

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Lasting Consequences *Season 1, Episode 2*

by:

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Lasting Consequences

Brian Weston was in pain. He thought he might have a chance if he could just pull himself out of this ditch. Otherwise, the vehicles traveling through the dead of night would never notice him and he wasn't so sure he could survive much longer if he didn't get help. The reality of his situation hit him once again. He was in trouble. Something was seriously wrong with him. His mind worked...but it was as if the blow to his head had caused a disconnect somehow. He could barely move and he felt uncoordinated and weak. Then there was his voice. He'd tried to call out to a passing car but somehow the wires connecting his thoughts to his vocal cords had stopped working. He concentrated on his legs then his arms, willing them to move. He had to pull his body from the muddy embankment but he was so weak and his head was killing him...probably literally. He'd been an idiot. Why had he let Tom talk him into doing something so stupid?

Brian took a deep breath and forced his aching body forward. He was almost out...almost free of the muddy ditch. If he could just get to the side of the road maybe... maybe he would survive this terrible nightmare. The instant his body was free of the shallow hole he collapsed, too exhausted and weak to move another inch.

Nicole sighed and turned away from her husband to stare out the side window. It was too dark to enjoy the scenery but it was better than engaging with Doug again. *Nope, not going there.* Her husband had earned himself the silent treatment for the rest of the evening. The man was infuriating. How often did they get out these days? *Never, that's how often.* So if she wanted to hear about Malory's blind date with the nerd, he could just wait five minutes. Seriously, five minutes was not going to make the slightest difference. *In bed by ten and up by six,* day after day - that was Doug's motto. Too bad his strict routine wasn't making him any less cranky. She sighed, then straightened. *What was that on the side of the road?* "Doug, Stop!"

"What? Why?" Doug asked in irritation. Hadn't they wasted enough time already?

"Look, what is that?" Nicole pointed up ahead.

Doug slowed the vehicle then abruptly slammed on the brakes. It was human. *Was he dead?* "You stay in the car while I check it out," he ordered as he jumped out the door.

"I'm calling 911," Nicole called out as she rummaged around in her purse for her phone.

Deputy Paige Carter stood next to her fellow officer and childhood friend as the ambulance pulled away. It was going to be touch and go for the kid and they still had no idea what had happened, or how a teenage boy...early twenties tops...ended up half dead in a ditch out in the middle of nowhere. "Gage, do you think he's going to make it?"

Lasting Consequences

“No idea,” Deputy Clayton said with a sigh. “Let’s do one more sweep and see if we can locate a vehicle. If not, we’ll have to pick this one up in the morning.”

“Not me,” she corrected. “Tomorrow’s Saturday and I have studying to do.”

“That’s right, we’ll get Dean to follow-up. He needs something to occupy his time. Otherwise he’ll just get into trouble again. Saturdays are either hot or cold around here and this time of year, they’re typically cold. Plus, he could use the practice.”

The two officers searched for over an hour without any luck. Paige couldn’t find even a shred of evidence. “Alien abduction,” she said when Gage stepped up beside her. “They plucked him up then dropped him haphazardly in the ditch when they finished their probing.”

Gage laughed. “Let’s call it a night. I’m beat and you need to get some rest before you hit the books. I’m counting on you to pass that test.”

“Me too,” Paige said as she turned and headed for her car.

Mysterious. She thought as she climbed into her cruiser and headed for home. She’d never seen a crime scene without evidence before. As severe as that beating had been, there should have been signs. Scuff marks in the dirt, trampled weeds, something. Then it hit her, the guy must have been dumped there. The fight...the beating...whatever... must have happened somewhere else. But was it attempted murder or just male stupidity? She was afraid they might never know.

Paige absently lifted her coffee cup and took another sip, then cringed and lowered the mug, resting it back on the table. *Yuck...*she hated cold coffee. She’d been sitting on the back patio for over an hour but she couldn’t concentrate. When the loud buzz of an electric saw filled the air, she sighed deeply, dropped her pen and rested her head against the tiny pillow attached to her lounge chair. She closed her eyes in frustration as she listened to the noise. She hadn’t spoken to her sexy neighbor since she’d pulled her gun on him that first night back in town. But, she knew he was there. Constantly there...hammering away, cutting two by fours, bull-doing walls and heaven only knew what else. The noise never stopped. He was up at the crack of dawn each morning and worked until nine o’clock each night. She was sure he only stopped because the local noise ordinance required it. Thank goodness for small favors.

Paige slowly opened her eyes and focused on her backyard. It was such a nice day, she’d rather be gardening. The flower bed her mother had so lovingly built was overgrown with weeds but it wouldn’t take much to revive it. The sun was shining and some kind of bird was chirping. She should be enjoying the pleasant summer morning. Or working. There was enough work waiting in the house and the yard to last an entire summer. Instead, she was trying to cram for a test that was going to determine the course of her life for the next year and beyond.

Lasting Consequences

Sheriff Walters would not give her access to the department's files until she completed her POST-Certification Waiver exam. He didn't want to waste Margie's time on training if Paige was going to have to attend a full academy session before starting with the department. So, here she sat studying when she'd rather be playing. But with the constant pounding next door, concentrating on anything was an exercise in futility. She glanced at her code book then looked away, she'd read the same passage three times and if asked, couldn't even say which ordinance she was studying. Her tall, dark and fearless neighbor was going to drive her insane.

Paige had silently endured the construction racket for over three weeks now, but something had to change. Soon! Maybe he'd be willing to compromise. If Dax would give her a couple hours each day, she could work around that. His choice...she just needed a little time to study without the constant banging. She couldn't spend an entire year in training. She had to know what had happened to her mother. The only way to do that was to gain access to the department's file on Chaya Carter's death. The only way to gain access, was to pass an extensive exam next week issued by Utah's Police Academy. She had no hope of passing if she couldn't find a way to study. Paige closed her eyes as doubt set in...had she made a huge mistake? Was she crazy? Seriously, what sane person left a job as promising as the one she had back in Virginia to become a local, small town cop in Manti, Utah?

General Nathan Porter asked her that same question almost every night. Paige smiled in spite of her frustration with her mentor. Nathan had only failed to call twice since she'd moved back to her hometown. Once, when she arrived and he was still angry with her for leaving, and then last week when he'd had an emergency meeting that went late. Each and every phone call included a lecture on how asinine this quest was. Then, he reminded her what she'd given up to search for answers to a mystery that may never be solved. After three weeks, she still couldn't defend her decision so she found herself changing the subject. Nathan didn't like her avoidance tactic, but he accepted it...for now.

It was exactly twenty-eight days ago today that Paige had sat at her desk, anxious and lonely. She'd caught her most recent boyfriend - and she used that term lightly- cheating on her the previous week. They had both been more devoted to their jobs than each other so the split wasn't too surprising, but the reason still baffled her. Even the breakup was dispassionate and mundane. She'd confronted him at the restaurant out of embarrassment, not emotion or pain. When Elliot canceled at the last minute claiming he wasn't prepared for his big trial the following day, Paige decided not to let it ruin her evening. She ventured out alone. Why waste a hard to come by reservation at the city's newest restaurant when she was free and starving?

But Elliot wasn't working late. He was engaged in an intimate dinner with a buxom blonde at her table. Her boyfriend and his new bimbo stole her reservation. Paige dumped the jerk and never looked back. Well, mostly. Missing out on the fine dining experience at an up and coming restaurant still annoyed her, but it couldn't be helped. A week later she typed out her resignation and delivered it to her supervisor without reservation. Her decision had been made.

Lasting Consequences

Special Agent Todd Gray was even more surprised than General Porter when he got the news. Her supervisor believed she'd continue to rise up the ranks at rocket pace until she was in charge one day. Paige had other plans for her life. Plans that only she seemed to agree with. Her colleagues believed she was acting in haste. Throwing away everything over a man. They were wrong, this was about her mother. The breakup was just the catalyst. The shove she needed to move her life in the direction it was always meant to go. But that was all in the past. It was done, no going back now. Right now, she needed another kind of plan. One that provided a nice, quiet place to study for the next six days.

Paige jumped in her seat at the knock on her front door. She stood, wondering who would be visiting her on a Saturday. She didn't have any friends here yet and her co-workers never stopped by - they saw enough of her during the week. Paige casually grabbed the coffee mug before sliding through the back door. She carelessly placed it on the kitchen counter as she continued into the living room. One peek outside had her even more perplexed.

"Sheriff Walters," Paige said in greeting.

"Hello, Paige," Walters smiled.

"Come in," Paige said loudly making sure he could hear her over the construction noise outside. It seemed louder somehow from the front of the house.

"I thought I'd come by and see how the studying was going," Jericho Walters supplied. "Can you study? I mean, I knew Dax was doing a complete overhaul next door but I had no idea..."

Paige laughed then sat on the comfortable couch. "I read the same code three times and still have no idea what I was reading. I'm trying to figure out how to handle this, but so far nothing is coming to mind. He's not breaking any laws and he has a right to remodel his house if he wants to. I'm not sure I know him well enough to ask for a favor. I only met him once and the circumstance was less than ideal."

Jericho considered. There was no way he'd be able to study for the POST exam amid all this noise, either. "Why don't you head over to my cabin for the next week? You'll need to pack in your own food, but it has running water and electricity."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," Paige began. "Don't you need me at the office? What about that case we caught last night?"

"We somehow fumbled our way through an investigation for years before you got here Paige, I think we can manage for another week," Walters joked.

"That's not what I meant." Paige was mortified. It seemed every time she opened her mouth the Sheriff thought she was trying to take over an investigation. Or worse, imply she was better than they were. In all honesty, she wasn't sure her years with the FBI had prepared her for the

Lasting Consequences

current job. Being a local deputy was much, much different than the investigative work she'd done in Virginia. She still had a lot to learn.

"I know Paige," Jericho grinned. "You need to lighten up. We're friends, well I hope we will be. I don't know if you remember, but your mother and I used to be friends. I hope in time the two of us can develop a rapport as well. And I think loaning you my fishing cabin for the week is a good start."

"I do remember and I'd like that. I don't have many friends. I'd be honored to be yours, Jericho. About the cabin...where is it?" Paige said hesitantly. It would be the perfect solution but she felt a little weird accepting such a gift from a man she barely knew. A man that was now her supervisor. Plus the man she remembered from her youth, her mother's friend, was far different than the man standing before her.

"It's up Ephraim Canyon. Ephraim is about five miles north of here. You just take Ephraim Canyon Road about six miles in. My cabin is on the east side of Lake Hill. I'll draw you a map if you're interested. I think you'll find it a peaceful place to study." Jericho smiled as the construction noise picked up again. "Dax is great, but he's focused. I don't see him winding down anytime soon. The cabin is yours for the week if you want it." He stood and headed for the front door. "Just stop by the office and grab the keys."

