

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Lakeside

Season 1, Episode 1

by:

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First Edition, First Impression

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Paige pulled into the drive and cut the engine. She still wasn't sure she was doing the right thing. *Too late now*, she thought to herself as she rested her forehead on the steering wheel. *What have I done?* She straightened and sat motionless for several minutes, enveloped in darkness as she studied the tiny house her mother had owned. It was a little surreal to think she'd quit her job at Quantico to move to Manti, a small rural town near the center of Utah. It was even more ironic that she'd quit to move back to a house she always swore she'd never step foot in again. Yes, it had been her mothers. A little oasis for the petite woman who loved her daughter more than anything. Then, it was just one of many assets tied up in a trust. The minute Paige turned eighteen, it was all hers. She hadn't cared. The only thing on her mind back then was getting as far away from this town as she could possibly get.

And she had. She'd hopped a bus, landed in Salt Lake and took the first flight available to New York. It hadn't been hard to find a decent hotel. Paige holed up for days planning out the rest of her life. A life that didn't include Manti, Utah. With a deep sigh she opened the door and climbed from the vehicle. Again, she stood in place pondering her new SUV. She'd traded in her fancy BMW M4 and picked up the Lincoln MKX just before leaving Virginia. General Nathan Porter was still angry with her. He didn't support her move and the BMW had been a gift from him after her most recent promotion. So far he wasn't returning her calls. Clearly an attempt at manipulation. The man wasn't used to being defied. Not even by Paige. Normally she gave him anything he asked but not this time. She couldn't. She needed answers. And over the past year she had come to realize the only way to get what she needed was to return to Utah...to the little house her mother had purchased to escape her own demons. The house, the garden, the friendly neighbors...it was the place her mother had been truly happy. Then she was gone and Paige needed to find out why. But that was a problem for another day. Tonight, she needed to find somewhere to sleep.

Paige threw an overnight bag over her shoulder, grabbed the compact sleeping bag from the back seat and headed for the front door. The ghosts of the past would have to wait. She was beat and she had a big day ahead of her. She would need to make a good impression on Sheriff Jericho Walters, otherwise her plans were doomed. All three of the weathered wooden stairs creaked as she slowly made her way to the patio. With another big sigh, she pulled out her keys and stepped into the dusty, dated front foyer. Everything was exactly the way she'd left it. Exactly the way her mother had decorated it years ago. Paige pulled out a flashlight and surveyed each room. Mostly she was looking for stray animals that had nested inside the place. She was well aware every surface had about an inch of dust and the utilities had been shut off nearly a decade ago. As she stepped into her old room a light caught her eye. She moved to the window for a better look and realized someone was outside. They were using a high powered flashlight to search her property. Were they looking for her? No, that was impossible. Nobody even knew she was here.

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Paige set her bag on the ancient bed and silently slid the zipper halfway open - just enough to reach in and retrieve her pistol. Then she tiptoed back down the stairs and positioned her body to the left of the back door. As she waited, she could hear the faint sound of footsteps cautiously moving across the back patio. With one fluid motion, Paige flung open the heavy wooden door and raised her gun at the intruder. The blinding glare of a flashlight landed on her face and she squinted in an attempt to keep the trespasser in sight.

“I’ve called the police,” came a steady voice as the man kept the light trained on her face.

Paige laughed and lowered her weapon. Clearly the man knew the light would hamper her ability to aim properly. “I guess I get to meet Manti’s finest sooner than I planned. Do you mind?” She lifted her hand in an attempt to shield the light from her eyes.

“I think I’ll wait until the cops arrive. You do have a gun and from the looks of it, you also know how to use it.” The man didn’t budge.

Paige could appreciate his hesitancy and rather than being angry, she was actually grateful someone was looking out for the place. She slowly slid the 9mm onto the counter and raised her hands in surrender. “That’s my gesture of good faith. Now, how about you?”

The man lowered the flashlight but remained attentive as he studied the woman in the doorway. Paige immediately registered the fact that he wasn’t afraid of her, not even with a gun pointed directly at him, he was cautious and alert - but not afraid.

“I’m Paige Carter. And believe it or not, this is actually my house. I assume that one is yours?” she asked as she lifted her chin in the direction of the house to the right.

“Nice try, but I’ve been here for months and this place is vacant. I was told the owner lives back east and hasn’t been here for years. It’s a shame really, the house is a hidden treasure just waiting for someone to appreciate her.”

“A hidden treasure, huh? Well, it is covered in about a ton of dust so the hidden part is right anyway. I didn’t catch your name.” Paige tried again.

“That’s because I didn’t throw it.” The man looked up as two officers rounded the corner and casually strolled across the back lawn.

“Hey Dax,” a young Liam Neesan looking guy said with a grin. He glanced at the woman standing in the open doorway then shrugged as he focused back on Dax.

“Well, as I live and breathe,” the second cop said as he leaped up the back stairs and pulled Paige into a big bear hug.

