

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Camp Reefer *Season 1, Episode 4*

by:

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Dax pulled across the empty parking lot, parked near the side entrance and shut off his truck. He sat silently studying his surroundings for several minutes. At the moment, he was engaged in an internal battle. How to handle the interrogation? Normally, he would just let things play out. But he was supposed to be a carpenter now, a normal average citizen...a good community member. Letting his anger make his decisions for him this time, would not be a good idea. So he sat, pondering, debating, trying to develop a plan.

It was nearly ten minutes later when he finally slid from the truck and walked casually towards the entrance of the garage. As his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting inside, he recognized Bobby Turner.

“Hey, Dax,” Bobby said cheerfully as he crossed the garage and approached his neighbor.

“Bobby,” Dax acknowledged. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Bobby laughed. “I could say the same for you.”

Dax grinned. “Probably. What happened to college?”

“Still in the plan,” Bobby assured him. He pulled a rag from his back pocket and began wiping grease from his fingers. “Mom and dad have been saving for that since they realized they were going to have a kid. I need to do my part. They don’t have a lot of extra and if I can save up a few thousand over the summer, I won’t have to call them for the unexpected, you know?”

Dax put a hand on Bobby’s shoulder. He was a good kid. “I get it. And I have no doubt your parents will be proud no matter what you decide to do with that oversized brain of yours.”

Bobby ducked his head and shrugged. When he looked back up, the embarrassment was gone. “You need an oil change or something? I can’t imagine anything worse going on with that beast of yours. You baby that thing like it was your own kid.”

“Naw,” Dax glanced around. “I actually need to talk to Frank. He around?”

“Sure,” Bobby said as he cocked his head in question. “He’s out back, in the yard.”

“The yard?”

“Yeah, the junkyard. He’s working on a classic and thinks he has the part he needs out there,” Bobby supplied. “Go on back.” He motioned to a side door and took a step back.

Dax stepped through the door and was instantly hit with the hot, dry air of summer. He glanced around and spotted Frank in the back corner. He made his way past the large piles of discarded metal and finally reached the grumpy mechanic who was leaning over a rusted out skeleton.

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Frank was obviously scavenging parts from the indiscernible heap. He swore under his breath, shifted and pushed himself further under the hood.

Dax patiently waited for the man to realize he was there. The last thing he wanted was to startle him and cause him to fall inside... or worse, knock something onto his head.

Frank let out a triumphant grunt, straightened and came face to face with Dax Hamilton. He frowned, when had he shown up? "Dax."

"Frank," Dax returned.

"Uh...you need to schedule a job? Bobby can do that for you inside."

"Nope," Dax answered. "This is personal."

Frank's frown deepened. "How so?"

"Paige Carter," Dax provided.

Frank took a step to move past Dax. "I got nothing to say about her."

Dax reached out, grabbed Frank's forearm and spun him around. "I'm here for answers. You're here to provide them."

Frank yanked his arm away but instead of leaving, he sat against the hood of a nearby Mustang. The entire back-end was missing, but the front was sturdy. He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"Let's start with the details regarding her car."

"I already told you...you gotta talk to Jericho about that." Frank grunted.

"I did," Dax took a step forward. "Now I'm talking to you. I know it was tampered with. I want the details. How, exactly?"

Frank took a deep breath. Jericho hadn't actually told him to keep the specifics to himself. He just didn't like that woman, she was too much like her mother. So he'd fudged a little. It should have worked. "Loose bolt," he finally provided.

Dax considered. "Then not the preacher or one of his followers?"

"No," Frank agreed. "It had to have happened when she was out at Pete's or shortly before. No way that bolt came off and the fluid leaked out during the short time she was up with the crazy cult."

"Okay," Dax filed that away for later. "So, why the attitude?"

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“I ain’t got no attitude,” Frank said defensively.

“Really? What do you call that?” Dax pressed.

“You come here and insult me what do you expect?”

“I have to say, I’m getting more suspicious with every passing second,” Dax considered. “The attitude against Paige is intensifying, not lessening. Why is that Frank? Are you the one that loosened that bolt? It’d be pretty easy for a mechanic like yourself to sneak out, take a look at the car, and know exactly what to do if you wanted to cause the lady some trouble.”

“Hey now,” Frank straightened. “You can’t come here and accuse me of trying to hurt that woman.”

“That woman,” Dax took another step toward Frank, “has a name. It’s Paige Carter. Paige says the first time she met you was that day in the meadow when you towed her car. So tell me Frank, why is it that you seem to despise her so vehemently? Kind of strange for a woman you never met before. Puts you right at the top of my suspect list. You’re gonna have to do some fast talking to change my thinking.”

Frank sat back on the hood of the junked out car. “She’s just like her mother. Knew it the first time I saw that one. Being from the city doesn’t make you better than us country folk. Chaya never understood that. Her daughter is just as snooty and proud as her mother was.” He paused then stared at Dax defiantly. “You ain’t any better than us, neither.”

Dax studied Frank Hopkins. He finally understood. The man had been rejected by Chaya Carter and he was taking it out on her daughter. Was he the vandal? Was he trying to run Paige out of town so he didn’t have to suffer from the memories? Did having Paige back in town make Frank feel inferior somehow? “I have to say, knowing you had the hots for Paige’s mom only makes you look more guilty.”

“I didn’t have the hots for her. That woman thought she was too good for this town, for the people that lived here all our lives. She run off to the big city and married that war hero...just something else to brag about. But she got hers. Her big hero done got killed and she had nowhere else to go. She had to eat some of that humble pie and come back here to her momma’s house, didn’t she?”

Dax realized he didn’t know anything about Paige’s father. War hero? He’d have to look into that. Another thing to file away for later. “I’m sure that was difficult for Chaya. Most people seemed to like her. Not you, I guess. Now Chaya’s been murdered and her daughter is being harassed.”

“Who said Chaya was murdered? That cop...Tibble said it was an accident. Some drifter got high or something and then split. What do you mean, murdered?” Frank said in surprise.

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“I wonder...” Dax drawled. “Is the surprise because you thought you got away with it, or because you really thought her death was an accident.”

Frank stood and marched away from Dax. He was angry for sure, but mostly he was shocked. Had Chaya been murdered? Killed for some reason by a drifter like Tibble said. But did that make sense? Why would a drifter kill Chaya Carter? Unless she'd rejected him, too. There was no telling what a man would do if he was humiliated. Chaya was beautiful and elegant and the one woman Frank could never get over. She was everything he'd ever wanted and a clear reminder that he would never have it. Yeah, that might anger a man into killin'.

Dax watched Frank march toward the garage and knew he wasn't their guy. He'd mostly accused him of the harassment then the murder for a reaction. He'd seen the shock and hurt in Frank's eyes. The man had been in love with Paige's mother. Sure, that could lead to murder for some men, but not a man like Frank. He was the kind of guy that would internalize it, stew over it and never forget it. But he wasn't the kind of guy that would go crazy and kill for it. He slowly made his way back to his truck and pulled out of the lot. He'd grab breakfast at Molly's café before heading back home and tackling the plumbing. He really hated plumbing. A little procrastination was just what the doctor ordered.

Dax was just finishing up his breakfast when Sheriff Jericho Walters walked in, scanned the café and made a beeline for Dax. If he had to guess...this was about his visit to Frank. He barely glanced up when Jericho settled into the chair across from him.

“Sheriff,” Dax said casually as he set his coffee mug on the table.

“Dax,” Walters responded. “You mind if I join you for a minute?”

Dax grinned. “Little late for an invite don't you think?”

“Thanks, I don't mind if I do,” Jericho grinned back. This was why the two of them got along so well. He glanced up when the waitress approached the table. “Hey, Tiffany. I'll just have a cup of coffee if the pot is fresh.”

“Sure thing, Sheriff.”

Dax stretched out and relaxed against the comfortable bench. Jericho Walters would get to the point when he was ready.

“Frank,” Jericho said once Tiffany had poured him a mug of coffee and retreated to the kitchen.

“Yeah,” Dax shrugged. “What about him?”

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“He seems to think you are investigating a murder and he’s your number one suspect.” Jericho didn’t believe in beating around the bush.

“Well, he would be wrong then.” Dax crossed one ankle over the other and waited.

“We could do this all day, Dax. Just tell me why you cornered Frank. Why did you bring up Chaya’s death and what is all this about murder and a list?”

Dax sat up and took another sip of his coffee. “I went to see Frank because the last time Paige and I stopped in to get answers, the man was rude and evasive. I got suspicious. So, I went back to have a little chat with him in private.”

“And?”

“And he told me what I needed to know.” Dax supplied.

“Which was what?” Jericho frowned. “And what does it have to do with murder? Frank is hysterical...well as much as Frank can get, anyway.”

“Why don’t you start by telling me what Frank said and then I’ll fill you in on the rest.” Dax suggested.

Jericho studied the newcomer. He’d always liked Dax, but from the minute he stepped into town, Jericho knew the guy wasn’t just a carpenter. Ex-military or law enforcement for sure. But he’d never thought it was his business, not until today. “That’s basically the gist. Frank said you challenged him about his attitude toward Paige and accused him of harassing her and killing her mother. He said you told him you had a list and he was the number one suspect. He then spent about twenty minutes defending himself and assuring me he didn’t kill anyone and he didn’t have anything to do with Paige’s car.”

