

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Youthful Plunder *Season 1, Episode 5*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

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www.melaniepsmith.com

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Paige climbed into her personal SUV and backed out of her driveway. She was finally returning to work after over two weeks of downtime. Jericho had refused to let her come back until she had a doctor's note releasing her to full duty. He was being so stubborn about it, he'd actually barred her from the office completely. Margie was put on notice that if Paige entered the station, Jericho was to be notified immediately. And she had actually thought her boss was more reasonable than Nathan Porter...for about five seconds.

Dr. Jan Symons was being just as stubborn. That immovable woman would not budge. She'd insisted Paige needed at least two full weeks before she would even consider signing a release. And, only for light duty. So, Paige was finally on her way into the office, doctor's note in hand, saying she could work a desk. Thank goodness for small favors. She'd nearly gone insane sitting at home with nothing to do but watch the meaningless drivel available on her hundred plus channels, so much for cable TV. But really? Light duty?

Well, it was better than nothing she supposed. Paige sighed, she just wanted to get back to the job again... without restrictions. Dr. Symons had adamantly refused. Worse, she wouldn't even listen to reason. The annoying doctor was demanding at least two more weeks of recovery before she would sign off completely. Paige didn't have a choice, she had to compromise. She could either accept the restrictions set in place by her doctor, or head back home to watch Netflix.

Light duty it was, because Paige knew for a fact Jericho would not deviate from doctors' orders. At least she could finally enter the office, her note would appease her boss on that front. A note that was very specific and concise – light duty, no running... no jumping. Seriously, how often did she have to run or jump on the job? The woman could have just released her. Her leg wasn't as painful as it had been. Sure, there was a bruise the size of Texas on her left thigh and the gouge from the tree limb was still tender and sore. But that wouldn't prevent her from doing her job. By the time she pulled into the lot, parked and headed for the door, her good mood had soured significantly.

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Paige stepped through the door, blinked several times to adjust to the dim lighting and grinned. It was great to be back...in any capacity. She took two steps forward before she spotted Gage. The large man must have noticed her at the same time because he immediately pushed back his chair, stood and took two long strides in her direction. Paige moved forward and smiled at her high school friend. "Honey, I'm home."

Gage wrapped his strong arms around her and lifted her off the ground in that big teddy bear hug he was known for. "Glad you're back," he said as he returned her to the ground. "You are back, right?"

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“Sort of,” Paige admitted. She pulled the note from her pocket and handed it to Sheriff Walters, who had just stepped in behind her. “Light duty for now, but at least it’s something.”

Gage frowned. “What does that mean?” He turned to face his boss. “I was just going to head over to John and Peggy Mullins place. They got in this morning and found their summer cabin destroyed, as they put it. I was hoping Paige could join me and take pictures while I talk to the Mullins.”

Jericho studied the note then turned to face Paige. “No antics from you,” he ordered. “This says light duty. I should make you sit the desk, but the crime is over and this should just be a report and documentation.” He turned to face Gage. “Any trouble, you call Marg. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Gage said happily. “I’ll watch our girl. Don’t worry. She’ll behave. Like you said, the vandals are already gone. This is just paperwork. We’ll come right back when we’re finished. She can sit a desk this afternoon.”

Paige scowled. She didn’t want to sit the desk, but she would. She would do anything to get out of the house and be productive again. And at least Jericho had said yes to the road trip. She had honestly believed she’d be answering phones and helping Margie dispatch for the next two weeks. This was much better.

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Gage pulled into the driveway and shut down the engine. A middle-aged couple was sitting on a wooden swing fastened to the front porch overhang. They watched as Gage, then Paige, stepped from the car. Neither one moved as the two cops approached the rustic wooden home that was surrounded by large quacking aspen and pine trees that must have been planted decades ago. The large trees provided plenty of shade but also created a secluded and private oasis. The privacy was great for a couple wanting to escape for the summer, but it also provided criminals the privacy they needed to wreak havoc...which was apparently the case today. As Paige surveyed the area more closely, it struck her just how spectacular the view would be in the fall. The dark green mixed in with reds and yellows would be breath taking, she was sure of it. Maybe she’d come back in a few months and see for herself. But right now, they had an investigation to conduct. She shifted the heavy camera case from her right shoulder to the left and followed Gage to the large patio.