Paige laughed and wrapped her arms around the giant officer. “Hey, Teddy. I didn’t realize you went into law enforcement. Scare any children lately?”

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Officer Gage Clayton, Teddy to his friends because he was huge but cuddly as a teddy bear, set Paige down and took a step back. “You’re just as pretty as you ever were. What brings you back home after all this time? Last I heard you were some big shot Forensics Do-dah with the FBI.”

Paige smiled. “Things change. I heard you have an opening, any chance you could put in a word...you know, for old time sake?”

Teddy frowned. “You get in some kind of trouble or something? I just assumed you were here on vacation. You know, to finally sell the place. You mean to tell me you’re fixing to stay? For good?”

“If I can talk that Sheriff of yours into hiring me,” Paige affirmed.

Dax cleared his throat. “Does that mean this woman does belong here?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry Dax. I got so caught up in the news that Paige here is back for good I completely forgot you were standing there. It’s all good. Paige owns the house, she’s not a burglar or anything. You can go on back home. We’ve got this.”

Dax took another minute to study the brazen brunette. Clearly she belonged but what kind of neighbor would she be? Well, since he hadn’t really been all that neighborly he couldn’t really complain. “Dax Hamilton,” he held out his hand in greeting. “Sorry about before. I’m not really in the habit of exchanging pleasantries with burglars. Hope you understand.”

Paige gave him a thousand watt smile and a nod as she gave his hand a firm shake. “No offense. I appreciate you watching out for the place. Sorry to drag you out so late at night. But again, I appreciate it.”

“No problem,” Dax smiled back. “Goodnight then.” He turned to leave then paused and shifted back around. “See you Gage...Dean.”

“Yeah man...see you around,” Dean gave a quick wave.

So, Liam Neesan’s look-a-like was Dean. Paige sifted through all the guys she remembered from school but couldn’t recall one Dean...not even in the class before or after hers. “You new around here, Dean?” she casually inquired.

“Naw, been here for about four years now. I moved here when I was eighteen, joined the force at twenty-one and if all goes well, tomorrow I won’t be the rookie much longer. Sounds like you want that job. Good luck with that, these guys can be brutal.”

“Paige a rookie?” Teddy laughed. “No such luck pal. That girl knows more about crime than you or I will ever know. Walters would be crazy not to hire you.”

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“Let’s hope he sees it that way,” Paige grinned. “Now, not to be rude but I’ve had a really long drive and I could definitely use a little R&R before I tackle an interview with the discernable Sheriff Walters.”

“Good point,” Teddy said with a nod then gave Dean a little shove in the direction of the cruiser. “See you around, Slider.”

“I get nostalgia and all, but could we maybe put that nickname to rest Gage?” Paige requested. “I think I outgrew it a very long time ago.”

“We’ll see,” Gage laughed as he disappeared around the side of the house.

Paige slipped back through the door and secured the deadbolt, then moved to the living room where she could watch the police car pull out of her drive and disappear down the darkened roadway. *Alone at last.* Within minutes Paige had brushed off her old bed, spread out her sleeping bag and settled in. She instantly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Sheriff Jericho Walters, Jer to most, hung up the phone and sat back pondering the call he’d just received. So...Paige Carter was back in town and she wanted a job. That news had taken him by surprise. Of course he’d take care of the girl. Not because some stuffed suit back in DC told him to, but because she was Chaya’s daughter. He owed it to the woman he had loved to take care of her daughter. Giving her a job was the least he could do. Not that anyone could know about that. Chaya was very clear that nobody could ever know they were an item. He hadn’t liked it, but he’d gone along because Chaya had wanted it that way. When she died so abruptly it had almost killed him too. The only thing that pulled him out of the depression and the drinking was the knowledge that if he didn’t get a grip...someone was going to figure it out. The death of a casual friend wouldn’t impact anyone so profoundly. More than once in that first year, Jer had wondered why he kept up the ruse. Chaya was dead, did it matter if people knew they had loved each other? But it always came down to Chaya. He had to honor her wishes and that meant pulling himself together. That meant forcing himself to attend neighborhood barbeques and town meetings. Eventually he started living again, but the pain never left him. Now Paige was back in town and wanted to work with him...side by side...day after day. He just hoped he could do it. He hoped the reminder of what might have been wouldn’t drive him to drink again. He hoped the personal price wouldn’t be too high. But his cost didn’t matter, he would give Chaya’s daughter a job. He considered it his penance, his private penalty for failing Chaya. He was the Sheriff, he should have protected her. If he had, she’d still be alive today.