Dax smiled. “Good, guess I can call that mission accomplished.”

“Dax,” Jericho warned.

Dax’s smile widened. “I’ve heard you and Chaya had...some kind of relationship, friendship, whatever...I don’t really care about that. What I am wondering is how things were with Frank once she returned to town. He said she was a snob and thought she was better than everyone here. Sounds like she grew up in Manti, then moved away and got married. He seems to resent her deceased husband as well. My gut tells me he’s harmless, is my gut wrong?”

“No,” Jericho sighed. “Yes, Chaya and I were friends. Frank...well, he developed a crush on Chaya years ago. Maybe the first time he laid eyes on her, I don’t know. She wasn’t in the least bit arrogant and she didn’t think she was better than anyone. Frank just tells himself that. He needs an excuse, some reason she wasn’t into him. So, he pretends she was a snob. Chaya knew how he felt and she was careful around him. She tried to be friendly, but not too friendly. She

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was considerate that way, she didn't want to get his hopes up and then dash them. Her consideration seemed to backfire though. The more careful she was around Frank, the more he claimed she was conceited and self-centered."

"Frank said something about her husband being a war hero," Dax supplied. "Do you know anything about him?" The sheriff had avoided the topic of his relationship with Paige's mother. Was that because General Porter was right and they had some kind of history? If so, why hadn't Jericho put everything he had into solving the murder? Unless he already knew who did it.

"Dylan was in the Army," Jericho began. "I never met him. I'm actually not from around here. I grew up northwest of here, in Nephi. By the time I relocated, got hired as a deputy and settled in... Chaya had already moved away. I did know Chaya's mother, briefly. She was a nice old lady, lonely and more stubborn than an old mule. When her health started failing, she refused to tell Chaya. She didn't want to burden her daughter. Shirley knew Chaya was still mourning the death of Dylan and struggling to provide for Paige on her own. She didn't want to add extra stress to the situation."

"Any idea what branch of the Army?" Dax hoped he'd masked his surprise. He'd heard of Dylan Carter. The man *was* a war hero. Unfortunately, the mission he was on when he was killed was so top secret only a handful of people knew the details. He only knew because his team was assigned a similar mission and, as team leader, he was required to read the file completely before they shipped out. The authorities wanted to ensure nothing went wrong. Operation Bronze Gate was officially labeled a success. Dax disagreed. Two men were seriously injured on that mission and Dylan Carter had been killed. In Dax's mind, that was not in the least bit successful. Dylan had been killed rescuing the wounded after he had already risked his life securing the asset they had gone in for in the first place. That mission would always be classified. Bronze Gate was the kind of mission America didn't want the rest of the world knowing about.

"Army," Jericho said again. "Chaya said he was a Ranger. She never knew where he was going, or how serious the danger. She loved him unconditionally, but that time in her life was difficult. She was worried all the time and when word came down he didn't make it out, she wasn't really surprised. He was the kind of man that ran into danger so others didn't have to."

"Still, it must have been a blow. A single mom with a small child, on her own. The military doesn't let widows remain on the base for long after they pay out the benefit. It must have been hard. Was Shirley still alive when Chaya moved back?"

"Yes, but she had suffered a heart attack a month before. Chaya and Paige got here a few days before Shirley passed away. Chaya inherited the house, which was a blessing to the young mother. But dealing with the loss of two people she loved so dearly, so close together, was something she never got over." Jericho remembered the day he'd met Chaya Carter like it was yesterday. She had looked so sad, so lost...his heart broke for the woman who was dealing with so much pain and heartache. It was several years later when they started dating, but the impact of

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her sorrow at that first meeting never left him. He sympathized with her the best he could, but never truly understood the intensity or the overwhelming misery she lived with until he experienced loss himself. Chaya's death had nearly destroyed him.

"I guess that's where Paige gets her strength," Dax said absently.

"No, I don't think so. I think she gets her strength from Dylan. Chaya survived, barely I think." Jericho paused, careful not to show just how much he knew about Chaya and her history. "And only because of Paige. She knew she had to get up every morning, to function, to live because her daughter was depending on her. But Chaya was always a little bit fragile. She was never self-sufficient like Paige is. She certainly didn't have Paige's fearless determination or unwavering courage. That, she gets from her father. Where Paige is independent and stubborn, Chaya was...I don't know, needy isn't exactly the right word. But, she relied on her friends to help when trouble came knocking. A broken water pipe, a leaky faucet, you name it...Chaya was completely out of her league. She had a lot of help maintaining that property. She was tiny, delicate even, and beautiful." Jericho smiled inwardly. "On the inside and out."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to meet her," Dax mused, knowing that General Porter had been right. Jericho and Chaya Carter had been an item at some point. There was no use asking him about, the sheriff would deny it. He was doing his best to hide it right now. He was failing.

"Anyway," Jericho finally said. "Back to Frank. I had to endure his frantic complaining for twenty minutes so now you get to tell me what that visit was all about."

"Not much more to tell," Dax shrugged. "Like I said, he was acting suspicious when Paige and I went to see him. Sent us to you to find out if the car had been tampered with, but his attitude made me wonder if he could be the one that sabotaged it in the first place. I thought I'd have a chat with him, alone...just to see what he'd tell me."

"And?" Jericho pushed.

"And I came to the same conclusion you did," Dax admitted. "Frank had the hots for Chaya Carter and he holds that against Paige, but he's not the vandal."

"So why'd you get him so riled up?"

Dax grinned. "Just to make sure I was right."

Jericho shook his head. "Your antics are going to keep causing me trouble, aren't they?"

"Possibly," Dax agreed. "But someone is after Paige and I aim to find out who."

"Well, you could always leave the police work to... oh, I don't know... the police," Jericho said sarcastically. "Or is there another reason you're looking out for your neighbor? A woman that is more than capable of taking care of herself?"

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“Like?” Dax asked.

“Like maybe a certain General back in Washington?”

Dax scowled. “I may have received a call from someone back east. Or...I might just be big on neighborhood watch.”

“Paige doesn’t know Porter called you, does she?” Jericho surmised.

“No, and for the time being I think it's best we leave it that way,” Dax sighed. “I don’t think she’d appreciate his interference. Me...she’s getting used to that, but I also think she’s a little suspicious of my motives.”

“Which are?” Jericho pressed. He knew he shouldn’t, but this was Chaya’s daughter they were talking about.

“Which are above board and honorable,” Dax assured him. “I like the place, I like Paige. I’m not in the habit of standing back and watching while someone...anyone, gets harassed or bullied. I would have stepped in whether I got that call from Nathan or not. This way, he can stay in the loop and he doesn’t have to hound Paige about what’s going on.”

“You are walking a slippery slope my friend,” Jericho warned. “I hope it doesn’t backfire on you,” he paused to consider. “Now, I just have one more question. Law enforcement or military? My money’s on military since Nathan Porter knew how to find you.”

“Army,” Dax admitted. “But I’d appreciate it if you kept that little tidbit to yourself. I’d like to be known as the newcomer that flips houses. It’s simpler that way.”

“Understood,” Jericho stood. “But thanks for your service anyway. I’m sure you deserve it.” Then he walked through the door and disappeared down the sidewalk.

Dax pulled into his driveway and spotted Paige on her front porch. She looked...sad. *What now?* He wondered as he climbed from his truck and headed her way. As he strolled across her front lawn, Paige glanced up.

“Dax,” she said solemnly.

“What’s wrong?” he didn’t waste any time.

She sighed and moved to sit in her new Adirondack patio chair. “I just got a call from a friend. She was in tears. A close friend of hers was shot last night. He’s a cop, looks like he was ambushed. Things are great here in Manti, the citizens are great. I don’t face the same danger as my counterparts throughout the country. But it’s getting crazy out there.”

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“You never know,” Dax disagreed, thinking about all the trouble Paige had encountered since arriving. “It hasn’t exactly been Mayberry here since you arrived.”

“Not the same,” she insisted. “I guess I feel like I abandoned my friends. I jumped ship and now they’re sinking. So many senseless murders. These guys are targeting the good guys, you know?”

Dax took a seat beside Paige. “I know. And I also know it has to be hard on all of law enforcement. Every day we hear about another death. Every day another officer is attacked. Some survive, some don’t make it. But it takes a toll. Which is why all of you need to be careful...even you.” He knew what it felt like to lose his brothers...comrades in arms. The military was the same as the cops, an unwavering brotherhood. If one guy went down, they all felt it...whether they knew the guy personally or not.

Paige shrugged. “Not like them. Not like my brothers and sisters in Chicago, Louisiana, Dallas...the list goes on.”

“Exactly like them,” Dax disagreed. “Because someone is out to get you, too. Not because you wear the uniform. I don’t believe that. But someone is out to get you. Just because we don’t know why, doesn’t mean it’s any less dangerous.”

Paige took a few seconds to consider. “I think I might know why.”