The moment the officers stepped onto the porch, they could see the damage clearly. The door had been forced off its hinges with a crowbar or something equally sturdy and effective. Paige was just about to speak when Peggy Mullins looked up and met her eyes.

“They,” she sniffed. Her red eyes a clear sign she’d been deeply affected by the intrusion. “Whoever did this...they shattered my grandmother’s stoneware, punched or kicked holes in the

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wall and completely destroyed the tile in the bathroom upstairs.” She turned pleading eyes to Paige. “Why would anyone do this to us? Why would they do this to anyone?”

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” Paige said sincerely. “We are going to do our best to figure this out. Do you mind if I take a look around? I’d like to get pictures of the damage and see if they left any clues. If they left even one strand of hair, we can tie them to this senseless destruction. It won’t repair your grandmother’s dinnerware, but at least they’ll pay for what they did. It’s the best I can offer.”

Peggy gave a brief nod, then buried her head in her husband’s chest. He immediately began to pat her back, clearly trying to sooth her pain.

Paige glanced up at Gage. “You coming in, or you going to hang here and get started?”

“I’ll join you for the walk-through. Then I’ll leave you to it while I get the information I need for the report.”

The two deputies slowly made their way through the entire residence. “It’s a beautiful home,” Paige commented when they were almost finished. “Shame someone took a crowbar to the tile. Looks old and expensive.”

“It was,” Gage said with a frown. “My grandparents had something similar in their home down in Aurora. Granddad worked hard, even got a part-time gig, to afford the granite he used in grandma’s kitchen. The Mullin’s ancestors probably did the same. The vandalism gives them a good excuse to update this place, but I’m sure it’s going to be extremely emotional and difficult for a while.”

“You go on out and see what they can tell you. I’m going to walk through again, slower this time. See if I can find something that doesn’t belong. The bedroom...the Master that is... looks like it’s been used. There might be a stray hair stuck to the pillow, or washed down the drain.”

Gage scrunched his nose and turned to leave. “Better you than me,” he mumbled as he headed for the front door.

Paige grinned. Gage’s least favorite part of the job was the boring, evidence work. Well, that’s how he put it, anyway. Paige on the other hand, loved to search for that proverbial needle in the haystack. And more times than not, she found something she could use. She just hoped that was the case today. Seeing how shattered Peggy Mullins was over her loss, made Paige even more determined to find the vandals and make them pay.

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Dax sighed and pulled out his phone. If Nathan Porter called him one more time, he might just be tempted to change his number. How many times did he have to tell the man there was nothing new? If he had something, he would have called. The guy should know that by now. “Hello,” he said impatiently.

“Dax?” a female voice said hesitantly.

“Yeah, this is Dax. Who is this?” Dax asked cautiously.

“It’s Jaimie, Jaimie Woolston. Ken Woolston’s wife.”

There was silence on the other end of the line but Dax could tell something was wrong. “What’s going on? Did something happen to Wooley?” Sgt. Kenneth Woolston had served under Dax for several years. He was a good kid, a good soldier and a lifer. Dax got out, Wooley served another tour. According to Dax’s calculations he’d be coming up on eighteen months and should be heading home about now.

“There was an... accident,” Jaimie provided.

“What kind of accident?” Dax demanded. Accidents didn’t happen in the Rangers.

“I don’t know,” Jaimie admitted. “They won’t tell me anything. You know how they are. Classified mission. Top secret. Need to know. All that crap. Wooley’s had two surgeries already and they are talking about a third. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know if he’s going to make it. I don’t even know what to tell my kids.”

Dax heard muffled crying on the other end of the line. “Let me see what I can find out. I can’t promise anything, you know I’ve been out nearly as long as Wooley’s been gone this time. But let me see.”

Jaimie didn’t even try to stop the tears from falling. “Oh, Dax. That’s not why I called, but if you could...I mean, I know there’s not much chance, but if you could tell me anything, that would be amazing.”