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Paige woke to the sound of pounding. What in the world was her neighbor building? She moaned and pulled the pillow over her head then sat upright and looked at the clock. She had less than an hour before her meeting with Sheriff Walters. She'd overslept. Now she'd be rushed and even more of a basket case when she met the man again after all these years. Jer had been a friend of her mother's, she remembered that. She also remembered she'd been afraid of him. He was always so serious and stoic...intimidating. With just a look he could stop her in her tracks. Now, she had to walk into an interview and exude confidence and professionalism. "Uhg," she growled rubbing her hands over her face. "Not the best start to an important day, Paige." She slid off the bed and closed her eyes, wiggled her shoulders, rolled her neck and tried to relax. After three deep breaths she was her old confident self again. Now a quick shower and a mad dash to the police station and she might just arrive on time.

Forty eight minutes later Paige sat in the visitor's chair just outside Sheriff Walter's office. As she nervously tapped her foot against the worn carpet she surveyed her surroundings. The building was old...probably a hundred years or so if she had to guess. But the age of the building added character. The desks were wooden, but sturdy. Not your typical flimsy office furniture. No, someone had gone to great lengths to make the building look authentic. Some of the items might even be antiques. She was so focused on décor she actually jumped when Jericho Walters opened his door and called her name.

"Sorry," Sheriff Walters said with a half-smile. "All Margie's doing. She should have gone into interior design I think. She has a knack for it but I'm grateful she didn't. I'd be lost without her. She really brought out the history in the place. Anyway, come on in. Let's get started." He stepped back into his office and settled into the large leather chair behind an enormous antique desk.

Great impression hotshot. The man is friendlier than you remembered and you haven't said a word. Paige settled into the leather visitor's chair across from the Sheriff and struggled to come up with something intelligent to say.

"So...you want to work for the Sanpete County Sheriff's Office?" he asked casually. The girl was clearly tongue tied.

"I do," Paige finally said clearing her throat. "As I stated in my application, I have worked for the FBI for the past seven years and I just completed my doctorate in forensic biology."

"Yes, your education and experience are quite impressive. Which begs the question...why did you come back to Manti? I mean with your credentials you could work anywhere and you

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have to know this job will come with a significant decrease in pay. So, I'm wondering why you're here Paige Carter. What does Utah have to offer that you couldn't get in Virginia?"

Paige had been expecting that question. Of course she would never admit the real reason she had returned, but she'd just been presented with the perfect opportunity to lay the foundation for her ruse. "I missed it I guess. A simpler life. The friendly interaction among neighbors. Everything that comes with living in a rural setting rather than the big city. Virginia, well the FBI for that matter, has the best training programs in the country but the one thing I didn't get was hands on police work. Local law enforcement responds to calls. They interact with their citizens...their neighbors. I suspect your department is a close knit family. That's something I couldn't get at the FBI. We were all professionals. We worked well together, then we went home alone and had our own lives. I want more. As you know, I don't have a family of my own. I need a working environment that is...more." She waited, hoping the sheriff would buy her explanation. Some of it was true, she didn't have any close friends in Virginia. The only family she had was General Nathan Porter and he wasn't speaking to her at the moment.

"I guess that makes sense," Jericho considered her answer but he wasn't buying it...not completely. There was another reason Agent Paige Carter had left the big city and landed in Manti. He just hoped she didn't start turning over rocks and digging up secrets in his small town. Secrets his community wanted to keep buried. "I'm willing to give you a shot but I'll be honest with you. I think you are going to get bored here. We don't have a lot of crime. That fancy PhD just might be wasted here in Sanpete County. But, if this is what you think you want it's not my place to stand in your way."

"Thank you," Paige said with a smile. "I promise, you won't regret this."

"I hope not," Jericho said seriously and he meant it. "Now, you will be on probation for at least six months. During that time you will have to contact POST. Your national certification won't transfer over. You'll have to test out of the academy and if you don't pass the test, your probation will be extended while you attend the courses."

"That's fair. I'm sure I won't have any trouble testing out. I won't let you down Sheriff Walters." Paige stood then paused. "So, what now? When do I start? Do I buy the uniforms or are they issued?"

"Margie will get you all the details..." he was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Come in."

A petite woman in her late forties to early fifties stepped into the room. "Sorry to disturb you but we have a body. Apparently it's a young woman. A couple teens found her up on the Skyline and called it in. Dean's trying to calm them down but they're pretty shook up. He called to say he could use some help."

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Jericho stood and reached for his jacket. As he pulled it on he studied Paige. She might just get to use that fancy degree after all. “You can start right now if you’re up to it. We don’t get many bodies around these parts. I could use that fancy education and experience if you don’t have other plans.”

“Can we stop by my car so I can change my shoes?” She asked following the Sheriff out the door. “I wasn’t prepared for a practical exercise today...just an interview.”

Jericho smiled. She was so much like her mother. The realization was bittersweet. He missed that woman and always would. “I’m parked around back. Go do what you need to do. Did you bring a jacket? Skyline Drive is above 10,000 feet in elevation and it’s still a bit chilly up there this time of year. Are you familiar with The Great Western Trail?”

