

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Perverted Theology* *Season 1, Episode 3*

---

*by:*

*Melanie P. Smith*

***Copyright 2016 Melanie P. Smith***

*First Edition / First Impression*

*No part of this document or the related files may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the Author.*

*This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All trademarks are the property of their owners and are acknowledged by the proper use of capitalization throughout.*

[www.melaniepsmith.com](http://www.melaniepsmith.com)

## Perverted Theology

---

The sound of breaking glass echoed through the silence like a bomb going off. Paige shot up from a deep sleep, confused and groggy. Then it hit her, shattering glass...someone had broken into her home. Her heartbeat accelerated, adrenaline shot through her and she was instantly wide awake and in cop mode. What time was it anyway? She glanced at the clock on the nightstand as she jumped to her feet and slipped on the black loafers she always kept at the foot of her bed. Two o'clock in the morning! Her vandal was at it again. She flung her bedroom door open, dashed down the stairs and rushed out onto the back patio just in time to see her neighbor, Dax, tackle the culprit several hundred yards from his back door. Clearly the suspect was headed for the forest that bordered both their yards. How in the world had that man beat her outside?

Frustrated and a little testy, Paige stepped from the porch and continued the short distance to the two men responsible for her sour mood. She stopped inches away and glared down at the intruder who had damaged her home and interrupted her sleep.

"I don't suppose you have any handcuffs on you," Dax asked casually as he yanked the kid's arm behind his back with a little more force than was necessary.

"Sorry, didn't grab them. I guess I was in a hurry or something," Paige forced a smile and shrugged. "How did you get out here so fast?"

Dax glanced up and did a slow, purposeful scan of Paige's attire. "One of us didn't have to stop to get dressed."

Paige narrowed her eyes at the cocky carpenter. "One of us sleeps this way." Not normally, but since she'd been having trouble, she'd been wearing loose fitting shorts and a tank to bed. She took a minute to study Dax. "You, on the other hand, do not sleep like that," she accused.

Dax frowned as he pulled a zip tie from his back pocket and secured the guy's hands in front of him. "Did you bother to call the cops?" he asked with a little more bite than he had intended. How was he supposed to explain his surveillance attire?

Paige forced a smile and shook her head. "I am the police, Dax. No need to bother Bridges with this." Deputy Dean Bridges AKA Liam Nissan in Paige's book, was busy enough. He didn't need to deal with a simple vandal. Not when Paige was here and could take care of the nuisance herself.

Dax stood and glared at his neighbor. If he was going to alter his schedule and work graveyards to protect her...the least she could do was bring in the authorities when he caught a burglar red-handed. He was about voice his annoyance when the guy on the ground shoved forward grazing Dax's leg in an attempt to escape. Dax placed a heavy boot on the kid's chest and firmly held him in place. As an added precaution, he reached down and, with an additional zip tie, secured the kid's arms to his belt. Then Dax returned his attention back to his neighbor.

"Get off me," the guy yelled.

## Perverted Theology

---

“Why are you harassing me?” Paige demanded. Silence. She crouched down and forced him to look at her. “Why?”

“The lady asked you a question,” Dax pressed harder on the guy’s chest.

“That’s police brutality!” the kid growled. “I want a lawyer.”

“It might be, if I were a cop. Answer the question,” Dax said, putting even more pressure on the kid’s chest.

“Bite me,” the kid said with a cocky grin.

Dax was tired, frustrated and he’d simply had enough. He slid his foot forward and pressed it firmly on the guy’s throat. “Last chance, tough guy.”

“Get off me,” the guy tried to twist but Dax added a little more pressure, cutting off his air. The kid started to flail wildly, yanking on the ties, trying to get free, Dax released some of the pressure. “I’ll report you,” the intruder wheezed. “I...am...going to...have...your...badge.”

Dax smiled. “Too bad I don’t have a badge, kid. Talk.”

Paige stepped forward, she couldn’t allow this much longer. “I need answers. I need your help. Tell us what we need to know and he’ll back off.”

“Okay,” the kid relented and Dax moved his foot back to the guy’s chest. “You’re a cop. I’ll report you. He can’t attack me like that. Its assault. I want him arrested.”

Paige casually glanced at Dax then back to the scrawny kid with too much attitude. She shrugged. “I didn’t see an assault. I saw a concerned citizen assist in the apprehension of a fleeing suspect. Then, I saw the same citizen trip and stumble slightly when you began to resist. I do apologize if, in all the commotion, the weight of his body was uncomfortable. But, you really did bring it on yourself. If you’re not going to talk, get up. I’ll just book you and be done with it.” She reached down and gave the plastic ties a yank.

Rhymes Haverson AKA Kool Buster Rhymes considered his options. He didn’t have the information these two wanted, but they didn’t need to know that. Maybe he could bluff long enough to take off and avoid another few nights in jail. “Wait! If I tell you what you want to know, will you let me go?”

Dax rolled his eyes. The guy clearly didn’t know anything and he wasn’t behind the attacks. Most likely someone had paid him to break out the window, or he owed a guy a favor who owed a guy, and so on. This was all a monumental waste of time.

“If you give me something worthwhile, I’ll forget the broken window,” Paige agreed. She saw the annoyed look Dax was giving her, but she knew what she was doing. “Why are you here?”

## Perverved Theology

---

“I got a note with some cash,” Rhymes shrugged. “Said break out a window right before two. I broke out the window. I didn’t do nothing and I don’t know anything about no harassment. You said I could go.” He raised his hands the fraction of an inch allowed by his restraints and waited.

“What is your name? Your real name...not some made up moniker you throw around to your buddies,” Paige demanded.

Rhymes scowled. If they knew his name, he could be charged later. No way. He shook his head. That was not part of the deal.

“Get up,” Dax reached down and forcefully pulled the guy to his feet. “Name?”

Rhymes was typically cool under pressure...that’s how he got his name ‘Kool Buster Rhymes’. But, he was having a hard time maintaining that facade around the tough guy he was dealing with tonight. Even so, there was no way he was going to cave. “Kool Buster Rhymes,” he said defiantly.

“I said your real name,” Paige demanded. “Or we take a trip to jail.”

Rhymes remained silent.

Dax knew the kid had dug in his heels. He decided to change tactics. “You said you received a note and some cash. You still have that note to back up your story?”

Rhymes looked up and nodded. “It’s in the car.”

“And that car might be where?” Paige was getting tired of the back and forth. She wanted answers...real answers and this was getting them nowhere.

“Cut the chains honey and I’ll be happy to show you,” Rhymes grinned.

“I have a better idea,” Dax said as he gave the kids shoulder a gentle shove...well, gentle for him anyway. “You get us the note and then I’ll decide if the ties come off.”

Rhymes knew he had lost this battle...didn’t mean he was going to lose the war. “Fine, follow me.”

The group proceeded into the forest and exited a short distance away onto a dirt road. A flashy yellow Camaro sat smack dab in the middle of the roadway. When they reached the car, Rhymes once again held out his hands clearly demanding his release.

“Keys?” Dax asked.

Rhymes glared.

## Perverted Theology

---

Paige turned to Dax and waited.

Dax shrugged, reached into his pocket and pulled out a Benchmade folding knife. As he carefully slid the blade between the kid's wrist and the plastic he caught Paige's frown. One of these days she's going to figure out I'm not just a friendly carpenter. What will the good General do then? Not my problem, Dax instantly decided.

Paige was watching Rhymes closely and it paid off. The kid planned to bolt. The instant she realized his intentions, she snagged the keys from his fingers, unlocked the car and casually slid them into her pocket.

Rhymes frowned. Another brilliant plan just went out the door. He sighed, accepting the inevitable as he reached into the car and pulled out an envelope.

Paige took the nondescript package, studied it for several seconds then focused on Rhymes. "You got ID in there?"

"That wasn't part of the deal," he argued.

Paige waited.

With a huff, Rhymes reached into the car and produced a wallet. He glared at Paige as he slid out his driver's license and handed it over.

Paige studied the license, memorizing the info. She just needed name and DOB, then she could run it through the system for the rest.

"If you try to charge me with something, I'll deny everything. I don't know where you got that envelope. I don't know nothing. I was just walking down the street minding my own business when I tripped. My foot must have caught a rock because before I knew what happened, your window busted out. The noise scared me and I ran. You can't arrest a guy for walking...or tripping."

Dax took a step forward wishing he'd never gotten involved in his neighbor's problems. The kid was a punk with a too much attitude. If he had his way, he'd teach the guy a lesson. Too bad Paige was here. His kind of lesson would get her fired.

Paige handed the license back. "If I find out you lied...even by omission, you will be charged with trespassing and vandalism. Go on and get out of here. A deal's a deal." Paige took a step back at the as Dax leaned forward. Rhymes took a step toward the car at the same moment and they both collided, then fell to the ground. Dax was on top of Rhymes, his knee in the kid's ribs.

"You mess with the lady again...you deal with me," Dax whispered. "Alone." Then he stood and took a few steps backward.

## Perverted Theology

---

“He threatened me,” Rhymes accused. “I know that was assault. I want him arrested.”

Paige grinned. “Sorry. You can’t arrest a guy for walking...or tripping.” She shrugged then watched as her most recent nuisance climbed into his car and sped away.

\*\*\*\*\*

The following morning Paige sat behind her desk, the events of the previous evening running through her mind. She’d run Rhymes through the system. He wasn’t a threat. Just a common street thug who had been arrested nearly a dozen times for petty stuff. Shoplifting, vehicle burgs, criminal mischief...insignificant charges but a frequent flyer just the same. It was probably why he’d been contacted to break out her window. But why? That part still didn’t make sense to her. She was a cop, a leaky water pipe or a broken window wouldn’t have her cowering in the closet. Was somebody trying to annoy her to death? Who could possibly want her gone so badly they would hire a thug to torment her? None of this made any sense to her at all.

Her mind shifted to her sexy neighbor. It took her longer to find anything on the annoying carpenter. His legal name was Maddax K. Hamilton. She would never have guessed that one. He didn’t have a record. Not much of a surprise but she still had this niggling feeling something was going on with that guy. She just didn’t know what...yet. But she would. In time, she’d figure him out. Then she could decide if he could be trusted or not. He had never explained why he was fully dressed at two in the morning. She’d be bringing that up again... and this time, she was not leaving without an answer.

Officer Gage Clayton stepped up to her desk but frowned when he saw the rap sheet displayed on her screen. “You busy on something already?”

“Nope,” Paige straightened and motioned for her friend to sit.

Gage slid into her visitor’s chair and dropped a manila folder on her desk. “The boss wants us to use our spare time to revisit unsolved cases.”

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “I think he’s getting pressure from the mayor or something.”

“I’m stumped,” he nodded towards the file. “Would you mind taking a look, see what you think? If there’s something there, we could work it together.”

“What’s the case?” she asked, a little intrigued.

“Missing person, Sissy Metz,” Gage said as he stood. “Reported by the older sister, Scarlett. Parents are deceased, the kid is fifteen. Only other relative is an aunt who lives somewhere in...Texas I believe. Scarlett swears Sissy is missing, not just a runaway. My gut tells me she’s right, but everything else points to the girl taking off. Her on again off again older boyfriend split town right around the same time the girl went missing.”

## Perverted Theology

---

“I’ll read through it, tell you what I think,” Paige agreed.

“Thanks,” Gage turned, took a step then pivoted back around. “I’m heading to Cal’s. You want a burger while I’m at it?”