Paige hesitated for several seconds then shrugged. "I'd love it. Thank you, Sheriff Walters. I don't know how to repay you for this. I am going a little insane with all the pounding. Would it be possible to swing by your house and grab the keys and the directions later this evening? I'd rather not wait until Monday when you're in the office. The sooner I can get settled, the sooner I can get serious about my studying."

Jericho laughed. "I thought we'd gotten past the official titles, Paige. Call me Jericho. And I'm headed over to the hospital to check on our victim, then I have some paperwork I need to finish this evening. Stop by the station after seven and I'll be there."

"Did the victim survive?" Paige asked, worried the answer was going to be no.

"So far," Jericho said with a frown. "But he's still unable to communicate. The doc said he's worried about brain damage. Guess there's a lot of swelling and such. We may never get a statement from that kid and without a statement..."

"The suspect goes free," Paige said softly not liking the situation any more than the sheriff did.

"Right," Jericho said then straightened and tipped the brim of his white cowboy hat in a goodbye gesture before leaving the house.

Lasting Consequences

Paige grinned. The white knight image was so cliché, but it fit. She turned and stared out the large French doors unsure of what to do with the rest of her day. Her gaze fell on the old flower garden and longing overcame her. She shrugged and headed for the backyard. If she was going to have an entire week of solitude to study, she could take a couple hours and pull weeds. The job would relax her. Once she returned from her test in Salt Lake, she could stop at the nursery and buy a few flowers and some fertilizer. Maybe she would have a flower garden this summer after all. Paige started to hum as she settled in for a few hours of yard work.

The following morning Paige was packed and ready for her next adventure. A fishing cabin in the remote woods was definitely an adventure for this city girl. She double checked the doors and unplugged her small appliances, grabbed her suitcase and stepped into the cool morning air. She was a little surprised to see Dax sitting on his front porch, drinking coffee. She glanced at her watch and frowned. It was already eight o'clock. The man hadn't waited this long to start pounding since she'd arrived and now, the day she decided to escape the noise, he sat quietly relaxing on the front porch.

"Moving already?" he called out as he stood and headed her way. "Need help with those?"

"No thanks," Paige called as she increased her pace. The last thing she needed was a testosterone filled guy thinking she was helpless. She set down her bags and pulled her car keys from her pocket. One click and the hatchback popped open. She was about to lift her heavy luggage into the cargo area when large hands beat her to it. "Thanks," Paige barked, not quite managing to keep the annoyance out of her voice.

"You're welcome," Dax grinned. So, the woman didn't like help. Too bad. "You never said, are you moving out? Seems odd, you just got here."

"No," Paige said with a sigh. "I have an important test next week and I can't study here. Not with all the pounding and constant power tools. A friend offered me his cabin, I accepted. I'll be back in a few days." She left it vague on purpose. She thought Dax was okay, but she didn't really know the man. He had ventured out to scare her away the night she arrived, thinking she was a burglar. Chances were pretty good he was a decent, honest guy. However, years in law enforcement had taught her you just never could tell.

"Oh," Dax said, a little ashamed he had run the woman out of her own home. He was so focused on his goals he hadn't stopped to think how his construction project might impact the lives of his neighbors. "Sorry about that."

"Its fine," Paige shrugged. "I just can't fail this test and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to spend some time in a peaceful mountain cabin away from the chaos. Do you mind keeping an eye on the place for me? It's not much but it's mine," she smiled.

Lasting Consequences

“I’d be happy to. I guess it’s the least I can do since I’m the reason you have to leave,” Dax said sincerely. “Don’t worry, your home will be safe and secure while you’re away.” He watched as Paige moved to the driver’s side and climbed in. She gave him a friendly wave as she pulled onto the road. Dax studied Paige’s house for several seconds before he turned and headed home. The old place had a lot of potential. In fact, he would have purchased it instead of the one next door if it had been available. But the owner wasn’t interested in selling – he’d checked. Now he knew why, she was planning on living there herself. He stepped through his front door, pushing the guilt he felt for driving her away to the back of his mind as he picked up a hammer and got back to work.

Paige inhaled the fresh air as she studied her surroundings. She had to be close to her turn off. Jericho Walters had not only scribbled directions, he’d drawn a detailed map of the area. Ephraim Canyon was identical to Manti’s mountain region. She guessed that made sense, it was just an extension of the same range. She slowed a little as she passed the turn off that led to Hill Lake and knew she was almost there. One dirt road down, one to go. She made a right and maneuvered her way over large rocks and pot holes before she finally saw the handmade wooden sign that read ‘Jericho Hole’, in honor of his favorite fishing hole. She pulled the vehicle onto the gravel drive and stopped directly in front of the log cabin. The place was beautiful...and definitely secluded. It was situated smack dab in the middle of the forest. Jericho had cleared back the trees to give himself a tiny yard, but Paige was sure you couldn’t get more rustic and isolated than she was at the moment. Good for study time...bad for sleeping. She’d always been terrified by horror movies that took place in a forest. Staying here for an entire week was going to take some getting used to.

“Stop it, Paige! You’re a cop,” she scolded herself as she grabbed the keys and exited her vehicle. As she approached the front stairs she again noticed the cabin’s charm. The inside was even more masculine than the outside. Clearly this was a place where a man holed up to do ‘man things’ in the woods. She wasn’t entirely sure what that consisted of, but one thing was clear...she had entered a man’s world and she would respect that. She absently wondered if a woman had ever set foot in the place before...then decided she was being silly. As she ascended the stairs and took in the comfortable loft with the queen sized bed, she felt honored that Jericho Walters would give her such a special gift.

Five days later, Paige was relaxed, refreshed and ready for her exam. She’d had such an easy time studying, she had allowed herself the luxury of exploring the area. Jericho Walters had hit the jackpot. Paige wasn’t ready to take on fishing, but she’d spent plenty of time relaxing by the lake and hiking the trails that took off from his property. The trepidation she’d felt about living in the woods was long gone. In all honesty, she was a little sad to be leaving but it was time. She

Lasting Consequences

had a test to ace. Maybe she could convince the stoic sheriff to let her come back again sometime. He might just regret offering up his sanctuary so easily – she was hooked.

Paige secured the cabin, loaded her belongings and with one last look at her temporary oasis, she shifted into gear and headed home. She'd spend the night in her own bed then, first thing tomorrow, she'd be on the road again. Salt Lake was only a few hours' drive and the Sheriff's Office was paying for the trip and the exam. Margie had emailed her all the details, so she was set. Just a couple more days and she'd have the exam behind her. Then, another week and she'd know what was in store for her future. A year at the academy... or Manti's newest deputy sheriff.

Paige watched the white USPS truck drive away then ran to her mailbox. The instant she opened it, a nervous flutter settled in the pit of her stomach. The moment of truth had arrived. She gripped the envelope with so much force, it crumpled in her hand. She didn't remember entering the house but found herself pulling out a kitchen chair and settling in. As she swallowed the lump in her throat, she set the envelope on the table then tried to smooth out the wrinkles. The contents of that tiny envelope had the power to destroy her plans completely, or set them in motion. Her hand shook a little as she slid the letter opener under the tab and cut through the seal. They were shaking even more as she dumped the folded sheet onto the table. After running her hand over the document to smooth the paper, Paige began to read. She let out a relieved breath when she saw her scores. She'd passed. No, better than that, she'd received scores in the high nineties in every phase. Paige Carter, former FBI Agent, was now a Certified Peace Officer in the State of Utah. She just needed Sanpete County Sheriff's Office to verify employment.

Paige stood and danced around the room. She'd done it! Tomorrow morning, she'd take the results to Sheriff Walters and it would be official. She sobered as the reality of what that meant hit her. She would finally learn the details of what had happened to her mother. She would finally know the answers to all her questions. There wasn't a soul on earth that would stop her from knowing...had Chaya Carter been murdered, or had she died from an unfortunate accident? And who was responsible?

Paige slid the last page of the report into the large envelope, glanced around the office and headed for the door. She couldn't read the file here. Margie might catch her. And if Margie knew...Jericho would know. She wasn't ready to explain her actions to the sheriff. Not yet. Accessing the file...a file that was personal and over a decade old could get her disciplined - if not fired. Especially since she was still on probation. She was willing to risk it, but she wasn't willing to lose the data. On top of everything else, Jericho could make her hand over the report. There was no way Paige would let that happen, she'd waited too long for this. The short drive to her residence seemed to take forever and she absently wondered if this was how a criminal felt after robbing a bank. Every turn calculated, cautious and alert, careful not to exceed the limit

Lasting Consequences

or make a wrong move. She laughed as she pulled into her driveway. Good thing she chose to enforce the law rather than break it. Her nerves would never survive a career as a bad guy.

Relief flooded her the instant she stepped through the front door and secured it behind her. *Home at last*. The file was safe. She set the envelope on the coffee table as she rushed to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine. She definitely needed something to help her get through the details tonight.

“What?” a rough and irritated voice answered on the second ring.

“I’ve been watching the girl like you said,” came a timid reply. “She left the office today with a file.”

“What kind of file?”

“I’m not sure. But beings she works for the Sheriff and all, I assume it’s a case file. Some kind of police report maybe. As far as I can tell, she’s not working a case...nothing pressing anyways. Dean and Gage are looking into the injured boys. So, I thought you might want a call. You know...just in case.”

“Just in case!” barked the male voice. “Just in case you want to get paid? Because I know I made myself clear. Crystal clear. You call me with everything. I want to know if that girl trips over a rock, if she talks to anyone or does anything out of the ordinary. I want to know if she so much as glances at me sideways. I especially want to know if she visits any of the remote pastures in the area. If she comes within a mile of my property, the old Tillman Factory or anywhere else, I better hear it first. Everything. Are we clear?”

“Of course,” came the timid voice. “That’s why I’m calling. I thought you should know, that’s all.”

“Now I do.”

“What are you going to do, boss?”

“I didn’t hire you to ask questions you idiot. I hired you to bring me answers.”

“But...” the informer sighed as the line went dead.

Paige was lying curled up in a ball on her bed. She couldn’t stop the tears from falling and decided not to try. She’d risked her job for nothing. If Sheriff Walters knew she had this file, he might very well fire her. She was still on probation and his friendly demeanor only stretched so far. She’d left Virginia, traveled thousands of miles across country, returned to an old house that

Lasting Consequences

needed more than a little work...for nothing. The police report had only left her with more questions and no answers. Her mother's body was discovered in an abandoned factory. From the autopsy it was obvious to Paige her mother was murdered, but the report was vague and inconclusive. She was dealing with a cold case but not just any cold case. A homicide where the local police didn't appear to have investigated the crime. There was a brief follow-up report by a Detective Tibble closing the case and indicating he believed Chaya Carter was in the wrong place at the wrong time and fell victim to a drifter. He couldn't locate the drifter but assumed he'd moved on. She scoured the report for clues...anything to give her a lead to follow, but there wasn't anything. No fingerprints, no stray hairs... nothing.