“Nope, I’ve heard of it but that’s it. Doesn’t it run border to border from Canada to Mexico?” Paige asked, curious now. She loved the outdoors and couldn’t wait to see such a monumental part of the west.

“Yep,” Jericho affirmed. “Get your coat and I’ll tell you about it on the way out. If you have boots in that car of yours, grab them. It’s still a bit muddy up top and I realize it’s early June but there’s probably snow on the northern benches where the sun can’t reach it. And I guarantee it will be windy and cold. We might be up there a few hours so dress for the weather. I’ll pull around and pick you up.” Then he disappeared down a rear corridor and out the back door.

Paige hesitated for a moment then glanced at Margie before she too headed out the door. Once she changed into sturdy boots, pulled on an FBI hoodie and grabbed her fleece coat she was ready for her first adventure.

The ride up was informative. Sheriff Jericho Walters had lived in the area all his life. He pointed out areas where hikers routinely got into trouble and passed Paige a copy of the ATV trail map of the entire Arapeen trail system. To say the area was a vast wilderness was an understatement. It was springtime in the LaSal mountain range and the meadows were covered in bright yellow and purple wildflowers with a few white spots sprinkled here and there. The road they were traveling was a dirt trail and occasionally they hit a rocky patch, but Sheriff Walters kept climbing hill after hill until they reached a trail that leveled out.

“This is The Great Western,” he informed her. “We’ll still hit some rocky patches but from here to the lake is pretty flat. We’re on top of the world up here. Keep that in mind when you get out. It may be a little hard to breathe for someone coming from the eastern shore.”

“Got it,” Paige said absently. She couldn’t pull her eyes from the beauty all around her. She remembered driving up to the mountains with some of her friends in high school but she

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didn't recall ever venturing up this far. She also hadn't remembered how beautiful the wilderness was. The wildflowers, pine trees and wild grass seemed to go on forever. Just acre after acre of rolling green with a few small lakes thrown in here and there. "Are there fish in those lakes?" she finally asked as she turned to face her driver.

"Some, mostly trout. DWR stocks them pretty regular so if you're into Rainbow you should give it a shot." Jericho said as he slowed his vehicle and pulled in next to his deputy.

Paige stepped from the truck and immediately surveyed her surroundings. The body was lying just off the dirt road next to a small lake. There were a couple kids, late teens early twenties tops, huddled together next to a couple four wheelers and Dean, one of the officers she'd met the night before, was standing next to the couple clearly trying to calm them. Everyone was messing up her crime scene. "Sheriff?" she moved to join him in front of his vehicle.

"Yes Paige," he said studying her face. She was clearly annoyed at something.

"Can we get those kids out of the crime scene? Have them leave the machines where they are until I can take a look."

Jericho grinned. "You offering to take lead on this one deputy? Don't you think you should check with Dean and see if he's willing to part with it first?"

"Oh!" Paige dropped her head and closed her eyes. She was already offending her peers and her boss. "Sorry."

Jericho laughed. "Lighten up Feebie, Dean's not territorial. I'm sure he'll be happy to turn the scene over to you while he takes care of the kids. I'll direct them to the back of my truck. He can see what he can get from them while they sip hot chocolate, Margie thinks of everything, and cuddle in a wool blanket. Might help with the shock of it all. Like I said, we don't get many bodies. I'll handle Dean, you just do what you do. With any luck we might actually ID the victim and make notification before the end of shift." Then he left her standing there, confused, as he approached his deputy and issued directives.

Paige took a deep breath and approached the scene. As she crossed the road she spotted what appeared to be tire tracks. They were larger than the others and she figured they had to come from a truck of some kind...a very large truck. She opened her small bag and pulled out a camera. They may not be from the perp but they might be. Better to track down the make and see how common the treads are. Before leaving the road she paused to take a panoramic picture of the location of the body as it pertained to the road, the lake and the tire tracks. Then she slowly made her way to the victim.

Sheriff Walters followed Paige as she cautiously approached the body. He was careful not to disturb more than was necessary and kept his eyes focused for anything the killer may have

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left behind. He paused when he saw a flash of something then it was gone. He glanced back to Paige and realized she'd seen it too.

Paige took one careful step after another. The wild grass could be a wealth of information. Chances were slim it contained any clues but she had always been methodical. She knew her colleagues at the FBI made fun of her behind her back, but being meticulous usually paid off in the end. She took one more step and for an instant saw a bright light. She was sure it was a reflection of some kind. She moved in the direction the light had originated and crouched to survey the foliage. *Jackpot*, she thought with a smile. Once again she reached into her bag and pulled out a pair of latex gloves. Then she fumbled around until she felt her tiny compact case. She was just opening the latch when Sheriff Walters stepped in behind her.

"That's some purse you got there," he observed.

"Not a purse," she said casually as she pulled a pair of tweezers from the case and reached out to retrieve a gold chain. "My go bag. It has everything I need to process a scene. Any scene," she said as she stood and held out the necklace with a strange medallion attached. "What do you think? Hers or our suspects? It looks a little masculine for a woman."