Dax waited silently.

“Wait here, I’ll be right back,” she disappeared through the front door. When she returned, she was carrying a small diary and a file.

“What’s that?” Dax asked.

“Part of the stuff we found in that wall,” she handed him the diary as she settled back into her chair. “Read the last page. She wrote it the night she was killed. She was going out to the old Tillman Factory to find something a friend had hidden there years before.”

Dax read the passage and was even more positive “J” was Jericho. His gut was telling him Porter was right. Chaya Carter and the town sheriff were romantically involved. So why hadn’t Jericho looked into Chaya’s death himself? Was he grieving? He replayed the conversation they had in the café. If Jericho had lost the woman he loved, but still believed the relationship had to remain a secret, he couldn’t exactly work the investigation out in the open. He recalled the police report Paige had produced the day before. She seemed to be sharing information a little at a time. He’d be able to help her to a greater extent if she just showed him everything she had and they worked the case together. But, Paige thought he was a carpenter...and that’s the way he liked it, for now.

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After reading the official report, Dax had concluded Detective Tibble was incompetent at best, involved somehow at worst. Maybe by the time Jericho dealt with the grief, it was too late to do anything about the botched investigation. Tibble had left the department only a few months after Chaya's death. Dax considered that too much of a coincidence. Was that Walters doing? Had the sheriff finally stepped in and pressed his cop for answers? Or had Tibble fled out of fear?

"There was nothing in the police report about her finding anything...not that Tibble would know. But I think it would have been taken into evidence...booked with the rest of her stuff. There isn't anything there. I checked. Whatever mom was after, might still be out there." She handed Dax another piece of paper. It looked like it had been torn from a large pad. "I wish I knew what this meant. She's talking about Tracy, about 'the incident' and about a cover-up." Then she handed him another page. "In this one she says she thinks people got paid off. But she never mentions a name...only the Playboy or the Troll."

"So, you think your mom was looking into an old incident and that's what got her killed?" Dax asked, studying the documents Paige had handed him. She might be onto something. But why not give it to Jer? Especially if she was as fragile and helpless as he portrayed this morning.

"I do," Paige agreed. "I just don't know what yet. I found this picture but I have no idea who those two girls are with mom. She just wrote 'the three musketeers forever and always' on the back. But if she was so close, why didn't I meet either one of them?"

Dax took the photo and studied it for several minutes. "You know," he glanced up. "This one..." he pointed to one of the teenagers in the photo. "She looks kind of familiar but I can't place her. Didn't your mom go to school here? Maybe these were high school friends and at least one of them still lives here in town. I swear there is something familiar about the one on the right."

Paige studied the old photo more closely. "I don't know. It doesn't look familiar to me. Maybe it's someone I haven't run into yet."

"Maybe," Dax took the photo again. It was starting to drive him crazy. Where had he seen that woman before?

"Anyway," Paige said as she gathered up the documents and shoved them back into a cloth bag. "I think I'm making headway. It's starting to make sense to me. If my mom was looking into something...an old incident that was covered up...it could be the reason for her death. If I solve that mystery, I just might find out who has been harassing me. Two birds, one stone." She stood and glanced at Dax. "I forgot to ask, why are you here?"

"You looked like you could use a friend," he admitted.

"Oh, yeah that. Well, Carmen's one of a kind and she still kind of had a thing for Brian. That's the cop that got killed last night in Chicago. Anyway, she always thought maybe

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someday...well, if they could overcome the whole long distance thing...that they might be able to work things out. He was a great guy from what I heard. And Carmen...she's the best. She could use a shoulder right now. It's hard being so far away. I'll give it a day and check on her, see if she's decided what she's going to do. Depending how she is, I might need to head to Chicago in a couple days. You mind keeping an eye on the place while I'm gone?"

Dax stood, "consider it done." Then he slowly made his way off her porch and into his own house. He had plumbing to take care of.

Paige glanced up as a man and what looked like his teenaged son stepped into the station. "Can I help you?" she asked immediately. Margie was busy on the phone and didn't need to be interrupted.

"Well, I don't know," the man began. "I mean, I could be wrong but I thought I better report it and let you guys decide."

"Okay," Paige stepped forward and held out her hand. "I'm Deputy Carter, come on over to my desk and you can tell me what has you concerned."

The man shook Paige's offered hand as he rested his arm on the kid's shoulder and propelled him forward. "I'm Craig Naylor and this is my son, Dustin."

"It's nice to meet you both," Paige said cordially as she settled back into her chair. "So, what brought you in today?"

Dustin pulled out a cellphone and began tapping the screen. Seconds later he held the phone out to Paige. "Here, I took pictures."

Paige took the phone as Craig began to talk.

"We've been camping up the canyon for a couple days. Dustin and I thought we'd check out a trail a friend suggested. Just a way to get further out, away from all the crowds. It was an all-day run, but John said it was worth it since it's hard to find and rarely used. So, we packed a lunch and set out early. It was well into the afternoon when we came across that," he pointed to his son's phone. "Dustin took photos and I logged the GPS coordinates. If you have something I can write on, I'll jot them down for you."

Paige opened her desk drawer and passed over a scratch pad and a pen. She began scrolling through the photos Dustin had taken. It was immediately obvious the two of them had stumbled onto a marijuana grow. And from the looks of it, the thing was huge. "Did anyone see you?"

"We don't think so," Craig answered. "Was I right? Is that marijuana? I had a friend in college that tried to grow a plant in our dorm. I made him get rid of it before we both got busted,

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but that's what it looked like...just a smaller version. Anyway, I know the kind of people who run those kinds of operations so we were careful. We didn't see anyone lurking around but we only stayed long enough to plot the coordinates and snap a few pictures. Then, we headed back down the trail and detoured on the first side trail we found. It eventually dropped back onto the main highway and we came straight here. Sorry it took so long, but I wanted to be cautious."

"You did the right thing," Paige assured him. "Do you mind if I borrow this phone for a minute? I'd like Margie to download the photos for evidence."

"Sure, no problem," Dustin agreed immediately.

A few minutes later, Paige returned and handed the phone back to the teen. She pulled out a pad, gathered the details she'd need for her report and sent the family on its way. She'd already called Dean back to the office and was impatiently pacing when Jericho stepped through the door.

"Something up?" he immediately asked.

"Paige caught another case," Margie said in exasperation. "I swear, since you hired that girl there's been nothing but trouble around this town. You might want to remember that next time a hot shot FBI agent asks you for a job."

"What now?" Jericho focused on Paige.

"Marijuana grow up the canyon. Father and son took an old trail that's not used by the regulars, too steep and difficult and it's not on the official Arapeen Trail map...a friend told him about it and highly recommended they try it. They did and found more than they bargained for."

"You headed up to look for it?" Jericho wondered.

"Don't need to look, we've got coordinates. Dad had a GPS and jotted down the exact spot. I'm just waiting for Dean. A friend of mine caught a case in Arizona, turned out to be the Mexican Drug Cartel. Things got hot immediately. I don't want to deal with this one alone."

"Let's go," Jericho turned and headed for the door. "Marge...tell Dean to head that way, we'll meet him there. Once you find the trail on the map, relay the info over the air. I'll let you know if we need to call in Gage."

"And what if I get a call here in town?" Margie called after him.

"I'm sure you can handle it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have hired you." Jericho called out just before the door closed behind him.

"I'm not really that much trouble," Paige insisted as she climbed into the passenger seat. "It's not my fault all these cases have surfaced since I arrived. I mean...this one...the size of those plants... that was well established before I moved in."

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Jericho laughed. “Margie’s just giving you a hard time. If she didn’t razz you now and then I’d worry. Her complaining...that just means she’s accepted you as a part of the family.”

Paige considered that while she helped Jericho hook the trailer containing the four office ATVs to his Explorer. This department was so much different from the Bureau. Back in Virginia, if someone said something like Margie just did, she’d watch her back with them for the next six months. Here, it was a sign of acceptance. Who knew?

Paige and Jericho parked the SUV and began unloading two of the four wheelers. They had just finished when Dean pulled in behind them.

“Gage is on his way,” Dean called. “We might as well offload both of them. He heard what we had and checked on early. He’s maybe two minutes out.”

Jericho sighed. His budget was going to take another hit, he could feel it. They were just backing the last ATV off the trailer when Gage arrived. Jericho opened his hatch and withdrew extra ammo then secured it to the back of his machine. Gage and Dean did the same. Paige grabbed her go bag and was on her machine, ready to go within minutes. She watched as the three men checked their loads, climbed on their machines and took off. She pulled in line behind Jericho and was followed by Gage then Dean.

The four law enforcement officials parked their ATV’s in the trees and made their way to the illegal grow on foot. They wanted the element of surprise if the field was occupied.

Several minutes later, Jericho stood at the edge of the field. It was the biggest illegal drug operation he’d seen in his career. “Looks like they have this set up so they don’t have to live here. The stream irrigates the product for them. It took a significant amount of time to dig this out and put it in motion but now...they probably just stop by every few days and check on things. It’s so far out in the wilderness it may never have been found if that family hadn’t decided to venture out on their own.”