Paige put her pillow over her mouth and screamed in frustration. The drifter theory had been floating around town when she was a teen. That's the reason she'd joined the FBI in the first place. Her imagination had gotten the best of her and she'd mistakenly believed her mother had to be the victim of a traveling serial killer. Once she was settled in at the FBI, she'd flagged any case, any murder, involving a transient or a drifter. Nothing fit. After a couple years, she'd extended her search to include businessmen, traveling salesmen...anyone that moved around routinely. Still nothing. That's when she forced herself to accept the possibility that her mother had fallen victim to an unfortunate accident. She'd returned to Manti hoping she'd pull the report-the whole report not just the small tidbits the department was willing to release - and finally get answers. Now, she realized there was nothing left to discover.

Once again her hopes were dashed. She was now positive her mother had been murdered, but there was nowhere to go from here. The crime was over a decade old and this Tibble guy was inept. She wondered if he'd even tried to find clues. Had he sought truth or just gone through the motions and then closed the case. *But why had Walters allowed it?* Paige wondered.

The brisk knocking on Paige's door annoyed her. She was wallowing, she didn't want visitors. Just because someone was there, didn't mean she had to answer it. She tugged a blanket over her head and did her best to ignore the intrusion. But when the knocking turned to pounding, she pulled herself from the bed and stomped down the stairs. When she reached the French doors she flung one open and glared at her neighbor.

"Are you okay?" Dax asked in concern when he spotted the tears.

"What do you need?" Paige demanded, ignoring the question.

Dax frowned. Clearly there was something wrong with the woman, but they had bigger problems. "Your water leak is flooding my yard. It's reached my wood pile and will completely ruin hundreds of dollars' worth of lumber if you don't do something. Have you called a plumber?"

"What water leak?" Paige asked, confused.

Lasting Consequences

Dax flung his arm to the side of the house impatiently. He'd looked at the pipe, the damage was man-made. She must have tried to tighten it up or something and stripped the threads. She had to know the thing was leaking. "What were you doing anyway?"

Paige stepped outside and rounded the house. The instant she did, her feet sank into an inch of mud. "What on earth happened here? Oh, no! The basement." Paige turned and flew back into the house and down the stairs. The water was flowing down the concrete foundation and settling on the cement floor. Everything her mother had owned was going to be ruined.

Dax sighed. If the woman didn't get the water shut off soon, cleaning the basement was the least of her problems. He returned to his house and retrieved his meter key. A few minutes later he had shut the water supply off at the main valve near the street and approached her back door.

"Paige," he called. No answer. He knocked loudly on the door frame but still didn't get a reply. "I'm coming in," he said as he entered the residence and headed for the stairs. He found Paige crying again as she frantically lifted soggy box after soggy box and relocated them in a room at the far end of the hall. This was definitely not the way he planned to spend his evening.

Paige lifted another box and turned then jumped when she saw a figure standing at the bottom of her stairs. It took her a minute to realize it was Dax. "You scared me," she said as she rushed past him.

"You want help?" Dax asked as he picked up an oversized box and followed her down the darkened hallway. "I shut off the water coming into your house which means not only the leaky faucet but all of your water. Your house is shut down completely. No flushing the toilet, no showers...nothing until you get a plumber out here to switch out that pipe. What were you thinking anyway? Once you stripped those threads you had to know the faucet would continue to leak."

Paige set down the box she'd been holding and looked at Dax in confusion. "I have no idea what you are talking about. I haven't done anything with that pipe."

Now Dax was frowning. If Paige hadn't loosened the pipe, who did?

"Maybe it just came loose on its own," Paige provided. "I mean it is old."

"No, it didn't." Dax was sure of that. Was someone trying to sabotage his neighbor? Or was it him they were after? Considering his past, the more likely target was him. But as he looked around, that didn't ring true. The damaged pipe was flooding her basement, ruining her property. The damage to his yard and the wood seemed to be an unintended casualty. "Maybe we should call the police...make a report."

"I am the police, Dax. I'll talk to Walters in the morning. In the meantime, I think there are only a couple more boxes. With the water flow subsiding, I think the damage is minimal. Oh, you

Lasting Consequences

said something about your lumber. Do we need to go move it? I am so sorry, I know you've been working hard on the rehab. What can I do to help?"

"Let's finish up here then we can go take a look," Dax studied Paige. When she came to the door, he'd seen the signs. The woman had been crying. He assumed it was the pipe but if she didn't know about that, what was going on? Had something else happened to her? If he asked, was he being a good neighbor or intruding on something personal? Better not ask. "You okay now?"

Paige brushed the moisture from her face. The crisis had pulled her out of her pity party and forced her to focus on something other than her mother's murder. But how had this happened? Maybe she'd have Gage look at it in the morning. He could tell her if there was foul play or just nature taking its course. "I'm fine. Let's go see what we need to do about your wood."

Dax followed Paige up the stairs and out the door. It took them nearly an hour but they finally relocated the lumber to higher ground. There was no chance the water could reach it now. "You want a night cap? I have a beer, water and beer."

Paige laughed. "No thanks, I have an early day tomorrow and I think it just got a little busier than I had planned. Thanks for your help and I guess I'll see you around." She turned to leave but stopped when Dax spoke.

"I don't know why you were crying when I got to your house before you knew there was trouble, and I don't want to pry, but if you ever need to talk...I'm a good listener."

Paige stood frozen for several seconds. Then she silently returned to her house, poured herself another glass of wine and tried to relax. Once the bottle was empty and she had a slight buzz on, Paige settled in for the night. It had been a very long and exhausting day. She needed sleep. The instant her head hit the pillow, she was out cold.

Paige walked into the office the following morning in search of Gage. Her high school pal had been more than helpful during her short time with the department. She glanced around and realized both Gage and Dean were missing. *Oh well*, she thought. She could just catch up with him later. The phone rang and Margie answered in her friendly but professional tone. Within seconds Paige knew something was wrong.

"What's up Margie? Anything I can help with?" Paige asked as she moved to stand in front of the secretary, slash dispatcher, slash administrative assistant's desk.

Margie shook her head and began to frantically scribble on a notepad. "I'll send someone over right away," Margie assured her caller before she disconnected.

Lasting Consequences

“I’m free,” Paige said immediately. “What’s up?”

“Jer,” Margie called.

Sheriff Jericho Walters exited his office and immediately registered Margie’s distress. “What’s wrong?”

“Penny just called,” she glanced at Paige then back to the Sheriff. “They have another one. This time the kid is so bad he may not make it.”

“Another what?” Paige asked. “What am I missing?”

Sheriff Walters sighed and shook his head. “That’s the third boy that’s ended up at the hospital all beat to crap if you count the one we sent there after we rescued him from the side of the road.”

Paige frowned. She hadn’t heard about any additional victims.

“The first kid came through but he’s got a long, tough road ahead. There was brain damage and he can’t speak. I think he’s finally been released to a rehab clinic. We found the second victim while you were in Salt Lake. This makes three. The second kid...what was his name?”

“Travis Ziebert,” Margie supplied.

“Yeah, Travis. He said he fell down a flight of stairs...alone. Tripped over a shoe lace. We all know that’s a bunch of BS but he’s not cooperating. That kid refused to say a word. He’s hiding something...but I haven’t been able to crack him. His parents aren’t helping. They put up a fuss that night, then immediately hired an attorney to keep us at bay. You up for a ride?”

“Of course,” Paige said as she pivoted and followed the sheriff out the front door.

“Alright, let’s see what victim number three has to say,” Walters said as he left the station and sped towards the other side of town. Unfortunately when they arrived the victim was still in surgery and couldn’t say a thing.

“Randall’s father took him to the hospital. Clark, what are we gonna do?” Tom asked in a panic.

“Nothing to do,” Clark said casually. “He won’t talk. Brian and Travis have kept quiet all this time...Randall will too.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Tom pressed.

Lasting Consequences

“Then we get rid of him,” Clark said as he continued to count the money from the previous night’s fight. “And then we move on just like the last time.”

Tom plopped onto a dirty lounge chair. “I’m getting tired of moving on. I’d like to stay in one place for more than a few weeks. I thought maybe...”

“And maybe we can,” Clark said impatiently. “But if not, we move. Just like we always do. You’re on board with this, right Tom?”

“Yeah, I don’t have to like it to be on board.”

“Good,” Clark said as he made a notation in the books then stashed the cash in the portable safe and settled into a chair next to Tom. “Next week’s fight is going to be monumental. I’ve got some real talent lined up. I can’t wait to see what happens when Tiny takes on that redneck hillbilly.”

Both men laughed and settled in to discuss next week’s pairings.

Paige hadn’t slept well. Part if it was her argument with Nathan, part was the case. After checking on their latest victim, she and Sheriff Walters had stopped in to see if anything had changed with their first victim. It was heart breaking to see how devastated Brian’s mother was over his injuries. It was sad to see such a strong, young kid with so much promise struggling to put two simple thoughts together...not that he could even do that. His mom claimed she had no idea where Brian had gone that night. He was a good kid but had been pushing her away since his high school graduation the previous spring. Mom wanted to give her son the world, which meant sending him to community college. She hoped it would open doors for him that had been closed to her. But, Brian wanted to find his own way which apparently meant trouble if his current situation was any indication.

The doctor said the violent attack had caused such a traumatic brain injury, Brian had lost his ability to communicate. The medical term he used was aphasia...whatever that meant. All Paige knew was at the moment, her victim didn’t appear to understand simple questions when spoken to. He just gave them this blank stare as if they were speaking to him in a foreign language or something. The professionals were working on the problem, desperately trying to figure out a method to at least communicate the basics. With time and a lot of effort they were hopeful his memory and cognitive communication abilities would return. But Paige didn’t have time. They had a third victim. One that was recovering from extensive surgery and unable to shed any light on the situation. Things were looking up for their latest victim, but he wasn’t out of the woods yet. She hoped eventually he would be more cooperative than Travis Ziebert, but she wasn’t counting on it.

Lasting Consequences

Then there was General Nathan Porter. Her favorite mentor had been furious with her when he hung up last night. She'd enlisted Gage to check her faucet just to be safe. He'd followed her home after work and was sure someone had tampered with it. Once she convinced him she hadn't touched it, he insisted on filing a formal report. She still didn't know how Nathan got his hands on that particular document, but she'd long since stopped trying to discover his sources. The bottom line was simple... he knew and based on this new information, he was insisting she pack up and move back east where he could protect her. Of course, she refused. She was a grown woman...and a cop. She didn't need some macho retired general hovering.