“Sure, thanks.” Paige snatched the file from her desk and slowly began to read the report.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige jumped when Gage dropped a sack on her desk. He grinned as he set the large Coke and a straw next to it then sat in her visitor’s chair.

“You back already?” Paige asked as she greedily pulled the burger from the bag, unwrapped it halfway and bit in. She snagged a fry then glanced at her colleague when he didn’t answer.

“I left two hours ago, Paige.” Gage settled back and studied his friend. She was off today and he wondered if it had something to do with that rap sheet she’d been studying.

“Really?” Paige shrugged as she bit down on two more fries. “I guess I got caught up. Anyway, I don’t think this girl ran.”

“Why?” Gage asked. He was glad Paige had reached the same conclusion he had, but he was curious how and why she believed him.

“Same as you I guess,” she took a gulp of her Coke and sat back. “First, there’s the boyfriend. He’s older, but it was on and off, not something serious. Plus, he split before she went missing. And he was a pretty boy. Said he was heading to Hollywood to get into modeling.”

“Wait,” Gage sat up. “None of that was in the file.”

Paige grinned and took another bite of her burger. “You know, I had forgotten just how good Cal’s burgers really are.”

“Sissy?”

“Right,” Paige continued. “I ran the boyfriend through the system. He has a few hits, nothing too alarming. A shoplifting three years ago and consumption a couple years back. That got me thinking, maybe Rhymes knew him. So I called Kool. Buster. Rhymes and asked,” she made a little hand gesture and cocked her head as she slowly said the name.

“And who exactly is this Rhymes character?” Gage asked, knowing it was the record she’d been running when he approached her.

“Just a guy I dealt with on a minor issue. I gave him a break, let him off with a warning,” Paige said cryptically. “I figured he owed me a little Intel.”

## Perverted Theology

---

“And did Buster Rhymes agree?” he refused to use the ridiculous moniker the guy gave himself.

“Not at first,” Paige shrugged as she finished off her sandwich and took another sip of her Coke. She dumped the remnants in the trash and pulled out the file Gage had left her. “He gave me attitude, which I expected. But as soon as I told him I didn’t care about Joey Cordero or what he’d been into, I was asking because of his missing fifteen-year-old girl, he changed his tune.”

“Really,” Gage had a hard time believing it was that easy.

“Sure,” Paige slid Joey’s rap across the desk. “Joey hasn’t been in trouble for over eighteen months. Rhymes said he was cleaning up. Didn’t hang around the neighborhood much anymore. He told his friend’s he’d done some modeling job for a magazine and it had gone well. He wanted to head to sunny Cal and see if he could make it in the business.”

Gage frowned. “He was dating a fifteen-year-old kid, he couldn’t be all that clean.”

Paige scowled. “True, but nothing happened between them according to the grapevine. Joey wanted it...he wanted it badly. But Sissy wouldn’t go there. Joey was all hot about having a virgin. He wanted to know what all the fuss was about. Picking a fifteen-year-old didn’t go over well with his buds. In fact, before he split some guy ambushed him, roughed him up a bit and threatened to do worse if Joey didn’t disappear and leave the young girls alone.”

“Can we verify that?” Gage asked, not remembering an assault near the time Sissy vanished.

“Not really, Rhymes won’t budge on the name. He said it was just an older brother concerned about his fifteen-year-old sister and he’s not a rat. I think it’s solid, though. He says Joey left a few days later. If Rhymes is right, and I think he is, Joey was headed out in pursuit of a modeling career. I have a hard time believing he took Sissy with him. She’s still a kid and he wants to be taken seriously. He wouldn’t have time for her, especially if she wasn’t giving him what he wanted.”

“Then we’ve hit a dead-end,” Gage shook his head. “If she didn’t run off with the boyfriend, that girl just vanished. She’s been gone for over two weeks. Now, to make things worse her sister has vanished as well.”

“Yeah,” Paige said. “I tried to call Scarlett. I had some follow-up questions. I got voicemail same as you. I don’t think we’re out of options yet, though.”

“What’s our next move?”

“Well, I am confident Sissy is not tanning the days away in California with Joey Cordero but just in case, I called an old friend – Agent Griffiths. He works in the Los Angeles field office. I



## Perverted Theology

---

asked him to track down Joey and let me know if he's alone or if he brought a friend. I should hear back by tomorrow."

"Okay, that's something," Gage agreed.

"And now that I brought you up to speed, I thought we'd head to the high school. Maggie has a name written on the dispatch card. I ran it through every system I could find but didn't get a hit. I'm wondering if Sabrina Hunter is another kid. If she's fifteen, she wouldn't have a license and Sissy didn't have a record, Sabrina doesn't either. With any luck, we have the name of Sissy's most trusted confidant."

"I saw that name, ran it and discarded it. I kept meaning to ask Maggie what it was but somehow I never had the chance." Gage said, standing. "Well, let's head on over to high school," he grinned. "I know how much you loved it the first time around."

"Funny," Paige said as she stood and followed Gage out the door. "I'm not attending. I'm going for a very short visit. You driving?"

"Of course," Gage said as he slid behind the wheel of his SUV. "Just like old times."

\*\*\*\*\*

Principal Swanson sat behind his desk and studied the two officers. He wondered why Sheriff Walters hadn't called to warn him they were coming. "You have to understand, I can't just let you interrogate a student without a parent present."

Paige smiled when she would rather grab the horrible statue prominently displayed on the man's desk and beat him with it. Surely that little pointy thing on the end would do wonders to improve his cooperation. "I'm not planning to interrogate the girl. She's a witness, not a suspect. But if you have concerns, I'm sure you could make a quick phone call to her mother or father. Once you explain the situation, I'm sure they won't have any problem with my request."

Swanson scowled. "That young girl is in class. Her education is important. If you won't tell me what this is all about..."

"We already told you that Mr. Swanson," Gage interjected. "It's about Sissy Metz. Surely finding that missing girl is important enough that Sabrina can miss a few minutes of class."

"I don't like it and in the future, if you are going to pull one of my students from the classroom, I'd appreciate a heads-up from the sheriff. Does he even know you two are here harassing me and my kids?"

"We didn't have a chance to brief him on the specifics, no." Paige inhaled and let it out slowly as the principal exited the room. "Can't imagine why I hated this place so much. Seems the faces might change, but the attitudes remain the same." She remembered the day the cops had

## Perverted Theology

---

arrived to break the news of her mother's death. The principal at the time had been just as obstinate and even less forthcoming with the details during her crisis.

Gage was sympathetic to Paige's history. He wished he knew what to say but there was really nothing that could ease the pain she obviously still felt given the circumstances. How could anyone get over their mother's murder? Gage didn't think they could and he felt helpless and a little sad about the whole thing. There was no doubt in his mind the town should have been more sensitive and supportive during her time of need. He was about to tell her that when Swanson returned.

"I spoke to Sabrina's father, Kevin. He's given his approval for you to speak with Sabrina. I, however, will be in the room the entire time. If I believe you are out of line, the questions will stop immediately." Principal Swanson said firmly.

Paige didn't like it, but she'd accept it. If she had more questions, she could speak to Sabrina at home. Just then a petite girl with shoulder length red hair stepped timidly through the door. "Ms. Etheredge said you needed to see me?"

"Yes, Sabrina. Come on in. These two officers have some questions to ask you regarding Sissy Metz," Swanson said trying to take control of the meeting. "Please close the door behind you, dear."

Once the girl settled into a chair, Paige began. The questioning didn't last long. Sabrina didn't know much, but they did get another lead. One thing Sabrina did confirm is that Sissy was not involved with Joey at the time of her disappearance. The two had broken it off weeks before Joey left and Sissy went missing. Sissy had met a preacher, though. Someone new to town and his wife. Sabrina didn't have a lot of information about the two, only that they were camping out in the mountains. It was something to check out, anyway. Paige stood and thanked Sabrina for her help. She turned to leave when she heard Gage speaking to the girl.

"I'm sure that was difficult, but you did great," Gage told the kid. "It might not seem like much, but every little bit helps. Do you mind if we come by your house if we think of anything else?"

"No," Sabrina shook her head. "I don't mind and I'm sure my parents will be okay with it. Sorry, I couldn't tell you more. Sissy was mad at me because I told her she needed to stay away from Joey. He's totally hot, but he just wanted one thing from her and she wasn't ready to give it." Sabrina glanced back at the principal then continued. "Anyway, we got into a huge fight and didn't speak for three days. Then she told me she met that preacher guy. She said he was real nice and invited her to attend one of his sermons. I told her not to go, he sounded creepy to me. She said I didn't understand and left mad again. I thought she'd call. I thought we would be mad at each other, then makeup like before but she didn't call, she just disappeared. You have to

## Perverted Theology

---

believe Sissy wouldn't run away. She just wouldn't. Something happened. Maybe that preacher did something. I don't know, but she didn't run."

"We don't think so either," Paige assured her. "Gage took the original report and he didn't think she ran away. He's been looking for her ever since. He brought me in today because we don't think Sissy just ran."

"I don't think it's appropriate to give the girl false hope. Clearly, Sissy Metz was a troubled girl who ran away when things didn't work out for her." Principal Swanson corrected. "It's going to be a bigger blow to Sabrina when she learns the truth."

"And what truth might that be?" Paige challenged.

"That she followed that no account boy out of town, of course," he said defiantly.

"I have an idea," Paige said calmly. "How about you try to be a principal and leave the police work to the professionals?"

"Sheriff Walters is going to hear about this," Swanson said as he escorted Sabrina out the door and followed her into the hallway.

Paige grinned and wondered how that conversation was going to go. She wasn't worried. She was just doing her job and Jericho would never fault her for that. She stepped out of the office and immediately strolled down the hall and out the door without a backwards glance. She was sure Gage was only steps behind her. Once they reached his car, she turned to face him. "Feel like taking a drive?"

"A mountain drive, I presume?" he grinned. "Sure."

"Other than hugging trees and spouting off about fire and brimstone what do you think that preacher is doing up there?" Paige wondered aloud.

"I guess it's time we found out," Gage said as he put the vehicle in gear and exited the parking lot.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Well, that was a monumental waste of time," Gage growled as he slid behind the wheel and started back down the canyon.

"Not entirely," Paige said, considering.

"What do you mean?" Gage glanced her way then back at the road. "Nobody said a word. They all swore they'd never met the girl in the photo."

"Yes, and they were lying," Paige said confidently.

## Perverted Theology

---

“What makes you so sure?”

“It’s my specialty I guess you could say. That preacher and his fake timid wife knew Sissy. I’m not a betting woman, but I’d bet my next paycheck Sissy spent time in that camp. A couple of the girls also knew her. They recognized her. They were just too afraid to admit it. I mean seriously, the threat Preacher Torben W. Schmeling issued before we spoke to the group was not subtle.”

Gage laughed, “No, it wasn’t subtle. That’s for sure. So, what now?”

“Let’s head back to the station. I want to do some research on Pastor Schmeling and his phony wife before I go at them again.”

“When?” Gage frowned. “Tomorrow is going to be crazy. The Fourth of July is mighty popular around here. We’ve got the parade first thing then the carnival and fireworks well into the night. By the time we get the traffic cleared, it’s going to be after midnight.”

“Not tomorrow,” Paige agreed. “We’re too busy and anyway, I want to let them think they fooled us. I’ll go back in a couple days, surprise them... keep ‘em guessing. It’s better that way.”

They pulled into the lot and Paige jumped from the car. “Thanks for bringing me in on this one. I have a feeling we’re onto something. That preacher is spreading more than the good word up there, I can feel it.”