“I agree,” Paige said in awe. “And I’ve seen some elaborate operations during my career. We need to call the Salt Lake field office, the FBI is going to want in on this. Especially if it’s a Mexican grow.”

“Let’s do a walk through, get some pictures for evidence then you can call your former counterparts and fill them in. We’re going to need to hold surveillance 24/7. With this kind of operation, they may just stop in and head right back out. If nobody’s here...we just might miss them completely.”

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“What if they come by air?” Gage asked. “They might spot the trucks and get nervous.”

“I’ll scope out the best place to offload from here on out. You may not be close to your vehicle so carry in what you need. Be sure to have a 72 hour kit with you at all times. Water, snacks, blanket...the works.” Jericho supplied. “Now, Dean you come with me. Paige, you and Gage head off that way. I want to walk the entire field and meet up on the other side.”

The four of them set out to document and peruse the field so they knew exactly what they were dealing with. It was several hours later when they finally arrived back at the trucks.

“Who gets first shift?” Dean asked. “I’m game if you want me to hang out here overnight. One of you guys can spell me in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” Jericho agreed. “Let’s drive up the road a ways and see if we can find a good staging area. We need the vehicles to be as far out of sight as we can get them.”

They finally found the perfect spot to hide the cars. The downside...it was about a quarter mile from the trailhead. Dean parked his car and climbed back on the ATV. “See you guys in the morning.”

“Whoever relieves you will bring a can of gasoline with them. We’ll take the other machines back to the office. We’re just going to have to play this thing by ear. Hopefully, it won’t last too long. The mayor is not going to be happy with the added expense but it can’t be helped.”

Paige poured herself a second cup of coffee and settled into the kitchen chair to enjoy the peaceful morning before she headed back up the canyon. The office had established a simple routine. She, Gage and Dean would each work an eight-hour shift, then they would be on-call for eight to back Sheriff Walters on any incidents that came in throughout the day. Margie was handling all the phone reports herself. They’d been doing this now for three days and the Mayor was getting impatient. Jericho was getting even grumpier and his three deputies were tired. Something had to give. With any luck, the marijuana growers would arrive to check on their crop soon. Paige had called an acquaintance who worked for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in the Salt Lake District Office. Once they saw the photos, they were immediately onboard. If all went well, they’d be arriving sometime this afternoon. It had taken the local agents longer than expected to get official approval from the Division Office in Denver. The Agents had been told they could respond immediately, but they were forbidden to take part in the operation or the actual arrests. In other words, let the locals catch them, then the DEA could swoop in, take custody and prosecute. The Agents disagreed and took it to Denver. Paige had taken the call the previous evening, help would arrive within forty-eight hours.

She had just taken the last swig of her coffee when she heard a noise on her front porch. She silently moved across the room, stopped to pull her gun out of the holster and made her way to the

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front door. The instant she reached it, she yanked it open, gun drawn, then let out a frustrated growl.

"You know, that's the second time you pulled that gun on me, Ms. Carter," Dax grinned. "I might develop a complex."

"What are you doing?" Paige demanded. She took a step then froze. What in the world was piled in front of her door?

"Horse manure if I had to guess," Dax answered the unasked question as he shoveled another scoop into his large wheelbarrow

"Horse manure," she acknowledged. "Of course, I mean that makes perfect sense. Except for the fact that I don't own a horse." Paige sighed. "No problem, I can handle this. I have a large pile of horse poop strategically dumped in front of my door." She started to step over it when Dax placed both hands on her hips and lifted her in the air, setting her safely on the other side of the large pile.

Paige frowned. "Dax, what is this all about?"

"More of the same, I suspect." Dax answered absently as he returned to his task of shoveling.

"Not the horse sh... oh, man!" Paige threw her hands in the air. "I just painted that door." She had spotted the word 'pig' painted in bright red across her entire door. They had used so much paint, globs of it had run down each letter making it look like some freaky Halloween prop.

Dax looked up and studied Paige. *Was she angry with him?*

Paige shook her head then returned her attention to Dax. "I'm talking about you. Why are you here, on my front porch, cleaning up my mess? Why did you lift me over that pile of...poo like I was some damsel in distress or something? Do you think I'm going to break? Poor, fragile Paige just might collapse into a fit of hysteria if she sees what the vandal has done now? I'm not some delicate flower that is going to wilt at the mere hint of trouble, Dax. And I'd appreciate it if you stopped acting like I am."

Dax dumped the contents of the shovel into the wheelbarrow then leaned it against the house. He moved to the wooden railing, resting his elbows on the smooth surface as he stared into the distance. He barely noticed when Paige moved in next to him. "I have this...I don't know, instinct to protect. I see a problem and I just jump in full throttle and do what I can to fix it." He glanced her way then continued. "Maybe it's in my DNA, maybe it's learned, I don't know. In a previous life, it was my job. That's in the past, but some things stick. The night you arrived, the first time you pointed that gun of yours at me, I was beat. Dead tired. I'd been working all day and had just settled onto my front porch to enjoy the peaceful, cool night air when you pulled up. I didn't think, I didn't stop to consider, to develop a plan, I just stepped into my house, grabbed the flashlight and

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headed over to deal with the problem. It's what I do, Paige. Probably what I will always do. This morning, I was in the mood for pastries. While there I thought, *Paige has been working long hours all week on that big case. Plus, she had that friend who needed consoling after her boyfriend was killed. Maybe she'd like one too before she heads back up the canyon. Just a little treat to get the day going,*" Dax shrugged.

"It seemed like the neighborly thing to do at the time. When I climbed your stairs and saw the mess I didn't think, I didn't even develop a plan. I certainly didn't stand there and say to myself *I better take care of this or poor, helpless Paige is going to break.* I saw that mess and it pissed me off. I was angry at the disrespect and the sheer meanness of it. I didn't think," he said again. "I just grabbed a shovel and my wheelbarrow and went to work fixing it." Dax faced Paige and clenched his hands in frustration. He wanted to kiss the woman more than he'd wanted anything in the past couple years. But he couldn't, she was his neighbor and he had accepted a job to protect her. No, he wasn't getting paid for it, but getting involved under the circumstances still went against his personal code. "I don't think you are weak."

Paige smiled and bumped his shoulder with her own. "I can live with that."

"You can?" Dax was a little surprised. He'd been expecting an argument.

"Sure," Paige shrugged. "As long as you can live with the fact that I am a cop and I just might return the favor someday. If I see something at your house, I'll have the same instinct. I guess it's in my DNA." She wondered about that past life he had mentioned but it was clear to her he hadn't wanted to talk about it. It was also obvious something in that past had caused Dax Hamilton a significant amount of pain. Maybe one day they would be good enough friends that he'd confide in her, but right now she was content with the way things were. Well, sort of. For a second there, she'd thought he was going to kiss her and her stupid heart had gone all pitter patter at the thought. She really needed to get over this school girl crush before she did something stupid. So he was amazing, in every way - inside and out. He was also her neighbor and a friend. Case closed. "Oh, I was going to tell you I think you're right about the third person in that photo. I've been showing it around town and a couple of people thought she looked familiar but nobody's placed her yet. It's strange...not one person recognizes the other girl. I've narrowed the timeline on 'the incident' my mom referred to and I think something happened their senior year of high school. I thought my next stop would be the library. Helen, the librarian, said they have all the old newspapers archived on microfiche. I should be able to scan through mom's senior year, maybe the year before and the year after and finally track down this mysterious event. It might be nothing, but it might tell me how this all started."

"Good idea," Dax moved to sit at the far end of the porch, taking a small white bag with him. "You don't happen to have any coffee left do you? I'll take care of that later," he glanced at the mess in front of her door. "Let's stop a minute and enjoy Dolly's fresh baked goods... best donuts in town," he practically sang. "I'm sure you need to head out soon to relieve Dean."

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"Right," Paige nodded, considered the pile of manure in front of her door and headed down the front steps. "Let's take this out back, the air may be fresher with an entire house between us and this mess."

Dax laughed, stood and followed her to the back of the house.

Paige was nestled in a tree above the marijuana field. It was the only place she could find where she could survey the entire field at one time. She'd been there nearly three hours and for about the hundredth time wished she had thought to bring a book to pass the time. The field operators would have to return soon, but that could still mean days. She shifted, leaned against a thick branch perfectly located behind her back and let her mind wander. She'd been trying not to think of Dax all day. There was something about him, something a little dangerous, something that should scare her away, but instead drew her to him. His revelation the previous morning that he had a past fit. She'd known, deep in her gut, that he wasn't just a carpenter. Yesterday's conversation had confirmed her suspicions. An errant thought struck her, *could he be army?* Was he watching over her because Nathan had ordered it? No, that didn't jive. She believed him. Stepping in, doing what needed to be done, was in his DNA. She always believed it was in her genes as well. Her father had been like that. He stepped in, helped anyone in need, mowed widow's lawns, looked after his neighbors... and gave his life protecting his country. Once again, Paige wondered if Dax was army, too. If not, he would have been good at it. If so, well...he said that was behind him. She would believe him.