Paige dropped her head onto her desk and sighed. Nothing was going according to plan. And she didn't want to fight with the closest thing she had to a father over this. She wished he could understand...wished he would support her need for answers instead of stomping on her dreams every chance he got.

"Rough night?" Gage asked as he pulled up a chair and sat across from her.

"Nathan read your report," she said...voice muffled because she hadn't lifted her head from her desk.

"Nathan...?" Gage furrowed his brow, trying to remember if he knew anyone by that name.

"General Nathan Porter...Army...top consultant to the Pentagon...decorated hero and all around hard ass."

Gage laughed. "Okay, I get the picture. But my report? Which report?"

Paige lifted her head and gave him a look that screamed... *You can't seriously be that dense.*

"You mean the report on your water pipe?" Gage frowned. "But how? Why even? I mean isn't he still back in Washington if he consults with the Pentagon?"

"Yes...Who knows and because he wanted it I guess. And yes, he is still in Washington, but feels it is his duty to oversee my every move apparently. And your report did not help in the least. Seriously Gage, did you have to say there was no doubt it was damaged due to foul play? What kind of friend are you anyway? I needed an out."

"The kind that made sure when we catch the perp some hotshot defense attorney doesn't get the case tossed because there was doubt." He stood then paused and waited. Paige finally lifted her head again and locked eyes with his. "Someone deliberately and maliciously vandalized your house, Paige. I don't know who and I don't know why but you need to be careful. If someone is messing with you, we need to know. Don't hide it or keep it to yourself because you don't want to deal with this Nathan guy."

Paige sat up and sighed as she rubbed her hands over her face.

Lasting Consequences

“Promise me, Paige.” Gage studied his colleague and knew that was exactly what she planned to do. “Nathan Porter is not the only guy that has connections. If you don’t come to me on your own, I’ll have to enlist help.”

“I’ll report it,” she finally said with a scowl. “I don’t need you or anyone else babysitting me Teddy. I can take care of myself.”

Gage smiled, these days she only used that nickname when she was annoyed with him. He didn’t mind, old habits died hard. “Good, Slider,” Gage added with a grin. One turn deserved another after all. “Now, Randall Cox is semi-conscious. His surgery went better than they originally believed. I think we might be able to get something from him today. They still have him on pain meds so he might be less than coherent, but if we can get anything it’s better than what we’ve tracked down so far. Which is a big fat nothing.”

She jumped to her feet and grabbed her jacket. “Why didn’t you say so...let’s go.”

Paige stepped into the dimly lit hospital room and glanced around, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darker setting. Randall’s father was stationed in a chair to the right of his son like a sentry expecting battle. His mother, Judy, was sitting on the couch next to the window. She stood as Paige stepped forward and took her hand.

“Randy’s been in and out all day,” she tried to smile. “The nurse said that’s good...real good. They think he might have a full recovery. In time, he may be just fine.” She let out a relieved breath and stepped back, then slowly lowered herself onto the couch.

“That’s wonderful,” Paige said sincerely. The woman was clearly exhausted. At least the prognosis was good news, it could have been so much worse. Randy could have been looking at years of recovery like Brian was. In fact, originally the doctors weren’t sure he’d even make it out of surgery. The kid wasn’t out of danger yet, but he was definitely on his way. She glanced at Randall’s father. He exuded an air of disdain without saying a word, but she couldn’t blame him. The cops were no closer to learning who had done this to his boy than they had been days ago. For a parent, that had to be frustrating.

Randall was a senior at the local high school. He’d been a wrestler until his sophomore year then he decided to pursue other avenues. From what Paige had been told, Randall Cox was excelling in his business courses and was slated for several scholarships. She hoped this setback didn’t prevent him from moving forward with his dreams, but she knew all too well how profoundly one incident could impact a person’s entire life. “Have the two of you had a chance to discuss what I asked you? I really would like to talk to Randall. I promise I will be careful, I won’t push him too hard, but if there is anything he can tell us...anything at all, it might help us determine who did this. So far the other two boys can’t or won’t help. We’re counting on Randall to shed some light on the situation before someone else gets injured.”

Lasting Consequences

“We talked and I don’t like it. The cops should have protected Randy. They should have been there. They should have stopped this before my son got hurt. Now you want to come in here and hope my boy can answer all your questions. You want him to do all the work, to hand over a suspect, so you can make the arrest. It’s not right. It’s just not right.” Frank Cox said angrily. “But if that’s the only way to get answers you go ahead and try to talk to him. I’m staying right here the whole time, though. I’m going to protect my boy and I want to make sure you stop these thugs before another father has to go through what I’ve been through.”

“I understand your frustration Mr. Cox. I really do,” Paige said softly. “And we are doing all we can to find the answers you so desperately need. But none of the kids will talk. Brian would, I think, but he’s suffering from brain damage and he can’t. The other boy...Travis Ziebert, he won’t say a word. If the victims can’t give us something...anything to follow-up on, we have nowhere to go. We’ll never get the answers we all need.”

Frank was about to speak when Randall mumbled softly. “Barn. Fighting in the barn,” then he lowered his head, closed his eyes and was out again.

“Do you know what barn he’s talking about?” Paige asked Randy’s parents. “Do you know anything about fighting?”

“No,” Frank said studying his son. How in the world had Randy gotten involved with illegal fighting? It had to be illegal, that’s the only kind of fighting that would occur in some backwoods barn.

“There are so many barns around here,” Judy said as she moved to stand next to her husband. “Randy loved wrestling. He had to quit because it conflicted with his business courses. The Marketing club competitions overlapped with the wrestling team events, but he loved them both. I guess I can see him joining in with other kids around his age if they decided to put together some kind of wrestling or fighting competition. But that doesn’t explain how this happened to him. None of the kids Randy knows would go this far. Nobody would hurt him like this.”

Frank studied his wife. “Do you know something? Something Randall told you? Something that might explain all of this?”

A tear trickled down Judy’s face and she impatiently wiped it away. “No Frank, I don’t know what Randy was doing. But, he mentioned something a few weeks back. Just casual like, you know? We were having breakfast and he said he missed it. He missed the fight, the adrenaline, the challenge of getting onto the mat. We talked about it...a little. But then he brushed it off, smiled and said he loved the business stuff more and that’s what was going to get him into college. He shrugged it off and headed to school. I didn’t think about it again until I got the call. I didn’t think he would...” she burst into tears and rushed out of the room.

Lasting Consequences

Frank watched his wife leave then slowly stood and faced Paige. “Randall did love the competition. He loved being the center of attention. He was good...real good. He liked that too. It was fun...good, clean fun. He wouldn’t have willingly participated in something if he knew it was going to be like this.” He glanced back at the motionless form of his son lying in the bed. “He wouldn’t have had any part of this if he’d known. I don’t know what’s going on out there, but I can tell you that. If someone is recruiting these kids to fight...to participate in some illegal boxing, wrestling...fighting club, the kids have no idea what they are getting themselves into.

I knew Brian a little. He’s a good kid, oh he’s a teenage boy and that should be all I have to say on that end, but he’s a good kid. Just like my boy. Neither one of those kids would have willingly set themselves up for this. Travis Ziebert is a troublemaker. He’s been kicked out of school, suspended and locked up in juvie more times than I can count, but not Brian and Randy. There’s something more going on here. I need you to stop it.” He glanced at the door then back to Paige. “I have to go find my wife.”

“I plan to do my best, I promise.” Paige looked up when the door opened expecting to see Mrs. Cox returning. When the nurse stepped in, she took a step toward Frank. “Your wife needs you right now. Go, find her. I’ve got enough for today. I’ll look into this barn thing...and the fights. I promise, I’m going to do everything in my power to figure this out. Focus on getting Randall better...getting him home. That’s enough for now.” She moved past Frank and left the room.

So, some kind of illegal fight club. That made sense. More sense than the kids getting beat up for some random reason. Maybe they didn’t know it would go this far. Maybe they thought they could handle it. They were young and most boys their age believed they were invincible. If Randall missed the excitement of wrestling, missed the competition and the thrill of the crowd...he just might try out something a little more dangerous. Something a little over the top. Something illegal. She could see it...especially if the guy coordinating the thing knew how to sell it. *Take a walk on the wild side, get the thrill of the battle and the added bonus of it all being a secret.* Yeah, she could see it. But she was going to find a way to shut it down. She just hoped she could do it before another fighter got hurt.

Paige exited the hospital and nearly collided with Judy Cox. Just the woman she wanted to see.

“I’m so sorry,” Judy said, embarrassed at the near collision.

“Judy, I’m glad I found you. I had one more question I was hoping you could help me with.”

“Oh?” Judy took a step backwards. She didn’t want to answer any more questions. She didn’t want to think about anything right now. Her nerves were shot and she needed to get back to her son.

Lasting Consequences

“It will only take a minute,” Paige assured her. “I was just wondering if you could clarify something that doesn’t make sense to me.” When Judy nodded, Paige continued. “You said Randall called you...at home. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Judy whispered.

“He said he was in trouble and needed your help.”

“That’s right,” Judy confirmed.

“Then you said you and your husband brought him here...to the hospital because he was in such bad shape. That you rushed him to the hospital.”

“Yes,” Judy said again.

“From where?” Paige asked.

“What?”

“Randall must have told you where he was. Where did you pick him up? When you hung up the phone, where did you go?” Paige inquired. “You left your home to pick up Randall.”

“Oh, out to old man Wilkes farm,” Judy said in understanding. “Old man Wilkes passed away a couple years ago but he was a friend. Frank took Randy out a few times to help fix a tractor or repair a watering system. When Randy called, he said he’d been left in old man Wilkes field next to the granary. Frank drove right to him, then we loaded him up and rushed him here. Does that help?”

“I think it might, Mrs. Cox. I really think it might.” Paige looked up and saw Gage and Frank Cox headed through the door. “Here’s your husband. I’ll let you go. Thank you for speaking to me. I’ll call you if I find anything.”

“Oh, thank you,” Judy said just as Frank and Gage stepped up next to them.

“Are we done here?” Gage asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” Paige said, anxious to get back to the office and look at her maps.

The minute they were inside the car, Gage turned to her. “The doctors didn’t have anything new. Prognosis good, he needs recovery time, can’t reduce the pain meds, blah, blah, blah. Basically it’s a waiting game from here on out,” he glanced at Paige. She was awfully quiet.

“I think I got something,” she couldn’t contain her excitement.

“Yeah?” Gage pressed.

Lasting Consequences

“Frank Cox wasn’t happy with us. I don’t blame him but he was telling me off. Putting me in my place for dumping our problem on his kid to solve.”

“That’s not...” Gage began.

“I know, but I get it. He’s frustrated. We haven’t exactly solved this one. Nowhere near it. So I let him vent. Then Randall sort of half woke up and said something about fighting in a barn. I quizzed his parents and they both agreed that Randall missed wrestling and may have participated in a fight club, something underground and illegal.”