“Then why did you call?” Dax asked hesitantly. What could this woman possibly want from him? He’d met her a couple times, but that was the extent of it.

“Well,” Jaimie said hesitantly. “I have this other problem. It’s kind of a bind Wooley caused before he shipped out.”

“What kind of problem?”

“I don’t want to tell you, really. But, Wooley said if anything happened to him maybe you would be willing to come by, to talk to the man, to help him to see how...well, desperate the situation is.”

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“What problem, Jaimie?” Dax asked again.

“Wooley borrowed some money from a guy. His brother vouched for him and everything but then we found out this Booker guy is kind of... I don't know, a loan shark or something,” she paused, not sure how to continue.

“A loan shark? I told Ken to stay away from that no-good brother of his. Darrell's bad news. Ken should know that. Why in the world did he listen to...”

“Their mom, Donna, she had a heart attack. It was bad, she had to have surgery. They threatened to take her house if she didn't pay the bills. She had insurance but not enough. Anyway, it was down to the wire before she told Ken what was going on. He was in a tough spot, Dax. He had orders to ship out and you know Darrell wasn't going to step in and save Donna. Ken couldn't leave the country knowing when he got back his mom might be homeless. That house was all she had left. He planned to pay off the debt while he was gone and we did...some. But I had my own bills to pay and our son, Jacob, had to have his tonsil's removed. We had our own bills. I paid, every month I gave him what I could, but he said the interest had doubled and my payments weren't touching the principle. Now that Wooley's home, they're putting more pressure on us. One guy followed Jake home from school. When I left the hospital last night, someone followed me to my car, then all the way home. I'm scared, Dax. I don't know what to do.”

Dax let out a long sigh and considered. He could put the house on hold for a week and head to Vegas but then what? Porter would be furious, but that wasn't really his concern. Paige could take care of herself and Jericho was keeping an eye on his newest deputy these days. No, the problem was money. “How much?” he finally asked.

“What?” Jaimie asked, surprised. “Oh, the money? Well, the original amount was five thousand. That paid off the hospital, doctors, everything. But that last guy that threatened me, he said we still owed the full five. I've paid them two thousand already. Gino, that's the collector... or whatever. Gino says Booker raised the rates. He said the two was interest and the only way to settle is to pay him the full five by the end of the week. Otherwise, at the end of the month, I'll owe seven thousand. I can't come up with that kind of money. What am I supposed to do?”

Dax ran a hand through his hair and considered. He could come up with three thousand, no problem. It would put a dent in his rehab funds, well his emergency funds anyway but there was no way he was paying some thug another seven. He'd just have to go down to Vegas and deal with the situation in person. And if money got tight, he still had his Ranger money stashed away in several high-interest accounts. He could always take the hit and withdraw some of that. “I'll be there tomorrow, it's going to be late. Do you have a room I can use, or do I need to find a hotel?”

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“Thank you, Dax. Ken said you were the best, now I know why. I have no idea how I’ll repay you for this, but somehow me and Kenny...or me and Jake if Wooley doesn’t make it... will find a way. We have a spare room, it’s yours for as long as you like. Are you flying or driving?”

Dax considered, flying would be quicker but he wanted his truck. “I’m driving. Text me your address and I’ll call when I’m close. Plan on tomorrow evening. I’ll leave early in the morning and I won’t be able to stay long. Any idea when the next surgery will be?”

“The doctor said they are going to run some tests tomorrow. If everything looks okay, he’ll have surgery the following day.” Jaimie inhaled air, trying to stop her emotions from getting the best of her. “What am I going to do if he doesn’t make it?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when it comes, kiddo. For now, let’s hope for the best. I’ll see you tomorrow. If anyone bothers you between now and then, call me immediately,” Dax said sternly.

“I promise. And Dax, thank you again. I’m getting desperate here and I am so stressed over everything. Jake’s only six and Tommy’s three. They don’t understand what is happening with their father and I’m not myself. I’m so scared all the time. I really don’t know what I would do without your help.”

“Wooley’s a good man, Jaimie. He’s a fighter. Let’s just get through one day at a time and deal with one problem at a time. The rest will work itself out. Okay?” Dax dropped into his favorite chair, not equipped to handle an emotional woman. What in the world was he going to do?