She was so deep in thought, the noise below her didn't register at first. When she heard it a second time, she shifted to get a better look. Her adrenaline shot up a notch when she saw the five men step into the open. There were too many to handle herself. She could see their weapons fastened securely to their belts...in plain sight. Clearly that was intentional. A strong warning to anyone that got in their way. She shifted, pulled out her phone and began to take video of their movement, careful to get a clear picture of each of the five participants. She may not be able to arrest them right now, but she could document their faces, capture their activities and gather enough evidence that when their case went to court, they couldn't deny their participation.

Paige glanced at the walkie strapped to her side, debated, then dismissed the idea. The department only used one channel. If Jericho was on a call or Margie was relaying information, turning on the radio would immediately alert the men to her presence. She couldn't risk it. If they caught her, she would be vulnerable and alone. This was the Mexican drug cartel, they'd probably kill first and ask questions later. She'd have to wait for an opening, get back to her truck and radio the station. It was her only option. She glanced towards the tree line where she'd parked the ATV, she wouldn't be able to take the machine, either. The instant she fired it up, the men would realize their operation had been discovered and probably flee. She'd just have to walk to the truck and wait for backup.

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Paige shifted uncomfortably, used the sleeve of her shirt to wipe away the sweat and carefully moved towards the back of the tree. Time to escape. The trick? Doing it without being noticed. The group of men had moved to the far end of the field. They were studying something out of her view. *Time to move.* Paige took a steadying breath, shifted and glanced at the ground below her. She just hoped she could make a run for it before they looked her way. She braced her hands on the outlying branch and pulled her body forward. She was repositioning her feet, ready to push away from the tree and make the drop to safety when the distinct sound of gunfire filled the air. Seconds later the branch above her head exploded. Paige released her grip and instantly fell to the ground. On her way down, her leg struck a protruding branch and pain radiated through her left thigh. She did her best to ignore it, braced for impact then rolled. Once her body was completely hidden in the thick mountain shrub, she froze... still as a statue she listened intently, completely focused on her surroundings. It was easy to hear the thundering sound of men's footsteps heading her way. They sounded like a herd of buffalo in the quiet mountain hide-a-way.

Options were rapidly running through her mind. Run? Slip further into the thick brush? Call for help? That's when she realized her walkie was missing. For several seconds she panicked as she surveyed the ground, looking for the one thing that was sure to give her away. Her entire body relaxed when she spotted it in the tree. You would never see it if you weren't looking – the men wouldn't be looking. The antenna must have caught on the sharp branch when she fell. Now, it was wedged between two offshoots at the perfect angle to hide its existence. Crisis averted, Paige dug her heels into the ground and quietly pushed her body backwards. When she was absolutely sure she couldn't be seen, she settled in to wait for whatever came next.

"Told you," one of the men said triumphantly as he kicked at something lying next to a tree several yards from her position.

Paige was barely breathing, the slightest sound would give her away. Two men were standing hunched over, studying the ground. She wanted to straighten, to see what it was they were examining, but she wouldn't. Her mere presence was risky enough. These men were hardened criminals. She could see it in their faces, recognize it in their mannerisms. If she got caught, she would be dead. She glanced down at her injured thigh and wished she could doctor it. But again, until the men decided to return to the field... a safe distance away, Paige was not going to move an inch. Instead, she pressed harder on the gaping wound in hopes the bleeding would stop. If she lost too much blood in this heat, she just might not make it back to the truck.

The two men continued to converse, occasionally kicking at the ground. Paige had no idea what they were saying. They had switched from English to Spanish. About the only thing Paige could say in Spanish was Buenas noches. As she listened, the conversation got more and more heated. Within minutes they were engaged in a full-blown argument. She wished she could take

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advantage of the distraction but she had no idea where the other three men had gone. Better to just wait it out.

Paige frowned when one of the men said halcon. Wasn't that hawk? Had they shot a hawk out of a nearby tree? Was it possible they hadn't been shooting at her after all? That the bullet had traveled through the majestic bird and collided with a branch above her head? That would mean they still didn't know she was there. It would mean, if she could remain silent and hidden, she just might have a chance to escape. *Be patient*, Paige reminded herself. Normally that wasn't all that difficult for her, but right now her leg was throbbing and she was feeling slightly woozy. Well, if she didn't pass out first, she'd take the first opening and head for her vehicle.

Paige had no idea how long she had been there or how long the two men argued. She just knew how relieved she was when a third man marched angrily toward the duo and softly gave them some kind of order. *He must be the man in charge*, Paige decided. He moved with an air of authority and whatever he said to the arguing workers, worked instantly. They lowered their heads and walked purposefully across the expanse. She didn't blame them. She had no idea what the words meant because he also spoke in Spanish, but the tone and volume were extremely menacing. She decided he wasn't only the guy in charge, he was the most dangerous suspect in the group and the one they all needed to keep an eye on.

Several minutes later Paige decided it was time to move. All five men were out of sight. It might be her only chance and she was going to take it. She cautiously reached around her back and slowly unzipped the side pocket of her small bag. Once it was halfway opened, she reached in and pulled out a bandana. It was the only thing she had to wrap around her wounded thigh. She may have lost her communication, but luckily she still had her pack. Once she was confident the cloth was secure and wouldn't fall off her leg as she walked, she pivoted and crawled away from the field. It was slow going. She didn't want to make too much noise and her wounded leg slowed her progress significantly.

After what seemed like hours but in reality was probably minutes, Paige forced her body to stand. She couldn't hear the five men any longer so if she was careful, they wouldn't hear her either. With each step, the pain grew worse but she couldn't stop. She had to get to her vehicle and call for help. The sun was high in the sky now, the hottest part of the day. And she didn't have any water left. The morning had been scorching and she'd already finished off the two bottles she'd taken with her that morning. Maybe that would help with the dehydration, she really didn't know. She just knew she needed help...soon. Hope soared as she rounded the bend and recognized the spot her and her colleagues had been stashing the truck. She picked up the pace, left the main roadway and frowned. She should be able to see the vehicle by now. After a few more painful steps Paige fell to the ground, defeated. The truck was gone. Nowhere to be seen. Had the

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Mexicans spotted it? Had someone else stolen it? Was she being watched? She jerked her head up and slowly began to peruse the area.

Once Paige determined she was in fact alone, she focused on survival. She was alone, without transportation, without a way to call for help, without water...she was tired and weak and her mouth felt like sandpaper. She couldn't stay out in the afternoon sun much longer. Slowly, gradually she forced her body back to a standing position and half walked, half drug her leg to a shady area. She lowered herself onto the ground and rested her back against a fallen tree trunk. Now what? Paige was out of answers.

Stan pulled the vehicle to the side of the road, fuming. How dare that man risk everything...risk Stan like that? Of all the stupid...asinine...

"Jump in back and make sure nobody can see you," the bane of Stan's existence said as he stood next to the open driver's side door.

Stan took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the wheel. He threw open the back door and dropped onto the shiny leather, slamming the door behind him. They rode in silence for at least a mile before Stan spoke. "Pull over and let me out."

"What? Are you nuts? Someone might see you. Seriously, don't be ridiculous. We're almost to your car."

"I...said....pull....over," Stan said through gritted teeth.

"You are being ridiculous," the man smiled, then slammed his hand down on the steering wheel in victory. "We did it this time." He let out a triumphant laugh and pressed harder on the gas pedal.

"I'd say that's the understatement of the century. Pull over or I'm jumping," Stan warned.

The man glanced into the back of the vehicle then pulled to the side of the road. "What the hell, Stan? Your car is just up around that bend. This is beyond absurd."

Stan took another deep breath, trying to calm his temper. "I agree. Ridiculous, absurd and completely asinine. What were you thinking?" he practically yelled. "You told me you needed a lift. You told me it was important. You did not tell me I was going to be the getaway driver so you could engage in grand theft auto," Stan yelled. "I'm the damn prosecutor in this county, you idiot."

"Calm down," the driver shook his head in disbelief.

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“Calm down? You want me to calm down?” Stan pressed. “Do you realize you just risked my career...my entire life...I could go to jail because you...you....” he closed his eyes and took another deep breath. It didn’t help. “Because you stole a freakin cop car! And then...as if that wasn’t enough...you drove the damn thing off a cliff.” He pushed open the door and stepped onto the dirt roadway.

Daniel pushed open the door and climbed from the car as well. “You really need to stop overreacting to this. Nobody saw us. We got away clean. Just get back in the car, let me take you around the corner and we head our separate ways.”

“Get in the car and drive away, Daniel,” Stan warned. “Get in the car and leave. And never, ever come near me again. This arrangement is over. You got that? Over.”

“It’s over when I say it’s over. If this didn’t work, if Paige Carter doesn’t leave, we’re going to have to strike again...immediately.”

“You, not me. You are going to have to strike again. I’m out. I’m done. Forget you ever knew me. Lose my number, block me out of your mind forever, because I will not help you ever again. Let that sink in because I’m serious. I am not, under any circumstance, going to assist you in this illogical quest to drive that woman out of town.”

“Sounds like you want your boss, Mr. Straight and Narrow, to find out about that little incident at the Quick Stop.”