Gage considered. “It would explain why the Ziebert’s are so uncooperative and defensive. The kids been in trouble before. If he was part of some illegal fight conglomerate...yeah, that makes sense.”

“I agree,” Paige had a million ideas running through her mind. There was evidence to be found, they just hadn’t been looking in the right place or for the right kind. “Judy just told me they found their son abandoned in a field...old man Wilkes. Do you know where that is?”

“What?” Gage flashed an angry look in her direction. “I asked Frank for details a hundred times that night. Why didn’t he say the kid was dumped in a field? That narrows it...our search parameters. That helps but the time delay might have jeopardized evidence.”

“I know, but it does help,” Paige agreed. “Do we still have Randall’s clothes?”

“No,” Gage shook his head. “Margie sent them over to the lab for testing. Preliminary results confirm two blood types. We thought that meant we had DNA. It’s been sent up north for more extensive tests. But if this is some kind of fight club, that won’t help us. It’s only going to tell us who was in the ring with him when he got injured. Not who coordinated the event. We may not be any closer to finding this guy than we were before.”

“Did they take Randall’s shoes?” Paige asked absently.

“Uh...no, I don’t think so. Why?”

“Because we have a lead. One that we can finally follow and those shoes will help,” Paige grinned.

Gage considered for several seconds then it hit him. “A barn, shoes...particles to be tested. We might be able to narrow down the location by what, if anything, is stuck to the bottom of Randall’s shoes.”

“Exactly,” Paige said triumphantly as Gage pulled into the station. “Let’s go see.”

Gage climbed from the car and fell in behind Paige. “I hope you aren’t disappointed. I mean, he was also in a field. Any evidence that was once there could have been lost on old man Wilkes

Lasting Consequences

property when his parents loaded him into the car. Or when the perps took him out in the middle of nowhere to dump him.”

“Kill Joy!” she accused. “Go wallow in your pessimism somewhere else. You’re disrupting my chi.”

“Well by all means I wouldn’t want to disrupt your chi,” Gage grinned.

“Laugh it up tough guy. I’ll be in the evidence vault with my dancing unicorns and pretty little butterflies if anyone needs me. We’re going to play with hay, animal excrement and wild seeds, or whatever the hell you find in a barn...and anything else attached to the bottom of those shoes. I’ll let you know when I crack this case. Later,” she gave a little wave as she disappeared down the hallway.

Gage grinned. He was going to like having Paige Carter around again. Things would not be boring that’s for sure.

Dax hung up the phone and cursed. He wasn’t in the Army...he retired. Did nobody understand the meaning of that anymore? He should just ignore the good general’s request...or in other words, order. No, he couldn’t do that. He liked Paige and someone was messing with her. Dax was sure of it. He had no idea how former General, Nathan Porter knew so many details of the situation but he wasn’t wrong. Dax just hated the fact that an Army General had found him. Not that he was hiding, exactly. He resented the fact that the guys daughter *in every way that mattered* according to Porter, had moved in next door. Now Dax was the one that had to pay the price. He’d left that life for a reason. A life he was determined to put behind him. He didn’t want any part of it. He wanted to be a carpenter.

Before Dax realized what he was doing, he’d slipped on his boots, pulled on his jacket and slid his Colt 1911 into a hidden pocket just out of sight of the casual observer. If he didn’t do this and something happened to his precious neighbor, General Porter would have his head. Dax sighed, it was more than that. If he didn’t do this and something happened to Paige, he would never forgive himself. He flipped off the interior lights and slid noiselessly onto his back patio. He had a good vantage point from here. He’d know if the perp had come back to do more harm.

He replayed his conversation with the General in his mind as he settled in for a long, uncomfortable stakeout. He’d been on plenty of them in his lifetime and was a little surprised how easily it all came back to him. His breathing levelled out, his heartrate slowed and the instant he settled into the shadows it all clicked...he was in the zone. Paige Carter had no idea just how safe she was going to be tonight.

Crickets chirped and a squirrel scurried around gathering pine needles and tiny seeds that had fallen from the large tree in his backyard. Once again Dax considered his conversation with Porter.

Lasting Consequences

The General had been on the phone with Paige when she'd heard something, some kind of noise that had frightened her. She'd immediately hung up the phone, telling Nathan she'd call him back after she went out to investigate. Of course he tried to talk her out of it but she'd insisted. He waited thirty five minutes before he called her back and scolded her for keeping him waiting. Dax had to admit it would be difficult to live thousands of miles away when someone you cared about was in trouble. And his neighbor was in some kind of trouble. Dax didn't know what or why, but it had started with the broken faucet then escalated to someone sneaking around, spying. Dax hadn't told Nathan or Paige about that, but he was sure it was happening.

The previous evening Dax had been checking on his lumber supply, trapped behind the house on the other side of the wood pile when he'd heard someone sneaking around. By the time he made his way to the far side of Paige's house, where the noise originated, the intruder was gone. He'd taken pictures of the large footprints left in the dirt before returning home. Then, he'd sat in the dark, waiting for over an hour before turning in. That fact amused him a little. He was already guarding the sexy cop on his own. He didn't need it mandated by some hotshot General who thought he still had the power to order Dax around. *He was retired.* So was Porter for that matter. They should both just stay retired...move on...enjoy life...he wasn't a Ranger anymore. He was a carpenter. And he loved the fact that he was building things now days instead of destroying them.

His body tensed and his eyes focused when he heard the faint but distinct sound of leaves crunching under foot. He had another visitor and this time his pray would not escape.

Paige tried to relax, to enjoy her evening but she couldn't. She'd been so sure someone was watching her through the window earlier when she'd been speaking...or should she say arguing...with Nathan. She'd done her best to act casual but something in her voice must have given her away. He was livid with her, again. That seemed to be the story of her life these days. By the time she'd gotten off the phone and rushed outside to investigate, her yard was empty. She'd taken a walk up the street, scoured every inch of her backyard, the adjoining yards and the large field that butted up against her property line then faded into the forest a few hundred yards away. She was certain she'd find something...just the slightest indication someone had been there, but she hadn't found a thing. So, she'd returned to the kitchen just in time to catch the phone before it went to voicemail. That's when she'd gotten an earful from Nathan Porter. She was pretty sure she'd calmed him down but she wouldn't know until she received his next call...which would come promptly at eight o'clock, six his time, tomorrow evening.

She'd always loved the way Nathan took charge. He was a fixer...a General. He was used to commanding people. So, having Paige defy him so regularly must be just as aggravating for him as it was for her. But Nathan was just going to have to accept the fact that she wasn't moving back to Virginia. She wasn't helpless and she could damn well take care of herself. She dropped into the recliner and picked up the file she'd been working on. It was not nearly as thick as it should

Lasting Consequences

be but all the info on her current case was here. Well, the case she was working with Gage that was. It wasn't her case but she was invested now. She'd been hooked the instant she'd walked into Brian Weston's hospital room. After speaking with Judy and Frank Cox this afternoon, she was even more determined to stop whatever the hell was going on in her town.

She'd pulled the information on every home, every shack, every barn in the area close to where the boys had been found, making certain she didn't miss anything located near the Wilkes property. The fight club angle made sense to her. It would explain why each one of the kids had been located out in the middle of nowhere without transportation. Someone had dumped them there after they'd lost a fight. The knowledge infuriated her and only made her more determined to find the monster who'd done this. Whoever it was, they were cold and calculating and unconscionable. She'd dealt with serial killers as a fed, she recognized the type and she could handle this. She was so focused on her work the loud crash just outside her front door actually made her scream. She jumped out of the chair, grabbed her pistol and flew onto her porch.

The dark outline of a man loomed in the shadows. The instant she spotted the figure, her body went into overdrive. She hadn't actually believed he'd still be there. In fact, she'd started to question whether or not he ever was. She didn't think, couldn't hesitate or she'd lose him again. Paige reacted, she sprinted across her front porch, vaulted the short railing and landed on top of the man's back.

Dax didn't want to hurt the guy, he needed answers and this wasn't a fair fight. Pitting an Army Ranger against a guy like this was almost criminal. So instead, he took his time and played with his prey a little. Eventually, the guy would wear himself out and decided to talk. Dax ducked and turned, easily avoided the fist that was headed straight for his jawline then took a deliberate step forward when suddenly something, or should he say someone, landed firmly on his back. He hadn't been prepared for a second attack and they both went down. He positioned his hands in front of him, prepared for impact then let his elbows bend to reduce the amount of force his body was going to have to endure. The instant his chest collided with the hard dirt, he rolled then shifted and pinned the intruder to the ground.

"Get off me!" Paige demanded, she was furious and a little stunned that the guy had outmaneuvered her. She opened her eyes, determined to get a good look at the man so she could describe him to Gage then let out a growl in frustration. "What are you doing here, Dax?"

Dax blinked, then smiled. The sexy cop's tight little body felt good beneath his, then he remembered why he was here and he frowned, leapt to his feet and took off running.

Paige sat up, stunned. *What in the world was going on here?* She pushed herself up and slowly made her way to the back of her house. Dax was standing at the fence focused and clearly annoyed. He turned to face her when she approached.

Lasting Consequences

“There went your answers, Legs,” he grinned, he couldn’t help himself. Paige was wearing a tight pair of sexy shorts and her legs seemed to go on forever. He always had been a leg man... every guy had weakness. And Paige’s legs were long, lean and gorgeous. Probably the reason she’d so easily cleared the railing that ran the length of her front porch. Now that was impressive.

“Answers to what exactly?” she asked as she narrowed her eyes at her neighbor.

“That’s the second night in a row that guy was lurking around your place. I missed him last night because I was preoccupied with tracking inventory. By the time I got clear of the wood pile, he was gone.”

“He was here last night, too?” Paige asked more than a little nervous about the situation now. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Dax shrugged and started to walk back toward the side of her house. “There was nothing to tell. I didn’t see him well enough to get a description, as far as I could tell he hadn’t broken any laws, committed any crimes, so it was over. The guy was gone - problem solved.” He hadn’t been that casual about the whole thing but Paige didn’t need to know that.

“And tonight?” she pressed.

“Tonight I was ready. I had just stopped the guy from cutting those wires...apparently he planned to take out your electricity...and was about to get answers when a wild woman jumped on my back and foiled my well thought out plan.”

Paige was furious. Was this the same person that had messed with her water? And Dax was way too confident and cavalier about her safety. “Next time just call the police.” She pushed past him and marched through her front door. She couldn’t deal with Dax Hamilton at the moment, she was too angry. Plus, she had to think. Why was someone messing with her place? Had she rekindled some feud she didn’t know about by moving back into her mother’s house? Or was it something even more sinister? She settled onto her couch and considered.