“Okay,” Jaime whispered. “I’ll let you go now. I’m sure you have to pack and stuff. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight,” Dax said in closing as he hung up the phone. A distraught woman, small children, a bully and a greedy thug. Just what he needed. Seriously, he was a carpenter now. Not a Ranger. Why did his previous life keep coming back to haunt him? So much for leaving the violence and destruction behind for good. He wasn’t about to kid himself, this new mission would be violent... and possibly destructive. Well... on that note, it was time to make a call to the good General.

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It was nearly ten at night when Paige pulled into her driveway. She slowly stepped from the vehicle and made her way to the front door. She was exhausted and her bad leg was complaining...loudly. Her light day at work had turned into a twelve-hour shift. The vandals at the Mullin residence had left more than enough evidence to nail them for the crime. Now, they just had to figure out who was responsible. Clearly it had been a duo, husband and wife,

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girlfriend / boyfriend combo, something. The sheets were full of DNA. Gage had refused to assist her in gathering that intimate evidence. Paige was thrilled with the lead. It was hard evidence that couldn't be disputed. She'd also located long strands of dark hair in the shower drain and blood in the kitchen. When they determined who the culprits were, they'd be locked up for a good long time.

Once the damage had been documented and the evidence removed, the deputies talked the Mullins into another walk-through. This is when they discovered several items had been stolen. Enough that it made the crime a felony. The Mullins were more prepared than most citizens Paige had dealt with. They had serial numbers for the electronics and photos of the jewelry and artwork that had been removed. That was going to help in recovery efforts, but it had taken hours to book everything into evidence, then list the missing property in NCIC (the national database for stolen property) and enter the details into their reports. All in all, it was a long but productive day. Paige felt for the Mullins. Not only had Peggy's grandmother's stoneware been completely destroyed but the artwork she'd inherited from her grandfather was missing. She was dealing with the loss of items that held little value in the open market but were irreplaceable on the personal front.

Paige stepped into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of orange juice and headed to her bedroom. She was going to sleep like the dead tonight, for sure. She paused at her dresser to pull on an oversized t-shirt, dumped out one pain pill and climbed into bed. As she settled into the darkness, her mind returned to that letter from her mother. She still hadn't made much progress on discovering who the mysterious "J" character was. There were just too many possibilities in this small town. Then there was the photo, she fell asleep pondering who the mysterious teenager might be.

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Paige bolted upright, confused and a little disoriented. Those pain pills knocked her out completely but something had woken her up. She glanced at the clock, it was just after one in the morning. What had pulled her out of such a deep sleep? She heard a noise outside and knew her answer. Her own vandal was back. She climbed from the bed and made her way down the long staircase. Gun in hand, she slowly slid open her front door and looked around. No new gifts so far, she tiptoed across the patio and glanced around the side of the house. The electrical box was still intact. She moved to the other side and perused her yard, then her neighbors. She was surprised to see Dax hadn't been roused by the intruder. Maybe he'd had a long day, too.

Paige returned to her house, then made her way to the back door. She stepped onto the back porch and once again surveyed the entire area. Nothing out of place. So, what had she heard? She descended the stairs and walked across the lawn to the side of her house. As she approached her garbage can, she saw something glisten in the moonlight. She stooped down and studied the object. A metal button. Strange. Off a suitcoat? If she had to guess that's what came to mind.

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Had some guy in a suit trespassed in her yard? But why? She glanced at the garbage can and realized what had awakened her. The containers were shifted as if someone had tripped and fallen into them. She figured the two containers colliding then striking the fence behind them was what had pulled her from her sleep.

Paige returned to her house, grabbed a pair of rubber gloves and a zip-lock bag and gathered the evidence. She'd give it to Jericho in the morning. She did one more walk around covering her entire yard then slid back into bed. Things just kept getting more and more strange. She wondered if she'd ever solve the mystery surrounding her mother and her vandal. Paige was positive the two were connected in some way. The question she couldn't answer yet was...how?