Jericho took a step closer to study the evidence. "Could be either. That's the wrestling medallion from Gunnison Valley High. Their mascot is a bulldog." He pulled out a pen and pointed to the center which depicted the face of a dog. "See the mountain range in the background and the two arms make the outer circle."

"Okay, so either our suspect is a wrestler or her boyfriend gave this to her...like a class ring or a letterman's jacket. A way to claim her as his?" Paige surmised.

"Exactly," Walters said as he pulled an evidence bag from his pocket. "Gives us somewhere to start. I'll call Patrick and see if he has any missing persons that match our vic's description. Let's see what else we can give him. The more the better."

The two cops moved in next to the body. Paige once again began to survey the scene. Every few seconds she took a new shot at a different angle. Walters was impressed. The girl knew what she was doing, that was obvious. He again wondered why someone with that kind of experience would move to such a small town. Was she running from something or running to it? Only time would tell. He stood back and took a photo of the girl's face with his cellphone then dialed Chief Patrick Strong. He paused before hitting send. Chances were good the man could identify their victim by the photo alone but he pulled out the evidence bag and took another shot of the necklace. Once he punched in the number again, he turned and stepped away. Best to have this conversation in private.

Paige was just finishing up with her initial inspection when Sheriff Walters returned. He was scowling so Paige figured the news wasn't good. She straightened and focused on her boss.

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“Patrick recognized the photo. Her name is Amber Jenkins. She’s a junior at Gunnison Valley. Dates a wrestler by the name of Dustin Finestone. According to Pat he’s a good kid. Tons of potential. College scouts have been looking at him for the past year. He’s headed to college in a few months...plenty of choices too.”

“Can we talk to him? Find out if he has an alibi for last night?” Paige wondered. “Or does this Patrick want to do it himself?”

“Oh, sorry,” Jericho apologized. “I keep forgetting you’re not from around here. Pat is the Chief of Police in Gunnison. He keeps busy with the prison riffraff. But no, he’s not going to question Dustin. The kid has a solid alibi. He’s in Tempe with his parents. They’re checking out the University. One of his scholarship options. Apparently they’ve been out of town for almost a week now. Due back any day. The kid is going to be crushed when he finds out his girl passed away while he was gone. Pat said he’d take care of notification. He knows the Jenkin’s personally and will see what they can tell us about her whereabouts the past couple days.”

Paige didn’t like it. She preferred to interview family members herself but she was new here and this was a small community. Everyone knew everyone and Chief Patrick would probably get more from the family than she ever would. Most small town residents didn’t take to outsiders asking questions...especially personal ones. “Before we go, I wanted you to look at these tire tracks. They are larger than anything I’ve seen before. I was hoping you might be able to tell me what made them.”

Sheriff Walters followed Paige back to the road and smiled. “Good eye,” he said as he crouched down for a better look.

“I compared them to your truck and Dean’s Explorer but they are much larger than either one. What kind of vehicle would be that large but blend in on a back trail like this one?”

“Whoever made those tracks drives a Jeep,” he said confidently.

“How could you know that?” Paige asked.

“They’ve put a lift kit on it, full suspension. It gives them maximum traction and suspension for off-road use. Lifts the vehicle four to six inches but requires wider tires. I’d say these are thirty-six...maybe thirty-seven inches. With tires that thick, it has to be a Jeep. If they’re still in the area, we’ll find them.” Jericho smiled at Paige, she’d just given him his first real lead.

“Okay, we’ll have to wait for the Medical Examiner to pinpoint the time of death precisely, but I’d say that girl died either last night or early this morning. With the recreational traffic in this area, it’s probably a good bet they took advantage of the darkness to dump her. Maybe that camp over there saw or heard something last night. Do you want me to question them? We could at least see if they heard a vehicle in the area.”

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“We’ll go together. But just because a Jeep came through here, that doesn’t mean they’re connected to our victim. I saw her head wound. There is a good chance she died from an ATV accident. She’s got what looked like road rash on her forearms and left calf.”

“I noticed that. It might not be homicide we’re dealing with here. Could just be a couple of kids goofing off and she couldn’t keep up.” Paige agreed.

“Doesn’t matter,” Walters said shaking his head. “The minute they decided to dump the body instead of calling for help it became criminal.”

“I agree,” Paige said struggling to keep up with the man’s long strides. “Are we walking or driving? Because if you say walking, I think I’ll just hang back and see if Dean needs my help.”

Jericho laughed. “Driving. What’s wrong, the big shot city girl can’t keep up in the backcountry?”

“Give me a few weeks then we’ll talk.” Paige said sliding into the passenger seat of the Sheriff’s truck.

The two of them made their way over the dirt road and stopped in front of a modest trailer. There were chairs set up around the fire pit and toy trucks scattered on the ground between the truck and trailer. Obviously this family had kids.