That’s how Dax found her. Paige was completely motionless as she sat on her couch and stared out the window. He didn’t think she was actually looking out the window, it was more like she was in shock, staring at nothing. “You going to be okay?” He asked softly as he settled in next to her. “I didn’t mean to scare you. It was just...well, after the water thing I was worried. I’ve kind of been keeping an eye and ear open. When I heard someone fiddling around on the side of the house, I had to look into it. I had it under control,” he smiled again. “Until you decided to go all Cat Woman on me that is.”

Paige smiled at that. “I heard something earlier. I think that guy was here before and I scared him away. When I heard the crash...and by the way what was that?”

Lasting Consequences

Dax shrugged. “The guy came at me, missed and was formally introduced to your garbage can. I’ve cleaned up the mess already, don’t worry.”

Paige frowned. She knew from her time watching Dax work on his house that he was buff, she figured it’d been from all that construction work but now she wasn’t sure what to think. He clearly knew his way around a fight.

Dax was studying Paige, she wasn’t happy before but now she had a look...she was staring at him, trying to figure something out and he wasn’t entirely comfortable with the intensity of it. “What?”

“Nothing,” she looked away. “I was just thinking...shifting, re-evaluating my thinking that’s all.”

“On?”

“On you,” Paige grinned. “I think there’s more to you than I originally thought. Not just a construction guy that works every waking hour, I think. No, there’s more but it doesn’t matter – not really,” Paige shrugged. “I’m going to have to make a report on this. We’re going to have to report it. I didn’t get a look at the guy, did you?”

“Not good enough,” Dax fudged a little. He’d gotten the general idea of the man and as soon as he returned to his place, he’d sit down and sketch out what he knew. But Paige didn’t need to know that either. It looked like General Nathan Porter was going to get his way. Dax was now on assignment. He was going to keep his sexy neighbor safe if it was the last thing he did. His eyes brushed over her and he stood. He wanted to kiss her, wanted to pull her into his arms and comfort her...which meant it was past time to go home. Time to escape. Dax glanced around the room and spotted a file and a notepad spread haphazardly on the recliner. He moved past Paige’s body and snatched it up along with a pen. After scribbling his phone number on the pad he handed it back. “Call me if you need anything.” Seconds later he was out the back door and headed to his place. This assignment was going to be difficult. He would not get involved with a mark...ever. And Paige Carter was marked for something, Dax just hadn’t figured out what it was yet.

The instant he stepped through his back door, Dax dialed Porter. He explained the situation, made sure the General knew Paige was fine and then hung up. His body was wound tight and his mind was taking him to places he couldn’t go. He needed an outlet...he needed his gym. This was the reason he had retired. Too bad nobody seemed to respect that decision. It was several hours later when Dax finally settled enough to slip into bed. His phone beeped, indicating he’d received an email. *Nothing that can’t wait*, Dax thought as he drifted off to sleep.

Paige was cranky. She was nervous about the talk she was about to have with the Sheriff...her boss. She hadn’t slept for fear the strange man might return and she had underestimated Nathan’s

Lasting Consequences

concern. He'd called her first thing this morning and again tried to convince her to move back home. She'd finally told him in no uncertain terms, that topic was off the table. If he mentioned it again, she would no longer take his calls. She hated to draw such a hard line with him but nothing else seemed to be working. She stepped up to Jericho's door and knocked softly. She just hoped being honest and up front with him was not going to create another overprotective male situation...she already had enough of those in her life. She definitely didn't need her boss fussing, too. Maybe she didn't have to tell him everything. She'd just advise him she'd had a trespasser and the rest could wait. Hopefully, the rest would never have to be revealed.

Paige and Jericho were just finishing up when Margie dashed in. "There's another injured boy," she said in a rush when Jericho looked up.

"Damn it!" he said as he stood from his chair and moved gracefully around his desk. "We'll finish this up later," he told Paige.

So, not a request. Paige recognized it as a command from the tone of Sheriff Walter's voice. The meeting had gone better than she had hoped. He trusted her to handle the situation, ordered her to report everything so it was on record if the culprit came back and they had immediately began brainstorming ideas to deal with the problem. Why couldn't Nathan be that easy to deal with? Well, she couldn't think of that now. They had another injured kid to attend to. She stopped long enough to jot down the address from Margie then rushed out the door.

Dax had just finished his beer and stood to clean up the lunch mess when his phone rang. He glanced at the display and sighed. "Yeah?"

"Did you get my email?" Nathan Porter demanded.

"I got it," Dax admitted. He still wasn't sure why Porter was so on edge. The pranks were annoying but not dangerous.

"Did you read it?" he pressed.

"Sure. You think Paige is in danger. You think someone is out to cause her harm and you want me to secretly watch out for her. Your message wasn't exactly subtle General."

"And..."

"And I said I'd keep an eye out but is there something you're not telling me? I mean why are you automatically jumping to *Paige is in danger and her life might be at stake*? It seems a little out there...you know a bit of a leap from here to there."

"Paige's mother was murdered in that town. She knew something...a secret of some kind," Nathan added.

Lasting Consequences

“And you know this because...?” Dax asked.

“Because I looked into it. Paige is special. She’s one of a kind. I knew she was looking into things...following serial killers, trying to make a connection. Anyway, I did a little investigating on my own. To my surprise, I didn’t find much. I did learn that the investigation was botched...seriously mishandled. In fact, it was barely handled at all. Now, she’s working for the same man that allowed that to happen. There was some speculation that Chaya, that’s Paige’s mother, was involved with the sheriff but that couldn’t be verified. There is something not quite right in that town and Paige is turning over stones. She’s already dug up the reports. She knows as much about the investigation as anyone at this point and she’s not one to let it go. She’s going to push and I have a feeling there will be more of this recent activity only worse. I suspect just the fact she moved back has someone very, very nervous. Nervous enough they are trying to scare her away before she gets started. I need you on your toes on this one. I need your word that you’re going to protect my girl.”

Dax sighed. He hadn’t known about the murder but it was just one more reason he wouldn’t back down. Not because General Control Freak asked him to, but because he genuinely liked Manti’s newest cop and he wouldn’t let some killer take her out to avoid jail. “I’ll protect her.”

Nathan let out a long breath. “I knew I could count on you, Dax. The army lost a good one when you decided to leave.”

“But I do it on my terms and leave my past where it belongs...in the past, General.” Dax stood, cleaned up his lunch mess and dropped most of it in the trash. “Anything else? I have work.”

“No,” Nathan said briskly. Dax Hamilton wasn’t going to be easy to control but that didn’t matter. As long as he protected Paige and gave Nathan regular updates, things would be fine. “Call me if you learn anything.”

“Yes sir,” Dax said, the slightest touch of sarcasm escaping. “Out,” he hung up the phone and tossed it on the table. He had work to do and if his routine was going to include nighttime surveillance for the foreseeable future, he needed a nap.

Paige stepped up to the body and ran her hands through her hair in frustration. This kid didn’t have to die. If Travis Ziebert had been forthcoming with them, this kid wouldn’t have been beaten to death and left alone to take his last breath in the middle of a field. As was the case with the others, she hadn’t found any evidence. Their perp was careful. Chillingly careful. She figured he, or maybe they, were leaving the wounded in fields to avoid footprints. But how were they ensuring no evidence was found at the scene? They didn’t leave anything. No stray hair, no lint transfer that she could find, no dirt or hay particles on the body, nothing. The more she worked

Lasting Consequences

this case, the more certain she was the leader had experience. This wasn't the first town they'd exploited, she was sure of it.

Sheriff Walters moved in next to Paige. He was angry. Furious really. The bad guy was winning and that was unacceptable.

"Can we arrest the entire Ziebert family for obstruction?" Paige asked not looking up as she methodically studied every inch of the victim's clothing. "Travis knows where the fights are occurring. His parents probably do as well. They're impeding our investigation. Can we go after them for it? Tonight? I'll volunteer to work late if I can throw them all in a cage."

"I'd like to," Walters said just as disgusted as she was with the current situation. "But Fairfax expected that. He's not stupid, in fact he's the best defense attorney in the area. He filed an injunction today. We can't do anything with the Zieberts until the matter goes before a judge."

"Paranoid much?" Paige stood and turned so she was facing her boss.

"It's not really paranoia if they are actually out to get you," he grinned. "Let's finish this up and get out of here. It's been a long day and I need all of you alert and ready in the morning. We are going to catch these guys. I won't tolerate anything less."

Paige nodded. They both knew the good sheriff didn't really have any control over that, but she wanted this guy too. More than she'd wanted anything for a long time. And she was worried about the direction her thoughts were leading her. She was worried this group was equivalent to a serial killer. Had others died in previous towns? Maybe. They recklessly put others in danger and there was no doubt in her mind the situation had repeated itself in town after town before they arrived here in Manti. She just needed the slightest clue and she'd nail them. She was sure of it.

"Paige," Dean called out as he approached her and the body. "Margie says you got a fax. I think something came back on that dirt you sent to the lab. I can handle this if you want to head back. Maybe we have something to work with. Maybe the dirt was unique or something."

Paige smiled. She liked Dean, but he had a lot to learn. "The boss wants us all to finish up here and then start fresh in the morning. The fax can wait that long. I'll let the ME know he can package up the body. We're done for now." She turned and headed toward the waiting van and the quirky medical examiner standing beside it, patiently waiting his turn.

Olivia Kindall scrolled through the posts, desperate to find the next listing. Brian had told her that's how he knew when the next fight was going to happen. It had been over a week since the last one. Eleven days since the cops found Darren Collins body. Brian's parents were trying to hold it together but Olivia knew they were on the edge. She was too. Brian still couldn't speak. Yesterday, when she'd stopped by the center to see him, she was sure he had finally recognized

Lasting Consequences

her. She'd been so excited, thinking maybe something had clicked into place and he was finally on the road back to being the Brian Weston she knew and loved. But her hopes had been dashed when she'd taken his hand and asked him to say something...anything. He'd just stared at her. She didn't know if he understood, if he was frustrated like her, or what. She didn't know anything anymore. That's why she had to find it. She had to know. She had to get in.

Yes! Olivia said when she recognized the listing. The guys were still using social media to advertise their events. Tomorrow night. She was going to get justice for Brian tomorrow night. Now, she just had to come up with an excuse for her parents. She picked up her phone and dialed her best friend. Becky had already agreed to be her alibi. Her parents never said no when Becky was involved.

Olivia stopped cautiously, pressing her body into the shadows. She reached up, straightened her ball cap and switched on the camera. It had been lucky that Brian had left the GoPro in her room. It was an older version so it was long and thin, not square and bulky. He'd forgotten it the last time they'd raced their dirt bikes through the forest behind her house. The last time the two of them had laughed together, had enjoyed the outdoors together, had enjoyed each other. A wave of intense melancholy threatened to overtake her. She shook it off, determined to put Brian out of her mind- at least for the moment. She needed to concentrate.