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Paige stepped from the house and started toward Dax's front porch. When she reached his truck, she stopped. Her neighbor was clearly packing for something. She took the front steps two at a time and knocked briskly on his open front door.

"Hey," Dax appeared with a black bag and a cup of coffee. "I was just about to stop over and let you know I have to bolt for a few days."

Paige studied Dax's face and frowned. "What's wrong?"

"A friend's in trouble and needs my help," Dax said vaguely. "His wife called, Ken's had an accident and will be heading in for surgery tomorrow. His wife is frantic and needs someone to help with... a minor problem. I should only be a couple days, but I'd appreciate it if you kept an eye on the place."

Paige wasn't buying it. There was more to the story, but it was none of her business. Her concerns from last night could wait. The last thing Dax needed was to worry about his invalid neighbor while he was out of town dealing with an injured friend and some kind of problem. "Have a safe trip," she finally told him. "And don't worry about the place, I got you covered."

"Thanks," Dax said sincerely. He stepped forward and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "I owe you one."

Paige stepped back, uncomfortable with the contact. "Yeah, well...I think it's the least I could do...all things considered."

Dax paused and shot her a cocky grin. "Yeah, I guess it is."

Paige was still shaking her head as Dax backed out of the drive and headed out of town.

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General Porter hung up the phone and considered. Sgt. Kenneth Woolsey was a national hero. Too bad nobody would ever know about his bravery. Now he just had to decide what to tell Hamilton. The man would not be satisfied with platitudes and evasions. Should he lay it out for him and leave out the specifics, or just throw out a few general details and claim that was all he found? He sighed and punched in his new friend's number. Oh, Dax would disagree but General Nathan Porter was never wrong about these things. The two of them were Army, deep in the marrow of their bones, and they would always hold a connection. No matter how determined Hamilton was to ignore it, they were becoming friends and the tenuous relationship that was beginning to develop would hold...Nathan was sure of it.

"Yeah?" Dax answered, too tired for pretext.

"Good evening to you, too." Porter grinned.

"What'd you find out?" Dax grumbled and shifted slightly in the driver's seat. He was nearly to Vegas and extremely anxious to get there.

"Sgt. Woolsey was supervising a team headed deep into the Afghan mountains. Headquarters had actionable Intel that two top level targets were hiding out with a small village. The Intel was good, but somehow the terrorists caught wind of the convoy. They were ambushed. It's believed they mistook your friend's team for a group of Marines on a peacekeeping mission in the area. Woolsey risked his own life to save a young Marine on his first mission out there. The guy panicked and put everyone at risk... your guy's team as well as the other Marines in his own convoy. Your friend is a brave SOB, but nobody will ever know it. How is he?" Porter asked sincerely.

"Hanging in there," Dax said soberly. He already knew Ken was top notch. Now he just had to figure out what to tell his family. "Tests came out better than was expected. He goes under the knife again first thing tomorrow morning. I'll see what I can do to tidy up the mess Ken's brother caused. I should be back in Manti by the end of the week." Dax signaled and pulled to the right. His exit was just up ahead and with any luck he'd be able to get a few hours' sleep before he headed out in search of a sleazy loan shark and his low life muscle.

"I talked to Jericho this afternoon," Porter confessed. "He said Paige is fine. Do what you have to do. I have a feeling Sheriff Walter's has things under control for now."

"Did you tell the sheriff you know about him and Chaya?" Dax wondered.

"Nope," Porter grinned. "You?"

"Not yet," Dax admitted. "I plan to fill him in when I get back, though. Paige still hasn't given up on the whole "J" letter thing. I don't think the man should be blindsided on this one. He'll need to be prepared. There was a reason he kept the relationship a secret. You might not

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trust Jericho, not completely, but I do. I know him. He's a good man. Whatever happened back then, he's got an explanation."

"That's good enough for you?" General Porter was anxious to hear Hamilton's answer on that one. The man had good instincts. Nathan trusted Dax, even if he didn't trust Jericho Walters.

"For now," Dax said as he pulled to a stop at the end of the exit. "There will come a time when he'll have to explain himself, but for now I'm fine with it. Now, I'm just pulling into Vegas and need to find an address. I'll check in with you in a couple days."