Gage wasn’t sure if that was good news or bad. He just nodded and backed out of the lot. His shift was over and he was beat. It seemed every time Paige got involved in a case, it turned out bigger than they originally believed. Maybe she was cursed. Naw, she was just good at her job. They were lucky to have her. Manti scored big time when Paige Carter returned home. They just didn’t know it yet.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige pulled into her driveway, grateful the day was finally over. She had always loved the holidays and the Fourth of July was no exception. It had been a long time since she’d relaxed and enjoyed a firework show. But she’d been up since six and it was nearly one in the morning. She had a reprieve, no work tomorrow until noon and she was going to take advantage of every minute. She slid from the car and approached the front door then frowned and pulled out her flashlight. Taped to her window was a bullet and a note of some kind. What now? She was too tired to deal with this.

She returned to her cop car, opened the hatch and pulled out a pair of rubber gloves. For about two seconds she fumbled with the flashlight, the evidence bag, and the bullet before she gave up, unlocked her door and flipped on her front porch light. She slid the bullet into the bag and slowly pulled the note from the window. With any luck, there might be prints on the tape. She

## Perverted Theology

---

lifted the flap on the note then screamed in alarm and whirled around at the sound of Dax's soft voice.

"What does it say?" he was frowning. He hadn't seen anyone lurking around the house but then he'd been away for most of the day. Like everyone else in town, he'd gone to see the parade. Once it was over he'd been talked into sticking around by Mrs. Greenwich – he never could say no to that lady. She was unnaturally spry for an eighty-four-year-old senior citizen. Dax had ultimately left just before the firework show. After his stint in the Army, he no longer enjoyed loud noises like he used to.

Paige sighed and turned to glare at her neighbor. "Do you ever sleep?" the fact that he could so easily sneak up on her grated on her last nerve. The guy was stealthier than a mountain lion on the hunt. And why was that? She wondered for about the hundredth time.

"When I'm tired," he shrugged and reached for the note.

"Wait," Paige said pulling it out of his reach. She unfolded it, slipped it into the evidence bag, sealed the bag and positioned the note so they could both read it. It was typed in large letters and the message was clear 'Leave now before you get hurt'.

"Not very subtle," Dax pointed out. "You packing your bags and leaving Dodge?" He didn't like it. The note was bad enough, but coupled with the bullet it sent a very clear message. One he knew Paige would not take seriously. Probably time to call the General...unfortunately.

"Not likely," Paige considered. She was pretty sure her vandal had struck again, but she'd met another man who wasn't exactly subtle...Preacher Schmeling. Could he be behind this most recent threat? Had the visit she'd paid him with Gage threatened whatever scheme he had going and he wanted her gone? She brushed that thought aside, the preacher might want her out of his business but he had no reason to want her to leave town. Her gut told her this had something to do with her mother. And knowing that, meant she was exactly where she needed to be.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige approached Gage and hoped he would cooperate. She wanted this kept quiet for now. She didn't need the rest of the guys making a big deal out of nothing. She took a couple deep, soothing breaths before she lowered herself into Gage's visitor's chair. "Can we talk?"

"What's up?" Gage asked as he studied Paige's demeanor. Something wasn't right.

"I need a police report," she began. "I was hoping you could pull a case number, fill out the report and then drop it."

"Well, that depends," Gage frowned. "What's the report?"

## Perverted Theology

---

Paige dropped the evidence bag on his desk. "I had another visitor. I just need a report and I need to book this into evidence. Then I want you to forget it. Nobody else needs to know."

"I don't agree," Gage said as he read the note. "I think it's time to come clean to Jericho. He needs to know someone is threatening one of his deputies."

"No," Paige said scooping up the bag as she stood to leave. "Never mind. I'll handle it myself."

"Paige," Gage pushed then stopped when he saw the determined look on her face. "Okay, fine. I'll help you out... this once. Anything else happens and you're going to Walters. If you don't, I will. Are we clear?"

"Okay," Paige nodded as she handed Gage the evidence. "Anything else and I'll come clean, I promise." She turned and nearly collided with Maggie.

"Are you available to head out to the old Butler Farm? Pete's in a huff, says kids spray-painted his fence again and stole all his eggs."

"Sure," Paige held out her hand for the information. "I'll handle it. Pete's like those eggs he's whining about...hard on the outside but a big old softy on the inside. You just have to know how to handle him, that's all. I got this." She turned to Gage and sobered. "We done here?" she hoped he understood her question.

"I got it," Gage signed into the system and began his report. "Call me, I need the specifics."

"Dialing now," Paige said happily as she pushed through the door.

"You gonna tell me what's going on with that girl?" Maggie demanded.

"Can't," Gage frowned. "Not yet."

"Jericho should be told if there's trouble, you know he won't be happy if he's taken by surprise." Maggie turned and headed back to her desk.

"Don't I know it," Gage mumbled. Paige was going to owe him for this one. And, speak of the devil. He snatched up the phone after the first ring.

\*\*\*\*\*

It had taken longer than usual to calm Pete down this time. Paige didn't mind. The guy was lonely and throwing a fit, calling the police, demanding justice was his way of ensuring he had someone to talk to every once in a while. She slid behind the wheel and punched in Gage's number.

"Clayton," Gage answered in that no-nonsense tone of his.

## Perverted Theology

---

“Hey. It’s me,” Paige returned. “I finished with Pete and thought I’d head up to question the crazy cult again. It might take a while, I want to talk to each of the girls individually. Schmeling won’t like it, but it’s the only way we’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

“Come back and get me, we’ll go up together,” he suggested.

“I thought I’d do a solo run this time,” she pulled onto the highway and headed for the mouth of the canyon. “I might get more if I approach them alone. There’s a reason those girls are up there. If it has anything to do with the male race, having a big strapping guy like yourself close by is going to terrify them.”

“I guess you have a point,” Gage relented. “Be careful. We don’t know what that group is up to. Watch you back.”

“Always,” Paige said before she disconnected. They didn’t know what was going on, but she was certain something was amiss. The million dollar question...did their secrets have anything to do with Sissy’s disappearance.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige knew the instant Mrs. Helma Halle-Schmeling spotted her. She grinned. Now wasn’t that a mouthful? She’d run the Schmeling’s through the system. Nothing popped, but that didn’t mean they were clean. There was always the possibility they were using fake names. She straightened as she approached the camp.

“This is harassment,” Helma said the instant Paige was within hearing distance. “The First Amendment gives us the right to worship as we please. And the police can’t harass us for that. You are violating my civil liberties as an American.”

Paige rolled her eyes and waited. “Where is Mr. Schmeling?”

“What can I do for your Officer Carter?” a male voice spoke behind her.

Paige turned and waited for the man to get closer. “That’s Deputy Carter, Mr. Schmeling.”

“And that’s Preacher Schmeling,” he said soberly. “As my wife says, you have already been here. We have already answered your questions. We cooperated the first time but if you insist on harassing us further, we will have no choice but to contact our attorney.”

“Well,” Paige smiled. “You did answer my questions, but you were less than honest I’m afraid. I personally do not call that cooperating.”

“Now just a minute,” Torben Schmeling growled.

“I forgot to ask, last time I was here you claimed to be Christians. What bible do you study? The King James Version or one of your own?”

## Perverted Theology

---

“We use the King James Version, of course, the only true doctrine of heaven available to us here on earth.” Schmeling supplied.

“So then lying is a sin.” Paige accused. “Psalms 101:7 He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight.”

“Exodus 20:3,” Torben countered. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. And 5, Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them. Ms. Carter, God works in mysterious ways. I am merely a mortal man. I do not question his commands.”

Paige frowned. She’d gone up against a religious zealot before....two years ago. He’d used scripture passages as clues for the police to locate his victims. People he considered to be sinners. Paige had studied the good book backwards and forwards to catch the maniac. Preacher Torben Schmeling did not know his scripture. First of all that was the weakest argument he could have made for his actions. “Are you implying God told you to lie to me? I find that hard to believe. I thought you were supposed to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s. In other words, obey the laws of the land and all that. Obstruction of Justice is against the law, Preacher Schmeling. So, to make things simple, consider me Caesar and start rendering.”

“As I said, mysterious ways Ms. Carter,” Schmeling repeated.

“You do know that is not actually in the bible, don’t you? Or do you typically quote hymns rather than scripture? I’m merely an outsider but doesn’t that confuse your followers? Maybe we could throw in a couple fortune cookie parables too for good measure.” Paige waited and enjoyed the furious and uncertain look on Schmeling’s face. “If you want to look it up...you know, later when you have a minute alone...the hymn was derived from Isaiah 55:8 and 9, For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” She could do this all day, but she was pretty sure fake Preacher Schmeling could not. The guy was a fraud. So what were they really doing out here under the guise of religion? Paige didn’t know, but she was determined to find out.

“I will not explain myself to a non-believer like yourself,” Torben said haughtily. How in the world did this cop know so much about the bible? “You have no interest in following divine revelation, you are simply here to harass us because of our religion and make fun of us because we are pure and undefiled by man. For the final time, what do you want? You are not welcome here and if you do not leave, I will have no choice but to enlist my attorney. We have rights and you are trespassing.”

“Feel free to contact your attorney and don’t forget to tell him you are squatting on public land. Kind of makes that whole trespassing thing mute. In the meantime, I will be interviewing each of these women...alone.” She glanced around the camp. “I want everyone to gather in that



## Perverted Theology

---

area,” she pointed to an open tent where chairs were set up. “I will address the group first, then I will interview each and every one of you individually.”

“She can’t do that,” Helma turned to her husband. “Can she?”

“I can,” Paige answered. “Or we can head back to the office and we can conduct the interviews there. It’s your choice.”

“We have nothing to hide, dear.” Schmeling blew a whistle and the women moved quickly to the tent. He’d already warned the women what would happen if they admitted to knowing that girl. He was sure they would follow his directive.

Paige frowned but followed the couple as they made their way over to the group. Seriously, these were people, not dogs. A whistle? Before the preacher or his wife could say a word Paige began to address the women. “I have some follow-up questions. Things I need to discuss with each one of you individually. I need everyone to remain seated until I come and get you myself. Oh, and if I find out your leaders over here said one word to you in my absence, they will be arrested for obstruction of justice.” She turned to the Schmeling’s, “Not a peep. Are we clear?”

Preacher Schmeling glared, his wife’s face turned red, but they just nodded and stood stoic at the front of the tent.

Paige had interviewed all but one woman. She’d left the most important for last. The other day, Sage Boon had clearly recognized the girl in the photo. The others had held out, not giving her anything she could use, even when questioned alone. But she was hoping this girl would come clean. If she could just get something...anything...the tiniest lead... they might be able to locate the girl.

Sage approached the tent, wondering how she should respond. The cop seemed determined to locate her sister but was she just going through the motions like the big cop had, or did she really want to find Sissy? It hadn’t been easy to avoid the large male deputy two days ago but Sage had done it. Barely. Now, she was in for another line of questions she didn’t know how to answer. She pushed open the flap on the medium sized tent and moved forward.

“Come on in and have a seat, Sage.” Paige opened the folder and pretended to read something. After several seconds it was time to begin. “I’m not going to beat around the bush here. When I showed you that photo the other day I could tell you recognized the girl. You masked it quickly, but not soon enough. I need to know what you know. You can either cooperate or I’ll arrest you. The preacher and his wife aren’t the only ones facing obstruction charges.”