“I don’t care,” Stan countered. “I don’t,” he repeated at the look Daniel was giving him. “I did. When this all started I cared a lot. But it’s gone beyond that now. You just committed a felony! As embarrassing as it was, I paid my debt, I worked hard, went to college, passed the bar and landed a good job. That record is sealed and even if it weren’t, it all happened when I was a juvenile. A stupid teenager who made a stupid, childish mistake. Do your best, you can’t hurt me. Not permanently, anyway.”

Daniel grinned. “We just committed a felony. Remember that.”

“Oh, believe me, I will never forget it. But you see, you have a problem. You try to drag me into this...you try to pin this on me...I have evidence. You really should be a little more careful what you leave on a person’s voicemail. I might be prosecuting speeding tickets the rest of my life, but you? You’ll be pacing an eight foot cell. I guess maybe *you* might want to remember *that*.”

The man stood in hundred degree weather in a suit and looked as calm and comfortable as if he were sitting behind the desk of an air conditioned office. “This is getting us nowhere. Get back in the car and let me drop you closer. I for one need to get back to work. I have a meeting in an hour.”

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Stan took a step closer and got right in the man's face. "For the last time, I am not getting back in the damn car. I am not taking your calls. I am out...done...finished...kaput. Figure out a way to get that through your thick skull because if you ever bother me again, you will not like the consequences. I'm not nearly as stupid and incompetent as you always believed, old man. I may be young, I may be the junior prosecutor now, but I am not an idiot. I kept evidence, proof that the perp is you...not me. I will put together the strongest, tightest case you ever saw if you try to bring me down. And I'll walk, while you fry. Are we clear yet?"

Daniel shrugged. "I think I was about done with you, anyway."

"And one more thing, I won't be doing you any favors in the future. It would be in your best interest to stop this thing before you go too far. After today, I think it's a little late but...well, who knows. Before that little stunt you pulled back there, my record was clean. I did not break any laws. I will not break any in the future. And I'll advise you to do the same. Because if a case crosses my desk with your name on it...I will not help you. I will spill my guts to James Tolman, take my lumps and watch the man destroy you before I lift a finger to do your bidding. We both know he is tough on crime and with him, there are no shades of gray. Everything is black and white. Guilty or not guilty. Plug that into your equation and smoke it." Then Stan turned, crossed the road and made his way to his car. He heard the vehicle pull away, but he didn't look up, didn't wave, didn't acknowledge it in any way. He'd been serious. He didn't care anymore. Daniel could tell the world what happened when he was a teenager. He would be embarrassed, he might have to work crap cases for a while, but he'd survive.

Paige studied the contents of the backpack she'd brought on the stakeout. The water was gone and the bandana was currently ensuring she didn't bleed out from the deep gash in her leg. All she was left with was a roll of gauze, two band-aids, a pocket knife and a granola bar. Life just couldn't get better than this. Okay, so Jericho had said a 72 hour kit and she had about a twelve hour kit. Lesson learned. She rested her head against the trunk of the tree and considered. She could cut off her pant leg and use the gauze to wrap her cut. The discarded denim would make good, strong strips to hold the bandage in place. But, what if it started bleeding again? Was it better to leave it the way it was? *Think Paige, you took First Aid.*

If she were lost in the backwoods, somewhere stranded and alone for days, the best option would be to clean the cut as best she could, bandage it with the gauze and then secure it with the cutoff pant material. Since that wasn't what she was facing and she wasn't worried about infection, she decided to leave the wound the way it was. She glanced at her watch...twenty. Okay, Gage would arrive in... how long before four o'clock? Her mind just wasn't working properly. Well over an hour, though. Should she try to walk out? They weren't that far from the city. Could she get to the mouth of the canyon and get medical help? A wave of dizziness hit her and Paige dropped to her side. She'd just rest here a minute and think about a plan in a minute.

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Gage pulled into their regular staging area and frowned. Where was Paige's vehicle? She should be here waiting for him but there was no sign of her or her cop car. He parked and got out to look around. This didn't make sense. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair and debated what he should do. He couldn't get to the marijuana field without the ATV and that seemed to be missing, too. He stepped in front of his Explorer and thought he saw movement in the shadows of the trees up ahead. As he slowly made his way toward the forested area, he saw a large lump on the ground. It was partially hidden behind a fallen tree trunk but his heart sank. Was that Paige? Had someone attacked her, stolen her truck and left her for dead? Was she dead? He wanted to pick up the pace, to run to the object on the ground and see if it were his friend and fellow cop. But he couldn't, he had to remain alert. He had to go slowly and maintain his situation awareness. If Paige had been attacked, the perpetrator could still be in the area.

Gage was only a few feet away from the body and it was obvious it was Paige. His stomach clenched as he slowly lowered himself to her side and reached for her hand. He instantly realized it had blood smeared all over it. He checked for a pulse and was happy to find one but her skin was clammy and she was so pale. At least she was alive. He gently turned her onto her back and spotted the problem. She had a serious wound on her leg. It looked like the bleeding had stopped but she was probably in shock. He stood and made one last check of the surrounding area just to be sure, then lifted her into his arms.

Paige groaned, tried to shift but realized she was pinned against something. She forced her eyes opened, wondering if the men had found her. She was relieved to see a friendly face. Friendly, but clearly worried. "Gage?"

Relief surged through Gage's entire body. She wasn't only alive, she was semi-conscious. "I've got you. We're going to the clinic. Just hang in there a little longer. I promise, you are going to be okay." He just hoped he could keep that promise. He still had no idea what had happened here.

"They came back," she whispered. "You have to get help. You have to stay here."

"Shhh," Gage soothed as he opened his passenger door and gently set her on the seat.

"Gage," Paige said more urgently. "My car...someone stole my car. And the men are here. They're working the field. You have to call Jericho. You have to get them out here to help you. I can rest in your car. I can wait." She let her head fall back against the seat but clearly exhausted.

"I'll call the sheriff but we are going to the clinic. I wouldn't be able to go in alone, anyway. There's nothing we can do here. I'll call Jer and he can bring Dean and the DEA with him. They'll handle the arrests."

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“They might need you,” she argued.

Gage didn’t answer, he just closed her door and made his way to the driver’s side. He had to get her medical attention. He just hoped they had what they needed here in town. Otherwise, she’d have to be transported to the hospital in Gunnison. She’d probably be mad, might even hold a grudge, but he was going to do what he thought was right. He started the engine and pulled onto the roadway before he grabbed his mic and called the office.

“Control,” Gage called.

“Go ahead, Gage,” Margie answered.

“Paige is injured and her car is missing. I’m transporting her to the center.”

“How serious,” Margie asked earnestly.

“I’m not sure,” Gage admitted. “I think she’s in shock.”

“What’s her condition, Gage?” Jericho came over the air.

“Charlie maybe,” he admitted. He didn’t think it would be life-threatening, but it could be if he didn’t get her to the hospital.

“I’ll meet you there,” Jericho responded.

“There’s something else,” Gage admitted. “Someone stole her patrol car.”

Jericho pulled to the side of the road and made a U-turn a little too fast. His tires spun and threw dirt and gravel behind him. Good thing the area was void of any citizens.

“And Paige said the men are working the field,” Gage added.

Could this situation get any more complicated? “I’ll call the feds, they just arrived and are getting settled in at the Country Village. They can deal with the illegal grow operation. I’m meeting you at the center.”

Gage relaxed. He knew he’d made the right decision, but it was nice to have the sheriff agree. “I’m pulling in now,” Gage said into the handpiece. “Margie, I’ll contact you by phone when I have an update.”

“10-4,” Margie acknowledge. She sat back in her chair and wondered when life in this small town was going to settle down. She was worried about their newest deputy. Paige had come into town and stirred up a hornets nest. She couldn’t help but wonder if this was work related or if it had something to do with her flashing that picture all around town. People were starting to talk... behind her back of course, but Margie had heard the gossip. The locals just wanted Tracy’s death to be left alone. They had accepted it years ago and the town wanted to forget it. Margie

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disagreed. If there was something mysterious about that girl's accident, she for one wanted to know the truth. Her thoughts took a turn to Paige's mother. Chaya Carter had been beautiful and delightful. Margie was still convinced something more than friendship had gone on between the delicate lady and the sheriff. But, if Jer wanted to keep his private life private, that was his business. Margie just hoped Paige's injury was a result of those men growing marijuana in the forest and not something more personal. Either way, Margie was going to be on edge until she received word the girl was okay.

Jericho Walters stepped into the Main Street Clinic and surveyed the room. There was no sign of Gage or Paige so he stepped up to the window. Tina Farren was working the desk. Well, at least he'd finally caught a break with that one. "Hello, Tina." Jericho forced himself to be friendly when all he wanted to do was demand answers.

"I'm guessing you are here looking for your deputy," she answered back. "Go on back, second room on the left."

"Can you give me an update on her condition?" he pushed.

"I'll tell the doc you're here. She's going to have to fill you in," Tina pushed back from the desk and headed through the open door behind her.