"Sounds like a plan," Nathan said before ending the call. He sat back in his chair and wondered. What possible reason could a man have for letting the person go unpunished that murdered his girlfriend? He soon realized he wasn't as patient and understanding as his Ranger friend. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now.

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Paige sat at her desk, going over the evidence again. She'd run the fingerprints through AFIS (the national database) without a single hit. She'd double checked all the missing property to make sure they'd been listed on NCIC correctly and she was now sifting through Pawn Cards to see if anyone had tried to get some quick cash. So far, nothing had popped.

The door opened and a couple in their mid-thirties stepped into the building. They looked around, then approached Margie's desk. Paige couldn't hear the conversation, but after a few seconds, Margie directed them toward Paige.

Paige stood and waited for the couple to reach her. She offered her hand, introduced herself, then motioned for them to have a seat.

"I'm Gary and this is my wife, Susan. Gary Hollaway that is," he said as he took a seat. "We just got back home and discovered someone had broken into our home. I don't know how long ago. We were out of the country for three weeks, so it could have been a while ago."

Paige straightened, were her vandals at it again...or was this her first victim? "Tell me what you know."

"Well, the back door looks like it was pried open with a tire iron or a pry bar of some kind. The house is completely unsecured. Since they went in the back, none of our neighbors realized how vulnerable our home was. Mrs. Crane, across the street did say she saw a woman on our property just after we left town. She called out to her and the girl held up a flyer and placed it on the door then left. Funny thing, nobody else got flyers that day. She thought it was suspicious but when the girl left, she decided it was nothing."

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“Do you have Mrs. Crane’s first name? Her address? Anything I can use to follow up?” Paige asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Susan answered. “It’s Betty. She lives across the street and to the south of us. She’s really good to watch out for the house when we leave. Whoever did this must have been real careful, because other than the girl...that one day, she didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. But our house is destroyed.”

“Was there anything missing?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” Gary handed her a notepad. On it was a list of items and model and serial numbers for some of it. “We gathered what we had. The only serial numbers we recorded was on the expensive stuff. We don’t have anything else on the small stuff.”

“This will get me started,” Paige said, taking the pad. “I’ll need to keep this, but let me have Margie get you a copy.” Paige returned moments later and handed the couple the copies. “Now, on this other stuff. The items that you weren’t able to find the serial numbers for...can you give me a better description? For instance, this electric drill. Does it have any identifying markers? A dent in the handle, a broken tip, anything?”

“Actually, that drill has duct tape wrapped around the grip. I was doing a large job and kept getting blisters. Then, the blisters would pop and get worse. I wrapped the grip with duct tape in hopes it would soften the grip...it worked so I never removed it.”

“That’s great,” Paige jotted down the information and moved on to the next item. Twenty minutes later, they had gone through the entire list. Paige glanced up when Gage stepped into the office. “Hey, you up for a road trip?”

“Sure,” Gage answered immediately. “Where we going?” He glanced at Paige’s visitors. They looked familiar but he couldn’t place them.

“This is Gary and Susan Hollaway,” she motioned to the couple. “They have been out of town. Sometime in the past three weeks, their house was broken into. I was just about to head over and see the damage for myself. If your game, I could use your help. It’s possible a neighbor spotted one of the culprits and didn’t know it.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Gage said as he approached the couple. “We’ll follow you over, take a look.”

“I appreciate that,” Gary said. “I realize the crime may be too old and we might never discover who did this. I just hope they moved on and it doesn’t happen to anyone else.”

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“You have no idea how vulnerable and violated it makes you feel to return home and find out someone has been living there in your absence. Then the destruction... well, it’s hard to describe just how that makes you feel,” Susan added.

Gage glanced at Paige. So, their vandals slash thieves had hit more than one house. Chances were pretty good they hadn’t stopped. Gage wondered just how many victims they were going to have before they stopped the destructive duo. He waited for Paige to lead the way, then followed her to the parking lot. “You want me to drive?”

“That would be great,” Paige said and settled into Gage’s passenger seat. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked as he pulled onto the highway.

“If you’re thinking we have another victim of the same duo, then yeah...I’m thinking what you’re thinking,” he answered.

