hanson’s posts, which consisted of many shared recipes and DIY projects. Switching to the woman’s photographs, there were some older pictures of Rachel with her husband and a handful with her mother. Oddly enough, there weren’t too many with Rachel’s brother or grandfather.

“I remember her,” Lydia said softly from behind the couch. Kinsley had been so caught up in studying one picture in particular with the brother-in-law that the approaching footsteps hadn’t registered through her concentration. “Rachel Hanson. I couldn’t believe it when I heard on the news that she had been murdered.”

“You knew Rachel?” Kinsley turned, putting her knee on the couch to help stabilize herself as she turned halfway around to hear what Lydia had to say about their victim. “How? Yoga class?”

“No, no,” Lydia murmured as she fiddled with the V-neck of a bright blue sweater she had given Kinsley last Christmas. The tag was still on the sleeve. “Rachel went to Eastside. If you remember, I couldn’t get an internship at the elementary school in my senior year of college. I had to help out the freshman English teacher. Anyway, Rachel was a student in my class.”

Kinsley stood to collect the scissors from the junk drawer in the kitchen. She motioned for Lydia to lift her arm to cut the tag off the sleeve.

“Do you remember those bonfires out at Boulder Creek?” Lydia asked in retrospect.

“I recall Rachel getting into some trouble in her freshman year after attending one.”

“I didn’t go to the bonfires our senior year,” Kinsley reminded Lydia before setting the tag and scissors on the counter. “I hurt my knee that Spring, remember?”

“You also didn’t go to the previous one in the Fall because you were grounded for sneaking alcohol into a school assembly.”

“You were the one who snuck a bottle of Vodka into the school assembly, and I covered for you because of your date with what’s-his-name.” Kinsley was able to recall the boy’s face but not his name. “Curly hair. Freckles.”

“Paul.” Lydia flashed a smile. “I heard he is some fancy plastic surgeon living in California now.”

Both women turned at the sound of the front door being opened, though Kinsley wasn’t alarmed in the least. She had been expecting her oldest brother. Noah stepped through the door, shaking his head in disappointment.

“Lydia, you left the engine running in your car,” Noah chastised good-naturedly, yet there was a hint of exasperation in his tone. “Someone is going to steal it.”

“Who is going to steal my car in front of a cop’s house?”

“Detective,” Kinsley corrected as she motioned for Lydia to turn around. She had taken the advice to secure her long curls so they were tamed for the evening, but she had missed one. After readjusting the clip, Kinsley patted Lydia on the shoulder. “All good. Go. Have fun. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“If I took your advice, I wouldn’t be doing anything on a Friday night. What fun is that?” Lydia leaned up on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on Noah’s cheek. “Say hi to

the girls for me.”

It wasn't long before the door was shut behind her with a thud.

Kinsley and Noah stared at one another in tense silence. Her regret at calling him that night was staggering, and she doubted that she would ever be able to forgive herself for such a selfish choice. She had dragged him into her nightmare out of habit and self-preservation. How he could stand to even look at her was beyond comprehension.

Kinsley broke eye contact to stare at the gas fireplace in the living. It was the sole feature that had sold her on this place. She hadn't gotten her mother's decorating gene, and she certainly hadn't inherited her father's obsessive desire to have everything in its place. The former was the reason that Lydia had been the one to help choose the furnishings, and nothing was going to help with the latter. The only reason why the townhouse appeared somewhat tidy was that she had thrown a ton of stuff in the coat closet near the garage entrance in the kitchen. She didn't want to receive a lecture from her brother about housekeeping.

“Pumpkin carving went well last night,” Noah shared as he brushed past her to reach the lasagna dish on top of the stove. It was as if they hadn't shared a moment of regret. “I'll win this year's competition by a mile.”

Not once had they spoken in length about Calvin Gantz or what had transpired that night. They had both agreed never to utter a word about their choices, and Noah had kept his promise. There were many times over the past twelve months when she had wanted nothing more than to beg for his forgiveness, but she had stuck to their script.

“Did you watch the six o'clock news?” Kinsley asked as she leaned against the counter.

“I did. Sounds like you’ll be working this weekend.” Noah made no move toward the front door. His blue eyes displayed no judgment, either. If anything, it was as if he was searching for reassurance. “Need anything?”

Kinsley managed to shake her head, not trusting her voice. The reason that he had called her today wasn’t because he was concerned with the consequences of their actions, but rather to check on her wellbeing.

His kind gesture only deepened her remorse.

“Call if you do, Kin.”

Noah closed the distance between them before gently planting a kiss on top of her head. Without another word, he quietly left her home. She couldn’t stop the onslaught of memories that she would have given anything to forget.

“N-Noah, I need help.” Kinsley pressed the phone painfully against her ear. Shock and adrenaline were surging through her body, and she could barely keep ahold of her weapon. She must have dropped to her knees after squeezing the trigger. “I—”

Kinsley pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to stop the words—the admission of guilt—from passing her lips. Bile hit the back of her throat, but she forcibly swallowed it back. She pulled her forearm away to stare at the weapon provided to her by the department to protect the innocent.

“Where are you?” There was no hesitation in Noah’s voice. None. “Kin, just tell me where you are.”

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The memory receded, and Kinsley found that she had pressed the back of her hand to her mouth once again. Clearing her throat, she forced herself to move away from the counter. Now that Alex had released a statement regarding the case, their daily lives could return to normal. The press wouldn't be hounding them, they would be free to investigate Rachel Hanson's murder, and the perp now understood there was no throwing suspicion onto someone else.

Kinsley made her way over to the front door. She turned the knob of the deadbolt before closing the distance to the living room window. Closing her fingers around the cord, she hesitated to pull it. Something prevented her from shutting the wooden slats. She leaned in closer until the cold seeped through the pane. Noah's taillights could be seen in the distance as he slowly came to a stop at the stop sign. It wasn't long before he turned left out of the addition toward his home.

Kinsley cautiously brought her gaze to the sidewalk across the street. Each tree had been strategically planted twenty feet apart, creating many areas for one to hide. She fixated on the large oak in front of her neighbor's townhome, the branches becoming barer with each passing day. She remained still for several minutes, not even daring to breathe as she waited for any sign of movement from the darkness.

The ringing of her cell phone from across the room startled her. Yanking on the cord, the blinds snapped shut. There was no one outside. No ghosts of the past, either. She was letting paranoia get the best of her, just as she had back then.

Kinsley retrieved her phone, ignoring the tremor in her hand.

"Aspen."

The precinct's number had been highlighted on the display.

“Detective, this is Officer Blake. I thought you should know that Gage Baird was in a serious accident this evening. He totaled his truck on the curve out by the covered bridge. He was life-flighted to Fallbrook General Hospital. They aren't sure he's going to make it.”

Chapter Eleven

Kinsley Aspen

October

Saturday — 9:16 am

The slate-grey sky loomed over Fallbrook, pressing down the chilled air as if the town had been packed into a deep freezer. Kinsley steered her car into the hospital parking lot. She was mindful not to make the left turn too sharp and spill her coffee. With three of her travel mugs sitting in the sink, she had opted to bring one of her porcelain mugs. Not the wisest idea, but Alex wasn't riding shotgun to deliver any judgment.

Kinsley managed to find an opening two rows back from the main entrance. It wasn't long before she had shifted the gear into park and left the engine to idle. Her attention was now solely on the rearview mirror. Ever since Noah had left the townhome yesterday, she had been on edge.

There was nothing to indicate that someone was monitoring her movements.

None.

Yet she couldn't shake the unease that caused every nerve in her body to go into

fight-or-flight mode. It had been that way for months after she and Noah had disposed of Gantz's body. The daily grind had gradually helped her develop another—somewhat normal—routine.

Unfortunately, it was as if she were back to square one.

Five minutes later, Kinsley set her empty mug in the cupholder as best she could given the awkward handle. She was allowing Gantz to disrupt her life again. Her anger rose swiftly as she shut off the engine and yanked the keys from the ignition. She needed this case to be closed.

It was a little after nine o'clock on Saturday morning, and it was easier to let Alex sleep as long as possible. She had sent him a text message detailing her day. After all, what were the odds that two siblings had been involved in separate car accidents in the span of two days?

Depending on how long it took for some of the interviews Kinsley had planned this morning, there was a possibility she would be working without overtime. The city had budgeted only so much for each department, and they had been put on notice a couple of months ago that certain requests would be denied unless signed off by their immediate supervisor.

Technically, Alex and Kinsley had planned to interview the victim's friends and coworkers this afternoon. Last night's phone call had altered the day's agenda.

Kinsley exited her Jeep, but nothing in her surroundings seemed unusual. The scent of burning firewood from some distant neighborhoods clung to the brisk air, but not even her favorite Fall fragrance could make this morning any more tolerable. Once her vehicle was locked up tight and she had rescanned the area, she eventually made her way to the entrance of the hospital.

Inside the sterile lobby, there was practically no difference in temperature. An exaggeration, for sure, but Kinsley couldn't stand hospitals for several reasons. The fluorescent lights were too bright, the linoleum floors too squeaky, and the scent of disinfectant too overwhelming. The sight of her mother, Margaret, standing at the information desk brought Kinsley up short.

"Mom?"

"Kin!" Margaret exclaimed after turning around. She reached out when Kinsley closed the distance between them and brought her in for a warm embrace. She pulled away after a few seconds, but she kept her hands wrapped around Kinsley's arms in concern. "What on earth are you doing here? Don't tell me something happened with Alex."

"No, no," Kinsley reassured her mother with a pat on her hand. "Nothing like that. An individual involved in a case was in a car accident last night. I'm just here to question the family."

"Thank goodness," Margaret said before dropping her hands and stepping back. She then reached into her purse and pulled out a packet of gum. "Here. Take this. You have coffee breath."

Kinsley held out her hand and waited for her mother to place a stick of gum into her palm. Margaret was a force to be reckoned with, and she had done her best to remain neutral on the issues between father and daughter. The past year had been a strain on them all.

"I'm here to visit Dawn Willers," Margaret exclaimed as she tucked the pack of gum back into her purse. She readjusted the thick strap on her shoulder. "You remember her, don't you? She used to work at that greenhouse where we got our annuals for the front flowerbeds."

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“I didn’t know that Ms. Willers was sick,” Kinsley said after crumbling the wrapper in her hand. Once she had tucked the chewed ball of gum to the side of her mouth, she continued speaking. “I ran into her a couple of months ago at the grocery store.”

“Colon cancer.” Margaret’s tone was enough for Kinsley to comprehend the gravity of the situation. “It doesn’t look good.”

“Please tell Ms. Willers that I’m thinking of her,” Kinsley replied, making a mental note to send flowers. “I’m bringing dessert to dinner this week, right?”

“Yes.” Margaret patted the back of her hair, causing Kinsley to tense. Her mother only ever made such a gesture when she was about to broach an unsolicited topic. “Kinsley Rose, someone vandalized your father’s car at work yesterday.”

The fact that Margaret had used Kinsley’s full name was significant. It was what she hadn’t mentioned that stood out even more. Margaret wanted Kinsley to do something about the vandalism, but she wanted a truce between father and daughter even more. If Kinsley were seen around town with her dad, it would denote forgiveness. Word had leaked about the dissension between the Aspens over the past year. Such a show of absolution meant others might follow.

What Margaret didn’t seem to understand was that there were a handful of residents who had treated Kinsley in the same manner. After all, Kinsley and Alex had been in charge of the investigation. The blame for giving George Aspen any ammunition to garner an acquittal fell squarely on her shoulders.

“I’m sure you and Dad read the paper this morning. Gantz isn’t back in town, and

things will die down now that it's been confirmed by the autopsy." Kinsley leaned in and kissed her mother on the cheek. "I've got to go, Mom. I'll see you on Thursday."

Kinsley didn't bother stepping up to the information desk. The ICU was on the eighth floor. She would speak to a nurse once she was off the elevator. Without so much as a backward glance, she made her way over to the elevator banks and pressed the appropriate button. It wasn't long before the doors slid open with a soft hiss.

Kinsley finally stepped out of the elevator and into a smaller lobby. She didn't need to read the signs posted directly on the wall in front of her. The double doors to the ICU were kept secure, and the only way through was to check in at the window. She unhooked her badge from her belt and held it up to the nurse on duty.

"I'm here regarding Gage Baird," Kinsley stated before clipping her badge back in place. "Would it be possible to speak with the assigned doctor who—"

A flicker of movement caught her attention.

Louise Baird had emerged from the restroom, her features drawn tight with grief. The dark blemishes underneath the woman's eyes could be seen from several feet away. Her stiff movements appeared to be almost automatic as she made her way to the waiting room across the hall without so much as a glance down the hallway.

"Never mind," Kinsley stated as she changed her mind on who she would speak to first. "I'll be right back."

Kinsley turned away from the window. She closed the distance to the entrance of the waiting room. Taking time to observe the occupants, she spotted Louise in the corner with her fiancé. Douglas Glynn was holding her close and rubbing her back in comfort.

“Ms. Baird?” Kinsley called out softly as she came to a stop before the couple. “I heard about your son’s accident. How is he doing today?”

Louise took a moment to compose herself.

“Detective Aspen,” Louise acknowledged, her voice strained. “Please tell me that you know who is doing this to our family.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any evidence to suggest that your son’s accident was anything other than that. I spoke with the officer on the scene last night, and he believes that the crash was due to high speed near the covered bridge on the road from Halliday to Fallbrook.”

“I find that hard to believe, Detective.” Douglas had replied on Louise’s behalf. His tone was accusatory, but Kinsley’s reaction would have been the same had their roles been reversed. “Both Rachel and Gage were involved in car accidents, and one resulted in Louise’s daughter being hunted down like a rabid animal. Can you honestly stand there and say that you believe someone didn’t want the same result with Gage?”

“Which is why I’m here this morning, Mr. Glynn.” Their conversation was attracting attention. “Would the two of you mind stepping out into the hallway to speak with me? Your son’s vehicle has been taken to our impound lot. Forensics will go over the exterior and interior, searching for any similarities that suggest foul play.”

Kinsley had continued to speak to the couple until they had come to a stop in the hallway. Douglas’ hand still rested gently on Louise’s back, but both appeared to be relieved upon hearing her statements.

“I spoke to your son in person yesterday morning,” Kinsley revealed, though she figured Louise had already been filled in about the questioning by either Gage or

Tobias. “Gage mentioned that he was going to be driving from Halliday to Fallbrook to be with you yesterday.”

“Something happened at the farm, and he wasn’t able to leave until the evening.”

“You spoke with him during the day?”

Louise nodded, compressing her lips to keep her emotions in check.

“Yes,” Louise answered as she wrapped her arms around herself. “Gage called me mid-afternoon to let me know he would arrive around seven o’clock. When seven came and went, I tried his cell phone. He didn’t answer, so I called my father. Dad told me that Gage left the farm around fifteen minutes before six.”

“Did Gage seem upset on the phone when you spoke with him?”

“Of course, he was upset,” Louise snapped in anger. “His sister is dead. My daughter is dead, detective. How do you think we feel?”

“Ms. Baird, there are a lot of moving parts to this investigation. Is there a chance that Gage figured out who killed Rachel? Would he have tried to take matters into his own hands?” Kinsley wasn’t one to talk when it came to such subject matters. As she waited for Louise to reply, another thought occurred to Kinsley. “When I spoke with Gage yesterday, he mentioned that your father has a gambling problem. Is that true?”

Louise seemed taken aback by the question. She lifted a hand and rested it on her cheek. She waited to respond until two nurses passed them to enter the double doors at the end of the hall.

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“My father hasn’t gambled for quite some time, Detective Aspen,” Louise shared, seemingly confident in her answer. “The possibility of losing his farm the last time he racked up too much debt was too much, and he quit cold turkey. Ask anyone.”

“And your relationship with your father? I was under the impression the two of you were close, but I didn’t get the sense that was the truth after—”

“What are you implying, Detective Aspen?” Douglas lifted a hand, but he didn’t go so far as to point his finger at her. “I don’t like where you are taking this conversation. Louise’s daughter is gone, her son is fighting for his life, and you’re interrogating us like—”

“The detective is just doing her job, Douglas,” Louise said softly as she rested a hand on his arm. Kinsley suspected it was more out of exhaustion. “Please don’t cause a scene. I just want to concentrate on Gage. I can’t lose him, too.”

Kinsley decided to let the topic of gambling and the father-daughter relationship slide for now. There was no need to push the woman too hard. She was liable to cut communication and threaten to obtain representation.

“Where is your father this morning?” Kinsley inquired as she attempted to change the subject.

“Tobias is sitting with Gage at the moment,” Douglas replied, giving Louise time to collect herself. “The ICU only permits one family member at a time.”

“The doctors still don’t know if he is going to make it,” Louise whispered with a

trembling voice. “They had to put him in a medically induced coma until the swelling on his brain recedes. Then the coroner called about Rachel to let us know that we could have a funeral home collect her—”

Douglas once again pulled Louise toward him when she couldn’t finish her sentence. Kinsley’s heart went out to the woman and all she had suffered over the last forty-eight hours.

“We haven’t had time to pick out a funeral home. I’ll be making some calls on behalf of Louise this afternoon while she sits with Gage.” Douglas smiled tenderly at Louise when she shifted to wrap an arm around his waist. “You just sit by his bedside and hold his hand while I take care of the funeral. Besides, he’ll want to be there. I’ll push the service out as far as possible.”

Before Kinsley could follow up with more questions about Louise’s phone call with her son, both she and Douglas peered down the hall. Kinsley followed their gazes to find a woman in her mid-twenties approaching them. She wore pale blue scrubs, her dark hair was pulled back at the base of her neck, and there were stress lines around her lips. She also carried with her two cups of coffee secured with black lids.

“Louise, has there been any word?”

“No, dear.” Louise pulled away from Douglas to take both coffees, which she promptly turned to hand one of them to Douglas. “Gia Torres, this is Detective Aspen from FPD.”

“You’re the one who left me a message yesterday. I don’t want you to think that I ignored your call, detective. I just finished a twelve-hour shift a couple of hours ago and have been sitting here with Louise and Douglas since then.” Gia offered her hand. “When I heard about Gage...”

“I understand,” Kinsley replied before stepping back. Gia’s name had been on Rachel Hanson’s list of friends supplied by her husband. Kinsley had managed to speak to a couple of Rachel’s friends over the phone last night. “Do you have time to speak with me now?”

“Of course, of course,” Gia replied before turning her attention toward Louise. “Are you okay for a while? Why don’t I walk Detective Aspen out? I’ll go home, take a shower, and come back with some food. How does that sound?”

Unlike what was displayed in the movies, investigations like these took time. No one worked cases around the clock, and detectives usually had multiple cases at any given time. Throw in their own family lives, and time was a very valuable commodity.

“Ms. Baird, one more question for you. And please know that this is just for our records. I’m sure you understand that we have to do our due diligence. Where were you and your fiancé Wednesday night and last night?”

“Wednesday? We had gone out to enjoy an early dinner,” Louise replied before the implication of Kinsley’s questions hit home. Douglas took her coffee before she dropped it to the floor. “How could you—”

“Louise, it’s her job,” Gia replied softly in understanding. She stepped forward and took the woman’s hand, squeezing her fingers gently. “Please answer so that the detective can focus on the real monster who did this.”

Louise pursed her lips in disbelief and anger, but it was Douglas who willingly supplied their alibis.

“We went to an early dinner at Peppercorn Steakhouse. Our reservations were for five o’clock. We don’t like to be there during their dinner rush,” Douglas explained as he held both coffees awkwardly. When Louise was still too upset to answer, he

continued to describe the rest of their evening. “We got home around seven o’clock, watched some news on the television, and then went to bed around ten. I had to be in the office for a seven-thirty board meeting. As for last night, we were at home waiting for Gage to arrive.”

“Thank you,” Kinsley replied, noticing that Gia was fiddling with her nursing badge. There was something that Gia wanted to discuss, but it was obvious she didn’t want to do so in front of Rachel’s mother. “I’ll be in touch.”

Kinsley nodded her appreciation toward Douglas before falling into step beside Gia. The two women walked in silence toward the elevator bank. It would have been fortuitous to speak with Tobias Zayn this morning, but Kinsley would have to follow up with him on Monday.

“Why do I get the feeling that you wanted to speak with me in private, Ms. Torres?” Kinsley asked cautiously once they were in the confines of the elevator. “Do you know something that could help our investigation into Rachel Hanson’s death?”

“I was with Rachel on Wednesday night,” Gia revealed after choking back a sob. Kinsley gave the woman a moment to compose herself. The numbers above the elevator doors began to count down with each passing floor. “I was with her until around seven o’clock. Rachel lied to Sebastian, Detective Aspen. She told him that she was going to call it an early night, but after she ended their call, she left the house to meet someone.”

Kinsley didn’t expect to receive Rachel’s cell phone records until sometime on Monday or Tuesday. Cell providers weren’t quick on the draw in any situation, including homicide investigations.

“I should have gone with her,” Gia said as she swiped the tears from her cheeks. The doors swung open, revealing a couple waiting to enter. Both Kinsley and Gia stepped

off, but they didn't go far. "I was due for my shift at the hospital, and I let Rachel drive off by herself."

"Ms. Torres, who was Rachel meeting on Wednesday night?"

"Her brother-in-law," Gia revealed, raising a hand to cover her neck. It was as if she couldn't believe her own answer. "Jack had something to tell her, and he made her promise not to tell Sebastian that they were meeting out at the Plow. Detective Aspen, I never heard from Rachel again."

Chapter Twelve

Alex Lanen

October

Saturday — 12:07 pm

Alex rolled his black Camaro to a stop behind Kinsley's Jeep. Despite the ten hours of sleep, his body had protested his first attempt to get out of bed. It wasn't until Kinsley had sent him a second text message informing him that she had a lead in the Hanson case that he dragged his ass into the shower.

What were the odds that two siblings had been in serious car accidents in a span of forty-eight hours? Kinsley was always one to give coincidence the benefit of the doubt, but he couldn't say the same. The fact that Gage's accident had been serious enough to cause the inflicted damage was not something either Alex or Kinsley should write off. Maybe the same had been intended for Rachel, but she had managed to escape into the woods. Had the killer improvised once he had caught up with his victim?

Kinsley stepping out of her Jeep caught Alex's attention. She seemed intently focused on the entrance to the neighborhood. Her expression was pensive. By the time he joined her, she had arched her brow at his appearance.

"You should have stayed in bed."

“You should have called earlier.”

“Cap isn’t going to be happy with my overtime sheet as it is, but this could be the break we’re looking for,” Kinsley said as her gaze veered back to the neighborhood’s entrance. “If I had known you needed more beauty sleep, I would have radioed in for an additional patrol unit. One should be arriving along with two techs since our warrant was approved late last night. I told them to hold off for a half hour while we speak with the brothers.”

“You don’t have a radio,” Alex responded, not needing confirmation of such conjecture. She tended to be impulsive. In all probability, she had driven straight from her townhome to the hospital and then to the Hanson residence without stopping at the station. “I’m betting you didn’t bother to bring a jacket, either.”

“I don’t need a radio when I have my cell phone. And I tossed my sweater in the back seat before leaving the house,” Kinsley muttered as the sound of an engine could be heard in the distance. Alex turned to find a minivan approaching them. A teenager was behind the steering wheel with his mother sitting next to him in the passenger seat. The fact that her hand was positioned defensively on the dashboard spoke volumes. “I drove over to Jack Hanson’s residence on the other side of townfirst. When he didn’t answer the door, I figured he might be here at his brother’s place. I would have been fine with a one-on-one interview, but not with the brother present.”

“You think the two of them are in it together?” Alex considered the theory. “It’s a possibility. Either that or Jack was having an affair with his brother’s wife.”

“That doesn’t explain why someone would target Gage Baird.”

“Your text stated that the officer at the crash scene believed it was an accident. Something change your mind?”

“Just a feeling,” Kinsley responded vaguely as she pressed the lock button on her keyfob. A quick beep was followed by the sound of her locks engaging. “I asked Izzy to go over Baird’s vehicle with a fine-tooth comb. We’ll know more this afternoon.”

Alex fell into step beside her as they made their way around the front of her Jeep and up the slight incline of the driveway. Jack Hanson’s car was parked in front of a three-car garage. Alex stopped himself from inquiring about her interest in the vehicles coming and going from the neighborhood. Given their profession, they were always aware of their surroundings. Kinsley’s unease indicated that such precaution had nothing to do with their case, but she would confide in him when she was good and ready.

It was Alex’s turn to study their surroundings. Old money was the first thing that came to mind. Each extravagant home was positioned on a large plot, though the structures varied in architectural lineage. Some houses were Tudor, some colonial, and there were even a handful of modern minimalistic designs. They must all share the same landscaping service, though. The meticulously tended flowerbeds all had identical displays.

“I chose the wrong career,” Alex muttered as they made their way to the front door. The home didn’t have a front porch. “Who knew selling composite fence panels could bring in this kind of money?”

“Speaking of the fencing company, I called the hotel in Bismarck last night to husband’s alibi. Therewasa conference, and therewasa hotel room booked under Hanson’s name. I requested the hotel’s security footage to confirm that he never left the site.”

“We’ll receive that in a week or so,” Alex muttered in disgust as he peered over his shoulder. Hotels were never too keen on sharing their customer’s information let alone their comings and goings. While he understood the concern with privacy laws,

such red tape tended to hinder homicide investigations.

He had noticed the neighbor across upon pulling up to the curb, and the older woman hadn't bothered to hide her curiosity. While she was arranging some pumpkins and some dried cornstalks near her front door, the attempt was weak. She hadn't stopped monitoring their progress for the past few minutes.

"Go," Kinsley directed as she reached out to ring the doorbell. "She might have some useful information. Blake spent the day getting the neighbor's statements. He was at the station pretty late last night typing up the reports. Nothing stood out that I could see, but we'll need to go over them again. I'll get started with the Hanson brothers, but don't be long."

"Wait to bring up Jack's meeting with Rachel until I get back," Alex advised as he retraced his steps. "And Kin?"

Alex waited for her to meet his gaze.

"About yesterday...thanks."

Kinsley's slight nod meant she understood the meaning behind his appreciation. She could have peppered his ass with questions regarding Laura. It would have been easy for Kinsley to give him grief. The fact that she had pulled back in doing so hadn't gone unnoticed, but he figured she was just returning the favor. After last year's fallout with the Gantz trial, he had gone easy on her.

Alex took measured strides across the street. The overcast sky hadn't allowed one ray of sunshine to break through the thick clouds, and the cold temperatures proved it. He shoved his hands in his jacket as he walked up the small path to the woman's front porch.

“Good afternoon.” It was close enough to lunch that Alex was comfortable with such a greeting. “I’m Detective Alex Lanen. My partner and I are investigating the murder of Rachel Hanson. I know you spoke with an officer yesterday, but I was hoping you had time to answer a few more questions for me.”

“Deborah Welling.” The woman had been adjusting the dried cornstalks tied together with brown twine, but she stepped forward and offered her hand. While doing so, her gaze peered past him to focus on the Hanson residence. “It’s just terrible. We were all shocked when we heard the news. On one hand, it was a relief to discover that the Fallbrook Killer wasn’t responsible. No matter that Calvin Gantz was acquitted, I watched the interview with some of the jurors. They might have acquitted him due to circumstantial evidence, but some of them still seemed convinced of his guilt. Anyway, I have a lasagna in the oven to take over to Mr. Hanson later this afternoon.”

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“How well did you know Mrs. Hanson?”

“Only in passing,” Deborah replied as she met his gaze. It was clear she wanted to share something with him. “They are relatively new to the neighborhood. Not even a year, I believe. The younger ones tend to flock together, anyway. Sometimes I think our addition is the older version of high school.”

“Did you notice anything unusual recently?”

“There was a pickup truck parked out front of their house for several hours last week. I almost called the station last night, because I didn’t think to mention it to the officer yesterday. Then I spoke to my husband, and he didn’t seem to think it was a big deal.” Deborah lifted one side of her mouth in hesitation. Her husband probably didn’t want anything to do with a murder investigation. “I’ve seen the man stop by from time to time, but I don’t want to talk out turn, Detective.”