“I don’t know anything about Sissy. I have no idea where she is. I have no idea what has happened to her. I don’t even know if she’s still alive. What I do know, is this is the last place she went before she disappeared,” Sage provided.

## Perverted Theology

---

Paige studied the woman closely then it hit her. “You’re Scarlett.”

“I am,” Sage admitted. “The first cop I talked to clearly believed Sissy ran off with Joey. He took the information, basically did his job, and forgot her. But Sissy is my sister, she’s my younger sister. I’m responsible for her. Something bad has happened. I know it. She’s never gone this long without calling. Someone or something is preventing her from reaching out. I think it’s the crazy preacher and his wife.”

“Okay,” Paige settled in. “Let’s start at the beginning. How did you know about this place? You never mentioned it when you made the initial report.”

“I talked to Sissy the morning before she disappeared. She was upset. She said she had a fight with Sabrina. I told that to the dispatcher. Anyway, she said Sabrina didn’t understand. She wasn’t making a ton of sense because she was crying and bouncing all around. She was upset at Sabrina. She was depressed over Joey. She felt lost and alone and said she’d met a man. One who said he could help her. A preacher. He had invited her to his next sermon and she had decided to go, but Sabrina told her not to. Then she disappeared. I didn’t mention it originally because I hadn’t put it together. Not until I talked to Sabrina. That’s when we realized Sissy had attended the sermon on Wednesday. I worked that day and didn’t get home until late. I went straight to bed and didn’t realize she was missing until Thursday morning. That’s when I made the report.”

“I guess it never crossed your mind to notify the police of your new findings?” Paige said impatiently. The girl could have kept them in the loop. If she had, they may have located the sister by now. “Instead, you disappeared. Gage has been trying to reach you for weeks. We both had some additional questions. Questions that may have led us here sooner.”

“I’m sorry,” Scarlett hung her head. “I honestly didn’t believe you guys were even looking into this. It felt like he was humoring me. You know, taking down the information because he had to, but he’d already made up his mind. I guess I didn’t trust you and I should have.”

“Yes, you should have,” Paige reiterated. She wanted Scarlett out of this mess but if the couple had done something with Sissy, if the girl was still alive, one wrong move might send them into a panic and they could kill Sissy to save themselves.

“I’m not leaving,” Scarlett warned, reading Paige’s expression correctly. “I am finally starting to be accepted as a member of the flock. Trust me, saying that makes me cringe as much as it does you, but I will do anything to save my sister. I am not leaving, not until I know what happened to Sissy.”

“I can’t take you out anyway,” Paige admitted. “If I do anything that makes them suspicious, Sissy might be the one to pay the price.”

## Perverted Theology

---

Scarlett relaxed. “So I’ll stay here and gather as much information as I can. I have a hiding place in the trees. It’s on the way to the hole they made us dig for the bathroom but off the trail a bit. I have a cell phone hidden out there.”

“They could find it,” Paige warned. “Don’t put anything in there that might give you away.”

“They won’t. I found a tree, it has a little hole, perfect for hiding things. Nobody has seen me go near the place yet. I’ve been careful. If something happens to me or if I learn anything, I’ll contact you. I just need your number. I’ll leave as much information in the trunk of that tree as I can. All you need to do is go to the small tent that is set up as an outhouse then take twelve steps north. You’ll see two trees that are growing side by side, the trunks are nearly touching they are so close. From there you will head west twenty paces. The trees fade away and there’s a little meadow. The hiding place is in the tree trunk that has fallen on its side near the edge. You can’t miss it.”

“Which is an even better reason you shouldn’t hide anything incriminating in there,” Paige insisted.

“I’ll be careful,” Scarlett assured her. “But if we move out...if we go somewhere else, I need to have a way to contact you. I’ll direct you to the new location if I can.” She hesitated then decided to trust Paige. “The day I arrived, I saw three men load two of the women into a truck. The girls never returned. When I asked the others about it, they said it was time for them to be relocated to another area. I was finally able to get their names. Theresa Reese and Ester Morgaine. They could be with Sissy. I don’t know their ages but they were younger than me. Not as young as Sissy, though. I’d say seventeen or eighteen if I had to guess. Olivette has finally started to open up to me. She’s the only one I trust to tell me the truth. Blossom and Peggy seem devoted to the cause. Olivette seems on the fence.”

“Okay,” Paige pulled out her notepad. “That’s Olivette Riverdream? Is that really her name or did she make it up?”

Scarlett grinned. “She made it up. Her real name is Olivette Rhoades. But she thought that was boring.”

“And Blossom Spacenik? I assume that’s fake, too?”

“I don’t think so,” Scarlett shook her head. “Unfortunately, I think that’s her real name. And Peggy Garland is real as far as I know. Like I said, those two don’t like me, so we rarely talk.”

“Alright,” Paige stood. “Can you write down this number? Plug it into your phone when you have a chance and call me if anything happens that you’re uncomfortable with. I need to know immediately. If I don’t answer, leave a message or send a text. Just get word to me as soon as you can.”

## Perverved Theology

---

“I’m not reckless and I’m not stupid,” Scarlett assured her. “Sissy disappeared from here. I’m even more positive of that now than ever before. I want someone to know where I am. I want backup, so I’ll get word to you somehow. You should know the preacher is spooked. He threatened us after you left. He said if you returned we were not to tell you anything. And under no circumstance were we to admit we had ever seen that girl before. He said we would be banished from the fold and labeled an outcast if we did. We all promised to obey. When I pointed out the girl had never been here, they admitted Sissy attended a sermon before I arrived but left on her own when it was over. Then they told me God works in mysterious ways and we were not to question his methods. He wanted us to keep quiet about the girl. Whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean.”

“Seems to be the preacher’s fallback,” Paige grinned and stood. “Okay, we’re finished here. Remember the number and call me if you need anything.”

Scarlett, or Sage, left the tent and joined the larger group. Paige followed her out. “I need a word with the two of you before I go,” Paige motioned to the preacher and his wife. Once they were out of earshot of the rest of the group, she addressed them. “I’m not finished here. If you decide to leave, I need to know where you’re headed.”

The couple didn’t say a word as Paige headed for her car. She’d parked it in the trees a ways down the road. It had given her the surprise entrance she’d been looking for, but now she wished she’d parked closer. She just wanted out of this place. She wanted to get away from the fake preacher and the reminder of the past. That case two years ago had given her nightmares. She hoped forcing her mind to recall scripture passages wasn’t going to open those floodgates again. She had enough problems as it was. She didn’t need any more sleepless nights on top of everything else.

Paige had gone about a hundred yards when she realized she had a big problem. When she hit the brakes to make that last curve, she’d felt nothing but dead air. The pedal had simply glided to the floorboard and the car careened around the bend at a dangerously high speed. Paige gripped the steering wheel tighter, so tight in fact her knuckles had gone white. Think Paige or you are going to die. Her heart was beating so fast, her chest hurt. She frantically pumped the brakes again, hoping somehow the mechanism would miraculously engage. No luck. Reality finally set in. She was traveling down a steep canyon with no brakes. The chance of survival was slim.

Had the preacher been so enraged at her for challenging his authority that he decided to take her out permanently? Maybe he had taped that bullet to her window. She flew around the next bend and the back wheels slid on the dirt road, nearly forcing her over a steep cliff. She needed a plan and holding on tight as her vehicle gained even more momentum on the downhill slope was not a plan. Paige knew disaster was inevitable. If she didn’t fly over the next cliff, she could easily wipe out a vacationer on an ATV. Or cause a head-on collision with a truck and trailer heading up the canyon. The roadway leveled out and she found her solution. She checked her

## Perverted Theology

---

seatbelt one last time and swerved into an open meadow to the left. The vehicle nearly tipped over as it propelled over the rough embankment. She gripped the wheel tighter as she bumped over rocks and stumps then struck a large tree on the far side of the field. Her head collided with the airbag and her world went black.

Paige woke confused and a little groggy. She focused on her surroundings and remembered how she'd gotten here. As she slid open her door, pain radiated through her temple. She must have hit her head on something. Once outside she paused to study the damage. Her vehicle was a mess. In addition to the lost brakes, the airbag had deployed and the front bumper was firmly attached to a large tree. She would have to call for help.

Once Paige retrieved her cellphone she was relieved to see she had service. Now, who to call? If she phoned Gage, he'd rat her out to the sheriff. Dean wasn't on duty yet and she had the same problem if she contacted Maggie. She closed her eyes and pressed send hoping she'd made the right decision.

"Yeah," Dax said impatiently into the phone. He was almost finished with the crown molding in the living room and resented the interruption.

"It's Paige," she said hesitantly. "Um...well, I kind of need a favor but it sounds like you might be busy."

"What's up?" Dax frowned, Paige wouldn't call him unless she was desperate.

"Well, I've had an accident and I can't drive my car. I'm up the canyon a ways...actually I have no idea how far up I am but I'm stranded in a meadow just off the side of the road. Is there any way you could drive up and get me? I'd owe you big time if you can help me out this once."

"I'm on my way," Dax hung up and made a call.

"Hello," Jericho answered on the second ring.

"Hey Sheriff, it's Dax. I hate to bother you, but I just got a call from Paige and I think you need to be made aware of a situation. You busy or could you head up the canyon with me?"

"I'm on my way," Jericho Walters stood and headed for the car. What situation involved Paige? Dax Hamilton had been a little too elusive and he didn't like the sound of that.

Paige glanced up and frowned. Anger coursed through her. Her head was now pounding for a different reason. Dax climbed from his car and casually strolled through the meadow stopping when he reached the open driver's side door. "If I wanted Sheriff Walter's here I would have called him myself." Paige moaned and put her head in the palms of her hands.

"What happened here?" Jericho demanded. The vehicle was so far off the road, she had to have driven here on purpose.

## Perverted Theology

---

“I lost the brakes,” she said softly. “I was gaining speed, so I decided to take my chances in the meadow...and with the tree.”

“What do you mean you lost your brakes?” Dax said wearily. His gut telling him it wasn’t a coincidence.

Paige tried to stand but instantly sat back down.

Dax crouched in front of Paige and gently brushed the hair from her face. When his fingers came back bloody, he scowled. “You’re hurt.”

“Only a little,” she insisted.

Jericho moved to the back of his vehicle and pulled out a first aid kit. He returned with a patch of gauze and a bottle of water. Once he’d dampened the gauze, he moved in and began cleaning the wound on Paige’s head. “Doesn’t look too bad,” he declared. “Hold this firmly against the cut, should stop the bleeding.”

Paige reached up and pressed the clean gauze to her head.

“You’ve also got a nasty bump. Must have hit your head on the door when the airbag deployed. Could have a concussion and that cut needs stitches. Let me call Frank, get him up here with a tow truck then we can talk about the rest.” Jericho turned and stepped away.

“You told him?” Paige accused.

“I asked him to meet me here and told him there was something he needed to know. Now you get to tell him what’s been going on. It’s past time he knew about the threats and the harassment.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make,” she accused.

“Maybe not, but I made it.” Dax wasn’t going to back down. If Paige had her way, nobody would know she was in trouble until she was dead.

Sheriff Walters returned and Paige filled him in on everything while they waited for a tow.

Jericho was silent for several minutes. When he finally spoke, he was clearly angry. “Any reason you kept this from me for so long?”

Paige had known she was going to have to deal with this eventually, but she wasn’t prepared. Well, it was best to get it over with. “Because I didn’t want the entire office to know,” she sighed.

“Because?”