Olivia wished she had a mirror, but settled for a quick check with the palm of her hand. Then she carefully switched on the recording device and she was set. She was ready. It was time to begin. She'd never be able to sneak a regular camcorder inside with the guard dog just outside the door, but the sports camera was small and compact and fit nicely under her hat. She made sure it was hidden even better by the large hoodie she'd pulled on after leaving her house. Her older brother, Braydon, wouldn't miss it and she needed it more than he did.

She moved to the side door and waited, the guard had disappeared. The area was dimly lit with only one tiny bulb illuminating the area around the man door. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the exact sequence required for entry. Knock once, wait for three seconds, five more knocks, two seconds, three knocks...

The door slid open and a large man waved her in. Success. Now, she just needed to casually walk the entire expanse of the barn, casually look at the attendees and be sure to get a good shot of the fighters and the crew, then escape into the night and never be seen again. She could turn the video over to the cops and they could take it from there. Easy...right? So why was her heart ready to jump out of her chest? As she pushed her way towards the front of the arena a large man shoved past her. He was carrying an unconscious kid over his shoulder. *No!* Olivia wanted to scream. Had another kid been killed in this crazy competition? How many of these guys had to die before someone would get a clue?

Lasting Consequences

She glanced away quickly when she realized she was staring. She could not draw attention to herself. This was a recon mission. She was just gathering information. She didn't want any trouble. She wouldn't have the first clue how to handle it if she did. Forty-five minutes later, Olivia began to make her way to the exit. She hoped she had enough video because she couldn't stand watching the carnage any longer. These guys were brutal. And it was obvious to her, the entire thing was rigged. Oh sure, the presenter made it sound like anything could happen. Like each guy had an equal chance, but more than once she'd seen the champion talking to a little guy in the corner. A guy that to her looked like the man in charge. They were throwing the fight when they needed to, then they'd come back with a vengeance and ruthlessly pummel the competitor. The last guy that went down didn't get up. Olivia didn't want to know if he was dead, paralyzed, or worse...trapped in his own head like Brian.

The more worked up she got, the faster she moved. When she tripped over a guy's shoe and went down hard she realized her mistake. She needed to blend not draw attention to herself. She was afraid to check on the camera, any movement would give her away if the right person was looking. As she stood, she casually glanced around. Everything seemed in order. No camera sliding across the dirt floor of the barn. She concentrated and was sure she could feel the camera resting above her right ear. If she was lucky, it was still hidden.

The instant she was back on her feet, the large giant of a man she'd seen carrying the lifeless form of a fighter outside when she first arrived stepped in her path. The smaller guy, the one that had been giving orders to the men, stepped in next to him. Olivia's heart pounded in her chest and her breathing became labored. She was going to die or wish she had. Maybe she could arrange for a double room with Brian. Two kids damaged and broken because they'd been stupid. It seemed appropriate to her.

"Can't you read?" the smaller guy demanded. "The sign says men only."

"I read," Olivia said forcing bravado that she didn't feel. "I just don't comply with sexists."

"I could have you arrested for trespassing," the guy added.

Olivia shrugged. "I'm leaving. And we both know you're not going to call the cops. This...what you're doing here, is illegal and we both know it. Don't worry, you're secret's safe with me. It's a waste of time anyway. I only came because I thought you knew what you were doing. It's painfully obvious you don't have a clue." She took a step forward, hoping to move past him but the guy sidestepped and again blocked her path.

Clark nearly growled at the insult. No prissy woman talked to him that way. He would have taken her outside to shown her a lesson but he was curious. "I guess you could do it better?"

"Sure I could," Olivia continued. She was on a roll and as long as she didn't think about the consequences of failure, she could get through this. "Those guys over there are betting on the

Lasting Consequences

fighters. That's your only source of income. If I were running this operation, there would be a cover charge and women would definitely be welcome. Have you seriously never watched the fights on television? The ratio is probably fifty/fifty. Just as many women as men. That's because women enjoy a good firm chest as much as men enjoy their strip clubs. They'd pay the price of admission and the betting...well that would just be gravy." She smiled inwardly at the surprise on the guys face and took the opportunity to move past him and slip out the door. The instant the cool air hit her face, she was off. She couldn't risk being followed. Once again she slipped into the shadows, made her way across the field and darted into the thick trees of the forest. She didn't stop until she'd reached the rotting trunk.

Olivia dropped behind the massive tree and removed her ball cap and the camera while she fumbled around for her backpack. She'd left it hidden beneath the rotting bark, positive nobody would find it but her. She shut off the power on the video then unzipped the pack and traded the camera for a hunting scope. Her father would kill her if he knew she had it. It was his pride and joy. A mid-range scope with night vision, which was the only reason she'd snuck it out of his gun case tonight. She surveyed the area carefully until she spotted the huge guy and his boss just outside the door behind a large van. She let out a long breath and her body finally relaxed. She tensed again when four more men joined the duo, then relaxed. If they were coming after her, they'd never find her but she had to get moving. She shoved the scope into her bag and set off through the thick brush.

Five minutes later Olivia was standing next to her bike, pack safely secured. She flung her leg over the side and started the engine. The wind hit her face as she flew through the night. She followed the main road for about two hundred yards then veered off to the right. She could take this trail for a couple miles then wind back down and end up directly behind her parent's farm. She left the headlight off until she was sure nobody was following her then she gunned the engine and headed home.

Olivia hit the edge of the hill just right, the way she'd done it a hundred times before, the way Brian had taught her. The bike flew over the embankment, cleared the fence and landed gracefully in the back pasture. She shut off the engine the instant she reached the front gate, secured the latch behind her and shifted the bike into neutral. It was easy to push the lightweight frame into the garage and close the door. As she removed the large pack from her bike, she felt safe. Relief flooded through her entire body as she snuck downstairs, slid the scope back into the cabinet and locked the door. She was nearly home free when her older brother stepped from his room. The second he spotted her, he scowled. "Olivia! I told you to stop wearing my clothes. Tell mom to buy a bigger size if you want, but leave mine alone. I've been looking for that thing for the last twenty minutes."

"Sorry," she said as she set the backpack on the floor and pulled the sweatshirt over her head. I wanted a quick ride before bed and it was the only one I could find." She hated the lie as soon as it left her tongue but she couldn't tell him the truth. Not until she knew for sure. Not until

Lasting Consequences

she was absolutely certain her video footage would give the cops what they needed. Otherwise, she was going to have to return. She'd have to find a way into the next fight and that was something she really did not want to do. Something her older brother would never let her do.

Braydon snatched up the shirt, pivoted and disappeared into his room, slamming the door behind him. It was his way of telling her she was not forgiven.

Olivia slipped into her room and immediately slid the SD card into her computer. She'd watch the footage, copy it to her hard drive then make the trip to the police station first thing in the morning. Well, that's what she would do if she had something worth sharing.

Paige sat at her desk drinking her third cup of coffee. She thought she might have found something. The dirt particles on Randall's shoes had alfalfa, straw and stone dust. The lab had to explain to her that stone dust was sometimes used in barn stalls under stall mats for cows. They said the mats were pretty pricey so it should be fairly easy to narrow down buyers in the area. That's what Paige was working on when the young girl stepped into the foyer. She glanced around then made a beeline for Paige.

Dean called out to the girl but was ignored. Paige laughed, she was pretty sure that was a first for him. She stood and approached the girl...teenager. Paige was sure the kid was still in high school. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, yeah." Olivia swallowed hard. She was nervous and hoped she wouldn't get into trouble. If going to that fight was illegal, her parents were going to be furious. How could she explain that she had to do it for Brian? Nobody even knew that the friendship had shifted into something special. "Um...well, I have something I wanted to give to you."

"Okay, why don't you have a seat and tell me what you have," Paige said in the most friendly, non-threatening voice she could muster.

"I well...um...maybe this was a mistake," Olivia started to stand.

"Why don't you tell me what it is, then I can help you decide?" Paige pressed.

"If I have something but the place I went to in order to get it was illegal, can I get into trouble by giving it to you?" Olivia asked.

"Hum," Paige considered. The girl was awfully nervous. Where could she have gone that was illegal? "I suppose that depends. Were you participating in something illegal?"

"No," Olivia said, shocked at the suggestion. "I just went somewhere. I didn't participate. I just went to get proof, that's all."

Lasting Consequences

“Okay,” Paige relaxed. “So you knew something illegal was happening and you went there...just to get proof and then you left?”

“Yes,” Olivia nodded. Maybe she wouldn’t be in trouble after all.

“Then I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. Do you have the proof you wanted?” she pressed.

“I think so,” Olivia said pulling an SD card from her bag. “I have this friend, we’ve known each other forever. He’s the most amazing guy around. He’s funny and kind and he cares, you know? He took the time to help me, to teach me. He made me feel like I matter.”

“Sounds like a good friend,” Paige surmised.

“The best,” Olivia smiled, then sobered. “But he got into something. He made a mistake. It was for a good reason,” Olivia added when Paige gave her that grown up look that said kids were so stupid.

“Okay,” Paige softened a little. She wanted the girl to hurry up already. She needed to get back to her maps.

“His half-brother got into a little trouble and Brian wanted to help. Kyle couldn’t tell his parents, they would be devastated. He needed money fast, so Brian agreed to fight. Only once and then he was out. But something went wrong and now Brian’s in the hospital. He might never be the same.” she paused to blink back the tears forming in her eyes. This whole thing had gotten so out of control.

“Brian?” Paige straightened. “Do you mean Brian Weston?”

“Yeah,” Olivia swallowed hard then nodded. “He’s my best friend. I had to do something. So I found out when the next fight was. I went. Last night. I snuck out and went.”

“Wait a minute,” Paige stood and called out to Margie. “Can you please get Jericho for me? I need him to hear this.”

“I am in trouble, aren’t I?” Olivia asked as she nervously picked at her nails. Her uncle was going to be pissed.

“Nope,” Paige gave her a reassuring smile. “I just want my boss to hear this so you don’t have to tell us twice.”

Olivia cringed when Jericho Walters stepped from his office and approached the desk. “Olivia,” he smiled at the teen then shot a questioning look at Paige.

“Hey, Uncle Jer,” she said sheepishly. “Does this mean you’re going to call my dad?”

Lasting Consequences

“Let’s take this into my office,” he turned, expecting both of them to follow.

“Uncle Jer?” Paige asked the instant they were behind closed doors.

“Honorary Uncle,” Jericho sighed. “Olivia’s father, Kenny Glenshaw, and I went to school together. We’ve basically been friends since Kindergarten. Olivia here is my honorary niece.”

“Okay,” Paige said. She learned something new about small town living every day she stayed here. “Well, Olivia says she and Brian Weston are friends. She seems to have snuck out and attended a fight last night.”

“Olivia,” Jericho said in disapproval. “Is that true?”