Jericho frowned but walked through the swinging door and stepped into Paige's room. Gage was sitting in the chair beside her. Worry hit him full force when he saw how pale and frail she looked. He quietly took in the scene before him. Every few seconds the electronic monitor next to her bed beeped filling the silent sterile room with a reminder they were in a medical facility. Paige had an IV line hooked to her left arm. It was connected to a bag that contained some kind of clear liquid. Her eyes were closed and she was covered with a thin sheet. Tubing ran out her dainty nose... Chaya's nose... to a metal container fastened to the wall behind the bed. *Why did she need oxygen?* For the first time since he had met the feisty woman, she looked fragile. He thought of Chaya and blinked back the moisture that suddenly formed behind his eyelids. This was the daughter of the woman he had loved...still loved and she had been alone and injured out in the wilderness. Jericho wondered if hiring her had been a good idea. He'd done it to protect the girl, but looking at her now, he felt like he'd failed Chaya Carter...again.

The doctor stepped into the room and Gage stood. "Sorry boss, I didn't see you there. Here, take my chair. I need a break anyway." Then the large man stepped from the room and disappeared.

"Tina said you wanted an update," Doctor Jan Symons said as she glanced at the patient's chart next to the bed.

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“That would be great, Jan,” Jericho answered as he lowered himself into the chair Gage had vacated.

“Well, she was in shock when she arrived. That’s why we’re given her oxygen. I’m not sure it’s necessary, but it’s a precaution. We’ll be keeping her overnight. She was dehydrated so we’re pumping fluid into her and will continue throughout the evening. She also had a nasty laceration on her leg. I’d say that’s the catalyst that started all this. If I had to guess, she somehow got it from the branch of a tree. It still had splinters embedded inside the wound but we cleaned it out and stitched it up. We won’t know the extent of the muscle damage until she’s able to get up and around again. There could also be tendon damage. Bottom line, she’s going to have to be careful with it for several weeks.”

“So the blood loss caused the shock?” Jericho surmised.

“She did lose quite a bit of blood, but it appears she was able to put enough pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding. I think it was a combination of the tissue damage and the blood loss that sent her body into shock. The heat and the dehydration didn’t help. Overall, she’s lucky Gage found her when he did. I don’t have to tell you what extended exposure when her body was already traumatized could have led to.” Jan said soberly.

“Thank you,” Jericho sighed and wondered exactly what had happened out there today. His phone chimed and he stood to step out of the room before answering it.

Gage strode down the short hallway and paused outside Paige’s room when Jericho ended his call. “The men were gone by the time the DEA arrived,” Jericho supplied. “It looks like they might be back, though. Apparently, the runoff this spring was more than they planned for. The men were clearing the trenches, which were cluttered with debris. Guess that heat wave that came through last week worked to our advantage. Agent Corbett said he and Platt are heading back to their room. They plan to get a good night’s rest before they pick things back up in the morning. They plan to be in place by seven. You think you’re up for it? They could probably use the extra manpower and technically this is still our case.”

“I’ll be there,” Gage promised. “What about tonight? Dean still headed out to pick things up?”

“Naw,” Jericho shook his head. “I cancelled him. I want him to head in with you. Plus, we still have a patrol car to find. Today has turned out to be a bigger cluster than we’ve had in a long time. Before I notify the Mayor I’d like to know we did everything we could to find that car.”

“I’ll call Dean,” Gage pulled out his phone. “We’ll drive the canyon for a few hours and see what we can find. Do you think it’s connected? The men could have spotted the car and ditched it.”

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“Possible, but not probable,” Jericho decided. “I guess they could have seen the unit and got spooked. Could be why they left, but I don’t think so. I think something else happened to that car. Could be a couple of kids, could be something more sinister. We may never know.”

“Could be the guy that’s been harassing her all this time,” Gage said, knowing the sheriff was thinking along the same lines as he was.

“Could be,” Jericho agreed.

“I’ll call you if I find it. By the way, Margie’s been updated. She’s gonna stick around for another hour then head home. I didn’t think you’d mind her taking off early. She said she might stop by before heading home,” Gage said.

“Thanks,” Jericho said. “I’ll watch for her.”

“You sticking around?”

“Yeah,” Jericho said soberly. “I want to be here if she wakes up.” Jericho watched his deputy walk down the overly white hallway and step through the doors. He pulled out his phone and dialed Dax. Several minutes later he pocketed his device and stepped back into Paige’s room knowing notifications were already made to those who needed them.

Dax settled into his favorite lounge chair and hit send. He wasn’t looking forward to this call and just hoped General Nathan Porter wouldn’t blame him for Paige’s injuries.

“Do you have news?” Porter said in answer.

“Not good news,” Dax answered. “Paige has been injured.”

“Injured how?” he demanded. “I knew something like this was going to happen.”

“Not sure, and this might not have anything to do with her personal trouble. It appears to be job-related this time.” Dax supplied.

“Tell me,” Nathan demanded.

Dax relayed the information Walters had given him then waited for the fallout. It wasn’t as bad as he had expected.

“I can live with on the job injuries,” he paused. “If that’s what this is. But what about the missing vehicle? Does the sheriff have any leads on who is responsible?”

“Not so far,” Dax admitted. “He has his men out looking for it as we speak. We both know it may be related to the other incidents. It makes sense to me but I don’t like it. If her vandal knew where to find the car, he’s escalating. He had to be stalking her.”

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“He was already stalking her, Hamilton.” Nathan had no doubt about that. It was the only way someone knew where her vehicle would be to tamper with the brakes.

“I guess,” Dax agreed. “Had to. It’s just way too much of a coincidence to think they just happened onto her car while she was busy with Pete. Everyone around here knows that man can talk for hours. But they would have had to know she was there in the first place. It’s possible they have a scanner. Those things are cheap and easy to come by. Whoever is after our girl might be monitoring the radio.”

“You might want to mention that theory to the sheriff,” Nathan suggested. “You said you trust him. I’m a little more skeptical than you, but I’ll trust your judgement on this. If you think he isn’t involved, keep him in the loop.”

“I think you were right about him having a thing with Paige’s mother,” Dax said thoughtfully. “But I think that makes him an ally, not the perpetrator. There’s something about the way he talks about Chaya Carter that makes me think he loved her. If that’s the case, I don’t believe he would hurt Paige. I think he would protect her. Plus, I was with him when we got to the meadow where Paige crashed her car. He wasn’t involved in that...I’m sure of it. I think we should bring him in on this. Tell him everything and see if he can help. At the very least, he’ll have her back while she’s at work when I can’t be there.”

“Like I said, I trust your judgment. Do what you think is best. Just take care of my girl. If anything happens to her, I’m holding you personally responsible.” Nathan Porter warned.

Dax looked at his phone when the line went dead. *Well, that’s just great. Now I’m responsible if some lunatic gets lucky and harms his neighbor.* “Urggg,” Dax growled. “Seriously, I... retired.” He stood and walked to the large bay window. He needed a plan and he definitely needed Jericho Walter’s help. Maybe together they could figure out just who was messing with the towns’ newest deputy.

It was just after nine in the evening when Jericho got the call. Gage and Dean had located Paige’s Explorer. Unfortunately, it had been driven over a cliff and was obviously totaled. Frank was on scene and was trying to determine the best way to retrieve the wreckage. Not an easy task now that the sun had set.

“Tell Frank he can wait until morning,” Jericho decided. And call Sgt. Lane Alva. See if he’ll get a couple of his technical rescue guys to rappel down and retrieve her equipment.”

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“What about evidence,” Gage asked. “There could be fingerprints, hair or fibers inside the car. Will they know not to mess with our forensic evidence while they’re down there?”

“Just tell Lane what our concerns are. He’ll take care of it. The START guys have training in evidence protection, tell him I’d like to utilize a couple of them. If he has any questions, he can call me. That’s one of the reasons we started the Sanpete Technical Rescue Team in the first place.”

“I’ll take care of it. Any update on Paige?” Gage asked.

“Not really,” Jericho sighed. “She’s resting now. The doc said she’s improving. They hope to release her in the morning but it depends on our girl. She’s tough but this time, she took a real beating.”

“I’d like to know what happened out there,” Gage admitted. “Not knowing is driving me crazy. Paige is tough. Whatever went down, could’ve happened to any of us.”

“I agree,” Jericho said soberly. “So you and Dean watch your back. We still don’t know who the men were that showed up and worked the field. If they’re from Mexico, they are going to be dangerous.” He paused, wondering if he should share the update from the DEA. “Gage?”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Agent Corbett called back. He said while they were out there, they spotted a dead hawk. Looked like it had been shot, but they didn’t want to disturb anything until they caught their men. So they didn’t get a good enough look. No idea on caliber or even how long the thing had been there. I’m confident it’s fresh, we’ve been all over that field and none of us noticed a dead hawk. Paige wasn’t shot, we know that, but if those men are responsible for the hawk, they’re going to be armed. Watch your back, and fill Dean in. You two need to watch out for each other. There is something going on here and I still don’t know exactly what it is.”

“I agree,” Gage said softly. “I’ll send Frank home and get working on Alva. Depending on how long he thinks this will take, I might leave Dean here and work the morning shift alone if that’s alright with you.”