“Nothing said here is out of turn, ma’am.” Alex made note of her doorbell camera, as well as the overhead security camera above her garage door. Both devices had a clear line of sight of the Hanson residence. He would politely request the footage if she said anything substantial. “Please, continue.”

“Well, it was an old beat-up truck. Light blue in color,” Deborah described as she crossed her arms. The cold wind was picking up, and since her residence was on a corner lot, there wasn’t much to block the strong gusts. “The man just sat behind the steering wheel for at least three hours. I finally walked across to ask if there was something he needed, but he drove off without rolling the window down.”

“Can you describe the man?”

“Late twenties or early thirties. Short brown hair. I don’t mean to make assumptions or anything, but he stopped by often when the husband wasn’t home. It’s one of the reasons I found it so odd that he would sit in front of their house for so long. Neither of the Hansons were home at the time, either.”

“What day was this?” Alex asked for clarification.

“It was over a week ago. Maybe a Thursday? It must have been, because my husband and I went out of town last weekend.”

Alex pulled his cell phone out of his jacket. It didn’t take him long to pull up a picture of Gage Baird. Out of the male subjects questioned so far, only Baird and Zayn drove pickup trucks.

“Is this the man you witnessed sitting outside the Hanson’s residence?”

Deborah reached into the pocket of her coat and pulled out a pair of reading glasses. Once she had them perched on the end of her nose, she peered at the display of his cell phone.

“No.”

Alex lowered his phone in confusion, certain that Mrs. Welling would have identified the male subject outside of the Hanson residence as Gage Baird. Maybe she hadn’t been close enough for an accurate identification. Alex was proved wrong when Deborah removed her glasses and squinted at something...someone...across the street.

Alex shifted to the side to discover Jack Hanson had exited the house. He strolled to

his car with purpose before yanking open the driver's side door. After retrieving whatever it was he had forgotten inside the vehicle, he returned to the front entrance in a matter of seconds.

“That's him, Detective. He is the man I saw sitting in the truck.”

Chapter Thirteen

Kinsley Aspen

October

Saturday — 12:22 pm

The rhythmic tick of the grandfather clock filled the room with each swing of the pendulum. The sound echoed off the vaulted ceilings, almost overbearingly so. The mechanical heartbeat was anything but soothing.

The Hanson residence exuded undeniable beauty. The walls were stark white, offset only by the vibrant hues of the Persian rugs strategically placed for pops of color. A grand piano commanded attention in one corner, while a lavish hearth on the opposite side of the room vied for awareness. Although there were remnants left behind from previous fires, it was clear that it had been a while since anyone had indulged in its warmth.

There were numerous framed photographs of the couple peppered throughout the room—always smiling, always close. It was difficult to ascertain whether the pictures were merely façades or authentic glimpses into their daily lives.

Kinsley stood with her back against the hearth, monitoring Sebastian Hanson's reaction to her presence. The moment she had stepped through the door, Jack Hanson

had done his best to prevent her from engaging in any form of conversation. He had then excused himself momentarily after issuing another directive to his brother to remain silent.

Jack returned shortly thereafter with a business card in hand.

“Sebastian’s lawyer. Any questions you have for my brother should be directed to his attorney.”

Kinsley deliberately took her time taking the proffered card while dissecting Jack’s last statement. Her hands were now tied when it came to questioning Sebastian. It wasn’t that much of a surprise given that she had opened by handing Sebastian a warrant to search the premises. She explained that other officers and a forensics team were on their way to the house, but she had a few questions for them before the others arrived on site. Many things, including all electronic devices, would be collected and then analyzed over the course of the coming days.

Fortunately, Jack had never once indicated that he was being represented by an attorney. Any questions posed to him would have to be worded carefully.

A quick rap on the front door revealed that Alex hadn’t been far behind Jack. She held up the card to indicate the change in their usual routine, but there was no need since the younger Hanson brother once again asserted his claim about Sebastian’s legal representation.

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“We aren’t taking any chances you’ll misconstrue my brother’s replies.” Jack crossed his arms in what could only be termed as condescension. “He’s not saying a word until his lawyer arrives. I’ve already placed the call.”

Kinsley motioned for Alex to remain on the other side of the living room. She wasn’t sure what Sebastian’s reaction would be to her response, but she wasn’t about to sugarcoat their discoveries.

“Should we have any further questions for your brother, we will be sure to go through his lawyer. In the meantime, I’ll address my questions to you.” Kinsley said casually, though the abrupt stiffness in his shoulders suggested he was already on edge. She had debated bringing up his role in the domestic abuse claim, but she was afraid he would seek representation immediately. A different route where Sebastian could start his own line of questioning was a better inroad. “Is there a reason you didn’t mention speaking to Rachel on the night she was murdered in Lionel Cooper’s barn?”

Sebastian lost all color in his face.

“Jack?” Sebastian’s voice was barely above a whisper. “What is she talking about? What did you do?”

Before Jack could respond, Kinsley pushed forward with some clarification.

“Your brother failed to mention to us that he phoned Rachel on Wednesday night and asked her to meet him out at the Plow. An additional request was made not to tell you of said meeting.” Kinsley kept her focus on Jack, noticing that he had lowered his arms to his sides. The way he squared his shoulders suggested that he was afraid his

brother would assault him. The air in the room had grown heavy, so she eased up on the throttle. It wouldn't do to have the brothers come to physical blows. "I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation as to why you didn't mention this to us yesterday, Jack. Would you care to explain?"

Jack shifted his weight in apprehension from one foot to another.

"Bass, it's not what you think. I—"

"Not what I think?" Sebastian reiterated in disbelief. "Why did you want to meet Rachel in secret, Jack?"

"We didn't meet up." Jack's denial contained a bit of desperation. "We didn't, Bass. Rachel never showed."

"Never showed? You didn't think to mention this when—"

"Bass, can we speak privately?" Jack implored as his gaze flicked toward Kinsley and then to Alex. "We shouldn't—"

"Jack, do you drive a blue pickup truck?" Alex's interjection caused Kinsley to relax somewhat. It was only a matter of time before Sebastian gave in to his brother's demands. Fortunately, Alex must have learned something from the neighbor, and his timing couldn't have been more perfect. "An older model?"

"Yes, he does," Sebastian replied, his features hardening. "My brother is a project manager for those commercial buildings being constructed north of town. He sometimes drives the company truck. Why?"

"The neighbor mentioned she spotted Jack sitting outside your residence for quite a few hours last week. Neither you nor your wife were home at the time, and now I'm

wondering if that visit has anything to do with requesting to meet Rachel at the Plow.”

“Jack, what the hell is going on?” There was an emotion in Sebastian’s tone that Kinsley couldn’t pinpoint. Fear, maybe? “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Jack quickly answered before taking a step forward. He lifted his hands up as if imploring his brother to listen. “I really think we should talk about this in private. The police won’t understand, and I—”

“I don’t give a damn about the police, Jack! My wife is dead. Dead! So help me, God, if you so much as—”

“Maybe if you had given a damn about Rachel in the first place, you would have told her the truth,” Jack shot back, his anger finally rising to the surface. “She deserved to know, damn it!”

Kinsley and Alex shared a knowing glance while observing the scene unfold before them. The tension was now palpable, but the floodgates had been opened. It was only a matter of time before they learned the truth.

“I couldn’t take it anymore, Bass.” Jack’s voice cracked, but he held himself together. Kinsley finally understood the man’s involvement. He had been in love with his brother’s wife. “You let Rachel believe she was at fault when it was you all along.”

“At fault for what, Mr. Hanson?” Kinsley didn’t care which brother thought she was addressing him. She only wanted answers. “The more we know, the faster we can make an arrest in Rachel’s murder.”

“Bass is sterile.” Jack set his hands on his hips as he stared at his brother with both disgust and anger for the decision made after the fact. “You should have told her,

man. I was only going to do what you couldn't."

Sebastian finally made his move, but Alex managed to step in front of the man before the situation turned violent. The abrupt motion had Jack wisely backing up a step in caution.

"...don't do this," Alex murmured, his voice low enough that Kinsley only caught the last few words.

Sebastian pushed away from Alex, placing his hands on his head in disbelief.

"How could you, Jack? How could you do that to me?"

"To you?" Jack's laugh was sharp and without humor. "Rachel was in so much pain, Bass. She thought she failed you. While you were using your promotion as an excuse to postpone her finding out the truth, she took the delay as a lifeline. She was secretly meeting with specialists, who kept telling her that there was nothing wrong. She'd move on to the next one, not believing a word they said to her. It was just a vicious cycle, and it was tearing her apart."

"Did you tell her?" Sebastian's voice was strangled with anguish. "Did Rachel die knowing that I lied to her?"

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There was no stopping the emotional breakdown. Alex eventually steered Sebastian toward the kitchen. The house had somewhat of an open layout, but there was enough space to offer Kinsley some privacy with Jack. He had turned away from his brother's emotional outburst. She tucked the business card that he had given her into her pocket next to her phone.

"Jack, we were granted a warrant to search your residence. A forensics team is there now." Kinsley stepped in front of him before he could make his way to the front door. "Talk to me. You were in love with her, weren't you?"

At first, Kinsley thought Jack wasn't going to respond. Ever so slowly, he nodded his reply. It was progress that she would run with until another brick wall materialized out of nowhere.

"Is it true what my partner said earlier about you sitting out front of the house for hours?" Kinsley asked softly while positioning herself at such an angle to give her a better view of the kitchen area. "Why?"

"They were both at work." Jack appeared angry with himself. "I thought that I could leave proof of Bass' results out in the open for Rachel to find. I just couldn't bring myself to go through with it."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Sebastian had that conference in Bismarck, and Rachel was planning on calling in sick to work on Friday. She was going to see another specialist, and I couldn't..." Jack cleared his throat. "I couldn't stand to see her go through it again. I called

Rachel that night and told her to meet me out at the Plow. No one we know usually goes there, so it was a safe meeting spot. Only she didn't show. I stayed there until well past midnight."

"What time did you call Rachel?"

"Right after she left work. Around five-o'clock."

The timeline wasn't in Jack's favor. If he left the Plow at midnight, he had ample opportunity to locate Rachel, force her car off the road, and hunt her through the woods to Cooper's farm.

"What time did you arrive home?" This was the moment when Kinsley figured she would lose Jack to an attorney. To buy herself some time, she made one more plea. "Help me clear your name so we can concentrate on someone else, Jack. Walk me through that night."

He drew in an uneven breath, but she relaxed somewhat when he finally supplied her with a timeline.

"I got to the Plow around seven o'clock. The bartender can vouch for me."

"Chuck?"

Jack nodded his reply, though it was clear he wasn't really present. His mind had gone back to Wednesday night.

As for Chuck Wharton, he was the owner of the Plow. He preferred to bartend himself, but he made exceptions on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. The Plow hosted a large crowd on the weekends, and Chuck relied on a handful of part-time employees for those three days.

“I waited for Rachel until around midnight. I tried reaching her, but the call went straight to voicemail.”

“Did you leave a message?”

“No.” Jack compressed his lips together before revealing the reason behind his decision. “I didn’t want Bass to figure out what I had planned to do that night. Anyway, I left the Plow and drove straight home.”

“You were home before one then?”

Jack hesitated, but he must have realized from her expression that she would eventually discover the truth.

“I might have taken a detour, but it was only to see if Rachel was still awake. Since she always parks in the garage, I parked out front. I then walked around the side of the house. There was a light on in the kitchen, but not in the living room. No sign of her, either, and I assumed she was in bed.”

“And you got home at what time?”

“Two o’clock, maybe? A little after? I didn’t really look at the time.”

Kinsley had heard that excuse often throughout many investigations. She had a difficult time believing that someone didn’t take note of their vehicle’s clock before turning off the engine. She could vividly recall the neon numbers before exiting her vehicle to confront Gantz. She ignored the flash of green at the edge of her consciousness.

“Jack, did anyone see you? Do you have a security system, maybe a doorbell camera? Anyone who can verify the time?”

Wally had stipulated in the autopsy report that Rachel had been murdered between one and three o'clock in the morning. Jack had ample opportunity to kill his sister-in-law. By the expression on his face, he was well aware of why he needed such verification.

“Detective Aspen, I loved Rachel. I know it wasn’t right, but I loved her anyway. And I swear to you that I didn’t kill her.”

Chapter Fourteen

Kinsley Aspen

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

October

Monday — 8:22 am

The usual hustle andbustle of the homicide division was absent for a typical Monday morning. Only two other detectives besides Kinsley were at their desks. She wouldn't have been stuck with paperwork from last week if it hadn't been for the coin toss Alex had won on Saturday afternoon. The loss for her meant that she would remain behind to catch up on paperwork while he drove out to the auto dealership for some scheduled interviews.

Kinsley took a sip of the caramel-flavored coffee she had picked up at the café on her way into the station. She stared at her phone, examining the grainy footage of the street outside her home. The timestamp was from Friday, but there was no indication that anyone had been surveilling her front door. She relinquished her coffee to zoom in on a tree, trying to determine if the shadows hid a figure.

“I found nothing in the wreckage at impound to suggest foul play.”

Kinsley fumbled her phone before managing to grab it securely. The only time she had ever been this on edge had been in the days leading up to Gantz's death. She hadn't been able to prove it then, but she had fully believed at the time that someone had been monitoring her every move.

Then...and now.

“Sorry,” Izzy quipped as she raised an eyebrow in curiosity. She then rolled out

Alex's chair from his desk. She was wearing a black turtleneck with matching jeans. Her choice of clothes covered the tattoo sleeve on her right arm. "You've either had too much caffeine or not enough. Anyway, sorry I couldn't get to Baird's vehicle on Saturday. Not sure if you saw the news, but there was an incident involving five vehicles at the intersection near the silo north of the city."

There was no one better at reconstructing crash sites than Isabella "Izzy" Martinez. The woman had made a name for herself a couple of years ago during a high-profile hit-and-run case. That particular investigation had occurred in a small town about forty miles from Fallbrook, and their law enforcement officials had been stumped for months. Once a request had come through the proper channels, she had performed a meticulous analysis of the crime scene, tire marks, and vehicle damage.

It had been Izzy's discovery of a unique paint chip that other reconstructionists had discarded as nothing more than debris from a nearby road sign. In actuality, the small piece of evidence had been from a vanity plate on the vehicle of the accused. The successful resolution of the case solidified Izzy's reputation as a top expert in the field.

"Not nearly enough caffeine," Kinsley replied with a tight smile. She set her phone on the desk. "Nothing odd stood out to you? Forget evidence for a second. This guy's sister was forced off the road. She crashed headfirst into a tree, suffered an injury from the shrapnel embedded in the airbag, and then hunted through the woods to a barn where she was ultimately murdered. You don't think it was a coincidence that her brother was in a car accident three days later?"

"I didn't say it wasn't a hell of a coincidence," Izzy said with a half-smile as she used her black boots to rotate the chair back and forth. "I'm reporting to you that nothing stood out to suggest the wreckage was the result of anything other than an accident. He was going too fast around the corner near the covered bridge. His brake pads were worn, and the result was basically metal on metal. Oh, and the techs couldn't find any

place in Rachel Hanson's wreckage where there was paint left from the other vehicle. I know you were hoping for better news. How is the brother, by the way?"

"Not good." Kinsley reached for her coffee, though she didn't take a sip. "I spoke to the mother on my way in this morning. The doctors aren't sure that Gage Baird will have full use of his motor skills."

"Where are you on the case?"

"That's a loaded question." Kinsley noticed that Izzy was studying the murder board. "Alex and I spent most of the weekend searching both Hanson brothers' residences and a storage locker. We're still waiting on footage from the hotel to confirm Sebastian Hanson's alibi. The domestic abuse investigation involving Jack Hanson didn't amount to anything, either. I tracked down the other party involved yesterday, and though the two were arguing, it never amounted to anything physical. With that said, the man doesn't have an alibi for the time of death."

"What about Friday night?"

"The brothers claim they were together. We're collecting doorbell camera footage from the neighborhood to confirm it. Doesn't mean they didn't sneak out the back door, but what would their motive be to kill Rachel and Gage Baird?"

Kinsley had already filled in some of the timelines on the board. The black line started at five o'clock on Wednesday with a phone call between Rachel and Jack. Around an hour later, Sebastian Hanson spoke with his wife. Gia Torres last saw Rachel roughly thirty minutes after that phone call. Since Rachel had been killed between the hours of one and three, that left six hours unaccounted for.

"And the grandfather?"

“Tobias Zayn is coming into the station this afternoon. I have some additional questions for him. While it isn’t out of the realm of possibilities, I don’t believe he could have physically kept pace with Rachel Hanson through those woods.”

Kinsley didn’t mind going over the details of the case with Izzy. Her curiosity was just that. Still, talking through the specifics helped Kinsley analyze the pieces a little better.

“I was hoping that your analysis of Gage Baird’s crash site would help eliminate him as a suspect.” Kinsley took another sip of her coffee. The contents had cooled a little too much for her liking, and she grimaced at the lukewarm temperature. “I’ve got a call into the rancher Gage conducted business with up in Leeds. I’m expecting to hear from him today.”

“Where’s Alex?” Izzy’s gaze swept across the impeccably organized surface of his desk. She purposefully reached out and began to shift some items around just to annoy him. “Did you hear about the wager going around?”

“Save your money.”

Izzy’s hand stilled above Alex’s stapler. She narrowed her eyes in scrutiny over Kinsley’s advice. She had always been envious of Izzy’s eyelashes. They were so dark and long it was as if she had her tattoo artist ink permanent eyeliner on her lids.

“You’re not going to spill, are you?”

“Not a chance,” Kinsley replied right as her phone chimed. She almost ignored the text, but the distraction prompted Izzy’s exit. “Thanks for taking a second look at the crash site.”

“Anytime.” Izzy had purposefully left Alex’s chair turned away from his desk. “Oh,

and word to the wise? Stay away from Wally. He doesn't have any players on his roster in tonight's game. He lost this week, and you're the reason."

Izzy's advice caused Kinsley to laugh, because she had checked her Fantasy Football points while brushing her teeth this morning. She had not only come in first this weekend, she had done it by a landslide.

"Duly noted," Kinsley called out, noticing that Sam was exiting the elevator while Izzy was motioning for him to hold the doors. By the time Kinsley had finished reading Alex's text, Sam was standing at her desk. "Morning, Sam. Hey, aren't you poker buddies with the service manager from Birdie's Auto?"

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“Depends. If you’ll be my partner, I’ll get you all the information you want from R.J.”

Sam’s odd request had Kinsley’s full attention. She prudently remained silent instead of wading into a conversation filled with land mines.

“You didn’t hear?” Sam curled his lip in frustration. “Hess is retiring, and Mitchell got the promotion.”

Kinsley weighed her words carefully. Sam had been passed over for a sergeant’s position twice in as many years. Rumor had the reason being was a beef between him and one of the upper brass. Either way, Sam’s life just got a little harder.

No wonder Alex had been in a mood.

“Be happy for her, Sam.”

Kinsley witnessed the difficulty Sam was having with the situation. He and Laura had been partners for years. The struggle he was enduring was twofold.

“What do you want with R.J.?”

Kinsley recalled a name on the list of employees at the dealership. Sam must be referring to Richard James Ivy.

“Our vic was in the finance department at the dealership. Alex is out there this morning conducting interviews. It’s come to our attention that Rachel Hanson

believed one of the salespeople there was taking kickbacks under the table. She reported it to HR, and..." Kinsley lifted her phone once more to read off the name that Alex had supplied her. "...Joe Cider has just become a person of interest."

"Never heard of him, but I can reach out to R.J. He tends to be protective of his staff, but I'll make sure he gives up any necessary deets to Lanen." Sam turned, but Kinsley could still hear his latest complaint about the previous topic of discussion. "I'm liable to end up with a rookie who tosses his cookies over a paper cut. Maybe I should be the one retiring."

As Sam made his way back to his desk, Kinsley turned her focus to her computer. She would put in for a more in-depth background check on Joe Cider. It would be nice to catch a break in the case. While family members were usually ruled out first, an investigation covered the victim's entire life. Everyone needed to be investigated, including friends, neighbors, and even acquaintances who might have only interacted with the victim once or twice.

Once Kinsley had exited the software and opened her inbox, the list of unread emails stretched down her screen. She quickly perused the subject lines until one snagged her attention—Rachel Hanson: Life Insurance Policy Details.

Kinsley clicked on the email.

In bold font, a seven-figure amount was displayed on the monitor, along with the name of the beneficiary. Without hesitation, she reached for her desk phone. She was willing to make the trip to Bismarck herself if necessary. She would have the hotel's security footage in her possession by the end of the day.

While there were still many avenues to search within the investigation, Sebastian Hanson had just moved himself back to the top of the suspect list. According to the terms of the life insurance policy, three million dollars would be electronically

transferred into an account under Sebastian Hanson's name upon receipt of his wife's death certificate.

Chapter Fifteen

Kinsley Aspen

October

Monday — 6:03 pm

The atmosphere at TheBucket was surprisingly lively for a Monday. That wasn't unusual during football season, but there were still a couple of hours before kickoff. It seemed that everyone wanted to fill their stomachs and quench their thirst before settling in for the game.

Kinsley wouldn't mind a bite to eat herself. She had spent most of the morning and early afternoon driving to and from Bismarck to pick up the hotel's security footage. She had driventhrough a fast-food joint, but that was all the sustenance she had consumed throughout the day. Her stomach let it be known that the scents of sizzling grease and strong liquor were an acceptable combination.

The dim lighting cast a warm glow over the worn oak booths and matching bar. Casual conversations were taking place at several tables that hadn't been replaced in decades, though the clinking of glasses and occasional bursts of laughter made it rather difficult to hear one another.

Kinsley stood still for a moment, allowing the warmth from the overhead heater to chase away the cold. The temperature was supposed to drop below freezing tonight. She had exchanged her blazer for her thick sweater coat once she had returned to town.

“The usual, Kin?” a voice called out over the crowd.

She nodded toward Tap’s question. Russell ‘Tap’ Hughes had owned the bar ever since his father had passed away six years ago. She had to give the man credit, because he had changed very little after taking over the place. The two men had been very close, and Tap had wanted to honor his father’s memory. She got the sense that the décor would remain the same for decades to come.

Kinsley zeroed in on Alex sitting at their usual table in the back. He was scrolling through his phone, but she didn’t doubt that he had noticed her entrance. He observed everything about his surroundings at any given minute. Now that she was somewhat warm, she took a step forward to join him, only the sight of her youngest brother brought her up short.

“Owen? What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Kin.” Owen set his bottle of beer down on the table before pushing back his chair. He had been sitting with a few friends, and they all greeted her in unison, not that she had formally met any of them. The Bucket wasn’t Owen’s usual hangout. “I had a business meeting with the bank regarding their online website and mobile app. I spoke to Alex briefly. Is he doing okay? Seems a bit off.”

“Alex is fine,” Kinsley replied, gesturing toward the corner opposite the jukebox. “Can I borrow you for a second?”

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“Sure.” Owen motioned to his friends that he wouldn’t be but a minute. Once he joined her, he widened his stance and crossed his arms as was his usual posture. “Are you doing okay? I saw the news about Gantz. Is that why dinner last Thursday was extra tense between you and Dad? You thought Gantz might be back in town?”

“No.” Kinsley internally winced when she realized her answer came a little too quickly. She could have used such knowledge as an excuse for the tension at dinner. The only individual in attendance who understood the significance of the month was Noah. “I just had a bad week at work. Anyway, I was hoping you could do me a favor. But since you brought up the family, I’d like this favor to stay between us.”

“Is this for the investigation?”

Kinsley hesitated, which prompted Owen to eye her suspiciously.

“Damn it, Kin.” Owen ran a hand through his already unkempt blond hair. “Thursday nights have become a broken record. We’re all stuck on that one song no one wants to hear but are forced to listen to it anyway. I’m pretty sure that Olivia muted us last week.”

Kinsley wouldn’t put it past Olivia to go about her own family dinner without the unwanted tension of the Aspen weekly get-togethers. There were times that Kinsley believed Olivia had been the smart one to move away from Fallbrook and start a brand-new life. Noah and Olivia were twins, but she had opted to attend medical school on the East Coast where she had eventually met her future husband. They had ultimately exchanged vows, attained accomplished careers, and were blessed with two adorable children.

Not even being over fifteen hundred miles away from home was an excuse to miss Thursday night dinner. Owen had been the one to set up a small television in their parents' kitchen as a video monitor to include Olivia's family in on the weekly tradition.

"Forget I asked, Owen." Kinsley shouldn't have involved her youngest brother in the first place. She patted his arm as she made a move to brush past him, only he side-stepped to prevent her from doing so. "Seriously, it's not important."

"It is, or else you wouldn't have asked me in the first place. Is it about Gantz?"

"Gantz is gone," Kinsley snapped, clenching her fists to reign in her frustration. "Sorry. I'm on edge. No, it's not about Gantz. Okay?"

"Okay," Owen repeated slowly before gesturing that she should continue. "What is it that you need?"

"Is it possible to enhance video footage from a home security system? I need better lighting on a sidewalk to see if anyone was using a large tree as camouflage."

"Send it to me, and I'll see what I can do."

"The footage is from my security system, Owen." Kinsley did her best to give a valid reason for her concern. "This case has stirred up some buried resentment. I think there are some members of the press who might be taking their jobs a little too seriously."

"I spoke to Mom over the weekend. She mentioned that someone vandalized Dad's car at work."

"Like I said, people don't forget," Kinsley muttered, garnering a narrowed stare of

caution from her brother. “I spoke to Mom, too. We both know that Dad won’t file a police report. My hands are tied, Owen. On the subject of Mom, she is the reason that I would rather keep this favor between us. Okay? There is no need to worry her when she is already beside herself about Dad. Besides, I can take of myself.”

“Fine. I’ll keep this between us...for now.”

“Thank you,” Kinsley replied softly as she stepped forward. He lowered his arms and accepted her quick hug. “Alex is waiting for me. I’ll send that footage to you. Any chance you can enhance it by morning?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Kinsley weaved through the tables until she reached the last booth. Alex had already dug into his teriyaki chicken wings and fries, even going so far as to roll up his sleeves and tuck a napkin into the collar of his dress shirt.

“Everything okay?” Alex asked, his gaze drifting over her shoulder to where her brother had reclaimed his chair. “This isn’t Owen’s usual hangout.”

“He had a business meeting at the bank. Something about their website and mobile app.” Kinsley didn’t have to go into detail regarding Owen’s cybersecurity firm. He and a friend opened their own firm over six years ago, and they had made quite the name for themselves. “I was just saying hi. How did the interview go with Joe Cider?”

“What interview?” Alex shoveled a few more fries into his mouth before reaching for a napkin. He didn’t continue until after he had swallowed his food. “I spent the morning and early afternoon interviewing everyone at the car dealership. Who knew there were so many departments? Sales, finance, service, not to mention marketing. By the time I was able to concentrate on Cider, I found that he had moved to Mott.

He works at a used car place down there, and he moved apartments, too. I'll take a drive and pay him a visit tomorrow."

"Learn anything else from the vic's coworkers?"

"Nothing that stands out." Alex took a sip of his beer. "What about you? Please tell me you turned in our reports."

"I can tell you that Sebastian Hanson's alibi is solid." Kinsley smiled when Alex groaned at her omission. She hadn't technically finished their paperwork, but she had made a good dent in it. "I drove to Bismarck this morning with the warrant in hand after discovering the three-million-dollar life insurance policy in Sebastian's name. Needless to say, the hotel manager didn't want a detective standing in their hotel lobby making a scene. Anyway, Hanson entered his room around eleven o'clock on Wednesday night. He didn't exit until the following morning."

"Hanson could have hired someone to kill his wife," Alex proposed as he reached for the ketchup bottle. The man loved his ketchup. "You and I have already floated the theory that the brothers could have done it together."

Kinsley would have responded, but the waitress suddenly appeared to deliver her order. She and Alex paused their discussion.

"Alex, can I get you another beer?"

"No, thanks." Alex gave a pointed stare in Kinsley's direction. "Someone didn't keep their end of the bargain, and I have to go into the station early tomorrow morning."