Olivia ducked her head, tried to gather her courage then looked Jericho directly in the eye. “Brian is my friend. He’s hurt, his family is suffering. I had to do something.”

“I might just tan your hide myself young lady, but first tell me everything you know. We’re having a hard time tracking these guys. How in the world did you find their location and sneak in on your own? Which was dangerous and reckless and extremely stupid by the way.”

Paige cleared her throat. If the sheriff didn’t dial it back a bit, the girl was going to shut down completely. “Do we need her parents here before we can talk to her?”

Jericho sighed. “No, just give me a minute.” He picked up the phone, dialed a number then explained the situation to his friend. Once he hung up, he briefly glanced at Paige then focused on Olivia. “Your father said he wants you to tell me everything. Then, when we are finished I’m going to drive you home. You did the right thing, coming here when you knew it was going to get you into trouble. You did not do the right thing...going to that fight in the middle of the night alone. Do you have any idea what could have happened to you.”

“Yes, sir.” Olivia did know and it had terrified her, but she had to do it. She had to do something to help Brian. And she didn’t regret a thing. She’d take her punishment and know deep in her heart it was worth it if the cops could catch the men that had done this to Brian.

“Okay, start at the beginning. Tell us everything. We need to know every detail you can give us. Do you know where the barn is? Do you know if they move around or have the fights in the same place all the time?”

Paige laughed. “Uh, Sheriff. Why don’t we let Olivia tell us herself? Then we can ask questions if she hasn’t covered something.”

Olivia pulled out the SD card again and handed it to Paige. “I had Brian’s GoPro. The one we used when we were riding. Some of it’s terrible, but I think I got enough to help.”

Lasting Consequences

Paige handed the card to the sheriff and the three of them watched the footage. When it was over, Jericho sat back in his chair speechless. He was horrified at what could have happened to Kenny's little girl. She was brave and smart and reckless. He wanted to be angry, but instead he was just proud of what she had done for her friend. After weeks of nothing, this little girl had provided evidence that would not only give them clear shots of the guys running the show, but indisputable evidence that could be used in court. He rewound the footage until the small man speaking with a larger guy came into focus.

"Olivia," Paige said after several seconds. "This is amazing. It is just what we needed to catch these guys. What you did was brave and I understand why you had to do it, but I need you to promise me you will never do anything that reckless again. Those men could have hurt you, they could have done so many horrible things to you. Once you knew where the fight was happening, you should have told your father. You could have called your Uncle Jericho. You could have gotten your older brother to help. Sneaking out of the house, not telling anyone where you were going..."

"I know," Olivia agreed. "At first, I thought I'd be fine on the bike. It would give me a sure way to escape. Then I worried what would happen when I got there. I pushed my hair up under the ball cap hoping I'd pass for a boy. I did at first. Nobody paid any attention until I panicked. I was rushing and tripped. Anyway, I thought about asking Braydon but he never has time anymore. I knew he'd say no anyway and then he'd tell dad and my whole plan would be ruined. Dad would never have let me go out there and I had to go. Yes, I know it was stupid. But those guys stole Brian's money, the money his brother needed. Even if he lost, he was supposed to get paid. Then they beat him up and left him for dead. His life is never going to be the same. My life is never going to be the same. I couldn't sit by and do nothing."

"You could have come to me," Kenny said stepping into the room and taking the seat next to his daughter. "Do you think I don't know how close you and Brian are? Did you think I wouldn't understand? We love that kid like our own. He practically is our own. Brian is important to me too, kid. I didn't hear everything but I think I know enough." He pulled Olivia into a hug as he stared at the computer screen. "What you did was..."

"It was stupid," Jericho said again. "It was brave and scary and utterly and completely stupid." He moved around the desk and sat next to Olivia. "And I'm proud of you. I still want you to promise you will never, ever, do anything like that again. But I'm proud of you kid. This..." he pointed to the screen that was paused on the face of the man in charge, "That is going to give us everything we need to arrest the men who are responsible." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Olivia's forehead. "And we owe it all to you. Now, I think it's time you go home. We might have a few questions...later. Right now, your dad needs some time with you." He reached out and shook Kenny's hand. "You have quite a girl there, take care of her."

Lasting Consequences

Paige was practically bouncing out of her seat. “Can we get Margie on this? Can we see how many of these guys we can identify? My gut tells me that once we know who they are, arresting them is not going to be a problem. I’m fairly certain they are wanted...somewhere. We just need to figure out who they are and the rest is going to fall into place.”

“I think you are probably right,” Jericho sat back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. “What that girl did...”

“I know,” Paige agreed. “Wow, that could have gone the other way. The look in that guy's eyes when she challenged him that way. Where did she learn to stand up for herself like that?”

Jericho smiled, “Her mother.”

“Well, I just hope they can talk some sense into her. That girl has serious cajones. It might get her into trouble one day if she’s not careful.” Paige maneuvered around the desk, closed out the program and slid the card from the computer. “I’m going to get this to Margie. I think we’ll have a location and several suspects in custody before the day is over.” Paige was about to leave the office when the phone rang.

“Sheriff Walters,” Jericho said. “Right, okay thanks, Ken.”

“What now?”

“Kenny gave me the location of the barn. He apologized for leaving the office without making sure I knew exactly where the fights were occurring. He also said they were posting the times on social media. Apparently we missed it, which was the point. There was some kind of clue...a code that was only revealed to the fighters and certain audience members that the proprietor decided he could trust. Brian gave Olivia the details as a safety precaution before he drove out for his fight. That’s how she knew where to look to find the next event.”

“If Olivia had told us, we could have done a raid during the fight. We could have arrested them all in one full sweep. Now, we’re going to have to play catch up. Maybe someone should explain that to the girl. She’s so sure she did the right thing, maybe she needs to know there was a better, safer plan.” Paige sighed and left the office.

Several hours later, Sheriff Walters, Paige, Gage and Dean approached the run down rambler then split and moved into position. The sheriff was going to approach the front door and casually knock. His deputies were going to surround the building and block the two additional escape routes attached to the home. These guys were not getting away. Not this time.

Lasting Consequences

Jericho knocked a second time and waited. He had a warrant. If the men didn't answer the door, he was going in anyway. "Clark Fellows? Tom Spragg? I know you're in there. I have a warrant. Let's not make this any more difficult than it needs to be."

Tom jumped over the chair and stood next to Clark. "What are we going to do?"

"Destroy those," Clark ordered. "We are going to get rid of any and all evidence then let them come in and search the place. If they can't find our records, they can't do a thing. Flush every page then get back out here and sit on the couch. Do not say a word. I don't care what they claim to have on us...you do not say one damn word. Got it?"

"Sure," Tom understood but he wasn't sure he agreed. He rushed down the hall as Clark had ordered but before he reached the bathroom all hell broke loose. The door leading to the backyard burst open and Tom was tackled in the hallway. The notebook where Clark entered every transaction, every fight, every dollar, every bet, lay open on the dirty carpet as Dean handcuffed his suspect and led him out to his vehicle.

Paige burst through the door behind Gage. The man shifted and something flashed in his eyes. Then he turned and took a step towards the fireplace. Paige spotted the rifle and at the same moment as Gage. She pulled her weapon then cursed and slid it back into her holster when Gage flew through the air and collided with the suspect, throwing him to the ground in a full body tackle.

"Seriously, Gage? How many times do I have to remind you, this is not the NFL?" Paige complained.

Gage grinned as he handcuffed their suspect and escorted him to the door.

Paige just stood there shaking her head. One of these days her friend was going to get hurt. She just hoped she was there to protect him. She let out a frustrated growl as she walked to the door. Gage was a cop now...not a linesman. He really did need to come to terms with that.

Tom watched as the cops escorted his friend to the other cop car. They were doomed. He knew Clark didn't want him to talk...but his daddy always told him when in doubt, save yourself. And that was exactly what Tom intended to do. This was Clark's idea, it was his operation, he could serve a life sentence for killing that guy. Clark and Tiny, they could take the hit. Tom hadn't participated. He only took the bets and found the fighters. Clark did the rest. Tom was going to sing...as soon as he talked to a lawyer, he was going to sing the prettiest song they ever did hear. Then he'd walk while bossy Clark Fellows rotted in jail. As long as Tiny went with him, Tom knew he had nothing to worry about.

Lasting Consequences

Paige rounded the corner of her modest home and collided with Dax. “Seriously?” she said in dismay. “Please tell me this will not be a nightly occurrence. I get neighborly but I think you’re moving into dangerous territory. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were stalking me.”

“Rough night?” Dax asked, ignoring her question. He felt like he was stalking her and he didn’t like it any more than she did.

“We caught the guys we were after. The scums responsible for hurting those kids. It felt good to take them down. Really good, actually. Margie found a hit out of Kansas. I think in time we’re going to find those men are wanted for a lot more than we originally believed. Clark is callous and calculating. Tom... he’s the weak link. We also caught up with a guy named Tiny. Nobody seems to know any more than that. We’ll run it through AFIS in the morning and hopefully, we’ll get a hit,” Paige hesitated when she saw the look Dax was giving her. “AFIS, the national database for fingerprints. Well it also contains basic descriptions and mug shots but everyone’s in there; criminals, government employees even the military. So yeah, I guess I had a rough night. But it was also satisfying and productive. How about you? Catch any vandals?”

“Nope,” Dax said as he took a seat on one of her patio chairs. “I was just about to hit the sack but decided to take one last look around before I turned in. All seems quiet on the home front. You good here?”

“I’m good,” Paige said with a grin. “Thanks for checking but I’m good.”

She watched as her neighbor stood and slowly, casually walked across her yard into his own. She wasn’t sure what to make of this new development. Why had her sizzling hot neighbor decided to play security guard all of a sudden? Especially since he knew she was a cop. Nathan’s image popped into her head but she brushed it away. If she were still in Virginia, sure. Nathan would be the likely choice. But as far-reaching as Nathan Porter seemed to be, there was no way he knew a small town carpenter that flipped houses in Utah.

She sat in the dark for several minutes pondering. Dax was probably the hottest guy she’d ever met. They seemed to be getting along nicely these days but that didn’t explain the why of it. Maybe he was just a nice guy. The first time she’d met him was when he thought she was a burglar in her own home. Maybe he was just the community watch type of guy. She kicked up her feet and studied the stars. She wasn’t going to dwell on something she didn’t understand. Not tonight. Tonight she was going to bask in the knowledge that three bad men were behind bars and a fearless teenager had cracked the case. Funny, a fearless teen was the hero of the night.

Sometimes life could still surprise her. Paige welcomed a good surprise any day of the week and twice on Sunday. She stood and stepped into the solitude of her tiny home, relaxed and content. That’s when it hit her, she belonged. Finally, she knew deep in her soul...this was exactly where she was supposed to be.