“Hello?” Sheriff Walters called as he approached the side door. “Anyone in there?” A woman in her thirties pushed open the door and rushed outside, finger combing her hair as she descended the stairs.

“Shhh,” she whispered. “I just got Benny down for a nap. The slightest noise will wake him again.” She narrowed her eyes at the markings on the side of the truck then studied the two strangers. “Police? You here to track down those men from last night?”

“What men would that be?” Jericho asked.

“Those two guys making all the noise. I swear it was four in the morning before they finished their squawking and headed out. None of us got a wink of sleep. Ben had finally had enough. He’d just slipped on his shoes and was about to go out and give them a piece of his mind when they took off. No way he could have caught up with them in that Jeep of theirs so we just went back to bed and tried to get as much sleep as we could. By that time Benny was wired. I stayed up the rest of the night with him while Ben got a couple hours rest. So much for a relaxing vacation. I hope that’s not the way it’s going to be every night. I mean I understand kids wanting to let loose and all but they could at least do it during the day. Or shut it down by midnight. We have a right to enjoy our time out here too, you know.”

“Mrs...I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name.” Paige said in her most empathetic tone.

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“Tiffany...Tiffany Glasgow.” She reached out and shook first Paige’s hand then the Sheriff’s.

“Mrs. Glasgow,” Paige said. “You said guys. Do you have any idea how many of them were out there?”

“At least two...maybe three. I heard two distinct voices...and laughter, but I thought I saw three shadows. They were acting all boisterous, laughing at everything. I told Ben I thought they were drunk. It’s the reason I didn’t want him confronting them alone. Drunks can be mean if you cross them and Ben had every intention of crossing those men,” Tiffany shrugged. “He’s not the most patient man on the planet but he’s a good man. He was mostly worried about me on account of me not getting any sleep.”

“Did you happen to see the Jeep they were driving?” Jericho asked. “Any idea what color? Was it a newer model or an older model? Anything you could tell us would be helpful.”

“So you are going after those men? Ben will be happy to hear it. He’s in town looking for earplugs. Maybe we can turn in early and still salvage the rest of our vacation.” Tiffany paused to think. “It was dark so I couldn’t say what color it was...dark, that’s the best I could do. Black, green...I don’t know, just dark. And it was a few years old but not one of those ancient ones...you know, like the old Army Jeeps you sometimes see out here. But not new either. I’d say maybe five...six years old maybe. It was all decked out...lift kit, big tires, roll bar with the top removed. And they had one of those spotlight thingy’s mounted on the passenger side. You know, the kind teenagers use to spotlight rabbits. Not that I know anything about that...spotlighting is illegal.”

Jericho grinned. “Of course. Just one last question. Do you know which direction they were headed? When they left the area, what way did they go?”

Tiffany held out her right arm and pointed toward the south. “That way, and they seemed to be in a hurry. They sped off like a demon was chasing them or something. I chalked it up to being drunk but Ben said they were acting suspicious. He was sure it was more than just a buzz that had them hightailing it out of here. We didn’t see or hear another car but something spooked them for sure.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Glasgow. I really appreciate all your help on this. I’ll have men in the area this evening so you shouldn’t have the same trouble as last night again. And I’m sorry they interfered with your vacation. It’s supposed to be great weather the next few days so hopefully that will make up for it.” Jericho tipped his hat and turned back toward the truck.

Paige smiled at the woman and then she too left her standing there, alone. Once she was settled back in the passenger’s seat Paige turned to her boss. “Do you think they were just out fooling around? Maybe driving drunk and the girl fell out of the Jeep and struck her head killing

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her. The guys could have panicked and decided to dump the body rather than get arrested for DUI.”

“Possibly,” Jericho pondered. “But it’s also possible they were up to no good and the drunken party was just an encore. Something clearly went wrong, though. Whether it was pre-meditated or circumstance doesn’t really matter. We need to find that Jeep. When we do I have a feeling we’ll find our bad guys.”

It was nearly dark when the call came in from Dean Bridges. Paige had learned the deputy’s last name earlier that morning. He’d come across a camp with a green Jeep that matched their description, lift kit, wide tires and all. It was situated in a secluded area a little ways from Jet Fork Reservoir. Dean was holding back, watching for any sign of the men while he waited for backup.

Jericho immediately headed that way. To Paige it felt like it took forever to get there and for about the hundredth time that day, she was glad she’d caught a ride with the sheriff instead of trying to navigate the area herself. There was no doubt in her mind that if left on her own, she’d be sufficiently lost by now. “So, how many years do you think it will take before I know my way around out here? Because if you said ‘Paige, I need you to head back to the scene of the crime and take a few more pictures, I’d be at a loss. I couldn’t even point you in the right direction after all those twists and turns today. I’m hopeless.”

“Not hopeless,” Jericho said as he shut down the engine. “Just new. If Dean can catch on, I’m sure you can too. After all, you’re a local. He’s an outsider. It will take a while, but if you stick around long enough, you’ll be taking shortcuts in no time.”