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Kinsley kicked him under the table.

“I got some forms turned in.” She reached over and snatched the ketchup bottle from his hand. “Don’t believe a word he says, Sherry.”

“Seriously, I’m good for now,” Alex said to Sherry before she left their table. His gaze didn’t immediately swing back to Kinsley, though. “Do you know that guy?”

Kinsley peered over her shoulder. She immediately made eye contact with Beck Serra. He was sitting at the opposite end of the bar near the entrance. In the brief moment that she studied him, he didn’t seem to be with anyone, either.

“He’s that reporter who managed to convince my father to give an interview before the Gantz trial.” Kinsley attempted to make herself as comfortable as possible, but she was relatively certain that Alex had caught her unease. “Getting back to the possibility of Jack Hanson being the one to commit the actual murder, it doesn’t explain why the brothers would want to kill Gage Baird. His name wasn’t listed on the life insurance policy.”

Kinsley hadn’t uttered Gantz’s name so many times in such a short period since the trial. Once was way too many in her opinion. In all likelihood, Serra was in town on the belief that Gantz could have been responsible for Hanson’s death. The press release last week should have already forced him to move on to another story. As far as she was concerned, he could crawl back under his rock.

“I remember him now,” Alex said as he picked up another wing. Kinsley had failed to shift his focus. “Serra. Beck Serra. Didn’t he also interview Gantz when—”

“Did I mention that I had to reschedule the interview with Tobias Zayn?” Kinsley asked, not in the least bit apologetic that she had interrupted him. She had lost her appetite, but she forced herself to squeeze some ketchup next to her fries. “As long as there is no change in Gage Baird’s condition, Zayn agreed to meet me up in Halliday.”

“Halliday? Why not the station or the hospital?”

“I want to question J.J. Callahan,” Kinsley replied, relaxing somewhat now that Alex’s focus had swung away from Serra. She was still uneasy at the thought she had attracted unwanted attention from the reporter, but at least Alex had gone along with the switch in topics. “You remember. The farmhand who I mentioned last week. The rancher from Leeds left me a voicemail while I was in Bismarck. Apparently, he wasn’t the onewho met with Gage Baird. There is a third party who handles those types of sales. I have a call into the guy. Anyway, I was hoping that maybe J.J. could shed some light on Gage and Tobias. We might be missing something there.”

Kinsley pointed a fry in Alex’s direction.

“And no jokes about bull semen while I’m eating, okay?”

Alex laughed, forcing Kinsley to return his smile. She couldn’t help but want to find her own rock to crawl under until the press relinquished Gantz’s name from their networks. On the other hand, maybe she deserved to be reminded of her sins every five minutes.

A large, rustic mirror hung between the two restrooms, positioned high on the far wall. Despite its distance, she could still make out Beck Serra at the end of the bar. It was obvious that he was monitoring their booth, though his expression was inscrutable.

Why was Serra still in Fallbrook?

A part of her feared that she was the reason.

Kinsley shifted her gaze back to Alex. She forced herself to pick up her beer as if everything in her life was normal. She was allowing her imagination to run, and that was dangerous. That was when a situation could spiral out of control. She reassured herself that no one but Noah was a witness to what had taken place that fateful night.

No one.

Chapter Sixteen

Kinsley Aspen

October

Tuesday — 9:37 am

Sunlight filtered through vintagelace curtains, casting patterns on the worn linoleum floor. As Kinsley took a seat at the table, she couldn't help but suspect that Tobias kept his surroundings the same out of sentimentality. The walls of the farmhouse were adorned with framed family photos, some even black and white. Tobias' wife wasn't beautiful in the typical sense, but there was something infectious about the woman's smile. Her adoration for her husband was obvious from the way the camera caught her staring at him, and vice versa.

"The swelling on Gage's brain has subsided. The doctors are hoping they can lower his levels of sedation today." Tobias was standing at the counter pouring freshly brewed coffee into two porcelain mugs. There was a tremor in his hand, but there was also a hint of exhaustion in his voice. "First my granddaughter. Now my grandson. A

grandfather isn't supposed to outlive his children let alone his grandchildren."

Tobias quietly placed the glass carafe onto the burner. He remained in place for a brief moment with his back to her, but it was long enough for Kinsley to realize he was taking a moment to compose himself.

"I apologize for having to cancel our interview yesterday," Kinsley said in a soft tone to ease into a difficult conversation.

"I assume it had to do with the investigation." Tobias picked up the two mugs before making his way to the table. He set one in front of her, but he kept the one with the chipped rim for himself. He didn't speak again until he had settled in the chair opposite her. "Well? Did you find evidence to put that sonofabitch away?"

Tobias was clearly referring to Sebastian Hanson.

"I know about the three-million-dollar life insurance policy, detective."

"May I ask where you heard that from?" Kinsley wrapped her hand around the mug for some warmth. "You didn't mention anything about a policy last week."

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“I heard it from my daughter at the hospital yesterday.” Tobias paused, but he made no move to drink his coffee. Kinsley assumed he wasn’t going to expand on his reply, but she was proven wrong when he eventually delved deeper into the relationship with his daughter. “Louise found out about it on Friday morning when Sebastian paid her a visit. She didn’t want me to think the policy was a motive. I happen to disagree. You know, Louise never wanted anything to do with the farm. She hated the life. It was one of the reasons she moved to Fallbrook after her divorce. I’ve spoken to my daughter more in the past three days than I have in the past ten years.”

“I understand the intricacies of family tension, Mr. Zayn.”

“Do you?” Tobias shook his head in agitation, but his anger was directed at himself. “I’m dying, Detective. Lung cancer. It should have claimed me months ago. Hell, I wish it had so I hadn’t been alive to experience the loss of my granddaughter.”

Kinsley’s heart ached for the man.

“Is your health the reason you’ve been going into town more often lately, Mr. Zayn?”

“I don’t mean to make your job more difficult, but why is that any concern to you?”

“Your grandson was concerned that—”

Tobias muttered a few expletives.

“Gage thought I was gambling again, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Kinsley answered honestly, discerning that there was no need to hide the truth. “Your grandson even expressed concern that someone might have taken things too far in their attempt at collecting your debt.”

“I learned my lesson a long time ago, Detective Aspen. I haven’t gone near a bookie in years, and it’s my mission to ensure this farm thrives after my passing.” Tobias grabbed the handle of his mug. “I just hope that I get a chance to explain everything to Gage. The thought of him dying while believing that I...”

Tobias shook his head to dispel such unwanted thoughts before zeroing in on his granddaughter’s murder.

“Did Hanson lawyer up? Is that the reason you haven’t been able to arrest him? He had three million reasons to want my granddaughter dead. It’s taking every ounce of willpower I have not to take my rifle and hunt that sonofabitch down.”

“If you took matters into your own hands, then you would leave your daughter and grandson with more loss.”

“I’m dying anyway.”

“Then do so with dignity,” Kinsley fired back. Tobias wasn’t the type of man who desired pity. He valued honesty above all else. “You concentrate on your grandson, Mr. Zayn. I’ll focus on investigating your granddaughter’s murder.”

“Louise tells me that you don’t believe the two crashes are connected, but I find that hard to believe,” Tobias said before finally taking a drink of his coffee. The steam had long since faded from both mugs. “Are you holding something back from us, Detective?”

“No, sir. As far as the evidence is concerned, Gage was driving too fast around the

curve right before the covered bridge into Fallbrook.” Kinsley had read over the final report. “The pickup was in rough shape, and the brake pads were worn. Worn enough that they were almost metal on metal.”

“Gage was going to replace them himself. I could hear him coming from a mile away. I complained about it a few weeks ago. He said that Douglas was able to get him a discount at some garage in Fallbrook but hadn’t had time to pick them up.”

“Douglas?”

“I only met the man this weekend.” Tobias lifted one side of his mouth in contemplation. “Gage visits them a lot, and I’m not one to stand in the way of family. The man seems decent enough. Supportive of my daughter, and I guess that’s all I can ask for before I die.”

“You suggested that Sebastian killed Rachel over the life insurance policy,” Kinsley pointed out as she studied the man’s reaction. She wanted clarification on his previous statements. “Yet you believe the crash involving your grandson wasn’t an accident.”

“That’s a hell of a coincidence, then.” Tobias shook his head in disappointment. “If Gage’s brakes did fail, then it merely proves that we shouldn’t put off what is important. His ass wouldn’t be lying in a hospital bed with tubes coming out of his body otherwise.”

Tobias leaned forward and tapped his index finger firmly on the table.

“I changed my will three months ago instead of waiting until the last second. It could easily be me in that bed. It should be me in that bed.”

“You changed your will?” Kinsley understood the magnitude of such a decision, but

she wasn't so sure Tobias would agree with her. He was already dismissing her interest with a wave of his hand. "Mr. Zayn, did you leave the farm to your granddaughter and grandson?"

"There is nothing in my will that would have caused someone to want my Rachel dead. Nor Gage. My relationship with my daughter might be strained, but I made sure that all three of them had a hand in the pot."

Kinsley was prevented from asking further questions when a quick rap came at the front door. Without waiting for Tobias, the guest turned the knob and entered the house.

"Mr. Z, do you need anything while I'm in—" J.J. Callahan brought himself up short at the sight of Kinsley in the kitchen. Though the farmhouse didn't have an open layout, she was sitting in the chair closest to the doorway with a full view of the front door. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Considering that Kinsley's Jeep was parked out front, she didn't buy J.J.'s excuse. The way the young man had been observing her and Gage speaking last week had piqued her interest, but she was even more confident now that he had something important to share with her.

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“I’m driving into town for those supplies,” J.J. said once he had closed some distance to the doorway. He came just close enough to be in Tobias’ view all the while avoiding eye contact with Kinsley. “Do you need anything else, Mr. Z?”

“No, no,” Tobias muttered as he glanced toward the floor. It was as if he were running through a list in his mind. He eventually focused his gaze on J.J. “Take my truck. Keys are in the ignition.”

J.J. nodded his understanding before vacating the house. He closed the door quietly behind him, leaving Kinsley with a choice to make.

“Mr. Zayn, would you excuse me for a moment? I need to obtain a statement from J.J.” Kinsley stood, leaving her coffee on the table. “It’s just standard procedure.”

“Of course.” Tobias rose from his seat, as well. “I’ll use the time to call Louise and check in on Gage.”

Kinsley crossed through the living room and out the front door. She had worn her long thick sweater, leaving her blazer in the back seat of her Jeep. The cold gusts of wind blowing across the field were strong, and the sky was now a pitstop for charcoal clouds. The threat of rain had arrived, and she could only hope to keep the upcoming discussion brief and to the point.

“Mr. Callahan,” Kinsley called out right before he could open the driver’s side door of a black pickup truck. “Do you have a moment? I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

She closed the distance between them, taking notice of the dull paint covered with dust and mud. There had been no paint transfer in either Hanson crash. Whoever had run Rachel off the road had done so with expertise. Still, Tobias' truck didn't appear to have any dents or scratches consistent with forcing someone else off the road.

"What would you like to know?"

Kinsley had hoped J.J. would just spit out the information he so obviously wanted to share with her, but she suspected his reluctance had to do with loyalty. She started by being direct due to the undercurrent of anxiety in his posture.

"How well did you know Rachel Hanson?"

"Not well. I talked to her a few times here and there, but I mostly work with Gage. Besides, Rachel usually visits on the weekends. I'm not here on Sundays."

"Usually?" Kinsley pressed, noticing his Adam's apple shift as he swallowed hard. "You didn't happen to see Rachel last Wednesday, did you?"

J.J. ran his hand down the front of his jacket. His gaze also swung to the farmhouse, as if he was second-guessing his decision to speak with her.

"Mr. Callahan, I'm doing my best to give Mr. Zayn closure. Not only has he lost a granddaughter, but there is a very good chance that his grandson doesn't pull through." Kinsley was mindful not to bring Tobias' health into the conversation. "I can't imagine the grief that Mr. Zayn is going through right now. If you have information that can help me, spit it out."

"I saw Rachel driving through downtown on Wednesday night," J.J. reluctantly admitted as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "I had attended the church's fish fry. I was standing in the parking lot talking with some friends when I

saw her drive past. I want to go on record that while I thought she was headed here, she didn't. I brought it up to Mr. Z, but he said I must have been mistaken. No one came out to the farm that night."

"When did you bring this up to Mr. Zayn?"

"Thursday morning," J.J. reluctantly admitted as he pushed his hands farther into his pockets. The front material of his jacket was strained against the weight, and his regret at being honest was noticeable. "I didn't even know Rachel was killed until Friday morning."

"And Gage?" Kinsley turned her head slightly when a gust of wind whipped around the truck. The chill was sharp, and she fought the chatter of her teeth. "Where was he on Wednesday night?"

"Leeds," J.J. replied without hesitation. "He got back to the farm on Friday morning. I'm assuming Mr. Z called him about Rachel at some point, because Gage was upset when he drove up to the farm."

Several scenarios raced through Kinsley's mind, and none of them were good. If Rachel had been in Halliday, why not call her brother-in-law to say she couldn't meet him at the Plow? Was Tobias being truthful when he claimed Rachel never came by the farm that night?

"Mr. Z wouldn't lie, Detective." It was almost as if J.J. worshiped the ground Tobias walked on. "Besides, all you have to do is ask his daughter."

"Louise? I was under the impression that the relationship between Mr. Zayn and his daughter was somewhat contentious," Kinsley stated carefully so as not to cause J.J. to go silent on the subject. "Why would Louise be able to verify Rachel's movements on Wednesday night?"

“Ms. Baird wasn’t that far behind Rachel.” J.J. must have finally realized that Kinsley hadn’t been aware of that fact. He backed up a step, but the truck didn’t allow him to go too far. “You talked to Ms. Baird, right? Didn’t she tell you all this?”

“What vehicle was Louise Baird driving that night?”

“Her blue Honda Accord.”

“What time did you witness Ms. Hanson and Ms. Baird driving through Halliday?”

“I guess it was around eight o’clock.”

“And where did you go after the fish fry?”

“Back to my house.” J.J. shrugged, not seemingly at all concerned with her question. “I have two roommates. We played video games until after midnight, but then I fell asleep on the couch. Woke up around four-thirty, took a shower, and then drove here.”

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“Everything alright out here?” Tobias called out. Kinsley peered over her shoulder to find that he had walked out on the porch holding both cups of coffee. His frown conveyed his impatience. “Detective?”

“Thank you, J.J.” Kinsley smiled reassuringly at the young man. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She collected one of her business cards from the case and promptly handed it to him. “If you can think of anything else that might help the investigation, please give me a call.”

Kinsley didn’t wait for J.J. to get into Tobias’ truck. She turned around, mindful of the dirt and gravel of the driveway. The older dog lifted his head at her approach, but he remained in the grass.

“You can check with Ms. Baird, Detective.”

Kinsley raised a hand of acknowledgment at J.J., but she kept advancing toward the porch. She had several questions for Tobias. He monitored her progression, but she never once got the sense that he understood the significance of what J.J. had disclosed to her.

“Mr. Callahan witnessed Rachel and Louise driving through Halliday on Wednesday night,” Kinsley stated, not bothering to take a seat. “It was brought to your attention on Thursday morning, but you failed to mention it to me when we spoke on Friday. Why?”

“Rachel never came to the farm that night, so I assumed that J.J. was mistaken. He shares a house with roommates, and they tend to drink from time to time.” Tobias

leaned forward in his rocking chair. “As for my daughter, J.J. never mentioned Louise.”

Tobias stood from his rocking chair, using the arms as leverage. Once he was steady, she realized her mistake. He was going to reach out to Louise before Kinsley could question her. There would be no stopping him.

Fortunately, Kinsley would be able to request footage from any city traffic cameras. If needed, she would then submit for warrants for specific storefronts dependent on what the traffic footage displayed of the two vehicles in question.

A shoe size of eleven and a half had been worn by the killer.

Was it possible that Louise had attempted to outsmart the police by wearing her fiancé’s shoes? Or had Louise Baird and Douglas Glynn murdered Rachel Hanson together?

“Mr. Zayn?” Kinsley’s voice stopped Tobias from entering his home. He turned, his lips compressed in frustration and impatience. “You recently changed your will. I’m asking you one more time—would any of those adjustments have been a motive for murder?”

Chapter Seventeen

Alex Lanen

October

Tuesday — 11:19 am

It was obvious that the seedy used car dealership was the kind that thrived on

promises of desperation, relying on slick financing offers and the vulnerable positions of their customers. The lot was a collection of past-their-prime vehicles. Most had been angled in such a way as to hide their worn paint jobs and rust spots.

“Do you believe Zayn?” Alex asked Kinsley as he parked next to a faded inflatable banner. The advertisement item was struggling to remain upright against the strong winds and practically completely bent in the middle forcing the fabric to flap in the opposite direction. “Between the life insurance policy and the will, we’re assuming Hanson’s death is about greed.”

“I got the sense that Zayn believed what he was spouting today, but I’m still going to submit for a warrant. I want to read the details of the will myself,” Kinsley said, her voice coming through the Camaro’s speakers loud and clear. Alex shifted the gear into park, allowing the engine to idle while she continued her side of the conversation. “I’m driving back to the station now. It shouldn’t take long for us to obtain the traffic cam footage from the city of Halliday. Oh, and Izzy finished up with Rachel’s vehicle. There was no paint transfer left by the other vehicle involved.”

The disappointment in Kinsley’s tone was obvious.

Nothing about this investigation had been easy.

“I finished the paperwork that we needed to submit from the events over the weekend,” Alex divulged as he spotted the front door of the building open. “Speak of the devil.”

“What was that?”

Since Alex had murmured those last four words under his breath, it was no wonder that Kinsley hadn’t been able to hear him. His focus was currently on Joe Cider. The man had a smile pasted on his face wider than the dealership’s name on the front side

of the building.

“Nothing,” Alex responded as he reached out and hovered his finger over the engine button. He always carried the keyfob in the pocket of his pants. It had been his intention to drive one of the unmarked cruisers, but his preferred vehicle had already been signed out by Haugen. The other cars were older and uncomfortable for longer drives. “Listen, Hanson’s cell phone records came in. I forwarded you a copy.”

“I’ll comb through them this afternoon to verify Jack Hanson’s statement.”

“Talk to you soon.”

Alex pressed the engine button, effectively ending their call. By this time, Cider was halfway across the parking lot. The man had paused only to zip his jacket. Alex reached for his own before opening the driver’s side door.

“Morning,” Joe called out cheerfully as he approached Alex. “I’ve got to say, that’s a nice-looking ride you have there. I can only imagine what your monthly payments are, though.”

Alex refrained from immediately replying to the leading comments. He reached into his pocket, pressing the lock button on his keyfob. The loud beep signified the locks had engaged, and the task bought time for him to put on his jacket. He wasn’t so sure that they would be standing outside for long after he explained the reason for his visit.

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As Alex adjusted his collar so that it rested smoothly over his suit jacket, Joe lowered his gaze to the badge clipped to his belt. He had honestly expected to have a brief conversation about Rachel Hanson, the man's previous employment, and clear up any misunderstanding that might have taken place at the Fallbrook dealership. What Alex hadn't anticipated was Joe Cider's fight-or-flight instinct to kick in. From the way Cider's smile faltered and eventually faded, flight had won hands down.

"Shit," Alex muttered under his breath when Joe spun around and bolted across the parking lot. "Cider, don't do this!"

Alex had no choice but to surge forward. The soles of his shoes pounded against the pavement as he took chase. The pursuit had them weaving through the parked cars in the lot before spilling into the small intersection. Mott wasn't that large of a town, but Cider had the advantage. He had knowledge of every alley, road, and parcel of land that could aid him in disappearing from sight.

Cider suddenly darted across the street, narrowly avoiding a vehicle whose driver had to slam on her brakes to avoid hitting Alex. The brief interruption had him slowing down and deviating from his path. As the woman pressed her horn in anger, Alex managed to veer around the back end and spot Cider already running down the sidewalk.

"Damn it."

Cider glanced back before darting down a narrow alleyway. Alex's breathing was ragged, and the frigid air seared his lungs. It didn't help that his leg muscles were protesting with every lunge forward.

Not wanting to get caught off guard, Alex was forced to slow his pace as he entered the alleyway. The rattling of a chain-link fence being made and the sight of Cider attempting to scramble over the barrier had Alex picking up speed. Without hesitation, he jumped with the intention of snatching Cider's pant leg.

Alex missed the fabric by mere inches.

The thought of his gym bag on the floor by his desk at the station came to mind as he climbed over the fence. He didn't land gracefully, but then again, neither had Cider. Fortunately, there was an open field ahead of them. The only plausible explanation for taking such a barren route was all-out panic.

Alex's body ached from exertion, but he would be damned if he had to explain to Kinsley that he couldn't keep up with a man at least ten years his junior. He allowed his pent-up frustration and anger over Laura ending their relationship to fuel him. He pushed himself to run faster, closing the distance between them.

There was a small house up ahead with two empty laundry lines. Cider would have to duck or go around them. Either way, Alex had the advantage.

Seizing the opportunity, he lunged and managed to tackle Cider to the ground. The man thrashed beneath Alex's weight. Unable to get a good hold of Cider's arms to pin him into the dry grass, they grappled with each other until Alex managed to finally grip the man's wrist and yank his arm to put pressure on his shoulder.

Unfortunately, Alex's effort had not been in time to stop Cider's elbow from connecting with his jaw.

"Okay! Okay!"

"Don't move," Alex yelled as he reached for his handcuffs. "You have the right

remain to remain silent. Anything you say..."

By the time Alex was done reciting the Miranda rights, a woman wearing an oversized jacket had stepped out onto her front porch. She already had a cell phone pressed to her ear.

"Stay down," Alex muttered as he shifted to a kneeling position, refusing to sit his ass on the cold ground. "Ma'am, please tell the police that an FPD detective is on the scene. Have them send a patrol car this way."

Alex rested a forearm on his knee, taking a moment to draw some oxygen into his lungs. He could barely move his jaw from side to side. Kinsley was going to give him hell over this injury.

He hadn't given real thought to taking the sergeant's exam, but he was beginning to understand the reason behind Laura's choice to do so. Granted, a promotion meant more paperwork and responsibility, but it beat the hell out of chasing perps and pulling a hamstring.

"Why run, Cider?"

Alex didn't get a response to his question until forty minutes after a patrol car had transferred Joe Cider to the sheriff's office, which just so happened to be located inside the county courthouse. The officer had dropped Alex off at the used car dealership to pick up his car. After explaining to the owner that he would be short a salesperson for the rest of the day, Alex drove over to the courthouse to conduct his interview.

Seeing as Cider hadn't requested a lawyer, Alex would take advantage of that poor decision. He pulled out a chair from the metal table without a word. One of the officers had handed him a cup of coffee, which he had gratefully taken before

entering the small room.

“I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong. I didn’t kill her, man.”

“Kill who?” Alex asked casually as he lifted the steaming cup to his mouth. He took a drink, not minding the hot temperature. “I don’t recall accusing you of murder, Joe.”

Under normal circumstances, Alex would have addressed Joe by his surname. Given that the man forced Alex to chase him down through town, across an open field, and into someone’s front yard, he wasn’t in that good of a mood. Add to that the pain in his jaw, and he would go so far as to say he was very irritable.

It was evident that Alex’s response had caught Joe off guard.

“Seriously?” Joe glanced from Alex to the door and then back again. It was as if he were expecting two large officers to come barging into the room to cart his ass off to jail. When Alex continued to drink his coffee as if he had all the time in the world, Joe eventually emitted a sigh of relief. “Shit. I thought this was about...never mind. Forget I said anything. I overreacted, man. I didn’t mean anything by it. Running from you, I mean. Mind taking these cuffs off?”

“You worked at Birdie’s Auto in Fallbrook last year,” Alex pointed out, not addressing the handcuffs.

“Is that what this is about?” Joe not only smiled, but he began to reveal a lot of information that Alex would pass on to the management of said dealership. “You can’t prove anything. I allegedly got some from some customers. So what? Like I said, no one can prove it, and I can think of at least three other salespeople who take kickbacks all the time. I’ll give you names, if you want.”

“Allegedly?”

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“Yeah, allegedly.” Joe shifted in his chair. “A customer mentioned something in front of our finance people, but she misunderstood the deal that I made with the customer. One thing led to another, and she had more clout than I did at the place. I was let go. I harbor no hard feelings, though.”

“Is that right?” Alex kept ahold of his coffee cup as he studied Joe. The guy wasn’t too bright. “So, can you sit there and honestly tell me you make just as much from that dingy car dealership as the one in Fallbrook?”

“Well, not quite,” Joe admitted, but he was back to flashing the smile he used to deceive customers. “But the perks of the job make up for it.”

“Let’s walk this conversation back to when you claimed you hadn’t killed anyone. Who exactly were you talking about?”

“It was nothing. Really. I—”

“Joe, you can’t just blurt out to a detective that you didn’t kill a woman. You did refer to the person in question as aher, correct?”

“Look, I saw on the news that Rachel Hanson was killed in some barn last week.” Joe visibly swallowed and laced his fingers together on the table. “Considering she was the one who got me fired, I assumed you thought that maybe I had something to do with it. I didn’t. You should know that upfront. Are we being recorded?”

“You didn’t want revenge? You mentioned kickbacks. Just how much money are we talking about?”

Joe was beginning to catch on, and he cracked his knuckles to ease his anxiety. If he answered the question, he was all but giving a signed confession. If he didn't answer, no doubt he thought it make him appear guilty to the police.

"There is no proof that I was taking kickbacks during my employment in Fallbrook."

"The truth of the matter, Joe, is that I'm not here because of some kickback." Alex set his coffee down far enough away so he could lean forward on the table with his forearms. "I'm here because I do believe you harbored resentment against Rachel Hanson. Did you kill her?"

Joe jerked back in his chair.

"I think you saw an opportunity to make Rachel pay for getting you fired," Alex pressed, never once breaking his stare with Joe. "You followed Rachel on her way back to Fallbrook. Waited for the perfect time to force her car off the road. You then hunted her down through the woods to an isolated barn in the middle of nowhere. Did you plan to kill her? Or did you just snap? When did you realize that you could stage it like the murders committed by Calvin Gantz?"

"I didn't—"

"Just admit it, Joe. You pulled out a knife, and you slit her throat."

By the time Alex had finished painting a vivid picture, Joe had lost all color in his face. His forthcoming denial was vehement, and the desperate plea seemed genuine.

"You have to believe me! I didn't chase her, I didn't hunt her, and I sure as hell didn't kill her. I didn't. I swear on my mother's grave," Joe yelled as he banged on the table. The handcuffs rattled as he pressed the bases of his palms against his eyes. He drew in a ragged breath before composing himself. By the time he lowered his arms, Alex

recognized the situation for what it was—he had pressed too hard. “I want a lawyer.”

“I’ll see to it that you have access to a phone.” Alex pushed back from the table, picking up his coffee all in one motion. He would toss a hook out before exiting the room, though there was no indication he would get a bite. “You give your lawyer an alibi, Joe. Once I’m given the details, I’ll be able to confirm or deny your story.”

Alex made it two steps before Joe took the bait.

“An alibi? I have an—”

“You already lawyered up, Joe. Too late.” Alex shrugged, implying that it wasn’t his problem to deal with now. “Come to think of it, I haven’t had a need for a lawyer myself in a very long time. What is the going rate for a good defense attorney these days? Got to be at least three hundred dollars an hour, right?”

“I don’t need a lawyer. I take it back,” Joe blurted out, the pitch of his voice filled with eagerness. “I have an alibi. You can check it out for yourself.”

Alex made it seem as if he was mulling over the offer.

“Look, I heard on the news that Rachel was killed last Wednesday night. Is that right?” Joe spread his hands out as far as the cuffs would allow. “I was with a woman the whole time. Sandy. Cindy. Wait...Mindy! Her name was Mindy.”

“Mindy...” Alex drew out the woman’s name, hoping that Joe would provide her surname. Unfortunately, he couldn’t supply the information. “You slept with a woman named Mindy, but you don’t know her last name? Where did you meet her?”

Joe closed his hands until his fingers were tight against his palms. It didn’t take long for Alex to get a whiff of the direction this discussion was headed.