“How about I contact Lane and fill him in. I’ll have him call your cell to get the location. When he arrives, turn the scene over to him and both you and Dean head on home. It’s been a long day and I’d like both of you there tomorrow to assist in the arrests,” Jericho ordered.

“Sounds good,” Gage agreed. “I guess I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

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Daniel sat in front of the television waiting to see if the car theft had made the news. He was desperate to learn what had happened to that pesky Paige Carter as well. He tightened his grip on his glass until his knuckles turned white. He wanted to call Stan. He wanted an update. He wanted to strangle the arrogant fool for crossing him the way he had earlier that morning. How dare the young punk refuse to help? Now, when he so desperately needed his inside man to tell him what was going on. Had Paige walked out? Was she okay? Was she home packing her bags? He needed to know these things. But how? He believed Stan, the man was finished. And if he called, he was worried what the guy would do. The fact that he'd kept evidence worried him. He seriously hadn't believed the guy was smart enough to think of that. No, he couldn't call. He punched the numbers on the remote and waited. Surely one of the news channels would report on a stolen cop car. He'd just have to be patient. Daniel laughed out loud at that. Wasn't that what had gotten him into this mess in the first place? He was not a patient man. Never had been. Probably never would be.

The following morning Jericho pulled up beside the tow truck and waited as Frank Hopkins slowly pulled the damaged vehicle from the ravine. The mayor was not happy. In fact, he was furious that the money he was planning to spend on revitalizing the city park was now going to be spent on a new car. How that was Jericho's fault, he still didn't know. He hadn't stolen the car. He hadn't driven it over a cliff. He shook his head and once again realized just how much he hated politics.

Frank pressed a lever and the crumpled metal began its ascent to the top. The vehicle bounced, struck the side of the mountain then swung back and forth through the air as it slowly got closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. Jericho silently stared into the distance, his anger rising with each passing second. Whoever did this had risked Paige's life. If Gage hadn't arrived when he did, who knows what might have happened.

His deputy was lucky to be alive. He had known that last night, but after listening to Paige describe the events of the previous day in detail, it was even more evident. Well, she could describe them up until she reached the staging area and found her patrol car missing. By that time, she was in such bad shape Jericho assumed she had passed out. Gage's arrival was the only thing that had saved her life.

They were dealing with hardened criminals. Jericho just hoped they returned so the team could arrest them. And, he hoped they could do it without a gun battle. The men had shot that hawk, without a second thought. They had to know it was illegal, but that's not what worried Sheriff Walters. No, what had him concerned was the callousness. They were in a populated area but they didn't seem to care. They weren't worried about the

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sound of the shot drawing attention to their operation. If they had come across a citizen, what would the outcome have been? Based on their willingness to fire their weapon for sport, he was afraid he knew the answer... and he didn't like it.

The vehicle was retrieved and safely secured on the back of Frank's tow truck. Jericho had just hung up with Dr. Symons. She was keeping Paige another day. Jericho smiled, glad his deputy's spunk was returning. Paige Carter was not thrilled. She wanted to be released...immediately. But Jericho was glad the hospital wouldn't budge. He'd have one heck of a time keeping her at home where she belonged. This way, he didn't have to worry about her showing up in the middle of the takedown

Gage had reported in nearly ten minutes ago. So far, the men had not returned. Jericho slid behind the wheel and made his way to the staging area. He was in the area, might as well join the fun. If all five of the men returned, the others might have their hands full. He still knew how to make an arrest.

Jericho silently slid into position next to Dean. All was still quite on the home front but instinct told him something was about to happen. He could feel it in the air somehow. He unsnapped the leather strap holding his weapon in place and waited. He didn't have to wait long. The first thing he heard was the loud snapping sound of a twig breaking under pressure. Then the sound of voices echoed loudly throughout the entire area. Jericho rested his hand on his weapon, more relaxed now than he had been moments earlier. If these guys were making that kind of racket, they had no idea they were about to get caught.

Gage heard the command loud and clear. Agent Corbett stepped into the clearing, gun drawn voice steady. "DEA, get on the ground."

Suddenly, their world erupted. Three of the men drew their weapons. Corbett fired. One man went down. The other men started firing off shots randomly, the two who hadn't drawn now alert, guns swinging in one direction then the next. None of them knowing where to shoot. Agent Corbett was now positioned behind a large tree...out of sight but ready to continue the battle if necessary. The rest of the officers were in position, ready to take action if necessary. The four remaining men began to fire into the trees. Blindly trying to hit something, but not knowing where to aim or how to escape. Every one of the officers returned fire. A second man dropped to the ground holding his right shoulder, moaning in agony.

"We have you outnumbered and surrounded," Corbett said stepping back into the open. Jericho wondered what the guy was thinking. If the men fired on the fed, one

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of them might find their mark. He stood, determined to find a position of defense just in case the men started shooting again. To his surprise, they dropped their weapons and held their hands in the air.

Gage, Dean, Jericho and Agent Platt rushed the field. Within minutes the three men still standing were cuffed and secured. The man on the ground moaning was also cuffed. The aggressor wasn't so lucky. It only took seconds to confirm the man was dead.

Several hours later, Jericho stepped from the office and made his way to his vehicle. Margie was holding down the fort while the rest of them got some much needed rest. Dean volunteered to be on call. He said he was tired, but not as exhausted as Jericho and Gage.

As he backed out of the parking stall, he decided to make a stop at the clinic before heading home. Paige would want to know they had caught the bad guys and everyone was okay.

Paige looked up and smiled as Jericho entered the room. "You look worse than I feel," she observed.

"Long night, kiddo." He settled into the visitors chair and waited for the question. It was almost immediate.

"Did you catch them?" Paige asked.

"We did," Jericho nodded. "We had a short gun battle. Lazaro Cruz died on scene. I believe he was the man in charge. He matched the description you gave of the guy that broke up the argument while you were there waiting. Another one of his men, Franco Parez was injured but he'll be fine. Took a bullet to the right shoulder. The other three surrendered without incident. Dario Morales, Ramiro Soto and Teyo Vargas are all tucked away tightly in the Sanpete County Jail. The feds are arranging things on their end. The four of them will be transported to a federal facility in the morning. All in all, I think I'll call this one a success." Jericho frowned. "Well, with one exception. I'd prefer one of my deputies wasn't recovering in a hospital bed at the moment."

"I'm glad," Paige said a little sad she'd missed the excitement. "We will call this a success. I got out of there without them knowing. I got plenty of video to use at their trial and none of our guys got shot in the takedown. Happy days all around."

Jericho smiled. "I think happy is a little overstated. You got injured, Agent Corbett had to shoot the leader and Dean is dealing with the fallout of having to use his weapon on duty."

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“How is he?” Paige wondered.

“He’s good. Says it’s okay he shot that guy, he didn’t have a chance and I think the fact he survived with a shoulder wound somehow makes things easier for Dean. He knows he did what he had to do, but doesn’t have to deal with all the emotions and the stress he’d face if the man had died. I don’t know Agent Corbett well enough to know if he’s okay. But I guess that’s for his people to handle. I’m just glad the whole ordeal is over.”

“Sorry about my car,” Paige frowned.

“Yeah, that’s a total loss,” Jericho admitted. “The mayor wanted to send it over to the junkyard for scrap but I’m holding onto it. I’d like you to take a look once you’re up to it. Gage and Dean went through it. They were able to pull some fingerprints off the door and the front panel but I want you to take a look. As I recall, forensics is your specialty.”

“Will that compromise the case? I mean with it being my car and all?”

“I don’t see how it would. You’re a cop, not a suspect. Sure it was your car, but so far there is nothing that points to this being personal. I’m working under the assumption it was an attack on the department, not an individual.”

Paige grinned. That might hold up in court but she knew differently. Sheriff Jericho Walters knew this was personal. She wondered how that was going to impact her quest to find her mother’s killer. Would he help or hinder her future efforts? She supposed only time would tell.

“I’m told you will be released this afternoon,” Jericho said as he settled into the comfortable chair. “I also need to warn you that General Porter has been notified of the situation.”

“What?” Paige practically shrieked. “Why? How could you? Do you have any idea how much trouble you have just caused?”

Before Jericho had a chance to answer, Paige’s room phone began to ring.

“Hello,” Paige answered tentatively. Then glared at her boss. “Nathan, I’m sorry they called you. I’m fine, really. No, I’m being released this afternoon. You do not need to fly out here.”

Jericho stood. “I believe that’s my cue to leave.” He was smiling as he left the room. His job was done...for the day. Nathan Porter could handle it from here. Now, for some much needed R&R. Tomorrow, he’d decide what to do about the threats on his deputy. Because he was going to do something. Even if that meant taking on the emotional task of solving the murder of the love of his life. Chaya would just have to forgive him if their secret got out. He had to be honest with himself. He’d never be able to work her case, to truly delve into the situation, without revealing

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just how much Chaya Carter had meant to him. But, he'd kept his feelings to himself long enough. And it was more important to protect the living than it was to hide the secrets of the past.