## Perverted Theology

---

“Because I’m the new girl,” she began as she folded her arms defiantly.

“Okay, I get that,” Jericho said shaking his head in frustration. And he did. She wanted to fit in, prove she was not the weak link in the chain. But this was serious. Could Paige be right, did this have something to do with Chaya’s murder? Guilt set in. He still hadn’t discovered the truth behind that incident after all these years. Would Paige pay the price for his privacy? “But no more secrets. If anything happens, anything at all, I want to know immediately. In the meantime, we need to figure out if this was caused by the crazy preacher or someone else.” He glanced up when he spotted Frank Hopkins, the owner of the local mechanic shop. “Let’s get you to the hospital, then we can head to the station. We’re going to sit down with Gage and Dean and see what we come up with.”

Paige just nodded, surprised she hadn’t received a more severe punishment for her secrets. She started to push herself out of the seat, surprised when Dax and Jericho each grabbed an arm and cautiously directed her to Dax’s truck.

“I’ll get you patched up and drop you at the office. I assume Jericho will find you a ride home?” Dax asked, turning to look at the sheriff.

“I’ll take care of it. You head out, I’ll touch base with Frank then head down myself.” He turned and walked back to the damaged vehicle afraid it might be a total loss.

Paige rode in silence most of the way out of the canyon. She was angry with Dax but if she was honest, calling the sheriff had been the right thing to do. “You know, I only called you instead of Gage because I didn’t want Jericho to find out.”

“Yeah?” Dax glanced her way. “So, how’d that work out for you?”

“Not funny,” she pouted. “Dax, were you standing guard the other night when Rhymes broke out my window?”

Dax hesitated then answered, “I was.”

“Why?”

“Because someone is after you,” he said casually.

“And you don’t think I can take care of myself. Because I’m a girl, you decided it was up to you to step in and protect me?” Paige accused.

“No,” Dax sighed again. “Because you’re my neighbor. I called Jericho because I realized we can do this by ourselves anymore. I would have done the same for Gage or Dean. You needed help... I was there. It’s really that simple.”

## Perverted Theology

---

Paige would have argued, but she sensed the truth in what he was saying. Dax was the type of guy that stepped in and helped. Not because she was a woman, but because it was the right thing to do. She couldn't be angry at him for that.

"How's the head?" he asked, changing the subject. If she pressed, he might have to come clean and tell her about the General and he wasn't ready to do that. Not until he had a chance to talk to Nathan Porter.

"Not bad," Paige said softly as she rested her head on the back of the seat. "Okay, it feels like you decided to pound on it with one of those power tools you're so fond of."

Dax laughed and reached out to take her hand. "Try to rest a bit, you've had a rough day."

Paige knew she should pull her hand away, but she didn't. It felt good to have someone there to comfort her. She hadn't had anyone to lean on for a very long time and she was going to accept it and worry about the consequences later.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was nearly two hours later. The small group was gathered around the conference room table as they went over all the details. In addition to Sheriff Walters, Dean and Gage, Maggie had joined them. Dax hadn't stayed. Once they left the hospital, he drove straight to the police station, waited while she entered the back of the building then sped away. Paige felt a little guilty. She'd taken up more of his time today than she originally planned. She'd have to make it up to him somehow.

She studied each of her colleagues and knew she'd made a mistake by hiding the truth from them. They were all angry with her, but how was she to know things were different here than they had been at the Bureau. She'd had to prove herself every step of the way in Quantico. These guys just seemed to accept her as she was. It was nice but because she'd refused to trust them, they were now having a hard time trusting her.

"Dean," Jericho called jerking Paige out of her thoughts for the moment.

"Yeah," Dean answered immediately.

"I want you to drive Paige home. Go with her into the house and make sure the area is secure before you leave." The sheriff gave her a scathing look that warned not to argue when she was about to do just that. "Gage and I are going to go pay a certain preacher a little visit. I think it's time he met the top cop in town, don't you?"

Paige grinned. "I'd like to be a fly on that tent. Maybe Gage could get video...you know to document the encounter and all. It might come in handy if we have to go to court."



## Perverted Theology

---

Jericho laughed. “Not on your life. Now go, get some rest and I don’t want to see you back here before Friday.”

“What? No way, that’s three days from now.” Paige argued.

Jericho raised an eyebrow and waited. “I could make it Monday.”

“Uh, no.” Paige knew he was serious. “Friday’s good.” She stood and followed Dean out the door. What in the world was she supposed to do with two whole days away from the office?

\*\*\*\*\*

Jericho approached the encampment more than a little curious about the man two of his best deputies despised. He thought he was prepared for anything. He was wrong. As strolled across the open area with a flashlight, the preacher exited one of the tents. It took him a minute to realize the woman peeking from the slats wasn’t Mrs. Preacher. No, the Mrs. was traipsing across the compound with purpose. The first thing that registered was that the woman was angry with him, not her cheating husband. No wonder Paige called the woman a fake wife. Maybe they’d stumbled across one of those cult communities. The ones with one man and a bunch of concubines. Anything was possible...but that didn’t mean it was going to be condoned in his county.

“This is ridiculous,” Helma practically screamed. “There’s a limit to our patients and your department has exceeded that. I’m calling our lawyer. You can’t seriously think you can justify two visits in one day.”

“Good evening,” Jericho ignored her tirade in favor of getting straight to the point. “I’m Sheriff Walters.”

“Sheriff,” Preacher Schmeling said coolly. “It’s a little late for a social call don’t you think?”

“I’m afraid this is business,” Jericho eyed the man he was beginning to think of as a controlling pervert. “My deputy was here earlier today.”

“Yes,” Torben said cautiously, wondering what this was all about.

“When she left, someone had tampered with her vehicle. She was able to maneuver it off the road and away from our innocent citizens but I need a detailed account of where you were and what you were doing while she interviewed your girls.”

“You think we had something to do with that?” Helma huffed. “That’s ridiculous. We never left that tent. You can ask the girls. We were right here the entire time.”

Torben gently rested his hand on his wife’s arm. “Why would we want to hurt one of your officers? We are a peaceful group. We would really like to be left alone to worship and grow

## Perverted Theology

---

closer to our Lord. I'm sorry to hear your officer had car trouble, but I assure you we had nothing to do with that."

"You can understand the timing is a little too coincidental, can't you?" Jericho pressed. "As I understand it, you were less than happy that Deputy Carter was interviewing your parishioners without you present. Were you angry enough to try to teach her a lesson?"

"As I said, whatever trouble Ms. Carter encountered, it had nothing to do with us. Please give her our best, but I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave now. It's late, we have an early morning ahead of us and the bible teaches the benefits of a good night's rest."

After Paige's observation that the preacher did not know the first thing about the scripture he was supposedly teaching, Jericho was tempted to ask which scripture exactly said that. He refrained from voicing his thought but did advise the Schmeling's they were not to leave town without advising his officer where they were going and how they could be reached. He was smiling as he turned and headed back to the car. That little ditty about early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise running through his mind.

"Enjoy yourself," Gage asked when the sheriff reached the vehicle, still grinning.

"Not particularly," Jericho sighed as he slid into the passenger's seat. "Let's get Dean up here to keep an eye on them tonight. I have a feeling that man is getting to know those girls individually...in the biblical sense."

Gabe frowned as he pulled onto the dirt road. "Really? That's just wrong. What about our missing person? Do you think he..."

"I think that man is up to something. They did not like us dropping by after dark. If we're not careful, they'll disappear and we'll never know what happened to that girl."

"I could come back," Gage offered.

"Naw, let's take shifts. Call Dean, he can handle the graveyard shift. You relieve him in the morning. I'll take over tomorrow afternoon. We're not going to bother Paige with this. She needs her rest." Jericho settled in to enjoy the ride back into town.

\*\*\*\*\*

For about the hundredth time that morning, Dax asked himself why he was here. Paige was an adult. She was a cop for crying out loud. She clearly didn't want to be mollycoddled or pampered by the likes of him. And he was never one to pamper. Yet, here he stood on her front porch with a dozen donuts and two fresh cups of coffee. And, if he was going to be honest with himself, he was worried about her. He hesitated one more second before he reached out and rang

## Perverted Theology

---

the bell. He'd just give her the food and the freshly brewed java and head back home to work on his house. He frowned when Paige didn't immediately swing open the door.

Paige swore under her breath and pulled the pillow over her head. She wasn't in the mood for company. Her head was still throbbing and she needed coffee. If Jericho was going to give her a day off, the least the guys could do is let her sleep in for a change. She slowly slid from the bed and made her way to the front door when the bell rang again.

Dax smiled at the annoyed and violent look on his neighbor's face. Okay, so maybe it was a little early.

"Are you kidding me?" she demanded. "I guess one day to sleep in was way too much to ask."

"Sorry," Dax said, still grinning. The woman looked pretty adorable in her white tank, navy blue shorts and a scowl. Her hair was tussled and her face was completely devoid of any makeup. It hit him unexpectedly just how beautiful Paige Carter really was. "I come bearing gifts." He held up the carton that contained the coffee and the box of donuts and smiled.

Paige snagged a cup of coffee, turned and strolled into her house. "Shut the door behind you." She called from the kitchen. "You want cream or sugar?"

"Both," Dax said as he settled onto the couch and waited.

"Really?" Paige asked as she casually settled beside him. "I thought such a macho, tough guy like yourself would go for black."

"Well, I guess you thought wrong," Dax shrugged as he dumped a teaspoon of sugar into the steaming liquid. He studied the container she'd set on the coffee table with a frown.

"What?" Paige asked, grabbing the bottle of Hazelnut Coffee Mate she'd brought with her.

Dax was still frowning as he cautiously poured the liquid into his coffee. He took a tentative sip then sat back to relax. "I guess it's okay."

"Okay? What do you use Mr. Persnickety?"

"Half and Half, what else? But this will do for a change." He grinned. "So, Jericho said he was giving you a mandatory vacation. What will you ever do with all that free time?"

Paige glanced around the house. "Actually, it's funny you should ask. I was actually wondering if you could look at a wall for me. I want to take it out to make one of the rooms bigger, but I don't know if it's a load-bearing wall or not. Do you have a minute you can check?"

"Sure," Dax said grabbing one of the donuts and grinning. "Once I've had breakfast, I'm all yours."

## Perverted Theology

---

Paige's stomach did a little leap at that and she frowned. Why was she having such a potent reaction to the man all of a sudden? It was one thing to admire the goods from a distance, that was perfectly acceptable. Having a physical reaction to his sexy grin as he sat next to her on the living room couch... was not. She set her mug on the table and reached for a donut. She'd concentrate on breakfast, get his advice then send him on his way. Two days with a hammer would cure her of any attraction she felt for the opposite sex...even the sexy carpenter that lived next door.

An hour later, Paige and Dax had all the tools gathered they would need to take down a wall. Dax stepped through the door with a long extension cord he had strung from his place to hers. He said he'd shut off her power to the breaker just in case. Now they were all ready to begin.

After their breakfast of champions, Paige headed for the small room in the back to show Dax what she had planned. One room was tiny, the other was regular sized but Paige wanted to take out the wall and make a large office where she could work on cases at home. She thought her mother had used the smaller room for storage but she couldn't really remember much more than that. To her, the space was wasted and needed to go. Dax assured her there wasn't any issue with tearing out the wall. In fact, he recommended it. He said it would open up the place and make the office seem much larger even though she was only gaining a few feet. So, here they were ready to get started. That had been the biggest shock of all. She'd expected Dax to escape back to his place once he determined it was safe to demo the room. Instead, he'd headed over, gathered up his tools and was prepared to spend the day helping her. She should have insisted on doing it alone, but she was starting to get used to having Dax around. That could be dangerous and she knew it but at the moment she really didn't care.