“Are you telling me that you sold her a car?”

“Her name is in our database,” Joe fessed up as he sat a little straighter. “She bought the car the following day. Take me back to the dealership, and I’ll get her name and number for you. She’ll—”

Alex tossed the rest of his coffee in the tall garbage can by the door. He reached for the handle, not surprised when Cider talked so fast that it was as if his words were strung together as one.

“Joe, you aren’t going anywhere.”

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“You can confirm my alibi, though! I was with that woman all night. Just ask her, and—”

“You aren’t being arrested for Rachel Hanson’s murder, Joe.”

“I’m not?” Joe leaned his head back and let out a moan of relief. “Oh, my God! Thank you. Thank you so—”

“You’re under arrest for assaulting a police officer.” Alex motioned for the officer standing not ten feet away in the hallway to enter the room. “Take Mr. Cider to booking.”

Chapter Eighteen

Kinsley Aspen

October

Tuesday — 3:51 pm

“I’m walking into the hospital now.” Kinsley turned her head as another gust of wind whipped through the parking lot. “The security footage from Halliday’s lone traffic cam confirms that Louise Baird was following her daughter that night. The angle made it too difficult to see if someone was in the passenger seat.”

“Do you have someone with you?” Alex asked over the drone of several conversations. He had shared with her the details of his morning. He was still at the

Mott County Courthouse finishing some paperwork at the sheriff's station. "I think there has been enough excitement for the day, don't you?"

"Blake and Hendricks," Kinsley replied as she stepped up on the curb. The two officers were right behind her. "And speak for yourself. It took me two hours to get a judge to sign off on our warrants."

There was the slimmest of possibilities that Louise and Douglas were guilty of murder, but Kinsley was having difficulty connecting the dots. Tobias' will confirmed that he had included his daughter and grandchildren. Kinsley had also taken the time to comb through Rachel's phone records. Per their statements, Sebastian and Jack Hanson had given accurate timelines for their discussions with Rachel.

That wasn't the case with two other individuals—Louise and Gage Baird.

"Are you driving back to Fallbrook?"

"In about an hour or two. Call me if I need to head back sooner."

Kinsley disconnected the call as she entered the hospital. She would have turned to address both Officers Blake and Hendricks, but the sight of a familiar male subject standing at the information desk brought her to a halt.

Beck Serra was in a conversation with a volunteer behind the counter, having no sense of his surroundings. For having short black hair, it was nowhere near as perfectly trimmed as Alex kept his. Beck also sported an uneven five o'clock shadow, proof that he didn't have a nine-to-five job.

"I'll meet you both at the elevator," Kinsley informed Blake and Kendrick without glancing in their direction. "I won't be long."

Beck turned around from the information desk. His gaze collided with hers, and she got the immediate sense that he hadn't planned this encounter. He narrowed his eyes at the sight of the two officers veering toward the elevator banks.

Kinsley waited for Beck to close the distance between them. She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of it being the other way around. There was a confidence in his stride, yet the way he shoved his hands into the pockets of his coat gave way to his discomfort at being caught at the hospital.

"Detective Aspen," Beck greeted, his voice casual despite the tightness in his jaw. "I don't know if you remember, but we met last year during—"

"Save it, Serra." Kinsley cut him off, her words clipped, leaving no room for misunderstanding. "In case you missed last week's press release, this investigation has nothing to do with Calvin Gantz."

"I'm not here about Gantz."

Beck's response had Kinsley refraining from stating aloud her preplanned response. She switched gears, fully aware that she was being lured into a conversation full of potholes.

"I didn't realize you took up residency in Fallbrook."

"I didn't," Beck replied, seemingly more comfortable with their conversation than before. His gaze swept over her face as if attempting to read her thoughts. "I'm still freelance. I drove into town last week when the rumors about Gantz started to surface."

Kinsley remained silent, not wanting to lead this discussion to a topic she would rather avoid. It would stand to reason that Beck hadn't left town due to curiosity

about the case. Either that or her father had agreed to another interview. She wouldn't put it past him to try and use the findings of the investigation to his advantage.

"I'm due home tomorrow, but I thought...why not write a piece about the Hanson murder while I'm here? I mean, it would be foolish to waste a trip." Beck gestured over his shoulder toward the information desk. "I was just checking to see if Gage Baird was still in ICU."

"Is that so?" Kinsley asked, mindful not to give out any information about the case. She had caught his interest in the two officers near the elevator. "Well, I don't want to keep you. Good luck with your article, and have a safe trip home, Mr. Serra."

"Is there any update on Gantz's whereabouts?"

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Kinsley managed to take three steps before Beck's next inquiry had her stopping and shifting her weight. She debated being drawn back into another discussion, but it would only serve to delay the inevitable.

"It seems as if your memory has failed you, Mr. Serra." Kinsley still held her cell phone in her hand. She took her time slipping it inside the pocket of her sweater before turning to face Beck. "Calvin Gantz is a free man. While it is true the department performed a wellness check after receiving a phone call from Gantz's employer, no foul play was discovered at Gantz's home. It was obvious from the officers' findings that the man simply left town...as is his right."

"You don't find it odd?"

"I find many things odd, Mr. Serra," Kinsley replied with a slight shrug. "Gantz leaving town isn't one of them. A free man has the right to come and go as he pleases. Given what took place last year, I'm sure he wanted a clean break."

"Gantz never hinted in our interview that he wanted to leave town, Detective Aspen." Beck wasn't backing down, and it was apparent that there wasn't a thing Kinsley could do or say to change his mind. "Considering the hate the man received after his arrest, I'm surprised that the department isn't a little more concerned with the man's wellbeing. Unless, of course, you discovered evidence in his home last Friday to heissafe and sound."

Kinsley didn't care for the way Serra's last statement had been worded, and she found herself even more cautious than before. His demeanor suggested that he had some sort of knowledge of the truth, but that wasn't at all possible. He was fishing for

a story, and she needed to make sure he didn't end up with one.

"You've already indicated that you've read our press release from last week, Mr. Serra." Kinsley casually shrugged to indicate there wasn't anything more to disclose. "I have nothing more to add. Have a safe trip back home."

Kinsley strode toward the elevator where Officers Blake and Hendricks had managed to time the parting of the elevator doors. She stepped inside, purposefully avoiding any eye contact with Serra. Nothing about their conversation had made sense.

"Isn't that the journalist who had a one-on-one interview with Gantz?" Hendricks asked as he pressed the button for the eighth floor. Kinsley noticed that Blake pinched the bridge of his nose in disbelief. "And your dad?"

"One and the same," Kinsley responded as she wished for the elevator to move a bit faster. "Would you mind going back out to the parking lot to wait for the forensics tech? If all goes well and Ms. Baird cooperates, I'll send Drew down with the car keys and the location of where she parked her vehicle."

The elevator passed another floor with a muted beep.

"I can do that, but wouldn't it be easier to—"

"Kendricks?" Officer Blake stepped forward when the doors slid open. He put out an arm and gestured for Kinsley to step out. "Go wait for the forensics tech."

"Thanks, Drew," Kinsley murmured after the doors closed. Seeing as the two of them ran the softball team for the department in the summers, he was aware of the toll last year's trial had taken on her. "Let's check the waiting room before bothering the staff."

Kinsley came to a stop just inside the doorway. She spotted Louise and Douglas talking in hushed tones near the corner. Fortunately, there was only one other person in the waiting room, and she had a pair of earbuds in while speaking softly into her phone.

“Ms. Baird. Mr. Glynn.” Kinsley didn’t doubt that Tobias had gotten ahold of his daughter. If it was at all possible, the woman’s eyes appeared more bloodshot than yesterday. “I have a warrant to search your vehicle.”

“I need to explain that—”

“Don’t, Louise,” Douglas warned as Officer Blake handed Louise the thin piece of paper. “We should wait to hear back from our lawyer.”

Douglas took the warrant from Louise’s hand, but Kinsley didn’t think the woman noticed in the slightest.

“We should have been upfront in the first place,” Louise snapped back before turning her attention toward Kinsley. “Detective, we didn’t mean to lie to you. We didn’t lie. We simply didn’t tell you the whole truth because we knew you wouldn’t look for anyone else.”

“Why don’t you hand over your keys to Officer Blake, and then you can explain to me why you attempted to obstruct the investigation into your daughter’s murder,” Kinsley stated civilly despite her reluctance to do so. She truly empathized with Louise’s loss, but not at the expense of doing her job. “It might be best that we conduct this interview down at the station. I can—”

“No, please,” Louise pleaded, stepping forward and grabbing Kinsley’s arm. Officer Blake reached for the older woman, but Kinsley raised her other hand to stop him. “I can’t leave Gage. Please.”

“Sit down, Ms. Baird,” Kinsley directed quietly so as not to cause a scene. The other woman in the waiting room was no longer focused on her phone. “Where are your keys?”

“Louise, don’t—”

“Enough, Douglas.” Louise shot him a glare as she retreated a few steps to the chair where she had set her purse. She collected her car keys before handing them over to Officer Blake. “Here. Do you need Douglas’ keys, as well?”

Kinsley had to amend the warrant to exclude Douglas’ truck after the judge made it clear he would only sign off on Louise’s vehicle. She kept that detail to herself, responding that the woman’s keys were all that was needed at the moment.

“Do what you have to do, but please do not make me leave my son’s bedside.”

Kinsley nodded to Drew that he could leave the waiting room. It wasn’t like they had any evidence for an arrest, and Kinsley wasn’t about to drag a mother away from her son’s bedside just because of a mistake. At least, she was hoping that was all there was to the decision to omit the truth.

Douglas seemed torn between staying with Louise and accompanying Officer Blake down to the parking lot. He chose the former and claimed the seat next to Louise.

Kinsley took her time positioning one of the empty chairs so that she could face the couple. She even removed her sweater and laid it over her lap before getting straight to the point.

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“I’ll refrain from asking any questions until you give me a full explanation as to what took place last Wednesday night.” Kinsley then met Douglas’ stare. “Not a word from you, Mr. Glynn. Am I clear?”

“Yes.”

It was obvious that Douglas wasn’t thrilled with Louise’s decision to speak with Kinsley, which meant that she needed to hear the woman out before he changed her mind.

“We didn’t mean to cause any trouble,” Louise said as she clasped her hands in her lap. The tissue could be seen peeking out between her fingers. “I didn’t want to be a distraction in the investigation. You see, I found out last Wednesday that my father has lung cancer. To hear that he could die...well, I realized that I was being petty. Had been for years. He always put the farm above his family. He still does, and it took me a long time to understand that I can’t change him. I called Rachel, and I asked her to meet me in Halliday. We arranged a time, but I didn’t want to tell her what we had discovered over the phone.”

Douglas reached out and covered Louise’s hands with his. His touch appeared to give her the strength to continue her version of events. Kinsley kept her promise to remain silent during the recollection.

“Rachel and I met at the front entrance gate. I explained what I had learned while at dinner. I suppose I should clarify what happened earlier that day. I ran into an old family friend at the restaurant. She works at my former doctor’s office, and she asked me how I was doing,” Louise said as her voice became softer with emotion. “I knew

then that something was wrong, so I went along with the conversation. Audry let it slip that the oncologist my father was referred to happened to be the best in the state of North Dakota. She even went so far as to say the oncologist specialized in lung cancer.”

“We left the restaurant right afterward,” Douglas added on as he kept ahold of Louise’s hands. Kinsley arched a brow to remind him of her warning, and he quickly finished what had been on his mind. “Louise called Rachel while we were on our way home.”

“When I met Rachel at the farm, I explained everything. She was, of course, upset. She talked me out of confronting Dad, stressing over and over that she believed he would tell us about this diagnosis when he was good and ready. If I hadn’t driven away...”

“I’m having difficulty understanding why you didn’t tell me the truth last Wednesday night.” Kinsley couldn’t help but think that Louise’s story fell short. “Why would you lie to the police, Ms. Baird?”

“I had nothing to do with my daughter’s murder, Detective Aspen.” Louise had straightened her shoulders in defense of her actions. “Nothing. If you had known that I was the last one to see her alive, you would have wasted time on me or...”

Kinsley was beginning to understand Louise’s thought process. She was concerned about Douglas.

“What time did you meet Rachel at the farm?”

“I suppose it was a little before eight o’clock,” Louise replied as she quickly shifted, the abrupt movement causing Douglas to release her hands. She reached into her purse to retrieve her wallet. Before too long, she was holding out what appeared to be

a receipt. “I had to stop at the gas station. I spotted Rachel’s car at the intersection, but I didn’t notice anyone following her. As a matter of fact, I was able to pull out behind her and follow her through town to the farm.”

“Who drove away first?”

“I did.” Louise’s voice had dropped to a whisper. “If I had known—”

Louise leaned back in her chair, unable to finish her sentence. Once she had composed herself, she diverted the conversation to her son-in-law.

“Sebastian and Jack have to be the ones who murdered my daughter, Detective Aspen. Three million dollars? Why would he take such a policy out on Rachel’s life?”

Kinsley had posed the same question to Sebastian Hanson’s lawyer. He had taken his brother’s advice, and there would no longer be any interviews without legal counsel present. An answer had been supplied to her this morning, and she could only assume such a quick turnaround had been at the behest of said representation.

“I spoke with Tobias this morning, as you well know. He mentioned that you have known about the policy for a while. It’s also my understanding that the life insurance policy was taken out a couple of years ago when your daughter and son-in-law first began talking about starting a family. Sebastian took one out for himself, as well.”

Kinsley paused when a man entered the waiting room. He didn’t even glance their way as he made his way to the small coffee station on the opposite side of the room.

“Ms. Baird, you were adamant that Sebastian would never have hurt Rachel, even with the knowledge of such a hefty life insurance policy. Why the sudden change of heart?”

“Sebastian called me yesterday,” Louise revealed with a quick sniffle. “At first, I thought he was calling to check on Gage. Then my son-in-law went into the details of what happened this weekend. He admitted that he lied to Rachel about being sterile, and how Jack was going to tell her the truth. Sebastian lied to my daughter, Detective Aspen. He let Rachel believe something was wrong with her. Any faith or trust that I had for the man evaporated during that phone call.”

Kinsley took a moment to weigh Louise’s statement. It was plausible that her phone conversation with her son-in-law had panned out in such a way. The same went for the woman’s decision to omit the truth about being with Rachel last Wednesday, though Kinsley would reserve judgment until more of the timeline from that night was filled in.

“Mr. Glynn, were you with Louise last Wednesday night?”

Douglas and Louise shared a concerned glance.

“I was home. Alone.” Douglas snapped his fingers as if something had just occurred to him. “Our neighbor across the street has a doorbell camera. It has a direct view of our driveway. That footage will confirm that I didn’t leave the house with Louise.”

Unless the doorbell camera had been activated during the evening hours, there would be no footage to confirm the man’s alibi. And even if such confirmation could be determined by such a recording, Douglas could have exited the back of the house without being noticed by anyone.

“Did you purchase brakes for Gage?”

“Yes,” Douglas replied, seemingly confused by the switch in topics. “Gage asked if I could get him a discount through my company, and I said yes. He had to go out of town last week, and he didn’t have time to pick them up. Are you saying that...”

“We believe the accident was a result of high speed and the lack of pads on the brakes,” Kinsley revealed truthfully. Considering there was no evidence to the contrary, she would stick to the facts in the case. “I’ll have Officer Blake return your car keys when forensics is done examining your vehicle.”

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Kinsley stood before slipping her arms through the sleeves of her sweater coat. Louise was attempting to reassure Douglas that the accident wasn't his fault, while he kept repeating that he should have made time to give the equipment to Gage. Kinsley took her time to place the chair back in its designated spot before requesting an update on Gage.

"Is there any update on your son's condition?"

Douglas put his arm around Louise as her eyes filled with tears. She broke down, and he pulled her gently against his chest.

"The doctors believe that he will gradually come to by this evening. We'll know then if there was any permanent damage to his brain," Douglas revealed in anguish as he rubbed Louise's back in comfort. "Detective Aspen, we didn't mean to hurt the investigation with our omissions. We just wanted you to focus on catching the son of a bitch who is hurting this family."

"If the two of you believe Sebastian Hanson killed Rachel for her life insurance policy, what reason would he have for going after Gage?" Kinsley asked, not bothering to keep the skepticism from her voice. "Gage wasn't even listed as a co-beneficiary on the policy."

Louise had composed herself enough to answer Kinsley's question.

"When Gage called me on Friday to let me know what time he would be arriving at the house, he mentioned that he wanted to talk to me about something," Louise disclosed while Douglas retrieved more tissues for her. "I didn't think anything of it

at the time, but what if Gage figured out who murdered Rachel? What if my son was nothing more than a loose end to the Hansons?"

Chapter Nineteen

Kinsley Aspen

October

Wednesday — 7:48 am

"Fall lasted all but two weeks," Kinsley complained as she unzipped her jacket. The fact that she had to pull it off the hanger before leaving the house this morning hadn't brightened her morning in the least. "It dropped below freezing last night, Earl."

"We should be back in the fifties in a couple of days, Kin." Earl handed Kinsley one of the gray buckets so she could walk through the metal detector. "You can go back to your sweater coats for another week or two."

"Not long enough." Kinsley removed her holster clip. "Has Alex shown up yet? He was stopping at Carol's to pick up coffee and donuts."

Carol's Cafe was two storefronts down from The Bucket. Since Kinsley came into town from the South and used the back parking lot, Alex was usually the one designated to pick up breakfast.

"Not yet. Your father is here, though. One of his clients was arrested a couple hours ago on a DUI."

Kinsley dropped her keys into the bucket. Earl had always looked after her, and she appreciated the warning. Considering that her dad would be on another floor of the

station, she only had to worry about the length of time it took her to walk to the elevator.

“Coming through!” Sam sidestepped two officers in deep discussion. He had a travel mug in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. “Aspen, you sure you don’t want to be my partner? We got ourselves a stiff up north at Terrapin Lake.”

“Take a pair of boots, Haugen!” Earl called out, but Sam was already through the door. “Mark my words, Kin. That man will be covered hip-deep in mud when he gets back to the station.”

“Someone discovered a body up at Terrapin Lake?”

Kinsley wasn’t sure how she managed to say those words aloud when she could barely hear her own voice. Her pulse hammered in her ears, and she had to grip her keys in the palm of her hand to keep them from falling onto the tiled floor.

“Yeah,” Earl stated as he observed Sam exit the station. “I haven’t been up there since I was a boy. Way before the county instituted a no-fishing policy.”

Kinsley reacted before she thought through her decision. She quickly dashed toward the entrance, opening the door and calling out to Sam before he reached his unmarked cruiser parked out front.

“Haugen!” Kinsley waited for Sam to turn around. “Where’s Mitchell?”

“In some meeting with Thompson about her promotion. Come Monday, I’ll be saddled with a new partner.” Sam shrugged as he put the small paper bag in between his teeth while he pulled out the keys to the car. Once he had the driver’s side door open, he grabbed the bag and tossed it in the seat. “You sure you don’t want to take one for the team? Lanen has more patience than me, anyway.”

“I’ll go with you, but only for the morning,” Kinsley warned as she held the door open wider for another officer to pass through. “Let me collect my firearm.”

Fear threatened to choke her, but she managed to paste a smile on her face by the time she returned to collect her belongings. Earl had set the gray bucket aside to allow others through the metal detector.

“Do me a favor?” Kinsley asked as she clipped the holster to her belt. She slipped her keys into the pocket of her jacket. “Let Alex know that I’m helping out Sam for the morning. I’ll be back before noon.”

“You got it, Kin.”

Kinsley made her way outside. By the time she settled in the passenger seat, Sam already had the contents of the small brown bag balanced on his leg. It was an egg sandwich, and it took every ounce of willpower she had not to dry heave at the wretched odor.

“Like old times, huh?”

Sam checked his side mirror before merging with traffic. He navigated them through downtown, but it wasn't long until they were on a back road leading to the one place she had no desire to return.

“Old times?” Kin asked as she reached out to adjust the vent. She was cold, though she wasn't sure any amount of heat would chase the chill away. “We were never partners, Sam.”

“We rode together for weeks.” Sam lifted the egg sandwich and took a bite. Kinsley turned away to observe the passing scenery. “Remember? You had just made detective, Alex had court, and Mitchell was on vacation.”

“It was one week, and three of those days were spent typing up paperwork that you promised Mitchell would be done by the time she got back from Florida,” Kinsley replied wryly, not against having something else to think about during their ride up to Terrapin Lake. She readjusted the vent to keep the rancid smell from blowing in her face. “Any details on the vic?”

“No,” Sam replied around a mouthful of food. Kinsley slowly released a breath. “Some fisherman found a body. What's going on with your case? Thompson was pretty pissed at the thought of Gantz being back in the picture.”

“Someone broke into Gantz's residence to make us think he had returned to town. There were no prints on the glass, and the kitchen sink and front door had been wiped down.”

“Got to give an asshole credit when he thinks outside the box, huh?”

While Sam continued to eat his sandwich, Kinsley fixed her gaze on the road and attempted to relax her muscles. She was stiff to the point of pain. Images of Gantz’s bloated remains floating to the surface of the dingy lake flashed through her mind.

“Is it the husband? It’s usually the spouse,” Sam said after he polished off his breakfast. “I heard Lanen on the phone the other day. A three-million-dollar life insurance policy? Hell, I’m pretty sure Nori would off me in a second for that much cash.”

“Nori loves you,” Kinsley replied, doing her best to keep any hint of desperation from her tone. Her darkest fears were about to materialize, and all she could picture was Lily’s heartbreaking reaction when her father was arrested as an accessory to murder. “I think you’re safe, Sam. Plus, the husband has an alibi.”

“Hired hit?”

Kinsley was prevented from responding when her cell phone began to ring from her coat pocket. She answered on the third ring.

“Hey, Kin. Sorry I wasn’t able to get back to you yesterday,” Owen said over what sounded like a room full of people. “I only have a minute, but I wanted you to know there was nothing to enhance on that footage. No reporters were lurking in the shadows or anything like that.”

Kinsley should have been relieved upon such disclosure, but she couldn’t bring herself to celebrate such news. What awaited her at the lake was worse than Beck Serra monitoring her every move. She had noticed Sam’s inquisitive gaze switching from the road to her and then back again. Owen’s voice was relatively deep, therefore a bit louder than she would have preferred given her close proximity to Sam.

“Thanks, Owen. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Kinsley didn’t give Owen a chance to reply. She disconnected the call and tucked her cell phone back into her pocket.

“You having trouble with reporters? I can give Lewis Mullin a call at the local station. If it’s a national channel, I can’t help you.”

Kinsley checked the time on the radio, and they still had quite the drive ahead of them. She should have followed behind in her own vehicle.

“You remember Beck Serra?”

“Isn’t that the freelance reporter who talked your father into a sit-down interview with Gantz?”

“One and the same.” Kinsley pointed the vent toward her now that the rancid odor was receding from the interior. “Serra was at The Bucket the other night, and he showed up at the hospital yesterday. Our victim’s brother is in ICU.”

“The guy probably came back to town when he thought Gantz had returned,” Sam said with a dismissive shrug. He picked up his travel mug and took a gulp of coffee, which was something Kinsley hadn’t had a chance to drink this morning. An empty stomach was probably a good thing to have at the moment. “Unless this Serra guy is hounding you. Is he? I can have—”

“Nothing I can’t handle, Sam. Besides, Serra mentioned something about heading back to Bismarck.” Kinsley cleared her throat. “I’m sure he has already left town.”

Fortunately, the rest of the drive was occupied with Sam’s endless complaints about breaking in a new partner. He brought up two names who were possible contenders

for the open position, and Kinsley didn't envy him a green detective.

Both individuals were from patrol.

She struggled with her conflicting emotions, because she would have given almost anything to have Sam's concerns over those plaguing her for the past year. As they arrived on the scene, two patrol cars were parked behind a Range Rover and an F-150. From the fishing decals on the bumper of the truck, it was clear which vehicle belonged to the fisherman currently speaking to two officers.

Kinsley didn't reach for her seatbelt right away. She would wait until Sam exited the vehicle first so he wouldn't notice the tremor in her hands. Hell, it was more than a tremor. She was shaking almost as badly as she had been the night when she and Noah had rolled Gantz's vehicle into the lake.

A sudden, loud horn blasted through the air.

Sam didn't notice Kinsley's distressed reaction, which was severe enough that the seatbelt cut into her neck. He was already out of the car and yelling good-naturedly back at Wally, who had parked right behind them. He must have left the station within seconds of Sam and Kinsley pulling away from the curb.

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“I saw you got your ass whipped last weekend in Fantasy Football,” Sam called out before shutting the driver’s side door. His voice still carried through the closed window as Kinsley managed to unfasten her seatbelt. “Bet you were wishing you had joined Vice’s league. Did you hear about...”

Kinsley slowly opened her door and stepped out while Sam and Wally were busy discussing football players who could potentially give them the most points this weekend. She forced herself to lift a hand in greeting before quickly making her way over to one of the officers who had been approaching through some thick grass. She didn’t recall the vegetation being so dense last year.

Earl had been mistaken about needing boots. Under normal circumstances, his advice would have been warranted, but the ground was almost frozen after the last few nights of the temperature dipping below freezing.

“Detective, you’ll want to be careful,” the officer called out as he all but held up a hand to stop her progress. “As a matter of fact, I don’t think you’ll be needed at all today.”

“What do you mean?” Kinsley asked as she continued to step forward anyway. “It’s my understanding that the fisherman found a body.”

Kinsley was close enough to read the man’s nametag. Officer Drewett had to be new to patrol. She couldn’t recall meeting him before. Plus, he seemed more concerned with turning her back than showing her the victim. She did her best to tamp down any sliver of hope that they weren’t dealing with a homicide. Had someone attempted to go swimming in the lake? Had his or her death been a drowning accident?

“Follow close behind me,” Officer Drewett replied as he turned around and retraced his steps. It was the first time she noticed the long stick in his hand. “Are you Aspen?”

“I am,” Kinsley replied as she ignored a cold gust of wind coming off the surface of the water. She was chilled to the bone for very different reasons, and not one of them had to do with the bleak sky overhead. “I won’t be taking lead on this case, though. Detective Haugen is right behind me. What is with the stick?”

“Prairie rattlesnakes. I’m Toby Drewett, by the way.”

“You aren’t from around here, are you?” Kinsley was doing her best to keep the conversation flowing so Drewett didn’t notice that she was barely keeping it together. “Prairie rattlesnakes are in hibernation right now.”

“You’re the fourth person to tell me that today.”

Officer Drewett finally came to a stop and stepped to the side. Kinsley’s gaze landed on a male subject, and her relief was so immense that she ended up kneeling close to the ground.

The body was dry, dressed, and displayed no sign of decomposition.

“Notice the man’s ankle? Officer Faillant wouldn’t allow me to check the body, but I’m confident you’ll find a snake bite underneath that pant leg.”

Kinsley held out her hand for the stick, which Drewett promptly relinquished before positioning himself a couple of feet away from the tall brownish-green grass. There were at least twenty feet of flat area around the edge of the lake, mostly from the wildlife traipsing through to quench their thirst. She couldn’t bring herself to glance at the water.

“The fisherman who called it in was coming out here to cast some line. He was recently laid off, but he didn’t want his wife knowing until he had another job lined up,” Officer Drewett explained as he continued to keep a close eye for any movement in the grass. “We’ll probably let him off with a warning after all he’s been through this morning. After finding a dead body, I’m going to assume the guy will stick to fishing in legal waters.”

Kinsley could only hope that was the case. She didn’t immediately use the stick to lift the victim’s pant leg. Instead, she relied on her training and took time to observe the scene in front of her. Such a feat was easier to accomplish now that her entire life wasn’t unraveling at the seams.

The victim had dressed warmly for his excursion, as if he had been expecting to be outside for a long period of time. A pair of binoculars was resting against his shoulder. The black strap around his neck had prevented the equipment from sliding completely to the cold ground. The way the victim’s mouth was open with his swollen tongue partially visible suggested Officer Drewett might very well have made an accurate assumption about the man’s death.

“Did anyone walk the perimeter?”

