

Deleted Scene: Jack & Kate — First Night After Brazoria

Early draft / not in final manuscript

From an early draft of THE LEASE by Alan Ray Winkley

At 4:38 in the morning, the kitchen still smelled like the night before — coffee grounds, dish soap, the faint damp of boots left by the door — and none of it belonged to a house that had just learned a man was dead.

Jack Mercer sat at the island with the overhead light off. The only glow came from his phone, held flat on the counter like something poisonous he didn't want to pick up again. He had washed his hands twice when he got home. Mud still lined the creases of his knuckles.

Kate came down without turning on the light. Sixteen years had taught her that when Jack sat that still, at that hour, the questions could wait. She crossed the tile barefoot, in an old T-shirt of his, and took the stool beside him the way she always had — no permission asked, none needed.

"Jack."

"Tommy's dead."

He said it flat because every softer version he'd tried on the drive back from Brazoria County had felt like a lie. The call that wasn't a call. The caliche road. Rourke No. 7 standing against the black Texas sky like a rusted skeleton. Tommy Baines near an abandoned well that hadn't produced anything worth hauling in years.

And the boots.

"The ground was mud," Jack said. "His boots weren't. Not clean for an oilfield. Clean."

Kate didn't ask if he was sure. She had been married to him long enough to know that when he said a detail like that, in that particular voice, he'd already run it four ways looking for an innocent explanation and hadn't found one.

He unlocked the phone and slid it toward her.

She scrolled through what he'd photographed inside the old control building: a 1987 Oil, Gas and Mineral Lease, paper gone soft and yellow at the folds; an old survey map; coordinates; a Polaroid. Wade Rourke's signature sat where a landman's eye went first. The second signature meant nothing to either of them.

Recognition changed her face the way heat changes a person's posture when they realize a countertop is hot.

"Wade Rourke," she said.

"Yeah."

“I know that name from a hundred title runs.” Kate had grown up in this part of the state. Everybody who’d worked oil and gas out of Houston knew the Rourke name the way people in Detroit knew the auto families. “Who’s the second signature?”

“I don’t know. Neither of us has ever run across it.”

Outside, the sky hadn’t started to lighten yet — just that first faint suggestion of gray that told a person morning existed somewhere and was coming on its own schedule. Refineries burned off gas somewhere in the dark along the ship channel. Eighteen-wheelers ran the interstates. The ordinary machinery of a state that never fully stopped, even at 4:38 a.m.

Somewhere past all that, a dead man’s boots were bothering Jack Mercer more than almost anything ever had.

Kate wrapped both hands around his coffee mug, though the coffee had gone cold an hour ago, and held it the way other people hold a rosary. “Who would do this,” she said — not really a question. A thought she needed to hear out loud.

“I don’t know yet.” Jack turned the mug a quarter turn on the counter, an old nervous habit. “But somebody went to a lot of trouble to make it look like nothing. And somebody else built a camera into a fence line on a dead lease that hasn’t produced a barrel in fifteen years. That’s not nothing, Kate. That’s money spent watching ground everybody’s supposed to have forgotten.”

They sat with that for a while.

Grief came sideways. Kate had loved Tommy too — sixteen Thanksgivings, countless barbecues under his gruff, affectionate supervision — and she felt it rise and shoved it down the same way Jack had, not because either of them was cold, but because feeling it fully would still be there later, and later was the only time they could afford it.

“You should sleep,” she said at last.

“I can’t.”

“I know.” She rested her forehead briefly against his shoulder. “I’m not asking you to. I’m saying the bed’s still there when you can.”

He almost smiled. Almost.

“When I left that well,” he said, quieter, “I put every page back exactly where I found it. Tube and all. Took the extra three seconds to make the dirt look untouched.” He stared at the dark phone. “I don’t know if that was smart or stupid.”

“It was Jack,” Kate said. “Which is usually both.”

That pulled something almost like a laugh out of him — brief, startled, gone as quick as it came. The first light thing either of them had managed since 2:17 that morning.

She scrolled back to the lease photograph one more time, patient the way she’d always been patient with paper that mattered. “Thirty-nine years,” she murmured, reading the date again. “Whatever this is, it’s been sitting under other people’s lives a long time.”

“Tommy hid it,” Jack said. “Or found it and decided hiding it was safer than walking it into daylight. Either way, somebody else was already watching the hole he crawled into.”

Kate set the phone face-down. The kitchen went back to gray. “Then we don’t sleep like people who just saw an accident,” she said. “We sit here. We keep the coffee. We decide — when the sun’s up — how deep we’re willing to dig.”

Jack looked at her. At the woman who had learned years ago not to turn on the overhead light. At the marriage that had, until about two hours ago, felt like the most settled thing in either of their lives.

“You sure you want in on that decision?” he asked.

Kate squeezed his hand hard enough to hurt in a way that helped. “Jack. I was in on it the second you killed the truck lights at Rourke No. 7. I just hadn’t been told yet.”

He nodded once. Outside, somewhere beyond the tree line at the edge of their property, the night held its breath a little longer.

Mud still on the boots by the door. Ink still dry on a 1987 lease that had no business being alive. And between them on the kitchen island, the first quiet hour of a conspiracy neither of them had asked for — not the secret under the Gulf Coast, not yet. Just the room where a marriage absorbed the first crack of it, and chose, in the dark before dawn, not to look away.

This early-draft deleted scene is a free reader magnet for Alan Ray Winkley's list. It does not appear in the published novel and is offered as a character-moment extra only.

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