Dax handed her a hammer and stepped back. "Let her rip," he said as he watched her take the first swing. He was leaning against the door jamb relaxed and more content than he'd been in a very long time when Paige gasped and dropped the hammer.

"What's wrong?" Dax asked as he quickly moved to her side. He peered into the hole and spotted a large box and a file. What in the world was that? He reached around Paige and carefully pulled the hidden treasure from the open wall. "Any idea what this might be?" He glanced at Paige and frowned. The woman had gone white as a ghost. "Come here." He helped her up and forced her into a chair. "What's going on here?"

Paige swallowed hard as she focused on the contents Dax had pulled from the wall. Was it possible her mother had left her a clue? What else would be hidden so thoroughly where nobody could find it? "I..." what could she say?

Dax crouched in front of Paige and forced her to look at him. "Talk to me," he soothed. "Do you know what that is?"

## Perverted Theology

---

“I’m not sure,” Paige said honestly. “Um...my mom was murdered a long time ago. Here in this town. She...well actually I don’t know. I’m afraid to look. What if that...whatever it is, was the reason she’s dead?”

Dax stood and glanced at the contents. “There’s only one way to find out.” He lifted the box and set it on the floor in front of Paige. “Let’s see what’s inside.” He waited, if Paige wanted him to leave, he would. But he wanted to stay. Especially if something inside that box had gotten her mother murdered. It could be the answer to why someone was harassing her. Why someone had sabotaged her brake system. The only way to find out was to lift the lid. Dax crouched in front of Paige again and rested his hands on her knees. “Do you want to do this alone? I’m here for you if you need me but if you need some space, I’ll go.”

Paige closed her eyes and tried to take a long soothing breath. What did she want?

“However,” Dax continued. “I think maybe you could use a friend. It’s been a rough couple days.”

“Stay,” Paige whispered. Then she opened her eyes to find two chocolate brown eyes only inches away. She studied Dax and knew she’d made the right decision.

Dax reached up and brushed a stray hair away from Paige’s face. She looked more vulnerable than he’d ever seen her before. He knew he should break the spell that was holding both of them hostage but he couldn’t. “Okay, I’ll stay.”

Paige’s focus moved from her sexy neighbor’s caring eyes to his mouth as he spoke. They were only a few inches away and oh, so inviting. She jumped to her feet and surveyed the room...looking for an escape. Chicken.

Dax grinned and lifted the box. So, the attraction was mutual...as well as the resistance. He took a moment to wonder what that meant for their future then casually strolled towards the door. “Let’s take this somewhere more comfortable. There’s nowhere to sit in this tiny space.” He didn’t wait for a response, just headed for the kitchen and the large granite countertop knowing Paige would follow.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Any word yet?” the man asked impatiently.

“Only that Paige Carter was injured in an accident and will be recovering for the next few days,” the informant provided. “I can’t dig too deep or Maggie will get suspicious.”

How had the woman survived? She was like the cat that always came back. “Maybe the scare was enough to send her packing.”

## Perverted Theology

---

“I doubt it,” Stan said. “She’s in the middle of a case. In fact, they think it was the strange preacher that sabotaged her car. Deputy Carter is stubborn and persistent. I don’t think she’s leaving.”

“We’ll see about that. I don’t care if she does have nine lives.” He slowly hung up the phone. Just maybe...the tenth time is the charm.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige sat at her kitchen table, documents scattered everywhere. There was no rhyme or reason to any of this. She had topo maps, what looked like teenage letters and a personal diary. Unfortunately, there was nothing that tied everything together. Paige had no idea what her mother was doing. And why in the world was it hidden inside the wall?

Dax had left hours ago. Once they opened the box and Paige realized she wasn’t going to get answers, his support wasn’t necessary. She insisted he return home to work on his house. She’d wasted enough of his time over the past few days. Plus, having him so close was making her nervous. Now, she was sitting here at nearly midnight staring at a diary that apparently used to belong to her mother wondering who “J” was.

She read the last entry for the third time.

*J–*

*I’m sorry. I know you begged me to let this go but I just couldn’t. Now, I fear I have gone too far. For the past several days I have felt like someone is watching me. I know someone is trying to scare me. I decided today that I need to take your advice and forget the past. I fear this decision has come too late and my past is going to jeopardize my future. I just hope it does not harm my daughter’s future as well.*

*There is one last thing I have to do... Tracy was afraid for nearly three weeks before she died. She wouldn’t even confide in me. But, she did tell me she had a photo. One she hid at the old Tillman Factory. She made me promise to find it if anything happened to her. She begged me to take it to the authorities. I am going to head out one more time to look for that photo. An idea came to me today and I think I might know where it is. I owe her this last try before I give up. She was so traumatized after that horrible incident and I couldn’t help her then, but I may be able to help her now. I don’t know if that monster is responsible for Tracy’s death and that may haunt me forever. But we both know it could have been anyone. So many people had turned against her by then. Too many vicious neighbors that blamed her for everything. I hope you understand that I have to do this. I have to give it this one last shot. I know I won’t be able to truly move forward unless I do.*

*Regardless of what happens tonight, I am going to stop. I’m tired of hiding things from you of all people. We are supposed to be a partnership and I have been hampering that bond for some*

## Perverted Theology

---

*time now. If everything goes as planned, you will never see this note. If, as I fear, something happens to me...please take care of my precious daughter. She is my life and Paige should not suffer for my bad decisions. She has already lost her father, I pray she won't lose her mother as well. It is for her sake that I am going to stop the digging, the investigating and the questioning that seems to have gotten me into trouble recently. I can't bring Tracy back, I may never get her the justice she deserves, but I can be here for my little girl.*

*One last thing, I was wrong. We should never have hidden our love. I wish we had been open about it from the start. This was my mistake and I am so sorry for that. Love should be celebrated. If I get the chance, we can develop a plan tomorrow. I'd like to start by talking to Paige, together. Then, maybe we could go on that date you've been wanting. I can't wait for the whole world to know you are all mine and I am yours.*

*With all my love,*

*Chaya*

*P.S. I will be asking the fates, the universe and anyone else who will listen to bring me luck tonight. I'd like nothing better than to burn this note and talk to you about all of this in person. I guess only time will tell. Until I see you again, sweet dreams and reach for the stars.*

As difficult as it was to realize her mother wrote this letter to a man that she loved on the very night she was murdered, that last part always made her smile. It was one of Chaya's favorite sayings. Paige had heard it at least a hundred times as a child. Who was this mysterious man her mother was in love with? And why was she so intent on hiding it from everyone? Was she afraid I wouldn't understand? Paige would have been fine with it as long as the guy treated her mother well. Dylan Carter had died a long time ago heroically fighting for his country. Paige didn't expect her mother to stop living. In fact, she'd wanted her mom to find happiness again. Paige thought she had...here in Manti. Apparently, she'd been right, but for all the wrong reasons. Chaya Carter was happy here because she had fallen in love again. And someone out there was silently suffering because Chaya had insisted they keep it a secret.

Paige quickly gathered up all the documents, returned them to the sturdy box and headed for her room. She'd need to find a place to hide them. Maybe the vandal knew about the evidence and that was the reason he wanted her gone. Well, he or she. Paige still didn't have a clue who could be responsible. She did know something in this plain cardboard container had gotten Chaya Carter murdered. As she stepped into her bedroom, she looked around, surveying the area for a good spot to hide the evidence. Nothing came to mind, so Paige slid the container under her bed. If someone wanted the box, they would have to go through her. She was exhausted when she finally

## Perverted Theology

---

climbed into bed. Still, she couldn't sleep. How had the box gotten inside the wall? Why had her mother put it there if she wanted her boyfriend to find the letter? Had the man seen Chaya's final declaration of love? And what was going on in the little religious camp in the mountains? She hadn't heard from Scarlett, Paige hoped that meant the girl was okay. She finally fell asleep dreaming about bible passages and missing girls.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dax hesitantly climbed the steps leading to the front door and paused. He was nervous and unsure of himself. He hadn't felt this awkward since high school. Avoiding Paige for a full day hadn't resolved anything. Nathan Porter had finally returned his call the previous evening. The man was audibly upset. The only reason Dax put up with the rant for so long was because he understood. Feeling helpless had to be difficult for a man like Retired General Nathan Porter. And clearly, Paige was doing her best to keep her mentor in the dark.

Dax had just set the box of eclairs on the patio table when he heard the distinct sound of a woman screaming. He shoved through her front door and darted up the stairs. As he burst into Paige's bedroom, he realized she was still in bed. Her hair had that messed up, morning look that women hated but Dax had always considered adorable. She was sitting stock still and her face was even more pale than it had been when she'd found that box. What in the world was happening to her? He cautiously moved to the side of the bed and settled onto the mattress. He knew he should say something, but he was at a loss for words.

Paige felt the bed move and she glanced over to see Dax sitting beside her. She planned to take a deep breath, climb from the bed and casually ask him if he wanted coffee. What happened was a much different scenario. When Paige shifted, Dax set a gentle hand on her arm and she immediately burst into tears. Before she realized what he was doing, Dax had lifted her onto his lap, wrapped his masculine arms around her and softly began to rock as he ran a soothing hand up and down her back.

It was several minutes later when Paige finally composed herself enough to sit forward. "Sorry about that."

"What was that anyway," Dax asked as he brushed her hair away from her face.

Paige sighed. "A mental breakdown I guess." She tried to slide from his lap, but Dax tightened his grip. She actually liked it where she was, so she didn't fight him on it...this time. "It's been a rough couple of days," she admitted. "The stuff in that box doesn't make sense. There's just a bunch of stuff. Nothing that seems to connect. I'm assuming it did for mom, but whatever she knew, it looks like she took it to the grave."

"Are you sure it was your mom that left it there?" he wondered.



## Perverted Theology

---

“I’m sure, I found a diary. I recognized her handwriting. Plus, there was a note to a boyfriend. One she wrote the night she died. She said a final goodbye to someone before she left home and drove to the Tillman Factory. Signature and all.”

“How do you know it was written the night she died?” Dax shifted so he could see her face.

“Because she was murdered at the factory and she said in the note she was going one last time. She was looking for something. And because if it hadn’t been the night she died, I never would have found the note. She claimed if she made it through the evening, they were going to have the conversation in person and the note wouldn’t be needed any longer.”

“What do you mean? Did she realize she was in danger?” Dax frowned.

“Apparently, someone was watching her. Someone was trying to scare her.”

“Oh, kind of like what’s happening to you then?” Dax scolded.

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “But mom was a petite vulnerable woman. I’m a cop. There’s a difference.”

“Really,” Dax fumed. “I’m pretty sure dead is dead.” He realized he wasn’t helping the situation, so he changed the subject. “What else? Why did you scream this morning? You took ten years off my life, you know?”

“I think...” she stopped to consider her words. “I think it’s the stress. Flying down a mountain without any brakes really scared me. And if you repeat that to anyone, I’ll come after you myself. Then the whole thing with that box. Plus, before...with the preacher, I was challenging him.”

“Challenging how?” Dax pressed.

“With scripture. The stress, my mom’s murder and the scripture recall all coalesced I guess. It brought back memories...nightmares of a time in my career I’d rather forget.” Paige stood and moved to sit in a chair by the window.