Kinsley used the stick to carefully shift the pant leg high enough over the hiking boot to get a good visual of the man’s shin. The discoloration around two puncture marks was glaringly obvious.

“No, ma’am. Officer Faillant didn’t want—”

“...the scene contaminated,” Kinsley finished wryly as she wrangled in her irritation with Faillant. There was a difference between making excuses not to do one’s job and performing one’s duties properly. Grateful that Alex wasn’t on site to witness what she was about to do next, she reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled

out a tissue. Using the stick to shift the victim's body slightly, she managed to pull out his wallet. She then searched the other pockets, locating a small notebook. "Here. Take the wallet."

Had the senior officer been a little more observant like Drewett, only the medical examiner would have been called out to the site. The longer she remained near the water, the stronger the urge overwhelmed her to scream in anguish. Calvin Gantz was in the murky depths of the lake, and she swore she could still hear his evil laughter traveling across the surface.

"Good call, officer." Kinsley handed off the stick before forcing herself to stand. Her muscles were a bit stiff and somewhat sore. She used the tissue to open the notebook. Once her mind was able to comprehend what was written inside, she wadded up the tissue and stuffed it back into her pocket. "You can take this, too. The vic was birdwatching, and he probably wasn't looking at the ground when traipsing through those woods over there. Prairie snakes should be in hibernation this time of year, but the victim obviously managed to get close to a den of some sort."

Kinsley noted the small smile on Drewett's face at making the right assumption, but his satisfaction was about to be short-lived. With homicide not needed anymore, notifying next of kin would fall onto his shoulders.

"What have we got, Kin?"

"No foul play involved with this one," Kinsley shared with Wally as he came to a stop beside her. "He's all yours. Sam and I are going to drive back to the station."

"We are?"

"We are," Kinsley said as she turned around. She couldn't face the water a second longer. The crushing relief she experienced over the lake not needing to be dredged

was something she had never experienced before, and it was all she could do to keep her knees from folding underneath her. She caught Wally staring intently at her. “No caffeine yet. Unlike my receiver and tight end last weekend, who were both amped up. I’m feeling it this season, Wally.”

“Hasn’t anyone told you it isn’t wise to poke a sleeping bear?” Sam muttered as he began to retrace his steps. “Come on, Aspen. We’ll drive through somewhere and pick you up a gallon of caramel creamer. I don’t know how you can drink that stuff.”

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Kinsley slapped Wally on the shoulder as she fell into step behind Sam. She had known the mere mention of Fantasy Football would have Wally forgoing any concern he might have had for her demeanor. She probably should have responded to Sam's comment about her preference for coffee creamer, but it was all she could do to walk in a straight line.

Everything she had painstakingly built throughout her life had almost come crashing down around her. She had thought long and hard over the possibility that Gantz's vehicle and body would one day be discovered. A lake out in the middle of the country hadn't been the wisest of choices to dispose of evidence, but it had been the only choice back then given the time constraints that night.

With Sam in front of her and her back to Wally and Officer Drewett, she allowed herself a moment of vulnerability. She brought her hands up to her face, resting her palms on her cheeks. There was no difference in skin temperature as she struggled to steady her rapid heartbeat. The tightness in her chest remained as she was struck with the unforgiving reality that her entire existence hinged on mere luck.

Terrapin Lake was home to her worst secret.

One ripple was all it would take to drown her under the weight of her own guilt.

Chapter Twenty

Kinsley Aspen

October

Wednesday — 10:57 am

The elevator dinged its arrival, and as the doors retreated, Kinsley hovered her thumb over her phone's screen. A reminder text had been sent from her mother about dessert tomorrow night. There had to be an easy recipe that didn't involve much prep in the kitchen. Kinsley had a hard time thinking about food when she had just visited the burial ground of her past sins.

“Careful.”

An unexpected surge of emotion flooded Kinsley's body, the way ink bleeds into water. The deep, familiar voice caught her attention instantly, but it was the heat from the man's hands that brought her to an abrupt stop. He had wrapped his strong fingers around her upper arms, and she regretted taking her jacket off before walking through the metal detector downstairs. She brought the thick material hanging over her arm a little closer to her torso to give herself time to work her voice.

“My fault,” Kinsley murmured, wishing she had regained some of her emotional equilibrium. The drive to Terrapin Lake had taken its toll on her. The last thing she needed was to run into a former lover—one who she thought could be the one. She had ruined any semblance of a chance at having a long-term relationship when she had killed a man. “I should watch where I'm going.”

Shane Levick hadn't changed much since she had last spoken to him a year ago. His broad chest made it evident that he still prioritized his workout routine. His black hair was expertly trimmed, and his sharp jawline was free of any stubble. Neither was a surprise given that he had served five years in the United States Marine Corps. He was set in his ways, yet he had gone to great lengths to accommodate her somewhat chaotic life.

Memories of his resentment at her decision to break things off flashed through her

mind, followed by a sharp pang of regret. She had hurt him, only he had no idea how much pain she had suffered in the process.

“It’s been a while, Kin.”

“I didn’t realize the two of you knew one another,” Captain Thompson replied before clapping Shane on the shoulder. “Levick here is transferring to homicide. He set the record in Vice two years running with the number of successful raids that led to solid convictions. With his contacts, he’ll be able to...”

Kinsley was grateful that Captain Thompson continued to run down Shane’s outstanding arrest record. She used the time to try and reconcile that her daily work life was about to become a living nightmare. She didn’t need to pose the question about what she had done to deserve her own personal level in hell.

“...do Sam some good to have a partner with such ethics.”

“Congratulations.” Kinsley forced a smile, grateful that the rumors of her and Shane’s relationship hadn’t made it to the top brass. She and Shane hadn’t gone out of their way to hide the fact that they were dating last year, but they also hadn’t flaunted it around the station. “I—”

“Kin!” Alex called out loudly, her name all but slicing through the strained pleasantries. “We got something.”

“Looks like I’m being summoned,” Kinsley said with a tight smile. “Excuse me.”

Kinsley veered around Shane, mindful not to brush up against him. She sought the sanctuary of her desk, and truthfully, she would have called it a day and gone home if she and Alex weren’t in the middle of an active investigation.

“Sorry about the ambush,” Alex said as Kinsley tossed her jacket on top of the small filing cabinet. She didn’t care for the way he was monitoring her every move. “I was about to give you a heads-up on Levick when the captain brought him over for an introduction. You okay with this?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Kinsley sat at her desk before yanking open the side drawer. It took her a moment to locate the ibuprofen bottle among the other junk. She had come up with some lie, explaining to Alex that she and Shane weren’t suited for one another.

Lie upon lie upon lie.

It was a never-ending cycle.

“It’s fine. Really,” Kinsley assured him after she had downed the two orange tablets with a soft drink she had left on her desk yesterday. Alex gave an expression of distaste, and she rolled with his reaction to ease the conversation in another direction. “It’s been over a year, and I’m just in a bad mood. Sam got a call about a body up at—”

“...made my day!” Sam had exited the elevator where the captain and Shane still stood deep in conversation. “Cap, I take back every bad thing I ever said about you. I thought for sure...”

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“I need caffeine,” Kinsley muttered as she capped the ibuprofen bottle. She tossed it back into the drawer before slamming it shut. “The potential homicide up at Terrapin Lake turned out to be a snakebite.”

“Prairie rattler? How is that possible? They’re in brumation this time of year.”

Leave it to Alex to use the correct terminology.

“Yeah, well, the guy was a birdwatcher. He must have gotten too close to a den or something.” Kinsley tossed the can of stale soda into her trashcan without glancing toward the trio on the other side of the glass partition. She stood and searched for her caramel coffee. “I thought you were stopping at the cafe?”

“That was hours ago.” Alex leaned back in his chair. “Earl told me you went with Sam on a call, so I gave him your coffee. Can you believe the guy actually liked that shit?”

“Yes, I can,” Kinsley stated as she sat back down in irritation. “God, I wish I could start this day over again.”

“Didn’t Sam at least drive you through a coffee joint on the way back?”

“You would think he would have had the decency to do so, but we stopped at a gas station instead.” Kinsley could still hear Shane’s voice, and she wondered if Alex would be open to taking the midnight shift. She removed her hair clip, but it didn’t do anything to relieve the pain in her temples. The ibuprofen needed time to lessen the pressure in her head before she could grab some coffee from the kitchen. “Where are

we with the case?”

“I’ve been going through cell phone records. The call logs match with everyone’s statements so far.” Alex gestured toward his monitor. “I’ll sift through the rest of the calls and texts this afternoon. I’ve spent some time combing through Halliday’s traffic cam footage, too. There is footage of Rachel and Louise driving through town. Louise returns twenty-three minutes later. Rachel must have taken a secondary road out of Halliday.”

Alex nodded toward the whiteboard. He had filled in some of Rachel Hanson’s timeline, still leaving several hours unaccounted for on the night in question.

“Where was Hanson for four and a half hours?” Kinsley murmured while fiddling with her hair clip. “Hey, do you feel like having a beer at the Plow after work?”

“No,” Alex said with a laugh. The Plow wasn’t his scene, and he hated driving the backroads at night. “I was thinking that I’ll head on over to the hospital this afternoon. I haven’t spoken to Tobias Zayn or Louise Baird. There’s a chance that Zayn is old school. Maybe I can get him to provide us with more information.”

“Maybe,” Kinsley relented as she gathered her hair and secured it loosely at the base of her neck. “You could be right. Maybe take a crack at Douglas Glynn, too. I still need to track down the male subject who rear-ended Rachel’s vehicle near the dealership. I’ll run the name through the system and see if we get any hits.”

It was very unlikely that an individual went so far as to murder a woman because she stopped to save a turtle. Still, Kinsley would ensure that every I was dotted and every T was crossed so nothing fell through the cracks.

“What are your thoughts on Glynn?”

“I don’t like the man much, but that doesn’t mean he murdered Rachel Hanson.” Kinsley wasn’t particularly fond of Louise Baird, either. “They both agreed to lie about that night. It makes no sense. Why not just say that Louise met up with her daughter?”

“People don’t surprise me anymore,” Alex muttered in disgust as he leaned forward and pulled his keyboard close to the edge of his desk. Kinsley took his distraction and glanced toward the glass partition. The captain and Sam were still talking with one another, but Shane was nowhere to be found. “I couldn’t shake something that Joe Cider said to me the other day about there being more salespeople taking kickbacks.”

“We should also canvass Hanson’s neighborhood again.” Kinsley wasn’t going to have the energy to do anything unless she got some caffeine. “Are you staying for lunch?”

“No,” Alex replied, still reading something on his monitor. “I’ll pick something up on my way to the hospital. You said that Louise hinted Gage might have had some information about Rachel’s murder, but I don’t see any unusual calls or texts in his phone records from last week.”

The murmur of voices from across the room pulled Kinsley's attention away from her partner. Sam's laughter was distinct as he approached his desk. He was still boasting to a fellow detective about teaming up with Shane Levick. Kinsley rubbed her eyes, wishing she could do the same to her ears and make everything she had heard today disappear.

“You know what helps me?”

Kinsley opened her eyes, hoping that she hadn’t smeared her mascara. She hated waterproof makeup, but it sure would have come in handy today. Lydia had gifted her some a while back, and the tube was somewhere in the bottom drawer of her

bathroom vanity.

“Bengay Ultra Strength?”

“I’m in my early forties, not eighties,” Alex said wryly as he stood and reached for his jacket. Once he had taken it from the hook, he took time to push in his chair. She could sense from his sudden change of demeanor that she was going to hear his advice whether she wanted it or not. “Hear me out, Kin. My mother used to say to me all the time that we’ve got to let Fate do her thing. Shane being in this department? It’s just Fate being temperamental. She’ll move on to someone else next week.”

“Leaving me stuck in hell for years,” Kinsley muttered in misery as she leaned her head back against her chair. It wasn’t like she belonged anywhere else. “I’m just going to sit here a minute until my headache subsides, Alex. I’ll let you know what I find out regarding the turtle guy.”

“Is that what we’re calling him now?”

“Until I’ve had my coffee? Yeah.” Kinsley forced a smile. “Go. I’ll hold down the fort.”

Alex shrugged into his jacket. No one would have ever known that he had been dealing with his own issues. She had observed his anguish when things had gone south with Laura, yet it was as if nothing earth-shattering had taken place in his life.

Kinsley was guilty of having done the same thing. She had lied, ignored, and diverted anything and everything away from her to get through day-to-day life.

Fate?

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She wasn't so sure she believed in such a thing.

Such notions had long since been eroded by the brutality of reality.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kinsley Aspen

October

Thursday — 8:36 pm

Despite the warmth of the firepit, Kinsley welcomed the crisp air cutting through the rising heat as she finished carving the last curve into her jack-o-lantern's mouth. The natural stone pavers of her parents' patio were bathed in an amber glow. The flickering flames had a bit of help in that area from a long string of fairy lights that wrapped around the perimeter of the sitting area.

Beyond the edge of the patio, darkness loomed as if the night were trying to remind her that all was not okay in her life. Or was it Fate, the way Alex had suggested the other day? Either way, she didn't need the reminder.

Instead, she focused her thoughts on the Hanson case.

The repetitive motion needed to make the curve a little steeper aided in mentally shaving off the layers of the investigation. Joe Cider had been removed from the board. The turtle guy was irrelevant, as well. The man resided out of state, and he had

already arrived home days before Rachel had been murdered on Cooper's farm. As for Alex, he hadn't been able to garner any useful information from Tobias Zayn, Louise Baird, or Douglas Glynn.

The only good news to come out of the past week had been an update on Gage Baird's condition. The swelling in his brain had fully receded, and there was a good chance that Kinsley and Alex would be able to question him about the events leading up to the crash.

Movement inside the house caught Kinsley's attention. She couldn't help but smile as Lily gingerly carried a mug of apple cider through the dining room and into the living room. Her lips were pursed in concentration with every measured step. Her niece had spent a good hour outside with Kinsley carving the pumpkin, but she had gotten restless when she spotted her grandfather doling out apple cider.

It wouldn't be long until Thursday night football kicked off, and that was when Kinsley would be able to grab her purse and keys in the front foyer. A simple claim that a lead came in regarding the case would lend itself to calling it an early evening.

She set aside the carving knife before reaching for the wet washcloth her mother had provided earlier this evening. The material was quite cold, but Kinsley didn't mind. She studied her handiwork as the jack-o-lantern sneered back at her. It certainly wouldn't win her this year's Aspen competition.

The swoosh of the sliding glass door had her believing that Lily had returned to witness the finished product, but Kinsley found that her bad luck continued its long streak. George Aspen was using his elbow to close the door behind him. In his hands were two mugs with cinnamon sticks gliding back and forth against the rims.

"I thought you could use a warmup."

George approached the firepit before holding out one of the mugs. The night had grown so cold that the steam from the cider rose in long, thin wisps. She accepted the mug, unable to prevent an underlying tension from coiling within her.

“Thanks,” Kinsley murmured as she tossed aside the wet washcloth. She wrapped both of her hands around the warm mug, suddenly grateful for the heat. She would bide her time until she could figure out a way to excuse herself for the evening. “I didn’t get to have any last week.”

The orange glow of the flames danced between them, casting flickering shadows over her father's face. She hadn’t really taken the time to observe him recently. Doing so was difficult when she had gone out of her way to avoid being in his presence. She was taken aback by how much he had aged in the past year.

He was ten months shy of his sixtieth birthday. Her mother was already planning a huge get-together with Olivia flying in to join the celebration. There was no denying the man pulled off a distinguished appearance, despite the lines of wisdom around his eyes and lips.

Kinsley took advantage of his interest in his drink to study him. His dark blond beard was trimmed short, although she could spot some lighter hairs in the mix. Even though the workday for him was complete, his attire was always immaculate. He had changed out of his suit and tie for a pair of khakis and a navy blue sweater.

“Did you ever file a report about your car?” Kinsley's question cut through the awkward silence. “I ran into Mom at the hospital the other day when she was visiting Dawn Willers.”

Kinsley’s father took his time responding to her question.

“No.” George glanced down at the apple cider. He made no move to taste the sweet

beverage. “I had it towed to Jensen’s Garage. He and his son have always done right by us.”

Kinsley refrained from advising her father that the individual responsible would never be held accountable, but he wouldn’t take the chance that someone related to a victim of Calvin Gantz was to blame. As much anger as she had directed at her father for what happened last year, there was no denying that he empathized with the families involved in the case.

“I know not everyone understood why I took Calvin’s case.”

“Dad, I—”

“Please, hear me out.”

George raised his eyes to meet hers. There was an emotion deep within the familiar blue hues that she couldn’t name. Noah took after their father the most, and she gritted her teeth at the knowledge her older brother would advise her that it was time to leave the past in the past.

Only Kinsley’s jaunt up to Terrapin Lake yesterday proved nothing stayed in the past...not secrets, and certainly not skeletons.

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She stared at the dark liquid in her mug, waiting impatiently for her father to continue. Everyone in the family would have agreed that this conversation was long overdue, but it wouldn't solve anything. Most of her anger was pointed inward, but he shared the blame for what transpired last year.

What would his opinion be of her if he knew the truth?

She took ahold of the cinnamon stick and began to stir the apple cider. The crackling of wood punctuated the stillness, and it was as if the flickering flames used the rising tension as fuel to reach higher into the chilled air.

“Your mother and I went to high school with Mary Gantz.”

“I know your reasons for defending Gantz. We don't need to—”

“Mary was the reason I became a lawyer.”

Kinsley stilled the cinnamon stick, eventually releasing it to wrap her hand around the mug. Everyone had been privy to the reason George Aspen defended Calvin Gantz, because her father had stood on the courthouse steps and announced to the world that the two victims hadn't been the only ones raised in Fallbrook.

Calvin Gantz had been raised on a farm, only to lose his father in a tragic farming accident. Mary had sold the farm and moved her young son to a neighborhood where she wouldn't be so alone in raising him. Calvin had thrived in his new life, never having been one for physical labor. He preferred to rely on his charm and intelligence. It was a lethal combination for someone so inherently evil.

Mary had been diagnosed with breast cancer shortly thereafter. Those years hadn't been kind to her, but she had managed to hold on until Calvin graduated from the community college. Her funeral had been held a month later.

"Mary got pregnant in high school. Her parents despised Frank," George revealed with a shake of his head. It was clear from his disapproval that he hadn't agreed with such a summation. "They did everything they could to talk Mary into giving up the baby, but Mary loved Frank. She wasn't about to leave him, but that didn't stop her mother and father from looking for ways to change her mind."

Kinsley bit the side of her cheek to keep from asking questions. Her father always had a way of telling a story and leaving the listener hanging on to his every word. Once Gantz had been arrested, neither Kinsley nor her father had spoken about the case to one another. Every detail she had learned about the man had been through her own investigation and the media.

"During Mary's seventh month of pregnancy, some of her mother's jewelry went missing. They called the police. Blamed Frank Gantz, saying at the time that he had been the only one with the means and motive to take the missing items." George paused to take a sip of his apple cider. He held up his mug. "Tasting this makes me miss her, you know."

Maybe that was why her father was sitting outside with Kinsley while everyone else was watching the football game. He missed Nana, and he was overcome with sentimentality. He always said that Kinsley reminded him the most of his mother.

"I don't recall Frank Gantz having a record," Kinsley said, hoping to delay or avoid altogether the issues between them. She would have preferred not to speak of Gantz, either, but that wasn't the way these past two weeks had panned out. "I'm sure the prosecutor was aware of it, not that it would have made any difference. Whatever Frank did or didn't do as a teenager had no bearing on Calvin's crimes."

“The police arrested Frank, but his family didn’t have enough money for a private defense attorney. He was given a public defender who was wet behind the ears. The guy tried to force Frank to take a plea, but it was Mary who begged and finally convinced him to stall.”

Kinsley sipped her cider, the warmth doing little to soften the chill that had settled inside her. Her father had an entire year to sit down with her, not that she had made such opportunities easy. Surely this heart-to-heart was at the urging of her mother.

“Mary asked a few friends for some help, and that’s what we did,” George replied with a glance toward the sliding glass door. “Your mother and another friend of theirs put together a timeline of who was in and out of the house during that period of time. I hit the law books in the library, looking for anything that could help Frank avoid jail time.”

“You found it, didn’t you?”

“I did, but it didn’t matter in the end.” George had been staring at the bright flames of the fire while telling his story, but he raised his eyes to meet hers. “Mary discovered that her cousin had been at the house the day her mother’s jewelry had gone missing, so Mary convinced your mother and a friend to sneak into the girl’s room. They found the necklace and ring that had been taken, so the police were forced to drop the charges. Frank was released, he married Mary on her eighteenth birthday, and Calvin was born three weeks later.”

There were no crickets to offset the silence, and the rest of the wildlife appeared to have called it a night. Even the rustle of the leaves from the slight breeze wasn’t loud enough to cause a distraction.

“I went into law because of Mary Gantz.”

“You went into law because of Mary Reeder,” Kinsley corrected him by utilizing Mary’s maiden name. She hadn’t meant for her voice to have such an edge, but the buried emotions from last year had been exposed at Terrapin Lake today. “Don’t confuse the two, Dad. Calvin Gantz murdered two women who were born and raised in Fallbrook. What about them? Their families? Don’t they deserve justice?”

“Of course, they do,” George replied just as sharply. He looked out into the darkness as if he needed to regain his train of thought. After a few seconds, he turned his attention back toward her. “It’s about legacy. About defending those who have no one else.”

“Even when the cost is so high?”

George rested his mug on his leg with his left hand while rubbing his lower lip with the other. Everyone had a tell, and her father had just shown his. Her question had hit from many different directions.

“I owed it to Mary to give her son a defense. You told me the day you clipped that badge to your belt that you wanted to be treated no differently than any other officer on the force. Had I overheard such a discussion from anyone else, I would have done the exact same thing—investigate the allegations myself. I did precisely that, and I won’t apologize for doing my job.”

Kinsley leaned her head back in disappointment and stared up at the stars. The world was such a vast place, yet Fallbrook was like one of those tiny towns encapsulated in a snow globe. She hadn’t expected her father to apologize, but his refusal to do so hurt nonetheless.

“What I do apologize for was how I handled the situation,” George stated gruffly before clearing his throat. “I should have given you some warning that I had overheard your conversation with Lanen. Instead, I called a private investigator to

confirm that the forensics tech had taken a bribe and allowed a journalist into Gantz's residence. Hell, the guy should have ended up behind bars instead of receiving a slap on the wrist."

"You won't get an argument from me there," Kinsley muttered in disappointment. "He was also fired, not that the punishment fit the crime."

The temperature had dropped enough that her breath had begun to form tiny clouds in the air. The heat from the firepit could no longer prevent the cold from seeping through her jacket. Her father probably wouldn't have put up much of an argument if she decided to go inside, but he had chosen to extend an olive branch. In reality, the olive branch was firmly in her mother's hand.

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Still, the anger inside of Kinsley was becoming almost too much to bear. While there was no absolution for what she had done, her father had no idea that his daughter was no better than those he represented on a daily basis.

It wasn't fair for her to continually penalize him.

"Even fathers aren't perfect," George reluctantly admitted as he shifted in his chair. Such admission wasn't easy for a man like him. "If I could go back and handle the situation differently, I would do so in a heartbeat. I miss you, butterfly."

The sincerity in her father's voice clawed at her resolve, which had been torn to shreds recently. Hearing her childhood nickname tore it completely in two. She was the only one of her siblings who hadn't been able to stand being swaddled in a blanket, and she would work tirelessly until her arms and legs were free from their constraints. Her father had mentioned many times that it was like watching a butterfly emerge from its cocoon, thus was born her nickname from day one.

Kinsley stared at the man who had taught her to stand firm. He was oblivious to the cracks in that very same foundation. She came to the realization that their relationship was akin to the fire between them—complex, flickering with moments of warmth, but ultimately unpredictable and capable of leaving scars.

A loud snap cut through the night air.

The sharp sound had nothing to do with the fire, and Kinsley scanned the darkness for any sign of immediate danger. She usually left her firearm in her safe at home before joining her family for dinner, but the busy day had forced her to drive straight to her

parents' house from work. While Owen's review of the footage hadn't revealed anyone outside her home, she couldn't shake the belief that someone was monitoring her from afar.

"It's just the wildlife," George reassured her as his interest focused on the sliding glass door instead of the thin stretch of land in front of the treeline on the backside of the property. "There's my toothless granddaughter."

"I'm not toothless, Grandpa. See?" Lily smiled as she came closer to them, pointing at her front teeth that still weren't fully settled. "Everyone is watching the game, and I need someone to play cards with me."

"You just want to play with someone who isn't good at Go Fish," George complained good-naturedly, causing Lily to giggle with delight. "Come on, squirt. I'll play you a hand or two."

Lily grabbed her grandfather's hand, and he allowed her to believe she was dragging him into the house. Her laughter was loud enough that it would have scared away any critter nearby.

Kinsley didn't sense a change in the air, though.

She might not have proof, but someone was out there.

Waiting...watching...and planning something that could very well destroy their lives.

"Dad?"

Kinsley drew her gaze away from the darkness. Her father had just reached the sliding glass door when he heard her call out to him. He released Lily's hand as she disappeared through the open doorway. There was a vulnerable quality to his stance

that she had never witnessed before. Maybe it wouldn't be the end of the world to take hold of the olive branch.

"I miss you, too."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Alex Lanen

October

Thursday — 11:47 pm

The usual occupants of the night shift, Detectives Dodd and Crosby, were nowhere to be found as Alex strode to his desk. He had spent most of the evening across the street at The Bucket watching the football game with Wally and Izzy. His intention afterward had been to go home and get some sleep, but he wasn't tired in the least. He figured he might as well knock some work out of the way to free up time for him and Kinsley to reinterview some key witnesses.

Once his jacket was hung on the coat rack and his computer turned on, Alex made his way into the kitchen on the opposite side of the floor. It shouldn't take him long to examine the security footage from Hanson's neighbors. The doorbell cams only recorded when activated by something or someone, so all that needed to be analyzed were short thirty to forty-second clips spanning three months from four different homes.

Alex hadn't been in the mood to drink alcohol this evening, so he had nursed one beer through each half of the game. He hadn't wanted to feel like shit in the morning when he hit the gym.

He flipped on the light switch in the kitchen, not bothering to fuss with the large coffee maker. Instead, he used the single-serve appliance that one of the wives had brought in for her husband. With his favorite mug in hand three minutes later, he exited the kitchen to find someone had turned on the overhead lights. Considering he hadn't heard the usual chime associated with the elevators, the individual must have used the stairs.

Since Dodd and Crosby had been summoned to the railroad tracks west of the city, Alex doubted the two men had returned to the station so soon. He hadn't bothered with the fluorescent lights since the egress lighting had been easier on his eyes. His interest immediately landed on Laura's desk, only she wasn't the one sitting in her chair.

"Levick, what are you doing here so late?"

Lauran's personal effects had been removed, from the picture of her daughter to the pen holder she had made in first grade. Seeing as Alex had remained at his desk until close to eight o'clock, Laura must have intentionally waited until he had walked across the street to The Bucket.

He didn't care for how much the deliberate action stung his already bruised heart.

"Lanen," Shane greeted as he rose from the chair. "Haugen and I have to be at the firing range first thing in the morning. I didn't want to have to stop by the station to fill out the remaining paperwork regarding my transfer, so I'm emailing them to HR now."

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Alex had caught sight of Shane at the bar with some members from Vice. They had acknowledged one another, but neither had taken the time for an in-depth conversation.

“Congratulations on the promotion,” Alex said after shaking the man’s hand. “I had no idea you wanted to leave Vice.”

Shane’s record spoke for itself, so it wasn’t that much of a surprise that the man would want a coveted position in homicide. Undercover work could take a toll on a person, though the same could be said for dealing with death every day.

“It was time for a change.” Shane glanced down at Alex’s tie. “Guess I’ll be brushing off my suits. Jeans and a tee probably won’t cut it.”

“I don’t know about that,” Alex said as he gestured toward one of the desks against the far wall. “Crosby has already told the captain that the department would have to pull his jeans off his dead body before he would resort to suits.”