“I’m also thinking that unless they’ve left town, we are going to have at least one more before we get this figured out. I just hope they left us better clues at this place than the last. We can collect all the DNA in the world, but until we figure out who that forensic evidence belongs to...it doesn’t do a whole lot of good.”

Gage grinned. “Is my favorite Forensic Detective getting frustrated already? Maybe you’re not up for the challenge? I thought you just injured your leg, girlie. Maybe you also hit your head on the way down.”

“Funny,” Paige scowled. “I’m just saying...”

“I know what you’re saying and I agree,” Gage said as he pulled off the road onto a long driveway. The house was modest but well maintained. There were raised flower pots with red flowers flowing everywhere. The house itself was finished in rock. It sat on a hill, with the back patio and yard completely secluded as it faced the mountain side. Again, it would be easy for someone to break into the home and remain unseen. The difference between this home and the first one they’d discovered was the neighborhood. The houses were not close together, giving each one relative privacy, but it would be difficult to come and go without being seen. Probably the reason the couple left and the reason Mrs. Crane had spotted the woman.

Paige stepped from the car and approached Susan and Gary. “Do you have someone taking care of the place while you’re away?” With the flowers and the lawn, the couple would have to have a landscaper.

“We do,” Gary admitted. “I have a teenager up the road that comes once a week and mows the lawn. The flowers are taken care of by the sprinkler system. He checks the hanging plants and waters them when he does the lawn if needed. The shed is on the side of the house and the back yard is just left to nature so he didn’t even go around back.”

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“You asked?” Gage inquired.

“I did,” Gary said with a nod. “When we found the back door open, we called Trent. I kind of regret calling. The kid feels terrible. He regrets not doing a walk around while he was here, but he’s a good kid. I’m sure he’s busy. It’s summer but he plays ball and teenagers like to hang out with their friends. I’m sure he just stopped by, took care of the chores and then rushed off to practice or to hang out with the other kids. I don’t blame him, I just wished he didn’t blame himself.”

“Do you think it’s possible he could have told his friends you were gone? You know, mentioned he had to go take care of the place for you until you got back?” Paige asked.

“I guess it’s possible,” Susan answered. “But like Gary said, Trent’s a good kid. He hangs out with good kids. They all get good grades and play ball. I can’t imagine one of them doing something like this.”

“Okay,” Gage said. “We’ll get Trent’s information from you later. We’d still like to talk to him. But for now, let’s just go walk through the place and document the damage and make sure you haven’t forgotten anything on that list you gave Paige.”

“Alright,” Susan said as she headed down the sidewalk and disappeared around the back.

Paige waited and watched. It was amazing how quickly the group disappeared as they walked down the sloped pathway and around the corner. It would have been easy for someone...or two someone’s...to break into this home at night. They would have only been exposed for a short time. If they were careful, they could easily slip inside, live there a few days and gather up all the merchandise they wanted. The tricky part would be leaving. But in this house, the damage was only to the bedroom upstairs. Unlike the Mullin’s...the damage to this home appeared to be deliberate. There was a hole in the closet above the safe. As if they were angry they couldn’t access the contents inside and were trying to find a way to take the entire safe with them. At the Mullin’s it was more like they were being destructive for fun.

Paige documented the damage then asked the Holloway’s if she could do a more thorough search for evidence. Susan admitted she had already washed the bed sheets. They had arrived home late the previous evening and Susan refused to sleep in a bed some stranger may have occupied without at least washing the sheets. Paige found the same brown hair in the drain and she was able to lift plenty of fingerprints from various rooms throughout the home. It was over an hour later when the two deputies climbed back into the patrol car and headed for the office.

Paige sighed. “Plenty of evidence, but still not a single clue. We have no idea if they are still in the area, or if they already left town and are victimizing unsuspecting homeowners in... I don’t know... Arizona.”

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“True,” Gage considered. “But this is a small town. I think you and I should take a proactive approach.”

“Meaning?” Paige asked.