“An old case?” Dax asked. He could understand old demons. He had enough of his own after all. “Was it bad?”

“An old case. And yes, it was awful. This guy...he called himself the avenger. He selected people based on his belief they were sinners. He enacted his own form of vengeance for their transgressions, using scripture clues to taunt us and lead us to the next victim. I knew that bible front to back, inside and out and still it took way too long to stop that monster. I won’t go into detail but it was the worst case I ever worked. This morning, I had a version of my old nightmare. Something that hasn’t happened for over a year now.”

## Perverted Theology

---

“What can I do to help? You want me to deal with the guy in the mountains? I’d be happy to go up there and get some answers for you. Just tell me what you want to know, I’ll take care of it.” Dax offered.

Paige laughed but when her eyes connected with his, she wasn’t sure Dax was kidding. Once again, she contemplated how much she didn’t know about her sexy neighbor. “Thanks, but no. I can finally get back to work today. I’m going to shower and head in to corner Jericho. He wouldn’t return my calls yesterday, but that wasn’t a surprise. Not really. He told me I was banished until today. Maybe I’ll get lucky and they caught a break while I was on my unscheduled vacation.”

Dax stood and moved to leave, then stopped. “Paige, I told you this before but I’m going to say it again. I’m a good listener and I would never judge. That friendship thing...it doesn’t have an expiration date. If you ever need me, you know where I am.” He headed out the door then called back over his shoulder. “I’ll leave breakfast in the kitchen. You’re on your own for coffee.” Then he was gone.

By the time Paige arrived at the office, she felt much better. Dax certainly knew a way to a woman’s heart...chocolate. As far as Paige was concerned there was no better way to start the day than with chocolate and coffee. Her good mood was challenged when she looked around and realized she was the only one feeling relaxed and refreshed. Gage looked exhausted, so did the sheriff. She turned to Maggie, “what did I miss?”

Sheriff Walters exited his office and headed for the conference room. “Staff meeting in five minutes,” he called as he disappeared down the hallway.

“They’ve been holding surveillance on the church group,” Maggie supplied. “We’re all glad you’re back. How are you feeling, dear?”

“Guilty,” Paige said honestly. “I’ve been lounging around for two days while these guys have been covering my job. Did something happen to concern them or were they just being cautious?”

“A little of both I think,” Maggie admitted. “Jer headed up to have a talk with the preacher, feel him out to see if he could have been responsible for your accident. It didn’t go well, he got a bad feeling about the whole operation. Ever since they’ve been keeping an eye on the place.”

“I better go. Thanks Maggie, I owe you one.” Paige headed for the conference room, wondering if she’d get details about the surveillance.

Paige pulled into her driveway, grateful to be home. It had been a long first day back. The staff meeting hadn’t produced anything new, which worried Paige. If the preacher held to what seemed to be his regular schedule, he’d be moving the girls out to a new location soon. If they could follow at a safe distance without being seen that might be good. But, the chance of moving

## Perverted Theology

---

around in that terrain undetected was unlikely. It was impossible to guess what the preacher would do if he felt threatened. Her very presence might put the girls at risk. With any luck, Scarlett would find something that would help.

Paige sat on the front porch and pondered the situation. This state of limbo she was stuck in was driving her crazy. Her patrol car still wasn't finished, she had an entirely new mystery surrounding her mother and she still didn't know what the preacher and his wife were up to. Nothing good, that's for sure. But the worst part was not knowing where to go from here. She was so deep in thought she didn't notice Dax until he was standing beside her.

"Rough day?" he laughed when Paige jumped.

"A bit. Too many unanswered questions, I guess. Thanks for the eclairs by the way. At least I started the day off right. It had nowhere to go but down from there."

"My pleasure," Dax said relaxing against the metal railing. "You still need help with that wall?"

"I should be able to finish up most of it myself. Thanks." They sat in silence for several seconds, neither one knowing where to go from there.

"Okay then," Dax straightened. "I'll leave you to it. I was just heading inside and spotted you, thought I'd swing by and make sure everything was okay."

"Maybe you could do me one favor," she said hesitantly.

"What's that?"

"Well, my car is still in the shop. Frank said it's not ready, but I wanted to swing by and see if I could get some answers. I'm hoping he can tell me why the brakes failed. He should at least be able to tell me if they failed on their own or if they had a little help. You busy? Or could I bum a shuttle?"

Dax was surprised. He assumed Jericho would already have answers to those questions. Maybe he did, but he just wasn't sharing. "Sure, let me grab my keys and we can head over now."

Dax was frowning when Paige slid into his truck. "Was that as strange for you as it was for me?"

Dax didn't know Frank Hopkins that well, but the man was hiding something. "I never knew there were so many ways to avoid a simple question," he said as he pulled onto the highway.

"I'm sorry, that was certainly a huge waste of time." Paige was perplexed by the entire encounter. "It's like he hates me and was being evasive on purpose. I know the car belongs to the

## Perverted Theology

---

city, but I was driving it. You'd think he could at least tell me if the thing was tampered with. I guess I'll have to get Jericho to follow-up. Which pisses me off. Seriously, it makes me feel like a misbehaving child or something."

If Dax hadn't been there, he wouldn't have believed how hostile and evasive the town mechanic could be. Was he hiding something?

"If I didn't know better, I'd think Frank was the one to mess with the brakes himself." Paige mused.

"How can you be so sure he wasn't?" Dax wondered absently.

"What? You think..." Paige considered. "No. There's no way. It took him too long to respond to Jericho's call."

"You said you were on a call before you headed up to question the preacher again, right?" Dax considered.

"Right, I was visiting with Pete Butler, he called in a report of vandalism and theft, but he was really only looking for some company."

"So, you probably spent what...thirty...forty minutes out there?"

"A little over an hour. Pete has become a special project of mine. He's lonely," she shrugged. "And I wasn't busy."

"So, technically anyone could have messed with the car. Your vehicle was unattended for over an hour. If the brake fluid leaked out, it may have been tampered with before you headed up the canyon." Dax surmised.

"I hadn't thought of that," Paige admitted. "But still, Frank Hopkins? Why in the world would he sabotage my car? I barely know the man."

"Why was he so hostile when you started asking questions?" Dax countered.

"I guess it's something to consider." Paige was still confused when Dax pulled into her driveway. "Thanks again for the ride. I'm sorry it was such a big waste of time."

"No worries," Dax waved as he maneuvered the truck the few feet to his own house, parked and silently strolled inside, still curious about Frank Hopkins and what he had against Paige Carter. Was it possible Frank was responsible for the murder? The demeanor of the man today was such a stark contrast to the man Dax had encountered since he'd moved to town. There had to be a reason. Dax was still considering the situation when he climbed into bed.

## Perverted Theology

---

\*\*\*\*\*

It was nearly eleven when Paige's phone began to ring. At first, she didn't recognize it as her cellphone. She snatched it off the nightstand and frantically answered the call. "Hello?"

"Deputy Carter?" came a female voice.

"Scarlett? Is that you? Yes, this is Paige. What's wrong?"

"The preacher is furious. I don't know what went wrong, but he's been stomping around camp for the past several hours clearly furious. He took his wife into the tent and they had a huge argument. We're leaving. He told her we are striking camp tomorrow morning. He wants to be on the road by ten. I'm going to leave a recording in that tree I told you about. He's become paranoid. They agreed to search all of us, if they find that phone on me...well, I don't know what will happen if it's discovered. I have to leave it behind." Scarlett was terrified. What if the cops couldn't trace them? What if she disappeared without a trace like her sister had? Jenny would be devastated.

"Scarlett," Paige said firmly. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Leave the phone in the tree and I'll get it. I am going to be there. I'll follow you, make sure not matter where they take you, I'll be there to get you out. Do you understand?"

"Okay," Scarlett swallowed hard, trying not to give into her fear. "Please, don't lose me."

"I won't." Paige hung up and considered. She had to get to the camp, but if she did...she'd be exhausted in the morning. Then it hit her, Dean was already there. She scrolled through her contacts and waited impatiently for the sheriff to answer. Once she got off the phone, they had a plan. Jericho was going to head up and join Dean overnight. She and Gage would pick up first thing and follow the group to their new location. Jericho had authorized them to leave the area if necessary. He wanted to know what the preacher was doing as much as Paige did. Now, she needed to get a few hours of sleep before Gage picked her up...yeah, right.

It was still dark when Gage pulled the SUV in behind Dean's vehicle. Paige wasn't surprised when Sheriff Walters appeared, motioning to Gage to roll down the window. "Not much activity yet." He informed them.

"I need to get to that tree stump and retrieve Scarlett's phone. Can you stick around until I get back?" Paige asked her boss.

"Gage, go with her. I don't want anyone alone until we figure out what we're up against." Walters ordered.

## Perverted Theology

---

“You’re going to have to be quiet,” Paige demanded. “From what Scarlett said, the tree is not far from camp. It’s fairly close to the outhouse. I realize it’s early, but that doesn’t mean they’re all still asleep.”

“Agreed,” Gage said exiting the car to stand beside the sheriff.

Jericho and Dean continued to watch the area as the two deputies disappeared into the forest. Within minutes Paige and Gage were sliding into the backseat of Dean’s cruiser. Paige pulled up the recording and they all listened intently.

“Did Brandon coordinate that with any of you?” Sheriff Walters asked the group.

“No,” Dean said immediately. “But he wouldn’t. This is Forest Service land. It’s his jurisdiction. If he decided to site that group for overstaying their welcome, he wouldn’t touch base with us first. He’d simply give them the cite and move on. He’ll probably be back today to make sure they left.”

“Well,” Paige sighed. “That explains why the preacher is moving. Now we need to figure out where he is going. They have to have a plan.”

“Agreed,” Jericho said wearily. “Dean and I are heading home to catch a few hours’ sleep. We’ll be back up here by ten. Call if you need me, otherwise I don’t want to hear from anyone.”

Paige laughed. “I’ll call Maggie and let her know at eight. Go on home, we’ve got this.”

\*\*\*\*\*

By the time Sheriff Walters and Deputy Dean Bridges returned, the camp was completely cleared of all evidence the group had been there, the cars were packed and the group was loading into their vehicles. A truck had arrived and two large men sat in the cab, ready to act at a moment’s notice. Jericho and Dean slid into the backseat and waited.

“I think those two are bodyguards of some sort,” Paige said immediately. “The girls don’t seem that alarmed. I wonder if he was planning on moving soon on his own, anyway.”

“Most likely,” Jericho said as he relaxed against the backseat. “If he’s doing something illegal, he wouldn’t want to draw attention to himself. On the other hand, why was he so irate after Brandon left?”

“Good question,” Dean mumbled.

“By the way,” Paige inserted. “Maggie talked to Brandon. He’s going to stay away for the day. He said to call if we need him, but otherwise he’ll leave it up to us to take care of business.”

## Perverved Theology

---

“We’re lucky to have him,” Jericho said as he watched the preacher climb into an overstuffed vehicle. “He’s easy to work with. That’s not always the case with the Feds.”

Paige grinned. She’d been a Fed once. Apparently, she’d finally been forgiven for that lapse in judgment. As the car pulled out, Paige studied her laptop closely. The instant the green light appeared, she relaxed.

“What is that?” Jericho demanded.

“I called in a favor,” Paige admitted without taking her eyes off the screen. “We really should get one of these ourselves.”

“Borrowed from who?” Jericho asked, realizing Paige had gotten her hands on a state of the art tracking device. “And did you get a warrant for that?”