“Crosby is also five years away from retirement and a lot higher on the seniority ladder,” Shane said wryly as he leaned forward and reached for his mouse. He pressed down with a click, and it wasn’t long before a swooshing sound came from the built-in speakers. His email to HR had been sent, and he proceeded to shut down his computer. “I’d rather be on the horizontal ladder, so it looks as if I’ll be shopping this week. Two suits won’t cut it.”

Alex didn’t find it odd in the least that neither one of them had brought up Kinsley. While he had been privy to their relationship, they hadn’t flaunted it around the

station. Given that their brief hookup had ended a year ago, it probably wasn't on anyone's mind.

Kinsley had broken things off between them right around the time she had been dealing with the fallout from the Gantz trial. He recalled her mentioning how the two of them were complete opposites. Shane was military, and everything had its place. Kinsley, on the other hand, was like a tornado within a hurricane. Regardless, he would always have her back.

"Congrats again," Alex said as he glanced toward his glowing monitor. "I need to review some footage from our vic's neighborhood. Neighbors sent over their security feeds."

"Good luck with that. Like I said, I doubt Haugen and I will be in tomorrow." Shane grabbed his leather jacket off the back of his chair. "I'll see you Monday."

Shane headed in the direction of the stairwell. He was about eight to ten years younger than Alex. The thought of walking up or down four flights of stairs after hitting the gym this morning for the first time in months had him grimacing in pain. Maybe in a week or two after getting back into his workout regimen, he could use the stairs with ease.

Alex closed the distance to his desk and settled into his chair. The wheels protested slightly, but he leaned back after starting the software program one of the techs had uploaded the footage to earlier today. He sought out the length of time at the bottom of the screen. To his surprise, he had been way off on his calculation.

He had been given four hours of footage to review, collected from four different houses that had a view of the Hanson residence. The only thing he could gather from the short clips was that they must have received numerous postal deliveries over the past few months. Another possibility was that their frequent yardwork toward the end

of summer had triggered their security systems.

Alex sighed and settled back in his chair while the footage played, all the while keeping his gaze trained on the Hanson driveway. Besides delivery drivers coming and going, homeowners collecting said packages, and friends visiting at all hours, nothing unusual could be spotted across the street. It was a mundane, almost painfully ordinary parade of everyday life in the suburbs. The dates and times scrolled past in a blur as he cataloged which neighbor's security camera had captured what and when.

He had almost finished with his second cup of coffee by the time he had completely gone through one neighbor's footage. He weighed the pros and cons of starting the second of the four security systems. The clips were labeled as Deborah Welling. Leave it to her to supply the entire year's worth of footage from her doorbell camera.

Alex decided to stream the footage for another half hour. He didn't bother with more coffee. The video played on without interruption, and before too long, winter had turned into spring. As the snow melted and the grass turned green, colorful flowers began to bloom as time passed...and with it, something else entirely that provided Alex and Kinsley with a completely different motive.

Amidst the monotony of everyday life, Sebastian Hanson could be observed leaning casually against a vehicle parked just within the frame. He was holding a woman's hands as they spoke with one another, but there was an intimacy that couldn't be ignored.

Alex glanced down at the timestamp.

The recording was from over six months ago in April.

He focused on the couple, noting how they glanced across the street as a delivery driver left a package for Deborah Welling. As if the man's presence wasn't a threat,

the couple went back to their conversation. The gentleness with which Sebastian lifted the woman's hands was evident. She even laughed as he kissed her knuckles. It wasn't long afterward that the doorbell camera stopped recording.

The following spliced video occurred five hours later when Welling's presence activated her doorbell camera. As the woman could be seen picking up her package, the couple and the vehicle across the street were no longer there.

Alex rewound the footage until he had the couple frozen in the frame. He zoomed in on the woman's face. Sebastian Hanson hadn't been speaking to his wife or kissing her knuckles. Hanson had been having an affair with Rachel's best friend—Gia Torres.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 8:47 am

Kinsley wrestled with the stubborn seatbelt of the unmarked cruiser. She had been searching underneath her seat for the source of the pungent odor that had triggered her gag reflex. She grimaced, half-expecting to unearth an old tofu container left by Haugen. She found nothing but crumpled napkins and a pen that probably didn't work.

“Haugen swiped our usual car, didn't he?” Kinsley asked, not bothering to hide her disgust. She finally managed to unfasten her seatbelt before opening her car door. “He had to have left his mother-in-law's tofu in here at some point. After we speak with Torres, we're taking this cruiser right back to the station to be detailed. Disgusting.”

“Actually, it was Levick who signed out our car.” Alex had parked the cruiser along the tree-lined streets of Gia Torres’ neighborhood. “He and Haugen had their requalification at the range today.”

Kinsley refrained from stringing together several expletives. She recalled complaining to Shane several times about Haugen. The man’s penchant for odd-smelling foods was close to some freakish fetish. She never would have thought such hearsay would come back to bite her in the ass.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

Kinsley kept the car door open as she removed the glove she had swiped from the glove box. She certainly hadn't been going to use her bare hands while swiping the filthy area underneath the seat. Once she had shoved the lone glove back inside the compartment, she slammed the cover shut.

Alex was wise not to say a word about her wasting city resources. As far as she was concerned, needing to have the vehicle detailed was a complete waste of money.

The only bright spot in Kinsley's morning had been the caramel-flavored coffee he had brought into the station. She remained in her seat with the door open to savor the rest of the contents. Sleep had been elusive. After driving home from her parents' house, she had spent most of the night adjusting the zones on her home security system. She had made it so the camera over her garage captured footage of every vehicle passing by on the street. Her actions might have been a silent admission of her paranoia, but if someone was monitoring her every departure and arrival, she would have her evidence.

Alex had already exited the vehicle and was waiting for her on the sidewalk. The familiar scent of damp leaves hung in the air, and she inhaled deeply to get rid of the stench that seemed to cling to her clothes. She closed the car door before lifting an arm to smell the fabric of her sweater.

"We smell."

"Send Haugen your dry-cleaning bill."

Kinsley surveyed the neighborhood of single-story homes. A strong breeze rustled

through the full-grown trees, blowing some of their remaining colorful leaves to the ground. Most of the residents had decorated their porches and bushes with jack-o-lanterns, fake cobwebs, rubber spiders, and even a few skeletons. One house, in particular, had gone all out and transformed their front yard into a spooky graveyard with tombstones jutting up from the ground and cackling witches that seemed to come alive with every gust of wind.

“The kids must have already been picked up for school,” Kinsley said as she fell into step beside Alex. “It’s quiet.”

“You don’t hear those witches?”

“I thought that was you laughing.” Kinsley flashed Alex a smile before changing the subject. “You should have called me last night when you discovered that Gia was having an affair with Sebastian.”

“It was after midnight, Kin.” Alex lifted the lapel of his coat to stave the cold wind as they stepped up on the porch. “Besides, three million dollars and a woman on the side is a double motive. If we make an arrest today, we’ll be pulling at least a twelve-hour shift. The DA will want an ironclad case.”

Kinsley reached out and pressed the doorbell. A faint chime could be heard through the heavy door. She adjusted her stance and slipped her hands into the pockets of her sweater. She had given up any notion that she could wear a heavy jacket without snow on the ground. Ignoring Alex’s knowing gaze, she used his body to block the biting wind.

“Knock,” Kinsley suggested when Gia didn’t come to the door. “Maybe she’s sleeping. I called the hospital, and she got off her shift at seven.”

Alex used the side of his fist and banged on the front door before pressing the

doorbell again for good measure. He wouldn't be giving any leeway to the woman. Gia Torres had slept with her best friend's husband. Alex had been raised by a single mother after his father had up and left his family to start another one in Wisconsin. His personal dealings with such a sensitive matter made it difficult for him to leave his opinions at the door. Kinsley was prepared to wade alone through the murky waters of today's interview.

While Gia hadn't gone all out on her Halloween decorations, she did have an autumn wreath adorned with sprigs of orange berries. The additional twigs with leaves in shades of reds, oranges, and yellows still shook from the previous bangs of Alex's fist. Kinsley was beginning to think she should have left him in the car to find the decaying food.

"Could Torres be at the hospital with Louise Baird?" Alex asked as he rang the doorbell again. "You said that's where you ran into her last week."

"I see movement," Kinsley murmured as she kept her gaze trained on the oval glass behind the seasonal wreath. When Gia finally swung the door open, it was apparent she had been in bed. She was wearing flannel pajamas, her hair was pulled into a messy bun, and her dark eyes were still somewhat unfocused as she squinted at them. "Miss Torres, we need to speak with you regarding some information we came across yesterday. May we come in?"

Surprise had etched itself plainly across Gia's features, underscored by a momentary hesitation that kept Alex and Kinsley standing on the front porch longer than appropriate. She stumbled back a step.

"Of course." Gia waved for them to enter. "Please, come in. You'll have to excuse me, but I got home from the hospital maybe forty minutes ago. I just fell into bed."

Gia secured the door behind them while Kinsley took time to make introductions.

Alex and Gia had not formally met, and it was obvious that Alex would have preferred to keep it that way. His clipped tone acknowledging her was enough of a warning that Kinsley cleared her throat to gain Gia's attention.

"What can I do for you, detectives?"

Gia's decor matched the woman's calm demeanor. The living room exuded a warm, welcoming atmosphere. The furniture was plush and covered in a cream-colored fabric with several pillows in earth-tone shades. Framed photographs hung from the walls, with some set out on wooden bookshelves. Most of the people in the pictures were easily identified as family members. Others were friends, with Rachel's bright smile featured predominantly in most of them.

"Is there a reason you didn't tell us you were having an affair with Sebastian Hanson?"

Alex hadn't bothered to stick to their routine. He had gotten straight to the point. Gia had been waiting for them to have a seat on the couch before taking one herself in the matching overstuffed chair. Upon hearing his question, she sank onto the cushion and clasped her hands tightly between her knees.

Kinsley took a seat on the couch, hoping that Alex would join her. Fortunately, he followed her lead, but the damage had already been done. If Gia was going to go on the defensive, she would do so by showing them to the door and taking a page out of Sebastian's playbook by calling a lawyer.

"Gia, we have a video of you two standing outside the Hanson residence in a rather intimate embrace," Kinsley explained as Gia leaned forward and placed her hands over her face. "We would like to hear your side of the story as to why you didn't mention your relationship with Sebastian to us earlier."

Gia's composure crumpled, and her shoulders shook from the silent sobs wracking her body. Alex parted his lips to say something, but Kinsley rested a hand on his shoulder. She wasn't sure if Gia was playing them with some type of act, but it would be best to let the interview play out.

"It wasn't supposed to happen," Gia whispered as she used the sleeve of her flannel pajama to wipe away her tears. There was a fragility that seemed to consume her, but it could be mistaken for guilt. "And it ended months and months ago. You have to believe me."

Kinsley wasn't so sure there would be an arrest made today. Alex rubbed his jaw in irritation as he waited for Gia to continue her side of the story. They had yet to reach out to Sebastian Hanson, but they had requested he come into the station with his lawyer this afternoon.

"Look, Sebastian was upset one day when I stopped by the house. Rachel had gotten held up at work, and he just...well, he kissed me. The next thing I knew, I kissed him back. I shouldn't have, and it was wrong of me." Gia pulled the sleeves of her flannel pajamas over her hands and held the material taut as she focused on Kinsley. "We had sex twice before I ended things. I didn't want...I didn't want Rachel to hate me."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

Kinsley cleared her throat when Alex would have responded, but the sound brought Gia's attention to where it needed to be. She stared at them with desperation.

"Please don't tell Louise. She's been through so much already, and..."

"We can't promise you that, Miss Torres." Alex had responded to Gia before Kinsley had a chance to ask a question. The woman's eyes filled with tears once more, but it was clear that Alex had no sympathy for a woman who would betray her bestfriend in such a conniving manner. "Did you and Sebastian plan Rachel's murder together? Did you know about the three-million-dollar life insurance policy, Ms. Torres? Were you hoping that he would cut you in on half?"

So much for delicacy.

Kinsley was now forced to play the role of good partner. She never wavered her gaze from Gia, and Kinsley took advantage of the woman's shock over hearing Alex's blunt inquiries.

"Miss Torres, you can understand why we would jump to such a conclusion." Kinsley could sense the vibrations of her phone through her sweater, but she ignored the call. "You claim that Rachel was your best friend, and yet you slept with her husband...twice."

"I'm not proud of what happened, and I can't change your opinion of me," Gia said as she only focused on Kinsley. Her words, however, had been directed at Alex. "I swear to you that I didn't kill my best friend. I didn't plan anything with Sebastian. I didn't know about the three-million-dollar life insurance policy, and I didn't know

that he had been lying to Rachel for the past six months about his test results. I found all that out yesterday from Louise. Detectives, she truly believes that Sebastian murdered Rachel. Not only that, but she thinks that Gage found proof or something, which was why he was targeted last week. And I...well, looking back at what happened, I think she might be right.”

“I’m sure you can understand why we would have trouble believing you when you say you would never have hurt your best friend.” Alex’s voice was measured, and he wasn’t giving the woman two seconds to gather her thoughts. Kinsley’s phone began to vibrate once more, so she discreetly pulled it from her pocket. “Had Rachel discovered that her best friend slept with her husband, what would she have done, Miss Torres? Is that why you went along with Hanson? You didn’t want Rachel to know that you slept—”

“Detective Lanen, someone has been trying to reach us.” Kinsley held out her phone, recognizing the hospital’s number. “Would you please take this? I’ll finish up here.”

Alex and Kinsley were usually tough with those individuals who had substantial motives. She would have continued in such a manner if she thought such manner of questioning would result in answers, but Alex wasn’t pushing Gia for the sake of the case.

“What about Jack?” Gia inquired as she closely monitored Alex as he stood and walked toward the front door. “He was meeting Rachel that night. What if the two of them were—”

“Miss Torres, what can you tell me about the times you were with Mr. Hanson? Did he ever indicate to you that he didn’t want to remain married to Rachel? Was there any sign that—”

“No,” Gia replied harshly. There was even an expression of disgust written on her

features. “No.”

“You said that you started to believe Louise after thinking back on your time with Mr. Hanson,” Kinsley pointed out, not willing to let such a statement slide. “Either you believe Sebastian murdered Rachel or you don’t.”

“I don’t know,” Gia muttered in frustration as she lifted her hands and pressed the flannel material against her eyes. She remained like that for a moment before lowering her arms and meeting Kinsley’s gaze. “All I’ve done since then is think over every word he said to me during that time. Nothing indicated that he would ever harm Rachel or Gage, but Louise is so convinced that Sebastian and Jack are guilty.”

“Did Louise tell you that she saw Rachel the night she died?”

“No. What are you implying?” Gia asked hesitantly as her gaze slid to Alex. He had disconnected the call, but he remained near the front door. Gia turned her attention back toward Kinsley. “Detective, are you suggesting that—”

“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m stating a fact. Four hours before Rachel had her throat slit and bled out on the ground of an empty barn, the two women met at Tobias Zayn’s farm,” Kinsley revealed, monitoring the woman’s features closely. “If I were to suggest anything, it would be that no one connected with this case has been truthful with us. You can understand how such omissions make it hard for us to do our job, Miss Torres.”

“I didn’t mean to...”

Alex signaled that it was time to depart the residence. From his stance, it was clear that there was another significant break in the case. She would give Gia one more chance to come clean.

“Miss Torres, if there is anything else you are keeping from us, now would be a very good time to tell us the truth.”

“There’s nothing else,” Gia whispered as she stood before crossing her arms around her torso. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her cheeks were flushed with emotion. “I swear.”

Why was it that people always placed such an emphasis on those two words during an interview or interrogation? It was as if those two words held all the power in the world, capable of determining one’s fate in a matter of seconds.

“We’ll be in touch, Miss Torres.”

By the time Kinsley reached Alex, he had already opened the front door. She stepped over the threshold, bracing herself against the cold wind. Her teeth were chattering by the time they reached the sidewalk. She held her hand out for her phone, disappointed in the results of Gia’s interview.

"That was the hospital." Alex reached into the pocket of his jacket for the keys. "The doctor just gave us the go ahead to interview Gage Baird."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 10:58 am

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

“Mom, I can swingby after work today,” Kinsley said as Alex flashed his badge to the nurse stationed behind the glass window of the ICU. “There’s no need for you to go out of your way.”

“We’re here to see...”

Kinsley took a step away from Alex so that he could speak to the nurse without interruption.

“Nonsense,” Margaret said, her voice loud enough that Kinsley pulled the phone away from her ear. “Joanne Knowles alsoordered a pumpkin pie from Lily’s school, so I have to drive in that direction anyway. I’ll just set the pie in your refrigerator. Oh, and I picked up some whipped cream for you.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Kinsley almost disconnected the call when she remembered the mess she had left in the kitchen. “Oh, and ignore the dishes in the sink. You know how I get when I’m working a case.”

Her mother’s last few words were drowned out by the door’s buzzer. By the time Kinsley registered her mother’s pledge to load the dishwasher, she was no longer on the other end of the line.

“Shit,” Kinsley muttered as she slipped her phone into her pocket.

“Mommy cleaning up your messes?” Alex said with a grin, causing her to backslap his stomach as she brushed past him. His mood had changed drastically after leaving Gia Torres’ residence. “Hey, I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. My mother still stocks

my freezer with homemade meals.”

Alex and his mother were close, but that was to be expected since it had only been the two of them for most of his life. Michelle Lanen still lived in Alex’s childhood home, and it was doubtful that she would ever downsize. She was set in her ways, much like Alex.

“You’ll want to ask for Renee at the nurses’ station.”

“Thank you,” Kinsley replied as she and Alex walked down the long hallway. The ICU was very different from the other floors. Quiet, sans the occasional beeps of various monitors drifting through the doorways from private rooms. “Alex, today is going to be hard enough on—”

“I won’t bring up Torres and Hanson...yet.”

Kinsley nodded her understanding, and she was in agreement. Depending on how the upcoming interview panned out with Gage, there could be a possibility that they would need to reveal the affair. Too many of the family members keeping secrets, and such decisions were interfering with the investigation.

“Detectives Lanen and Aspen,” Alex greeted the nurse before he leaned a forearm against the counter. “We’re looking for Renee? Gage Baird’s nurse?”

“That would be me.” The petite woman typing on a keyboard closed out of a software program before spinning in the chair. She stood and motioned for them to follow her through to the other side of the station. “I take it that you’re here to speak with Mr. Baird?”

Renee’s steps were quick given her petite size. It wasn’t long before they were standing right outside an open door. She turned right before Kinsley and Alex would

have entered the room.

“You should know that brain injuries can be unpredictable. We’ve been focused on his physical state,” Renee explained, though Kinsley took it as a warning. “We haven’t spoken at length about the accident yet. His mother and father are in with him now, but I wanted to caution you about—”

“Father?”

Renee seemed to be taken aback by Alex’s question.

“I just assumed...” Renee thinned her lips in annoyance.

“We still need to question Mr. Baird regardless of any memory loss,” Kinsley explained to Renee, not willing to forgo the upcoming interview. “His physician gave us approval. As I’m sure you are aware, his sister was murdered last week. If there is any connection between the two, it would be beneficial for us to know that upfront.”

“I understand, but please know that his memory is a bit spotty. It’s difficult to say what Mr. Baird can recall from that night or the past week. The brain does its best to shield itself from—”

“...stop fidgeting with those bandages,” Louise directed, her voice becoming louder with each word. It was obvious she was upset about witnessing her son in pain. “Here. The nurse said that all you had to do was press this button for more pain medicine.”

“Mom, stop. I want to know what happened,” Gage replied with frustration. “Did I have an accident on the farm? Is Pops okay?”

“Your grandfather is just fine, and he’s due here shortly for a visit.” There was a long pause, and Renee would have entered the room had Alex not prevented her from

doing so. He wanted to hear more of the conversation, and Kinsley found herself siding with him on the decision. “In the meantime, let me get you some Jello. I’m sure you’re—”

“Call Pops back and tell him not to come. He needs to be at the farm. JJ doesn’t know everything yet.” Gage moaned in pain, but the distraction only pushed him into asking about his injuries. “Was it the tractor? I thought I fixed the—”

“You were in an accident near the covered bridge.” The abrupt response came from Douglas. “At least, that is what the police are saying. Do you remember talking with your Mom that afternoon?”

Kinsley and Alex shared an irritated glance, and he held up a hand to Renee to silently request that she wait a few more moments to hear the conversation unfold.

“Accident? In my truck? How bad?” Gage asked, his voice tight with pain. “Please tell me it isn’t totaled. Mom, stop fussing!”

“Your truck is still with the police at their impound lot.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

“Where’s Rachel?” The question went unanswered while it was obvious Louise was urging her son to press the morphine drip. “Maybe she can get me a loner from the dealership.”

The silence that emanated from the room was enough to cause Renee to turn on the heel of her white sneakers. She was no longer willing to wait on behalf of the police, and her first and foremost concern was her patient. Kinsley figured she would rather Gage’s memories come back to him slowly versus the shock of being told outright that his sister had been brutally murdered last week.

“Mr. Baird, how are you feeling?” Renee asked a little too loudly as she entered the room. Her presence seemed to have caught everyone off guard, but the interruption afforded Louise time to discreetly wipe away her tears. “I’m pleased with how—”

“I know you.” Gage’s focus slipped past the nurse and fixated on Kinsley. His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. Renee took her time wheeling a small computer so it was positioned near Gage’s bedside. She appeared more comfortable with her patient’s reaction to Kinsley than Douglas’s approach to blurt out the truth. “Your...”

Gage shook his head, but he immediately winced and closed his eyes. Renee began to ask him questions about his pain level while Douglas crossed his arms in agitation. Louise had composed herself, and she was busying herself with pouring water from a plastic pitcher into a small cup.

“...remember to push the button if your discomfort becomes too much. As for the two detectives, they were hoping you could remember the night of your accident. If you can’t, that’s quite alright. There is no need to—”

“Did someone run you off the road, Gage?”

“Douglas!” The reprimand came from Louise, but Douglas had already moved to the end of the bed. “The doctor said—”

“He has a right to know about Rachel, and the sooner he can remember what happened that night, the faster those bastards will be behind bars. We all know that Sebastian and Jack—”

“I don’t think now is the time—”

“Stop!”

Gage raised both hands to his head as the pain became obviously unbearable. Everyone was talking over one another, and their voices had become slightly raised. Renee reached over him for the morphine drip and pressed the button herself.

“This is the ICU. I will not have my patient—”

“Rachel was murdered last week, Gage,” Douglas stated in anguish. There was a protective undercurrent in his tone, but he didn’t understand the damage he had done to Gage or the case. “It was no coincidence that you were run off the road. We need you to remember everything you can so that the police can make an arrest.”

“Leave,” Renee ordered Douglas. She even solicited Alex’s help. “Remove him from this room. Now.”

“He has a right to—”

“Mr. Glynn, you need to come with me,” Alex stated firmly as he took the man’s arm. “I understand that you want...”

Alex escorted Douglas from the room, but the damage was already done. Gage's reaction had been visceral, the news hitting him like a physical blow. A guttural sound escaped him, raw and pained, as he stared at his mother for confirmation. Louise was crying uncontrollably, and her shoulders shook with each sob that wracked her body.

“Please, not today.” Renee approached Kinsley, all but turning her toward the door. “I’ll see to it that Mr. Baird is given a sedative. He needs his rest. Your questions will just have to wait.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Beck Serra

October

Friday — 11:32 am

The mid-afternoon sun was hidden behind a thick sheet of grey clouds. The elements weren’t conducive to bringing rain or snow into the area this afternoon, but the recent cold front had been successful in producing bone-chilling gusts of winds.

Beck sat in his rental car outside a row of townhomes. He had left the engine idle while deciding whether he should break into Kinsley Aspen’s residence. Unfortunately, it was hard to miss the security camera positioned directly above her garage door. She probably had one installed around the back, too.

He reached for his travel mug, but the cold stainless steel reminded him that he had drained the contents twenty minutes ago. His choices were limited now regarding a search of Kinsley’s home for any evidence to disprove or corroborate the claim made in Gantz’s handwriting.

Unless...

Beck shifted to the right in his seat. He reached into his coat pocket for his cell phone, settling back when he used facial recognition to access his contacts. He browsed through the names until he came to the person listed who just might have the answer to his problem.

While he waited for the line to connect, he couldn't help but wonder if Kinsley had heard about Gantz's missing person investigation being reopened by the department. Beck had spent the past three days tracking down a distant cousin of Gantz.

At first, the woman hadn't wanted anything to do with Beck. They had spoken for a good thirty minutes about the deserted house in Fallbrook, and how it could potentially go into foreclosure at some point due to unpaid property taxes.

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He had been able to convince Evelyn Reichard to call the Fallbrook Police Department and officially label Calvin Gantz a missing person. Beck might have suggested that, should it be discovered something happened to the man, the house stood a chance to go to the closest next of kin. He had no idea if what he had spouted during the call was true, but the end result had been a formal missing persons claim.

Beck tapped his thumb on the steering wheel as the other end of the line rang numerous times. He was just about to pull the phone away from his ear when a familiar voice greeted him.

“Ryan, it’s Beck. I have a quick question for you,” Beck greeted as he adjusted the vent away from his face. “How difficult is it to shut off a home security system without the owner’s knowledge?”

“I didn’t take you for a criminal, Serra.” Ryan’s laughter could be heard over what sounded like a loud fan. “Tell me this is a hypothetical question.”

“Hypothetically, how difficult is it to shut off a home security system without the owner’s knowledge?”

“Hypothetically, it would depend on the system. It is hooked to a landline? Wireless? Do you have a particular brand in this scenario?”

Those were questions without answers, and Beck figured he would have an easier time asking Kinsley for the code outright...which is a scenario that would never come to fruition.

“Never mind. Forget I asked,” Beck muttered as a white Chrysler sedan entered the neighborhood. “How has Miami been treating you?”

“My days are filled with sunshine, vodka, and beautiful women. You’re freelancing, right? You’re out of your damn mind for staying in that cold ass state.”

“You’re probably right.” Beck monitored the vehicle with interest when the driver slowed down and began to pull into Kinsley’s driveway. “Ryan, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you back if that hypothetical situation ever pops up again.”

Beck lowered his cell phone. He recognized Margaret Aspen as she stepped out of the car. Her chestnut-colored hair was blown into her face as she quickly reached for the handle on the back door. Before too long, she had leaned inside to collect what appeared to be a white square box. Once she had the container securely in hand, she closed both doors and made her way to the front entrance of Kinsley’s townhouse.

He had never met Margaret in person. The one-on-one interviews he had arranged with George Aspen and Calvin Gantz had been held at the offices of Aspen Law LLP. Beck wondered if she would even recognize his name should he introduce himself.

Margaret stood at the front door for a moment, finding a specific key on her keyring. Before too long, she disappeared inside. Beck waited in his car for a while. After five minutes had passed and Margaret never exited the house, Beck made the impulsive decision to knock on the front door.

A cold gust of wind whipped at his face as he stepped out of the rental car. He pressed the key fob to lock the doors since his leather satchel containing his laptop was in the backseat. Even though the neighborhood seemed decent, he didn’t want to take any chances that someone would steal the contents. Some of the neighbors had opted to put up Halloween decorations. As he walked past a mailbox, he was startled by the sudden caw that emanated from a black raven.

Agitation set in as he continued to walk up the short driveway. He empathized with the mail delivery person who had to deal with that life-sized bird every single day. The homeowners would be lucky if they didn't find it stuffed inside their mailbox one afternoon. Then again, given the security camera above Kinsley's garage, nothing could be done about the annoying decoration without being recorded for all to see.

Once Beck reached Kinsley's front entrance, he hesitated to ring the doorbell. She would inevitably hear about his visit, but maybe that would spur her to seek him out. He had several questions for her, and it might be time to ask them.

Beck rang the doorbell.

He shoved his hands in his coat pockets and waited for Margaret to come to the door. When she finally appeared, he noted that she had removed her jacket and was currently holding a dishtowel.

"May I help you?"

"I was hoping to speak with Kinsley," Beck replied, keeping his tone casual.