“Well, thanks for your vote of confidence anyway. I’m not nearly as sure about that as you seem to be, but I’m determined to try.” Both officers exited the vehicle and joined Dean who had also stepped out of his Explorer and headed their way.

“I’ve only seen three of them but they all have weapons. I ran the plate. The Jeep is registered to Cornell Stedman, who just happens to be a restricted felon. He was released six months ago from Gunnison Prison. Served three years for armed robbery. That’s him in the red and black plaid shirt. We’ve got him on a weapons violation hands down. I haven’t been able to identify the other two but they’re all packing.”

Paige heard a vehicle in the distance and glanced up to see another police cruiser headed their way. *Good*, she thought they could use all the help they could get. If these three got spooked or they really were the ones that killed that girl and thought the police were onto them, the situation might get a little sticky. When Deputy Gage Clayton stepped from the vehicle,

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Paige relaxed. Gage might be known as a gentle giant among friends but nobody that ever crossed him would refer to the man as gentle. She also happened to know he was an ace at shooting. His father had taught him to fire a rifle when he was about five.

The group was still discussing their approach plan when the three men disappeared into the trailer. Moments later they exited their temporary home and strolled casually toward the four officers.

“We got tired of waiting and decided to take matters into our own hands.” Cornell announced. “Hope you don’t mind but we were just about to break out the beer and didn’t want any trouble.”

“The fire’s warm if you’d like to join us,” a second man said with a smirk. He was looking directly at Paige. Her skin was crawling from the look in his eyes. If he hadn’t been to prison, she was certain it was only because he hadn’t been caught yet. The man was creepy with a capital C.

“I think we’ll pass,” Jericho said soberly. “You got any ID on you? All three of you.”

“Well, that just might be a problem. You see officers, I done forgot to bring my wallet,” Cornell said with a shrug. “Didn’t think I’d need it. Not much chance the chipmunks are going to require a license before they steal our bread crumbs.”

“Who drove?” Jericho pressed. “At least one of you better have ID or I’ll have to impound the Jeep and the trailer.”

The third man pulled out a wallet and produced a driver’s license. He held it out to Paige in challenge. Gage stepped forward and forcefully gripped the plastic card then, without taking his eyes from the man, handed it back to Dean.

Dean stepped backwards and slid into the driver’s seat of his vehicle. Moments later, Margie had run the name. Mr. Torrance Fernandez was not only a former resident of Gunnison Prison, he also had three outstanding warrants for his arrest, including fugitive. Seems he failed to report in with his PO as required. Two down, one to go. Dean was willing to bet the third guy was also trouble and just asking for an eight foot cell.

“I think you forgot to return my ID, copper.” Fernandez said when Dean exited the truck without the license.

“I’m going to need your name, too.” Jericho said to the remaining suspect.

“Kenny Culpepper,” the kid said with a grin. “Maybe you’ve heard of my cousin, Brad.”

“For his sake I hope not,” Gage said without emotion. “He’s had enough bad publicity since leaving the NFL. But we all have a bad seed in the family so I guess it’s possible.”

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“Who you calling a bad seed?” Kenny said, taking an aggressive step toward Gage.

“Simmer down Ken,” Torrance warned. “You always did think with your temper. Let’s try using our brains this time, what do you say?”

Kenny stopped in his tracks, but he didn’t break eye contact with Gage.

Paige shook her head in disbelief. The guy was an idiot. Did he seriously think he could take on former NFL linebacker Gage Clayton? Maybe he just didn’t know who he was messing with. “We’re going to need all three of you to accompany us back to the station.” She finally interjected. “We have some questions for you and I for one would rather not spend any more time out here in the cold than necessary.”

“Awe, sweetheart all you had to do was ask.” Cornell drawled. “I’ll warm you up.”

“Nice try, but I think I’ll pass,” Paige said as she took a step closer. “I prefer men, not boys pretending to be tough.”

Cornell scowled, then lunged. Paige was ready for it. She took a step to the side then rammed her elbow into his ribs. “I believe that’s called assault on a police officer.” She casually pulled a set of handcuffs from her back pocket and within seconds had their first suspect in custody. “Who wants the honors?” she asked glancing around at the three men standing behind her.

Jericho smiled, so little Paige Carter wasn’t all brains after all. She just might have what it takes to gain respect in his department, with his men. He nodded to Dean, indicating he wanted the man to secure the prisoner.

“So...who wants to be next?” Paige asked as she took another step forward.

“Torrance has warrants,” Dean provided. “Maybe you’d like to deal with him.”

Torrance pivoted but only got in two steps before Gage grabbed him by the back of the neck. He was handcuffed and thrown into Dean’s backseat before he even knew what was happening.