“Exigent circumstances,” Paige grinned. “Those girls are in imminent danger. I would have driven into town, tracked down Judge Potter and gotten a warrant, but by the time I returned, the girls would all be missing. I think this falls under the hot pursuit policy. I am in hot pursuit of a suspect and simply made sure I didn’t lose the suspect in the wilderness.”

“Hope that works,” Jericho said a little worried. “Judge Potter is not all that forgiving when we don’t follow the law...to the letter. We’re going to have to make a very good case as to why we didn’t get a warrant beforehand.”

“Because I promised Scarlett I wouldn’t lose her.” Paige was starting to second guess herself.

Jericho swiped a hand in dismissal. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of Steven Potter. You just make sure we do not lose that vehicle.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The small group remained hidden inside their vehicle as Helma Schmeling escorted the girls into a large barn looking building. The building was large, but not overly so. The casual observer would pass by without a second thought. They were in farm country, many farmers possessed large barns to house their expensive tractors, combines, etc. Once they had left the campsite, Gage followed the tiny group up the canyon onto Skyline Drive until they intersected State Road twenty-nine. They had continued past Joe’s Reservoir and dropped into Castle Dale. The area was scattered with farmland and ranches for miles. The nondescript rambler fit right in with the neighbors and the area.

The instant Helma padlocked the large door from the outside and disappeared into the residence, Paige was out the door. She didn’t stop until she reached the back side of the barn and a window. She was searching the area for something to stand on to see inside, when Gage rounded

## Perverved Theology

---

the corner with a weathered log. He dropped it below the small, cloudy window and motioned for Paige to go forward.

It was difficult to see inside, but Paige could make out enough to determine this was some kind of jail. Horse stalls had been turned into cells with bars across the front. She had no idea how many girls were inside, but the sight made her physically ill. “We need to get in there.” She demanded when Jericho joined them. “It’s a prison. Those girls are locked up with no way out. No wonder Sissy disappeared without a trace.”

Jericho put a hand on Paige’s shoulder. “We have to do this right. I need to get a warrant. If we don’t do this right, those two might get away with this.”

“But...” Paige wanted to argue. She wanted to break through the door right now and release every one of the girls inside. But she knew the sheriff was right. If they waited for a warrant, the entry into the barn could not be questioned.

“I’ll hurry,” he said as he slid into the shadows and pulled out his phone. If he could get Potter on the line, he could do an electronic warrant in minutes.

\*\*\*\*\*

Scarlett was afraid. She’d seen Sissy huddled in the corner cell when they had entered the barn. It had taken all her willpower not to run to her sister and demand her release. But that would only put both of them at risk. Sissy had looked so fragile...so broken as she watched Scarlett move down the aisle and into a cell of her own. Almost as if Scarlett’s mere presence sucked the last bit of hope Sissy possessed away with the slamming of Scarlett’s cell door. But Scarlett knew there was still hope. Unfortunately, she couldn’t pass on that knowledge. Sissy might have given up, but Scarlett never would. Deputy Paige Carter would come...she had to. It was the only way out for her, Sissy and the rest of the prisoners in this awful, smelly barn.

Scarlett was starting to doubt her conviction that Paige would save her when her world erupted in chaos. Police swarmed in from the small man door at the side as well as the large double barn door. The makeshift cells were opened and everyone seemed to be talking at once. The large deputy she had made her original missing report to on Sissy stepped into the stall and crouched before her.

“Are you okay?” Gage asked, concern in his voice.

Scarlett slowly stood and took a tentative step forward. “Did someone get Sissy? I saw her when I walked in. Is she okay?”



## Perverted Theology

---

“Let’s go find out.” Gage held out a hand and escorted Scarlett into the bright summer afternoon. He paused to let her eyes adjust before he encouraged her to walk around and see if she could find her sister. Scarlett looked up and realized officers had also stormed the house. Where had all the cops come from? Relief flooded her entire body when she spotted Sissy moving toward her, assisted by Deputy Paige Carter. She couldn’t talk, the instant Sissy came within reach Scarlett wrapped her arms around her sister and held on tight.

Sissy was crying and Scarlett was barely holding in her emotions. Paige decided to give them a moment alone before she offered her phone so the girls could call their aunt to let her know they were both okay. She was about to step away when Scarlett called to her.

“Paige?” Scarlett moved away from Sissy and rushed to the officer. “I will never be able to thank you enough for saving my family. But...Thank you!” She said as she reached out and wrapped her arms around Paige in a huge hug.

Paige was taken by surprise. This case turned out much different than the last religious zealot case she’d worked. Maybe the nightmares would finally subside. She hoped so, a happy ending had a way of making things right again. She stepped away from Scarlett and smiled. “I’m sure your aunt would like to know everything is okay. Castle Dale PD has a Command Post a few yards down the road. They’re expecting you and Sissy. I told them you would need to make a call as soon as possible. Grab your sister and head over. I have a few things I need to take care of but I’ll find you later.”

“Okay,” Scarlett said as she wrapped her arm around Sissy’s shoulders. “I’m going to need to take my sister to a doctor. She’s pretty weak and I think she’s dehydrated. Is there someone that can give us a ride?”

“There are medics over by the Command Post. Stop in and have them check Sissy out before you go in. I’ll check in with you later and see what you need.” Paige turned and headed into the cozy farmhouse ready to work. Forensics was her specialty. She was determined to make sure every shred of evidence in that home was collected and used against the fake preacher and his annoying wife.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paige sat at her desk putting the finishing touches on a traffic accident report before she headed home for the day. When her desk phone began to ring, she hesitated. She could let it go to voicemail and handle it in the morning. After two more rings, she gave in and answered. “Deputy Carter.”

“Hey girl,” Carmen Fennelly said cheerfully.

## Perverted Theology

---

“Carmen,” Paige said happily. Surprised to be hearing from her friend so soon. She and Carmen had been tight when Paige was still with the FBI. The woman was the best Technical Analyst Paige had ever met. Unfortunately, she was a little on the wild side and didn’t always follow the rules. Once a hacker, always a hacker. Her lack of boundaries had gotten her into hot water with their boss, Special Agent Gray, on a high profile case right before Paige moved. Carmen wanted to step a little over the line, Gray shut her down without listening to the reasons. Carmen freaked, went over his head and got her way. The SAC decided the circumstance was dire and felt the ends would justify the means. Gray was embarrassed in front of his boss and afterward, Carmen was quietly relocated to the dungeon. If Paige hadn’t stepped in, her friend would still be there wasting away day after day...buried under years of paperwork hell. Nathan had jumped at the chance to bring Carmen onto his team. He’d been furious when he heard the girls talents were being wasted on filing. “Don’t tell me you got fired already? I told you Nathan can be demanding.” Paige joked.

“No, nothing like that,” Carmen assured her friend. “I’m calling to give you an update. I’ve located all but two of those missing girls...the names you sent me from the farmhouse. Some are worse off than others but all will be getting the best counseling available courtesy of your tax dollars and mine.”

“Really?” Paige asked in amazement. “You are the best!”

“And don’t you forget it,” Carmen agreed. “Seriously though, you saved those girls Paige. They weren’t even on our radar. The case is federal now, too many kidnappings to ignore and states lines and all. Preacher Creepy and his mate are going down for a very long time.”

“I helped, but it was actually Gage that deserves the credit,” Paige corrected. “It was his case. He’s the one that brought me in because something didn’t feel right to him.”

“You sound happy,” Carmen observed.

“I am,” Paige agreed. For the most part. It had been over two weeks since they had arrested Pastor Torben W. Schmeling and his wife, Helma. The couple insisted they didn’t have anything to do with her brakes and Paige was starting to believe them. She still hadn’t gotten anywhere with Frank Hopkins, though. Jericho told her to drop it and let him handle it, which she reluctantly agreed to do. She had a line unit now and most likely would not get the old car back at all. The mayor was waffling but promised to seriously consider the situation and would have a decision by the end of the week. Jericho was optimistic. He was sure he’d sold the Council on the benefits of totaling out the old vehicle and replacing it with a gently used one later in the year. In the meantime, she was stuck with the line unit. That meant she would never get the chance to inspect the wrecked car herself. She’d have to rely on the report Jericho was able to get from Frank. And that made her more than a little uncomfortable about the entire situation.

“Earth to Paige,” Carmen called.

## Perverted Theology

---

Paige laughed, “Sorry. My mind was wondering a bit. That’s great news about the victims and one less thing I have to worry about.”

“Like I said, we still have two that are unaccounted for, but I’m on it. I’ll find them if they can be found.”

“I have no doubt,” Paige agreed. “So, seriously...how’s the new job working out?”

“Amaze-balls,” Carmen said happily. “I owe you for that. I think SA Gray would have left me in the dungeon for all of eternity if he could manage it.”

“Watch your back,” Paige warned. “I still have friends in high places and he is not happy with your transfer. You embarrassed him. He wasn’t finished dishing out punishment when you were suddenly whisked away. And to a dream job, no less.”

“That’s your fault,” Carmen accused. “Maybe you could be a dear and let him know you orchestrated the whole thing.”

“Not on your life,” Paige said soberly. “I do not need that man as an enemy. And anyway, I’m still worried about you controlling yourself when it comes to those extracurricular activities you love so much. My reputation is on the line.”

“Paige,” Carmen sobered. “I told you, I’m done with that. You stuck your neck out for me and I will not let you down. Nathan is amazing to work for and he’s taken me under his wing, so to speak. I’d be letting you both down if I went back to my old nefarious ways. Anyway, I gave up the black market hacking before you even called me. It was painfully obvious the only way to get out of the dungeon was to clean up. I haven’t taken a job in months and I won’t. I promise. I still get the occasional request but I’ve shot every one of them down immediately. No more gray area for me...pun intended.”

“Good,” Paige said relieved. “But what if you decide you just have to have those Louboutin’s for that next party? Can you honestly tell me you’ll be able to resist?” She loved her friend dearly, but Carmen got bored easily and she loved her shoes. It was the reason Paige hadn’t stepped in right away and saved her friend from Gray’s dungeon, as they called it. Paige was worried Carmen couldn’t resist that one last hacking job if the price was right. And with the newly acquired top secret clearance necessary when working with Nathan Porter, any slip would land them both in hot water.

“I saw the most amazing pair of black pumps with red heels the other day,” Carmen began. “You have no idea how tempting it was to accept Dark Solo’s request to skim a little from the Clinton’s bankroll.”

“Carmen,” Paige practically begged. “Please....please don’t let me down here. Do you have any idea what would happen if a member of Nathan’s team...”

## Perverted Theology

---

“Paige,” Carmen cut in. “I was kidding. Although I despise everything that woman stands for and for that alone I’m tempted to hack in and do a little redistribution of wealth. But I won’t,” she added hastily. “Like I said, the good General has taken me under his wing. I won’t do anything to embarrass him. I promise.”

“Good,” Paige accepted Carmen’s word on it. If she said she stopped, she stopped. That was one thing Paige trusted. “And maybe General Porter will be so busy hovering and protecting you, he’ll relax and finally accept my life choices.”

Carmen laughed. “Don’t count on it.”

Paige heard voices in the background so she wasn’t surprised when Carmen abruptly discontinued their call. She sat back with a sigh of relief. After two weeks of worrying about all those names they had located in that locked file cabinet inside the farmhouse, she could finally relax. The girls were safe. One more human trafficking ring was shut down for good and...if she had anything to say about it...Gage would be getting a commendation for his persistence and tenacity. All things considered...it was a very good day.