"I'm sorry, but Kinsley's at work right now." Margaret waited for him to reply, but he remained in place hoping that she would invite him in. If he could get a glimpse of the alarm panel, then there was a chance that Ryan could explain how to get around the system. "I'm her mother, Margaret. Is there something that I can help you with?"

"I appreciate that, but I need to ask Kinsley a few questions regarding Calvin Gantz." Beck had purposefully brought up the alleged killer's name. "I've met with your daughter twice before. As a matter of fact, your husband gave me a one-on-one interview last year. My name is Beck Serra."

Margaret nodded in recognition, but she still didn't take a step back from the

threshold. As a matter of fact, she shifted until her right arm was behind the door. He figured Kinsley had taught her the defensive maneuver. It gave her the ability to shut the door with the weight of her body if needed.

“You should stop in at the station,” Margaret advised as suspicion flickered in her hazel eyes. Kinsley took after her father’s side of the family when it came to physical attributes, but she had definitely inherited Margaret’s heart-shaped face. “I’m sure you’ll find her there.”

“Kinsley wasn’t at the station when I was there this morning, but I should have just asked to speak with the officer handling the missing persons case.” Beck gave Margaret an apologetic smile. He loathed being like those other reporters, who would do anything for a story, but this was about life and death—Gantz’s life to be more specific. “You have a good day, ma’am.”

“Missing persons?”

“You haven’t heard the news yet?” Beck asked after he had taken a step back. He shrugged, as if what he was about to say was common knowledge. In reality, it would be once the local media got wind that one Evelyn Reichard had reported her cousin missing since last year. “Calvin Gantz is officially listed as a missing person. I’m sure your husband knows all about it. Again, I’m sorry to bother you. You have a good day.”

Beck turned and began walking down the side of the driveway. Once he reached the end, he made it a point to stare directly at the security camera mounted above the garage. He wanted Kinsley to seek him out. If she murdered Gantz, then she was no better than him.

As for Margaret, she seemed genuinely clueless as to what her daughter might have done. For nearly a year, Beck had kept the handwritten note under wraps, biding his

time and gathering information. Having interviewed Calvin Gantz himself, he understood firsthand that the man could be cunning and manipulative.

Could Gantz have wanted Beck to accuse Kinsley of murder all along?

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Was Gantz holed up in some cabin, wanting revenge on the people involved with his arrest and trial? After all, Kinsley had been the arresting officer.

Or was Gantz truly six feet underground?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 6:23 pm

“Aspen, are you going to Crosby’s annual bonfire tomorrow night?”

“Are you bringing that moonshine of yours?” Kinsley asked, raising her voice so Hess could hear her on the other side of the glass partition. She glanced up from Rachel Hanson’s phone records. A printed version of the numbers was easier for Kinsley to cross-reference. “Judging by that smile of yours, I’ll be there.”

“Admit it, Aspen. You’re going to miss me.”

The faint muffled sound of the elevator arriving on their floor could be heard, and Hess’ laughter faded away. She was going to miss him. Hess had been one of the first detectives to welcome her to the fold. He was old school, but he had worked his fair share of homicides. He had a method that worked for him, and she had taken tips along the way.

Kinsley glanced up when one of the fluorescent bulbs flickered, but it went right back to being steady. She gave it two weeks before it completely went out. Her gaze slid to the murder board. She and Alex could very well still be staring at the same timeline without any additional leads next year. There were too many cold cases on their desks as it was, and she didn't want to add another.

With that thought in mind, Kinsley turned up the country music to keep her company. She wouldn't be staying for too long, especially since she and Alex needed to go back to the hospital tomorrow morning. Gage Baird would have had time to process the events that unfolded before and after his accident. There could even be a chance that he recalled what he had wanted to speak with his mother about last week.

Two other detectives occupied the far side of the room, but they were too engrossed in their own work to be bothered by the tunes. Dobbs and Crosby wouldn't be in for another couple of hours. As for Haugen and Shane, they probably wouldn't report to the station until Monday.

As Kinsley settled back in and scanned the list of calls, she noted the number of times Rachel and Sebastian had spoken on a daily basis. The man and his lawyer had canceled their interview earlier today, which only served to irritate her further. Was Hanson avoiding her questions out of guilt? Covering for his brother?

Jack Hanson had motive and opportunity.

Kinsley jotted down a few more questions she would like to pose to Sebastian Hansen. She would be forced to give the list of inquiries to the man's attorney, but eventually, said lawyer would advise his client to respond.

On the bright side, she had one less concern knowing her father wasn't representing Hanson. He had chosen an upscale law firm from Bismarck.

Kinsley hovered her pen above the paper, using its tip to circle the calls Rachel made to the farm's landline—twice a week, every week, at the same time.

Tobias didn't carry a cell phone and was probably at the hospital with Louise and Douglas right now. Kinsley glanced at the clock on the wall, noting that visiting hours would likely be over by the time she reached the hospital. She understood what it took to run a farm, so she wasn't concerned about the fact that JJ hadn't been to the hospital. At least, to her knowledge, no such visit had taken place. Maybe they should be looking more into J.J. Callaghan's relationship with Gage and Rachel.

The sudden vibration of Kinsley's cell phone on the desk jolted her from her thoughts. She picked it up while lowering the country music playing on her computer speakers. The display read her mother's name, and she couldn't help but smile.

“You did my dishes, didn't you?”

Margaret didn't laugh, and Kinsley's hand slowly came to rest on the small stack of papers. “Mom? Is everything okay?”

“Did you speak with a journalist named Beck Serra today?” Margaret inquired cautiously. “He stopped by your townhouse, and I directed him to the station.”

Kinsley leaned back in her chair, too stunned to immediately respond.

“I told your father, of course. He doesn't seem to be too concerned about it, but I find it odd that a journalist would come to your home.”

“Did Mr. Serra give a reason as to why he wanted to speak with me?” Kinsley had managed to shake off her shock, but that sinking sensation in her stomach remained behind. “Did he upset you?”

“No, no,” Margaret said, though Kinsley caught the underlying tone of tension. “He was very respectful. He mentioned that he had met with you a couple of times, and he wanted a comment regarding Calvin Gantz’s missing persons investigation. I guess someone reopened the inquiry into his whereabouts. Again, I told your father all of this, but he doesn’t seem too concerned about it.”

Kinsley’s father wouldn’t be worried about the past coming back to haunt them, because he had no idea the horrifying deeds two of his children had done twelve months ago. She tightened her grip on the phone and closed her eyes to try and even out her breathing. Knowing better than to let her mother hear how unsettling the situation was, Kinsley forced a lightness to her voice.

“Dad’s right, Mom. Beck Serra is the journalist who Dad gave that one-on-one interview with during the Gantz trial.” Kinsley’s throat constricted upon saying aloud the man’s name, but she managed to stay composed. “It’s obvious the man doesn’t know boundaries, but I was out of the station working a case most of the day. Maybe Serra thought I was home. Listen, Mom, I’ve got to go. Oh, and thanks for doing the dishes.”

Kinsley lowered her phone, but she was unable to push down the fear and anxiety that had resulted from hearing her mother’s words. Someone had reopened the missing persons inquiry into Calvin Gantz, but who? Before she could reach for her desk phone to contact the proper division, Izzy came around the glass partition with a folder in hand.

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“I ran into Alex when he was leaving the station. He mentioned you were still up here,” Izzy said as she came to a stop beside the two desks. Much like Wally, the woman was a contradiction. She had a rough exterior, yet she always carried a fragrance of lavender everywhere she went. “I thought you should know that I swung by the Baird crash site since I was out that way earlier today. I know you weren’t convinced about it being an accident, but the lack of skid marks matches up with the brakes going out on his truck.”

Kinsley forced a smile as she tried to mentally switch gears. It was difficult, but the interruption gave her time to put things in perspective. If Serra had been the one to get the missing persons case reopened, it would soon be closed. In the eyes of the law, it wasn’t illegal to up and move one’s life to another city or state. The man’s passport and most of his clothes were gone, and any officer would take that to mean Gantz left town voluntarily.

“Thanks, Izzy.” Kinsley pushed back from her desk. “I appreciate you double-checking the site.”

“One more thing,” Izzy said as she handed off a folder. “I also took another look at the location where Rachel Hanson crashed headfirst into a tree. About a half mile from that location, I found some skid marks. I can’t guarantee that they are from the night in question or if they had anything to do with her being forced off the road, but I took pictures of them just in case. They belong to tires from a pickup truck. Pretty standard ones, too.”

“A pickup truck?”

“Don’t get too excited,” Izzy warned as she held up a hand. “Like I said, the tires are standard, and the skid marks were a half mile back from the crash site. They might not have anything to do with the Hanson investigation. Anyway, I’m joining Alex and Wally across the street. You ready to call it a night?”

“You go ahead,” Kinsley said without hesitation. She needed a minute to get the ground back under her feet after the phone call with her mother. “There are still a few things I need to take care of, but I’ll be over soon.”

Izzy rapped her knuckles on the desk before taking her leave. She veered around the glass partition and proceeded down the hallway. Kinsley stood from her chair, needing some caffeine or sugar. She opted for sugar and opened her top drawer to fish out some quarters for the vending machine.

As she shut the drawer with her thigh, she was caught off guard to find Shane striding down the hall from the opposite direction of the elevator. She recalled his unease with tight spaces, but she had never given it much thought before. He had served five years in the Marines, and he rarely discussed that time of his life.

Shane’s strides faltered when he spotted her at her workstation. Their gazes locked, and he briefly nodded at her in acknowledgment before continuing to his desk. Regardless that he attempted to ease the tension between them, it still settled in the air.

Between Izzy’s brief visit and Shane’s presence, maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing for Kinsley to take a moment and mull over her options when it came to Beck Serra. She didn’t want to call attention to herself by placing a call to the officer investigating the man’s disappearance. She wasn’t sure what she had done to cause Serra to take such an interest in her life, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it this evening.

What she could do was make amends with Shane...or at least attempt to do so. She

slowly closed the distance between them and leaned against Haugen's desk. Shane had been in the process of removing his jacket. He silently took a seat and used his black boot to turn himself so that he was facing her.

There was no judgment in his blue eyes...eyes that were bluer than hers. If anything, she perceived deep confusion, but it wasn't like she could ever satisfy that need. She would never place him in the position to be the one to put her in cuffs.

Kinsley glanced down at the quarters, struggling to find the right words. That pesky layer of hair fell into her face, and she tucked the wayward strands behind her ear for something to do to bide her some more time.

"Kin," Shane said softly. "You don't have to say anything. We covered it all last year. There are no hard feelings, alright?"

"Between the trial, my father, and...well, I should have handled everything better. I didn't, and I'm truly sorry."

"Is this the 'it's me, not you' speech?" Shane gave her a lopsided grin, the corners of his eyes crinkling with warmth. "Like I said, you don't need to go there."

Despite how different they were in their personal lives, she had truly thought they could have a future. Her actions last October had changed the course of her life, and with it, his. He had respected her decision to end their relationship, and never once had he pushed her for more of an explanation than she had been willing to give.

"I need you to know that I don't regret our time together."

"No regrets here, either." Shane jostled his knee as he veered their conversation to safer ground. "You're going to need to give me more tips about Haugen, though. I don't understand how a man can eat an entire meal, two milkshakes, and a slice of

apple pie and still be hungry thirty minutes later. It makes absolutely no sense.”

“And Sam is probably over at The Bucket right now complaining to Alex that you’re too straight and narrow.” Kinsley rattled the quarters in her hand as she pushed herself away from Haugen’s desk. “Oh, and the black unmarked cruiser with the dent is ours. No more signing it out. I had the navy blue car detailed this afternoon. That’s your ‘welcome to the department’ gift.”

“If I have my way, we’ll only ever use my personal vehicle. That way, I know it's maintained and won't smell like dog shit.”

Shane’s words caused Kinsley to slow her departure until she came to a stop near the glass partition. Something about his statement triggered a memory from last week. Slowly, she turned to face Shane, who was in the process of turning on his computer.

“Shane, I have a question for you. If you ordered a new set of brakes, how long would it take you to install them?”

A playful grin tugged at the corner of Shane’s mouth.

“Come on, Kinsley, you know me better than that.”

Gage had practically grown up on his grandfather’s farm. He would have the same mentality, so what reason could have possibly forced him to put off such an important task?

“And if someone else ordered brake pads but couldn’t find the time to give them to you?”

“I’d make time to pick them up.”

Unless Douglas hadn't wanted Gage to have them. Was that the reason that he had wanted to speak with his mother? Had he been able to discern that Douglas was involved with Rachel's death?

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Izzy mentioned tires a half mile away from where Rachel had been run off the road. Douglas owned a pickup truck.

Kinsley's mind continued to race, attempting to fit all the pieces of the investigation into place. She thought back to the night she called Noah. The two of them had gone through several scenarios in a desperate attempt to protect themselves. They kept coming back to the same one—the one that contained a diversion.

“And if you thought the police suspected you of a crime, what would be your first reaction?”

Shane leaned back in his chair, spinning it with his black boot. Once he was facing her again, his playful grin faded into a more serious expression. He understood her inquiries had to do with her case.

“A person's first instinct is to push the blame onto someone else,” Shane said with a dismissive shrug. She doubted that Shane had ever committed a criminal act over the course of his life. His standards for himself and others were high, and he never would have understood her decision last year. “Is that what you think happened in the Hanson case?”

Douglas had consistently pushed the theory that Sebastian and Jack Hanson had killed Rachel for the money. What if the same motive applied, but in a completely different manner?

Kinsley hurried to her desk. She slapped the quarters down next to the phone records. She began to sort through the mound of papers until she had to resort to her email.

She finally located Tobias Zayn's will, which had been emailed to her by Tobias himself. Louise hadn't been a part of her father's will at all until a couple of months ago. With both Gage and Rachel out of the picture, Louise stood to gain a financial windfall.

"I think you might have just helped me piece together who murdered Rachel Hanson." Kinsley grabbed her sweater, keys, and cell phone. When she reached the glass partition, she stopped to voice aloud one more thing. "Welcome to homicide, Shane."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 7:21 pm

The low, constant pulse of The Bucket was typical for a Friday night. Engaging conversations were occasionally interrupted by bursts of raucous laughter, with a sporadic outburst from someone who wouldn't be driving home this evening. Tap had very strict rules for those who chose to drink beyond their threshold at his establishment. Even so, every table was occupied, and there wasn't an empty stool to be found.

The door closed behind Kinsley, drowning out the night's chill. She had jogged across the street in an effort to save time. Giving her lungs a chance to ease the burning left behind, she quickly sought out the back booth where Alex sat with Wally and Izzy. His gaze never once veered from something or someone at the bar, so Kinsley raised her arm to grab his attention. She had hoped to avoid weaving through the crowded tables.

She shouldn't have been surprised that her luck hadn't returned. She followed his gaze to Laura sitting at the bar. The woman was twirling the stem of her wine glass while laughing at something her companion said without a thought to the man nursing his broken heart in the corner booth.

Under normal circumstances, Kinsley would have ignored the callous manner in which Laura was handling the situation with Alex. What had taken place between the two of them was private. Kinsley had no business butting into their personal lives, and she reminded herself of that fact as she made her way over to the bar.

She and Alex had a case to close, and petty behavior didn't deserve to be awarded with attention. It would have been best to leave well enough alone, but Laura's companion wasn't someone easily ignored.

"Serra." Kinsley shoved her hands into the pockets of her sweater. She didn't want him to notice that her fingers had curled into the palms of her hands. "I need to speak with you in private."

Beck had crossed the line by showing up at her home. The gleam in his eyes set her on edge, but she didn't break their stare. She didn't want any part of his twisted game.

"Watch my drink for me?" Beck asked Laura, whose interest was now on Kinsley. "I'll be right back."

She stepped aside to give him space, but she didn't follow directly behind him. Instead, she turned to Laura to give a not-so-friendly warning.

"Serra is a bottom feeder, Mitchell. Be careful or he'll swallow you whole."

Kinsley turned before glancing toward the back booth. Alex was staring at her with

interest. He had complete faith in her that she wouldn't say the wrong thing, and such trust hadn't been easy for him to give. It had been earned and built over time. The fact that Laura had discarded him with such ease made Kinsley sick to her stomach. It took every ounce of strength she had to walk away.

By the time she had made it to the front entrance, Beck was already holding open the door. She stepped outside, and the night air wrapped around her like a cold, wet blanket. The streetlights cast eerie pools of varying yellow hues on the damp pavement, but it was the dim lighting of the bar through the front windows that afforded her the ability to observe Beck's facial features.

"I'm not going to mince words, Serra. You are never—under any circumstances—to show up at my home again."

Beck's lips curled into a small smile. He seemed unfazed by her words as much as he was by the cold gust of wind blowing down the street.

"Well, Detective Aspen, seeing as you were the arresting officer for Calvin Gantz, I would have assumed you'd want to make a statement on record." Beck held up a finger and tsked his tongue in acknowledgment. "Wait. My bad. You don't like talking to the press, do you? That job falls to your partner. I guess I'll mosey back into the bar and ask him for a statement."

It was the second time this evening that Kinsley chose to remain silent. She wasn't sure how long she could keep suppressing her opinions.

"From your non-reaction, I take it you already know that a distant cousin of Gantz seemed really concerned over the phone about the fact that he had up and abandoned his property. Of course, I encouraged her to reach out to the police."

"Of course. Being such the good Samaritan that you are," Kinsley pointed out as she

dug her nails into the palms of her hands. While she was now in possession of how the missing persons investigation had been reopened, Beck's motives remained unclear. "You seem awfully obsessed with Calvin Gantz, Mr. Serra. I might even label it disturbing."

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“What is disturbing is that an innocent man—acquitted by a jury of his peers—up and disappeared without a trace. The Fallbrook Police Department doesn’t appear to be concerned, either. I feel the public has a right to know that—”

“Kin, is everything alright here?”

Kinsley had spotted Shane crossing the street. Serra, on the other hand, had been so caught up in his little speech that he hadn’t noticed someone approaching them. Her heart hammered in her chest at the possibility of Serra suspecting she had something to do with Gantz’s disappearance.

A sense of dread settled in her stomach.

No one had been around when the shooting took place or when Noah had arrived on the scene. The same could be said for when she had broken into Gantz’s residence to grab his clothes and passport. She and Noah had also taken additional precautions when placing the man’s body in the trunk of his car and driving it to Terrapin Lake, where it now rested at the bottom of the large body of water.

Not one witness.

Serra somehow had Kinsley questioning her own sanity.

“Everything is fine, Shane,” Kinsley responded with a tight smile. “I was just giving Serra advice on the proper way to ask for a comment from a detective.”

“And seeing as I have now been properly chastised, I’ll be heading back inside to

enjoy the rest of my evening,” Beck said wryly, never breaking eye contact with her. “It's been... enlightening, Detective Aspen.”

Beck finally glanced toward Shane, but neither man decided to introduce themselves. Beck finally disappeared through the front entrance of The Bucket, leaving several dark thoughts swirling in her mind.

“Kin?”

“I’m fine.” Kinsley forced a smile. “Really. He has been a pain in my ass since the trial.”

“I take it that was Beck Serra?”

Shane had still been sharing her bed when Serra’s article regarding his interviews with her father and Gantz had been published in the national newspapers. Beck had no doubt been paid some pretty pennies for such an exclusive.

“The one and only,” Kinsley replied sardonically as she took a step toward the entrance. Shane beat her to it and opened the door for her. “I’ve got to grab Alex. We need to head to the hospital. And Shane?”

By this time, Kinsley was standing just inside the door. She waited until it had shut completely, sealing out the cold, and she had his full attention.

“I truly appreciate the help tonight.”

“Anytime.”

There was a promise in his voice that she would go out of her way to avoid, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t appreciate the sentiment. She flashed him a genuine smile

this time before threading her way through the crowded tables. She ignored those at the bar, not wanting to engage in a staring contest with Serra. The closer she got to the booth, the louder Alex and Wally were in their discussion about the depth players of the Minnesota Vikings football team. He spotted her approaching the booth.

“Kin, explain to Wally that—” Alex broke off when she took a seat beside him. “I know that look.”

“Me, too,” Izzy agreed.

“Shit,” Wally muttered as he picked his phone up off the table. “Was one of my players put on injured reserve? It better not be my tight end. I—”

“You idiot,” Izzy muttered as she elbowed Wally in the side. “Kin figured something out about their case.”

“Really?” Wally studied Kinsley before shaking his head to the contrary. “I don’t buy it. That is the same expression she gets when she is set to receive more points than me.”

“You aren’t even playing her this weekend.”

“One of Wally’s wide receivers pulled a hamstring in practice today. And while the player is questionable for Sunday’s game, that’s not why I’m here.” Kinsley turned to Alex, wishing she could take a swig of his beer. As it stood, she was glad it was only half empty. “Alex, do you think there is a possibility that those inside the hospital room knew we were in the hallway today?”

Alex considered her question carefully while Wally muttered an expletive under his breath. He was already searching his phone for confirmation about his injured player.

“Sure, it’s possible,” Alex responded before lifting his bottle of beer. She quickly snagged it from his fingers and set it down on the table. He frowned in irritation, but he didn’t make a move for it. “There was a metal sheet protector on the door. They could have seen our reflection. I take it we’re driving back to the hospital tonight?”

“You figured out who killed Rachel Hanson, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” Kinsley replied to Izzy’s question. “Hear me out. Douglas Glynn was able to get a discount on brakes and pads for Gage’s truck. Only I think Douglas might have made the offer out of pure selfishness. This brake thing has been mentioned several times during our conversations with them. Think about it. Gage isn’t the type of man to let his brakes go like that. He fixes equipment on the farm all the time. It’s in his nature to make sure everything is running smoothly.”

“So why not replace his brakes?”

“I looked through Gage’s phone records again. He and Douglas spoke several times in the past few weeks. I think Gage attempted to arrange a time for him to pick up the brake pads, but Douglas kept putting it off.”

“Okay,” Alex said cautiously as he took the bottle of beer and slid it over to Izzy. Wally was currently halfway through his daiquiri. “What is the motive?”

“Money. We know that Louise was added to Tobias’ will. If her children are dead...” Kinsley let her voice trail off before adding one more detail. “I believe Douglas saw our reflections in that metal protection plate. I think that is the reason he pushed Gage into believing the Hanson brothers tried to kill him. If Gage is having trouble recalling the days leading up to his accident, how easy would it be for Douglas to start planting seeds of doubt?”

“Kin, it’s all circumstantial,” Izzy pointed out as she wrapped her hands around Alex’s beer bottle. “You don’t have enough evidence for an arrest.”

“Douglas Glynn drives a truck.” Kin had been in such a rush to share her theory that she hadn’t confirmed Glynn’s alibi. “Alex, was the doorbell camera footage from the house across the street ever emailed to us? The house facing Louise Baird’s home?”

“The lens on the neighbor’s doorbell camera has been broken for a while. We’re out of luck on that front.”

“There isn’t a traffic camera for at least two miles from that neighborhood,” Izzy

divulged, though Kinsley had already run the route in her mind.

“Why don’t we walk back to the station?” Alex suggested as he motioned for Kinsley to exit the booth. “We’ll put in a request for warrants to search Douglas Glynn’s truck and Louise Baird’s residence since he lives with her.”

“Or we can drive to the hospital under the guise of speaking with Gage again,” Kinsley suggested, liking her idea better. “I called the hospital and spoke with security. Douglas’ truck is still in the parking lot. We can divide them. Think about it, Alex. We never spoke to them individually.”

Kinsley was merely being proactive. It would take maybe twenty minutes to submit the proper paperwork, and then another ten minutes to drive to the hospital. There was a good chance a judge wouldn’t sign off on the warrants without something more concrete, and she didn’t want Douglas Glynn to slip through their fingers. If luck was on their side, which it hadn’t appeared to be lately, she or Alex would receive word that the warrants came through while questioning the man.

“I’m putting in for overtime on this, Kin.”

“Does that mean you’re buying the first round on Sunday?” Wally asked, picking up his daiquiri in salute. Izzy had already taken a healthy swig from Alex’s bottle. “We’re meeting here at noon.”

Kinsley let some of the tension release from her shoulders. She stood from the booth. She had kept her hands in the pockets of her sweater, but she hadn’t realized just how deep she had dug her nails into her palms. Her encounter with Serra had set her on edge, and she needed the Hanson investigation over if just to have a few days of breathing room.

“Not a chance,” Alex said with a laugh. It was as if he understood Kinsley required a

moment. “The new guy is over at the bar. Tap him to buy the first round.”

“Trust me, Wally,” Izzy muttered as she set the bottle down on the table. “Neither one of them will be paid overtime for this.”

Alex stood and took his jacket off the hook on the side of the booth. By the time he slipped his arms in the sleeves and hooked the zipper, Kinsley had some semblance of composure. As she and Alex made their way to the door, it was impossible not to spot Laura and Beck deep in conversation. He made eye contact with her, but she didn’t falter her steps.

She wouldn’t allow a journalist searching for his next big payday to expose her brother’s role in her crime. Once she and Alex made an arrest in the Hanson case, she could then turn her attention to the missing persons investigation into Calvin Gantz. Every action she had taken that fateful night had been with the purpose of leading the authorities away from Terrapin Lake.

Away from Noah.

Away from the truth.

And Kinsley needed it to stay that way.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kinsley Aspen

October

Friday — 11:04 pm

The hospital parking lot was nearly empty, the vehicles that had filled it earlier in the day now gone. The illumination from the midday overcast sky had been replaced by a gentle glow from the lampposts lining the perimeters in squares. In stark contrast, the bright lights of the hospital sign made it seem as if daylight had never left.

Kinsley slowed her Jeep before parking in the first row. Her seatbelt was already unfastened and the engine turned off before Alex pulled in beside her. Not knowing how long they would be or what would need to be done in the aftermath of the interviews, they had opted to drive separately.

Spending longer than intended at the station putting in for the proper warrants, Kinsley used the additional time to return some calls. She wasn't surprised when her cell phone rang with an area code from Leeds.

"Aspen."

Kinsley reached for the handle.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

“Detective Aspen? This is Roger Stowe. You’ve been trying to reach me?”

“Yes,” Kinsley replied as she exited her Jeep. “Thank you for returning my call. I’m investigating a homicide, and I simply need confirmation that Gage Baird met with you last Wednesday. Your name and number were given to me as the third party of a business deal.”

“I wish I could supply one for him, Detective Aspen. Unfortunately, I was mugged a couple of hours before our scheduled meeting. I’ve been laid up in the hospital with a broken leg, a punctured lung, and a fractured collarbone. I was just released today.”

Kinsley closed the distance to Alex’s Camaro before opening the passenger side door. She pulled the phone away from her ear once she had settled in the seat and pressed the speaker button.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Stowe.” Kinsley reached out and shut the door to trap the heat. “Were the police able to arrest the individuals responsible?”

“Individual. One. And not to my knowledge,” Roger replied bitterly. “I hope they find that son of a bitch soon, though.”

“Did you at least speak with Gage Baird last Wednesday?”

Alex pressed the dome light overhead. It wasn’t long before he pulled a small notebook from the console, along with a pen. He quickly jotted down a question.

“No, ma’am. I reached out to Gage today to reschedule our meeting, but I haven’t

been able to get ahold of him or his grandfather.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how much money did you have with you at the time?” Kinsley asked after reading Alex’s note.

“I usually don’t have any cash on me when conducting those types of meetings, but I’ve been doing business with some wagyu breeders lately. Those straws tend to sell for a pretty penny. We deal with wire transactions mostly, but I had a customer who paid cash that morning.”

Why had Gage lied about his alibi?

Kinsley thought back to the first time she spoke with Rachel’s brother. He had mentioned the Fallbrook Killer before following her from the porch to her Jeep. It was then that he had brought up his grandfather’s past gambling history. Why would he have done so if he believed Gantz was responsible for Rachel’s death?

“Mr. Stowe, did you happen to mention this meeting to Mr. Baird?”

The long pause gave Kinsley her answer.

Alex pulled his phone out from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He exited the car to allow Kinsley to finish the call with Stowe. She asked a few more follow-up questions before wishing him a speedy recovery. Once their conversation had drawn to a close, she remained seated while reconsidering the facts of the case.