“So, Kenny boy. What’s it gonna be?” Paige asked as she raised an eyebrow in challenge. “You want to resist too, or you think you might want to come quietly? You cooperate maybe we’ll go easy on you. Or not,” she said with a sigh when the kid took off running.

Gage was across the expanse in an instance and tackled the wily kid before he reached the Jeep. Kenny went down, hard. With the wind knocked out of him Kenny immediately began to wheeze and cry. He was screaming about police brutality before his butt hit Gage’s back seat.

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“We’ll follow you back to make sure they all behave,” Jericho advised before returning to his truck. The second Paige shut the door, he shifted into gear. The three vehicles made their way back to the station. The instant they pulled into the lot, Sheriff Walters was out of the car. He opened the back door of Dean’s unit and pulled Torrance to his feet. “You get Cornell,” he directed Dean. “Gage has Kenny,” he paused to look at Paige. “You get our backs. I don’t trust these guys. The sooner they’re in a cell, the sooner I can relax.”

Sheriff Walter’s had the truck and trailer impounded. By the time it arrived at the station, he’d obtained a warrant from the local judge to search every inch of both. Paige had found blood and hair in the back of the Jeep that appeared to be Ambers. Dean located a pink cellphone hidden in the back of the closet in the main bedroom area of the trailer. They had enough to hold the three men even without the evidence. All three of them were restricted felons and the arsenal they had stashed in the trailer was going to get them several years in their favorite correctional facility. Torrance and Cornell had the same Probation Officer. Kenny’s PO was out of Salt Lake and wouldn’t arrive until the following day.

With the three of them headed back to prison Jericho and his deputies had plenty of time to figure out exactly what had happened to Amber. Paige wasn’t sure she wanted to know, but that was the job. And she’d do her job. Amber deserved justice. Her family deserved answers. And the men responsible deserved a lifetime in Gunnison’s finest.

It was just after midnight when Paige finally stumbled through her front door. So much for cleaning out the dust. Her first day back in Manti hadn’t exactly gone as she planned but it had been interesting. She just hoped every day wasn’t this busy. Otherwise, she’d never settle into her new home and she’d never find the answers she so desperately needed.

Paige ascended the stairs and stepped into her old bedroom. The bed was calling to her. She didn’t even stop to change, she just dropped onto the bed fully dressed. The minute her stomach hit the mattress, she curled into a ball and exhaustion overcame her. Within minutes she was sound asleep. As she drifted off, she realized she was finally content. This is where she belonged...just like her mother.

The following afternoon Paige stepped from the confines of the police station. It was a warm sunny day and she needed the fresh air. Kenny had proven to be the weakest link in the chain. He was facing prison for the weapons but she doubted he’d be charged with the rest. He was, for the most part, an unwilling accomplice. Torrance and Cornell had kidnapped Amber on her way home from the library. The two had called Kenny to pick them up in the Jeep. At first, Kenny had believed the girl was there willingly. By the time they’d left Gunnison headed up the dirt road to their favorite camping spot, he’d realized she’d been abducted by his friends. At one

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point, Kenny had actually set her free. He told her to run and gave her directions to the main road. Before she got far, Torrance and Cornell had realized she was missing. Kenny was completely drunk by that point but they forced him to drive them around at gunpoint until they found her. Amber didn't go quietly, though. When she started to fight them, Torrance picked her up and slammed her down into the back of the cargo area. Her head hit the metal roll bar and killed her instantly. Kenny had panicked and hit the gas too hard, throwing Amber's body from the vehicle. The other two men loaded Amber's body back into the Jeep and Cornell took over the driving until they found a dump site.

The noise Tiffany and Ben heard wasn't partying, it was Kenny's drunken objections. The three of them got into an argument and Torrance and Cornell forcefully carried Kenny back to the Jeep. Cornell held Kenny down while Torrance sped away from the scene. Once Kenny sobered up, he realized it was too late to do anything to help the dead girl. That's when he decided to go along with their scheme. They had planned to stay at the campsite for one more night in an attempt to appear innocent. They thought it would be obvious they were involved if they struck camp and fled too soon. When the cops arrived, he knew he was in trouble but tried to save face up until the end. Torrance and Cornell were headed back to Gunnison but Kenny was transferred back to Salt Lake. His PO hadn't decided what to do about him yet. Paige really didn't care. She knew he'd be punished but chances were good he'd spend time in a half-way house rather than locked up behind bars for his participation. She really didn't care either way. Dustin would never be the same but with Gage's help, Paige believed he'd move on to college and learn to cope as he focused on his promising athletic career.

With a salad in hand, Paige headed for the local park. It was too good a day to spend her break inside. She had just settled onto a picnic bench, prepared to dig in when her cell phone rang. One glance at the display and she couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face.

Finally!

"Hey, Nathan. Does this mean I'm forgiven?" Paige asked her favorite General in greeting.

"You know I can't stay mad at you," Nathan responded. "Now tell me all about your first day on the job."

Paige laughed and began to relay the story of Amber and the three crooks.