“Is it possible that Gage murdered his sister?” Kinsley asked in disbelief after Alex had rejoined her in the car. “He is the one with the gambling problem, isn’t he?”

“That’s the theory I’m working with, too,” Alex said as he held up his phone. He hadn’t closed the door, and all the heat had been extracted in seconds. “I just got off

the phone with Crosby. I had him go back a few months in Gage Baird's phone records, and a number popped up. He spoke to someone for three months straight every Sunday morning. Crosby is running the number now."

"Killing a sibling just to hide a gambling addiction, though?" Kinsley shook her head in astonishment. "That's...well, extreme."

"Is it?"

"Shut the door," Kinsley directed as she leaned her head back against the seat. "We can't go inside until we make sense of this."

"Zayn is dying from lung cancer. He told you himself that he hadn't expected to make it this long, and what if Gage was under the same assumption? What if Gage has known all along that his grandfather was dying? What if he had planned to sell the land after the old man's death to pay off his debts?"

"A bookie only waits so long," Kinsley whispered while tapping her phone on her thigh. Alex hadn't bothered to shut his door, and she was getting colder by the second. "I just...Rachel was his sister, Alex."

"Not every sibling has close bonds like you do with yours, Kin."

"That would mean that Gage staged his own accident. There were no skid marks. No paint markings on his vehicle to suggest that someone else ran him off the road. He expected his brakes to give out on that turn, but he hadn't anticipated the crash to be so severe. He was going to claim that someone ran him off the road, too."

"The hospital probably put Gage's clothes and personal items in one of those bags. What are the chances that the knife he used on his sister is among his belongings? Kin, we need to resubmit those warrants."

Kinsley had been staring at the front entrance of the hospital while going over their options. Had she been looking anywhere else, she would have missed the sight of Louise Baird exiting the glass doors.

The woman came to an abrupt stop.

Since Alex hadn't closed his door, the dome light overhead illuminated their presence. Kinsley met the woman's stare. Something in her body language had Kinsley reaching for the handle of the passenger door.

"Alex, look. Is she...damn it! I think Louise knows Gage killed Rachel."

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

Both Kinsley and Alex began to run toward the entrance, but Louise had already raced back inside. She disappeared around the corner toward the elevator bank. Kinsley quickened her pace, and Alex matched her strides.

“Go,” Alex ordered as he began to veer off toward the information desk. “I’ll bring up security.”

“I’ll meet you in the ICU.” Kinsley reached out and pressed the top button on the elevator. “Come on. Come on.”

The short ride to the eighth floor was anything but, and she finally made her way to the waiting room moments later. A sleeping couple, huddled together in the far corner, were the only ones present.

Kinsley made her way to the window, but no one appeared to be on duty. Pressing the call button, she waited impatiently for someone to appear. She began to jab the button again and again.

“May I help you?”

The agitated nurse wasn’t someone Kinsley had met before, so she shifted the right side of her sweater to display her badge.

“Buzz me in, please. I’m here to speak with Gage Baird. It can’t wait until morning.”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Baird has been transferred from ICU to the sixth floor.”

“When did this take place?” Kinsley asked, tamping down her frustration. She let her sweater fall back in place. “And why wasn’t the station notified?”

“I wasn’t on duty when the transfer took place, ma’am. I can contact the administrator if you—.”

“No, that’s fine,” Kinsley replied as she stepped away from the window. There would be time to examine mistakes and inconsistencies later. “Thank you.”

Kinsley closed the distance to the elevator, reaching for her phone. She called Alex after pressing the up arrow on the panel. It took a moment for him to answer.

“Baird has been moved to the sixth floor.”

“What? When did that happen?”

“I guess a few hours ago,” Kinsley responded as the elevator doors slid open. She quickly entered the lift and pushed the button for the correct floor. “I’ll meet you there.”

Upon arriving on the sixth floor, she paused only to study the signs secured on the wall. Since most hospitals were the same, she disregarded the information and jogged down one of the hallways in search of the nurses’ station. A large open area with elongated countertops had been constructed in the middle of the floor with two separate hallways lined with patients’ rooms.

“Excuse me.” Kinsley kept her voice low as she unclipped her badge. Her boots had squeaked with each step, echoing off the walls, so it wasn’t as if the nurse hadn’t heard her approach. “I’m looking for Gaige Baird’s room.”

“Room 618.” The nurse’s nametag read Heather. She stopped whatever it was she

was doing on the computer and signed out, glancing at Kinsley with curiosity. She stood from the chair and motioned for Kinsley to follow her through the shortcut alongside the nurses' station. "Is everything alright? If you'll follow me, his room is on the other side, and I can—"

"If you could wait a moment, my partner is walking down the hall right now." Kinsley nodded in Alex's direction. Only one security guard was with him. She resecured her badge while waiting for them. "Heather, did you see Gage's mother return a few minutes ago?"

"Yes," Heather replied cautiously. "Regular visiting hours are over, but we're not too strict with them. And seeing as Mr. Baird was settled into his room a few hours ago, his mother asked that we extend them for her. Is there something wrong?"

"I called for backup, and security is locking down the hospital," Alex alerted Kinsley as he came to stand beside her, keeping the topic rather general in front of Heather. She had yet to move toward Baird's room. "What about Glynn?"

"Heather? Is Douglas Glynn in the room, as well?"

"I believe so, but—"

Kinsley shared Gage's room number with Alex before they headed in that direction. Alex instructed the security guard to remain in the hallway with Heather following close on their heels. Given that the soles of their shoes had probably made enough noise to alert Louise and Gage that someone was approaching, Kinsley didn't hesitate to cross the threshold.

Douglas Glynn sat in a chair next to an empty bed.

Kinsley slowed her pace and eventually came to a stop while staring at the closed

door of the bathroom. Louise was only delaying the inevitable.

“Mr. Glynn, I’m going to need you to step out of the room,” Alex instructed before Heather came to a stop just inside the doorway. “We would like to—”

“Does Mr. Baird need assistance?” Heather asked as she attempted to cross the room. “Detectives, I understand that you have jobs to do, but Mr. Baird is my respon—”

“Step out of the room, Heather,” Kinsley directed when Douglas made no move to follow Alex’s directive.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

Maybe it was the room's muted lighting casting shadows on the wall, but the air was suddenly thick with tension. Douglas's features were taut, and a sheen of perspiration was visible on his forehead. Alex took a few steps away from Kinsley. Such action had been ingrained in them from their time at the police academy.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," Heather muttered as she sidestepped Kinsley's reach. Heather knocked rapidly on the door. "Mr. Baird?"

"Heather, move away from the bathroom. Now." Kinsley held up a hand to indicate Douglas should remain in place. The nurse hesitated, but Alex stepped forward and took Heather by the arm. Once she was removed from the room, Kinsley lowered her arm. "Mr. Glynn, what am I going to find when I open this door?"

Kinsley unfastened the small leather strap of her holster before resting her hand on her firearm. She didn't need to glance over her shoulder to know that Alex had now positioned himself properly to help if the situation warranted it.

"Please." Douglas' plea was a harsh whisper. "Louise is only trying to protect her son. She can't lose another child. It would destroy her."

It was obvious that Douglas wasn't going to give Kinsley a straight answer. She braced herself before turning the handle and yanking the door open.

The bathroom was dark, but there was enough light from the room to reveal no one inside. Alex immediately ordered the security guard to contact his supervisor to provide an update on their current situation.

“Mr. Glynn, Louise stands to lose her life if I can’t find them immediately,” Kinsley said sharply, not concerned with the man’s emotional well-being right now. She waded into personal territory, knowing such direction usually reached an individual on a deeper level. “Gage slit his sister’s throat and stood there while she bled out. He won’t hesitate to do the same to his mother.”

“Louise is trying to get him away from the hospital,” Douglas revealed as his eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t know. You have to believe me. I didn’t know until a few minutes ago when—”

“Don’t leave this room,” Kinsley ordered, not giving Douglas time to finish his speech. He could save it for a judge. “Alex!”

Kinsley exited the room, closing the door behind her. She caught sight of Alex near the nurses’ station. He was on the phone while the security guard had positioned himself next to the stairwell entrance. The doors at the end of each hallway began to close as an alarm blared from the overhead speakers.

“I’ll go room to room,” Kinsley called out to Alex. Concern for the other patients took precedence. “See if security can determine an exit or if they are still on the floor.”

Alex lifted a hand in acknowledgment as Kinsley began to search each room. Most beds contained sleeping patients who were now stirring upon hearing the alarm. She reassured them as best she could while clearing each space.

As she finally reached the last room on the right, a male nurse emerged with concern.

“What is—”

“Please join Heather at the nurses’ station,” Kinsley urged as she glanced at his

nametag before quickly explaining their situation. Another thought came to mind. “Aiden, how many nurses are currently working this floor?”

“Just me and Heather.” Aiden gestured toward the other side of the floor. “We also have two orderlies with us tonight. Should I go and find them? I can—”

“No,” Kinsley swiftly replied with as much of a reassuring smile as she could under the circumstances. “Please go and stay at the nurses’ station. Let Detective Lanen know if you need to tend to a patient, and he or a security guard will accompany you.”

The piercing alarm abruptly stopped, only to be replaced by a brief buzzer. Kinsley turned her attention to the double doors on her side of the hallway. Two more security guards came rushing through, one of them remaining near the exit while the doors closed completely shut. She took the time to direct them to the other side of the floor.

She glanced down the hallway, but Alex was no longer in her line of sight.

Her mind raced as she considered the likelihood of finding Gage and Louise Baird. If the nurse believed Gage might need assistance in the bathroom, then his physical state must be too weak for Louise to have gotten far.

There was a really good chance he was still on the sixth floor.

After searching two more rooms across the hallway, she came upon a supply closet. As with each search thus far, she kept her firearm in its holster yet easily accessible. There was no need to turn on the light. That fact alone was what brought her up short.

A spike of adrenaline shot through her, but it was also too late for her to back out. Her gaze dropped to the droplets of blood on the linoleum floor, the trail beginning at the wheel of an IV stand.

“Gage, Louise...step out where I can see.” Kinsley used a measured tone, not willing to raise her voice so Alex and the other guards could hear her. There was no telling what would set Baird off, and she wasn’t willing to put the other patients in danger. “There is no reason for anyone else to get hurt.”

Muffled cries came from somewhere in the back behind a shelving unit. Kinsley glanced down to find a rubber stopper, so she carefully used her boot to wedge it under the door. She needed a quick exit if things went sideways.

Kinsley took a cautious step forward with her weapon trained in front of her.

“Gage, do you hear me? I need you to acknowledge me.”

Louise released another whimper, but Gage continued to remain silent. The air in the storage closet was cool, but that didn’t stop Kinsley’s hands from perspiring. She did her best to even out her breathing as she peered around the corner of the shelving unit.

Gage’s back was pressed against the far wall, his eyes wide with desperation. He clutched his mother to his chest while holding a scalpel mere centimeters from her neck. There was a slight tremor in his hand, and it wouldn’t be long before the blade cut into her skin.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

“Gage, it’s over. There is nowhere to go. Think about what it is you are doing right now.”

“Do you know what it is like to be ignored your entire life?”

Kinsley could hear Alex calling her name, but she didn’t dare move from her position. Gage’s question indicated a deep hatred directed at everyone in his life, including his mother.

“Gage, I know you can hear my partner. You also heard the alarm. The hospital is on lockdown. You’re bleeding, and the only thing holding you upright is that wall.” Kinsley figured it was only a matter of time before Alex materialized in the doorway. There was a possibility he could have a clear shot through the shelving unit, which meant she had to buy him enough time to get into position. “Let your mother go. I’ll stay, and you can talk to me.”

“Pops paid for Rachel’s college. Bought my sister her first car. Paid for her damned wedding,” Gage said with a painful laugh. Kinsley didn’t doubt it was a mixture of emotional and physical pain. “I worked the farm. I kept his dream alive. What the hell did I get in return?”

Gage slipped a little, one of his knees giving out right before he caught himself. Louise cried out when the scalpel cut her neck, and Kinsley tensed in fear that the woman would begin to struggle.

“They all took advantage of me. I worked that farm for years while my mother and sister lived out their lives without a care in the world.” Gage pulled his mother closer,

causing her eyes to widen with terror. He whispered in her ear with such severity that droplets of spit landed on her cheek. “I told you over and over and over that I wanted out. You didn’t care.”

“I did c—”

“You didn’t love me like her,” Gage screamed as he shook his mother in anger. The outburst caused Kinsley to rest her finger on the trigger. Louise began to cry harder. “I asked Rachel for money, you know. My own sister would have rather seen me beaten to death than help me pay off my debts.”

“Gage, I need you to put down the scalpel,” Kinsley instructed quietly while noticing movement in her peripheral vision. She didn’t want to remove her focus from Gage to identify if the individual was Alex or one of the security guards. “I know you love your mother. I’ve heard you talk about her when I was at the farm. She loves you, too. But your mother is very frightened right now, and she is bleeding. You both are. Release her so that I can get the two of you medical attention.”

“Do you still love me? Do you? Will you treat me now like you did her now that she’s gone?”

“Hasn’t she proven her love to you already, Gage?” Kinsley stepped to her left in hopes that his attention would follow her. She had been able to detect Alex as being the individual near the exit from the way he moved, and she wanted to give him the ability to obtain a line of sight on his target. “If I’m not mistaken, your mother was the one who told you we were entering the hospital. She was willing to risk jail to help you. Doesn’t that prove her love?”

Gage blinked rapidly as her words penetrated the fog that was no doubt blanketing his thoughts. His fight or flight response was gradually fading as his façade began to crack.

“Louise, tell your son how much you love him.”

Kinsley no longer had a line of sight on Alex. He had disappeared behind the shelving unit. Her position didn't afford her a view beyond the items stored on the shelves. It wasn't often that they were put into a situation where their weapons needed to be drawn, but she had every confidence Alex would give her the opportunity to talk their suspect down without further bloodshed.

“Louise?” Kinsley prodded, noticing Gage's knuckles turning white.

“Gage, I h-have always loved you. Always.”

Kinsley wasn't certain if it was Louise's words or the crack in her voice that had Gage shoving her away from him. The scalpel dropped to the floor with a clatter, and Kinsley immediately lowered her weapon and all but shoved Louise toward the door. Alex was there instantly to guide her the rest of the way while Kinsley moved swiftly toward Gage.

His legs had finally given out and the wall helped guide him to the floor. His breaths came in short, heavy bursts, and his eyes glazed over as if he were staring into some unseen distance. The frenetic energy that had propelled him to desperation had evaporated into the sterile air, leaving behind nothing more than a shell.

“I'm so tired,” Gage whispered as his head rolled to the side.

It was difficult to believe she was witnessing vulnerability in a man who could slit his sister's throat and stand there while she bled out, her life slowly leaving her body with each pump of her heart. He had gone through his days without anyone knowing he was capable of killing someone. Not even his family.

“So tired...”

As the adrenaline left Kinsley's body, it was as if the man's exhaustion bled into her. She called out for medical assistance, kneeling to remove the scalpel from his reach. Until he was restrained to a bed, she would remain by his side. The hypocrisy of the situation didn't slip by her unnoticed. After all, how could she condemn Gage Baird for his hatred of others when she herself had taken a life in a fit of fear and rage?

The burden of their lies was soul-crushing.

But the repercussions?

Their own personalized burning hell.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kinsley Aspen

October

Monday — 9:12 am

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

The law offices of Aspen Law LLP took up the entire second floor of an aged building in Fallbrook's business district. The exterior of faded red bricks held a certain nostalgic charm that spoke of its history, and the exposed wooden beams that stretched across the high ceiling were a testament to the passage of time.

Kinsley didn't bother taking the elevator. She had no patience to wait for the lift as it slowly descended from the seventh floor. She veered to the right and swiftly made her way up the wide staircase with wrought-iron handrails on either side. The metal spindles allowed a pedestrian to view the lower levels. She took advantage of such vantage points, but she didn't spot anyone who didn't appear to belong.

Not even Beck Serra.

The envelope she clutched in her hand seemed to burn her fingers, but she didn't dare loosen her grip. It was difficult for her to remain composed when the message inside threatened to unravel her entire life. She had left Alex at the station to finish up the paperwork for the Hanson case. His concern for her sudden departure had been evident, but she couldn't find it in herself to ease them.

She had no idea if she was making the right decision by visiting her father, but she couldn't allow Noah's world to come crashing down alongside hers. She hadn't figured out how to keep him safe quite yet, but the gravity of the situation left her no real choice at all but to seek her father's professional opinion.

She spotted Vicki Silvis through the glass windowpanes. By the time Kinsley walked through the entrance, her father's personal assistant didn't bother to hide her surprise at the unexpected visit.

“Kinsley, it’s so good to see you,” Vicki said in a genuine tone. She stood from behind her desk before making her way around to greet Kinsley with a warm embrace. “It has been way too long, dear.”

Vicki was in her early fifties with short light brown hair, rimless glasses that didn’t quite sit high enough on the bridge of her nose, and a visible mole on the left side of her chin. She hadn’t changed much in the past year, with the exception of a few more laugh lines around her eyes and mouth.

“Hi, Vicki,” Kinsley greeted warmly as she stepped back. She managed a tight smile before dispensing with the pleasantries. “It’s important that I speak with Dad. Is he with a client?”

“No, his first appointment isn’t for another hour.”

Vicki walked around her desk to no doubt ring her father to ensure he wasn’t on a conference call, but Kinsley couldn’t afford to wait. She approached his office before she could change her mind.

“Kinsley Rose?” The fact that George spoke his daughter’s full name told her that she was the last person he expected to walk into his private office. She met his gaze and quietly closed the door behind her. “What’s wrong?”

George had risen from his chair before she could take a step forward. It was apparent he had assumed something terrible had happened to someone in the family, and she hurriedly put his mind at ease.

“Nothing,” Kinsley murmured as she reached into the pocket of her sweater. She pulled out a dollar bill from the small pocket on the back of her cell phone. “Everyone is fine.”

George stared cautiously at her while she approached him. She hated the tremor in her hand, but she eventually managed to place the dollar bill on the polished mahogany surface of his desk. He couldn't miss the significance of such a gesture, and an immediate heavy silence settled over the room.

Unable to take a seat in one of the guest chairs, Kinsley made her way over to the large windows overlooking the city of Fallbrook. She used to peer over the windowsill when she was young, counting the vehicles on the street below. She and Dylan used to choose a specific color, and whoever was able to spot the most cars in that shade won.

So many good memories had been tarnished by her impulsive nature.

She stared out at the morning traffic, refusing to bear the sight of her father's disappointment. His daughter...no different than the clients he represented on a daily basis.

"Gantz didn't reach out to you for representation because of your friendship with his mother." Kinsley was glad she hadn't taken off her sweater. She was cold, and she struggled to maintain every bit of warmth she could under the thick material. "He wanted to learn everything he could about the officer who put the cuffs around his wrists—me."

"Kinsley, we've been over this—"

"I didn't notice it at first," Kinsley continued, refusing to give her father the opportunity to paint the past in a different shade. "I ran into Gantz at the grocery store, the dry cleaners, the cafe...the gas station. Each time, he would say something to provoke me just enough that it would appear I was at fault for the confrontation. I didn't catch on until the third run-in, but a lot of the damage had already been done. I came to realize it was nothing more than a game to him. I went out of my way to

change my routine just so he wouldn't get the best of me. It wasn't until the day of his acquittal that I threatened his life in front of a bailiff."

Kinsley recalled the countless times Gantz had deliberately crossed paths with her. Each encounter had been designed to goad her into a reaction, playing on her emotions until she had been reprimanded for her behavior by her captain. The twisted game created by Gantz had been designed to ruin her life.

"Gantz was using you to gather information about my life, Dad." Kinsley didn't have to turn around to know that her father had reclaimed his seat. The day was overcast enough to cause a faint reflection in the windowpane. "By the first day of his trial, Gantz knew my favorite color, how I took my coffee, and that I used to color in the corner of your office while you were writing your opening or closing statements. He even called me butterfly once."

Her father's sharp intake of breath rang out as her words hung in the air.

"Gantz had set up everything so perfectly that if anything happened to him, I'd be the first person the police—my colleagues—would look at."

"No one would ever believe that you—"

"Those confrontations weren't just exchanged words, Dad." Kinsley caught sight of a faint sunray right before the overcast sky swallowed it whole. "Gantz would intentionally raise his voice to indicate his fear of me. It didn't matter if I uttered a word in return or not. He suggested several times that I threatened to take his life if he were to walk free. And then he did."

The room seemed to close around her.

Suffocate her, really.

Kinsley squeezed her eyes shut to concentrate on taking even breaths, but it was a struggle to draw air into her lungs. Her chest was tight and there was a high-pitched ringing in her ears that made it difficult to hear her own thoughts. Ever so gradually, she was able to reign in her emotions.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:21 am

“For better or worse, I thought everything would come to an end after Gantz’s acquittal.” A lone snowflake fell from the sky, and Kinsley followed its path downward until she lost sight of the minuscule white dot. “Foolish, I know. A killer had been set free, and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it. Five days later, I was sitting in the school’s auditorium watching Lily dance across the stage in a princess costume. I’m not sure why I turned around. All I know is that when I peered over my shoulder, I discovered Gantz sitting in the back row with the most gratifying grin on his lips. He was staring right at me.”

For the first time since she had walked into her father’s office, he didn’t try and interrupt her story. Maybe he had finally caught onto the direction she was steering them, or perhaps the mention of his granddaughter had thrown him off balance.

“I didn’t want Noah or Emily to know that Gantz was watching their daughter perform in her school’s play. I turned around, waited for the play to end and the curtains to close, and then excused myself to the lobby by saying I had to use the restroom.” Kinsley focused on a few other snowflakes as they fell from the clouds above. “Gantz had left the building. He wasn’t waiting for me out in the lobby, and he wasn’t in the parking lot, either. Not wanting to ruin Lily’s night, I didn’t say anything at the time. Maybe I should have. Maybe if I had...”

Kinsley closed her eyes once more, but this time her reasoning had everything to do with bracing herself against the damage she was about to inflict on her family.

“I left the school, driving on the street that leads to the back entrance of my neighborhood.” Kinsley couldn’t get her voice any louder than a whisper. “And there he was...standing smack dab in the middle of the road. I braked and brought the Jeep

to a complete stop.”

The beam from the headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating Calvin Gantz as he stood motionless on the center line. His breath morphed into a ghostly vapor that swirled into the air before slowly dissipating into nothingness. A cruel smile twisted his lips into a sinister curve as he stared at her through the windshield.

Kinsley had removed her holster and firearm before entering the elementary school. She contemplated calling the station as she reached into her glovebox for her service weapon. Gantz technically hadn't done anything wrong this evening. She decided to forego reaching out to the department as she clipped the holster to her belt.

Not taking her gaze off Gantz, Kinsley slowly opened the driver's side door. She kept the engine idling and her headlights on as she stepped out of her Jeep. She was letting the heat escape the interior of her vehicle, but she was close enough to home for it not to matter.

“It was a beautiful play, wasn't it, Detective Aspen?” Gantz's voice was smooth, almost conversational.

“You don't want to do this, Gantz,” Kinsley warned as she remained near the side of her Jeep. He wasn't visibly armed, but she wasn't foolish enough to believe that he wasn't in possession of a weapon. “I have no qualms about arresting you for harassment.”

“Harassment? That is a strong word for simply enjoying a community performance,” Calvin replied amusingly with a slight tilt of his head. The sound of a dog barking in the distance could be heard over the hum of her engine. His vehicle was parked off to the side. “Besides, do you really think anyone will believe you after that little outburst at the courthouse last week? Or shall we let the department decide?”

“I’m not going to play your games, Gantz.”

“Oh, but you’re so good at them.” Calvin inhaled deeply, as though savoring the cold air. “It’s a lovely evening, isn’t it?”

Kinsley had enough of his taunts, and she turned to get back into her vehicle. Everything inside of her was screaming to end this encounter.

“It took me a while to figure out what...or who...could break you.” Calvin’s tone was almost contemplative. Kinsley forced herself to take another step around the open door of the Jeep. “I thought it might be your father, but I quickly dismissed that notion after noticing the tension between the two of you. Your mother? Siblings? Maybe, but I couldn’t be sure that the family strain hadn’t seeped into those relationships. Your lover? Nah. You haven’t been together long enough. Now your partner, on the other hand, was under serious consideration. Until...”

Kinsley tightened her grip on the side of the door as Gantz’s words trailed off. She tried to rein in the rage coursing through her body. He was taunting her yet again, but she wouldn’t allow herself to fall victim to his trap. She shifted, pulling the door wider so she could settle in behind the steering wheel.

“I was taking a walk in the park yesterday evening. You were pushing Lily on the swing, and her laughter carried in the air like a sweet melody. So precious, wouldn’t you agree?”

Kinsley’s breath caught in her throat at the mere mention of her niece’s name. The only saving grace was Gantz being unable to witness the fear in Kinsley’s eyes. He waited patiently for her answer, which gave her time to compose herself. He wanted her to react in a violent manner. He would tout police brutality, ending her career.

She repeated to herself over and over again that she couldn’t fire her weapon.

Not without cause.

“You really should take time to think before you speak,” Kinsley advised him as she released her hold on the door. She shifted her stance and took a few steps forward so he wouldn’t misinterpret her message. “You don’t want to make this personal.”

“Oh, I think that is exactly my intent...butterfly.” Calvin reached into his coat pocket, causing her to instinctively place her hand on her weapon. He slowly held up his car keys. “I’m going to savor every minute from this moment forward, imagining how you will drive yourself insane, wondering when the call will come. The one telling you that your precious niece is lying in a pool of her own blood. You could call the station right now, but they won’t believe you, will they? You’re the detective who cried wolf too many times.”

The nausea was overwhelming, and Kinsley’s resolve slipped another notch. She hadn’t realized until this very moment how Gantz had methodically manipulated her over the course of his trial. He was in the process of dismantling her life, and there wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it.

If it had just been a threat toward her, she would have confidently gotten into her Jeep and driven away. She would have strategized and found a way to regain control and protect herself. His decision to involve Lily in a nightmare of his own making had irrevocably changed everything.

“Do you think little Lily will cry out for her father or her Auntie Kin?” Calvin tsked, as if he were disappointed in himself. “What am I thinking? Drowning in her own blood will tend to make screaming...difficult. Have a good night, Detective Aspen.”

Gantz twirled his keys as he began to walk toward his car, his laughter turning into an ominous whistle. His intent to deliberately leave her with such a gruesome image of her eight-year-old niece clearly fueled his excitement. He relished the power he held

over her, and she didn't doubt for a moment that he would turn his twisted fantasy into a reality.

"I drew my weapon," Kinsley stated, her voice devoid of emotion after managing to relay the details of a night that would forever remain imprinted in her mind. She accepted that her father would never again see her in the same, innocent light. "And I squeezed the trigger."

Kinsley finally turned away from the window.

Her father's face had lost all color. It was as if he had aged ten years upon hearing her confession. She closed the distance to his desk.

"I'll spare you the rest of the details for now. The bottom line is that I disposed of Gantz's body and made it appear as if he left town." Kinsley set the slightly crumbled envelope on his desk next to the dollar bill. She hadn't brought Noah into the conversation, and she would take his involvement to the grave. Her father never needed to know that his oldest son was an accomplice to murder. "But there's one problem."

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George slowly reached for the envelope, the tremor in his hand obvious. He managed to open the flap and pull out the thin piece of paper. He cautiously unfolded the letter. She would worry about forensic evidence later, if it came to that.

“Oh, butterfly...”

Kinsley bit the inside of her cheek in a futile attempt to hold back the tears upon hearing her father’s heavy voice filled with so many conflicting emotions. The copper tang of blood hit her tongue right as her gaze landed on the black ink. Her father had placed the letter on his desk, probably in an effort to wrap his mind around her admission.

Kinsley had already reached her conclusion.

Even in death, Gantz’s reach was inescapable.

From her position on the other side of the desk, she could easily make out the damning words—I know you killed Calvin Gantz.

~ The End ~