“Meaning, our shift is nearly finished. Let’s head back to the office and map out a plan. First thing in the morning, we’ll take a road trip. Let’s stop by the post office, see if anyone has stopped their mail delivery. We can also head up to the mouth of the canyon. There are several developments up there with summer homes. There are going to be a ton of options for a couple free loaders to choose from. Let’s see if we can smoke them out,” Gage proposed.

“By smoke them out, I hope you don’t mean literally start a fire,” Paige grinned.

“No,” Gage sobered. “But now that you mention it, I hope they don’t. So far, they’ve proven they are willing to destroy the place without a care.”

Paige also sobered. It was entirely possible if the couple was cornered, they might catch the place on fire in hopes of escaping in the chaos. They would just have to cross that bridge when they came to it. She hopped from the vehicle and made her way back into the office. They had planning to do.

* * * *

Dax stepped from the shadows and yanked Darrell back into the alleyway. He hadn’t been able to locate the elusive Booker or his muscleman, Gino. But he had a feeling Ken’s younger brother could tell him how to find them.

“Hey,” Darrell said as he twisted and pulled in a futile attempt to break free. “You better let me go, man. You don’t know who you’re messing with.”

“Actually, I know exactly who I’m messing with and I want answers,” Dax said softly.

“Dax?” Darrell asked, eyes widening in fear before he masked it and once again returned to cocky.

“Got it in one,” Dax said soberly. The kid had too few brains and an excess of attitude. As he studied the lowlife punk, he once again marveled that the guy was related to Ken Woolsey. Woolsey was sharp and fearless, this kid was a snake. Where Woolsey had earned Dax’s respect almost immediately, Darrell had earned his disdain nearly as quickly.

“What do you want?” Darrell growled as he tried to free himself from the firm grip holding him against the brick wall.

“I already told you, I want answers.” Dax shifted and tightened the grip he had around the kids’ neck. “I warned you last time I was here, apparently you didn’t listen.”

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“Hey,” Darrell whined. “It’s not my fault my brother got in too deep with the wrong guys.”

“Really?” Dax raised an eyebrow. “Would that be the guy you hooked him up with?”

“Well...”

Dax pressed harder.

“Okay, okay,” Darrell wheezed. “Lighten up. I admit it, I arranged the meeting between Ken and Booker. But it was all Ken’s idea to borrow the money.”

“I supposed giving a little, instead of constantly taking from your mother never crossed your mind?” Dax asked in disgust.

“I don’t have nothing to give,” Darrell said defensively. “If I had the money, sure I would have helped ma out. I didn’t.”

Dax just quietly stared.

“Okay, I should have helped. But it’s too late. Books got his eye on Jaimie. He wants her. He needs to keep her indebted and desperate.”

Dax frowned. “Is Ken in danger?”

Darrell looked away.

“Is he?” Dax demanded.

“Maybe,” Darrell shrugged. “I don’t know. Booker usually gets what he wants. We don’t ask questions, it’s better to not know.”

The situation just got much worse than Dax could have imagined. Ken was still recovering. He was in ICU and safe for now, but once he was moved to a regular room, Dax was going to have to stand guard. It would be better to deal with the threat head on before Ken was moved. Maybe he could call in a favor and keep the Ranger in ICU for another day or two. It should be easy enough to convince the staff Wooley needed the recovery time. He was headed to surgery anyway. If not, he’d call Porter and see just how useful his new acquaintance really was. He’d only need a couple days...tops. That should be plenty of time to make Booker disappear and deal with Gino. “I shouldn’t be surprised at how much you don’t care about your family, but I am. You are a disgusting excuse for a human being.”

“I care,” Darrell objected. “I just can’t do nothing about it. And Jaimie thinks she’s better than everyone else. She deserves whatever she gets from Booker.”

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Dax shoved Darrell and waited as the kids head struck the brick wall then bounced back in place. Darrell opened his mouth to say something but must have recognized the look in Dax's eyes because he closed his mouth and waited. "Where is Booker?"

"You don't want to mess with him," Darrell answered.

"I do," Dax disagreed. "Where do I find him?"

"No way," Darrell shook his head. "If I tell you, he'll kill me."

"If you don't, I'll kill you myself," Dax countered.

"You wouldn't. Ken says you're some big time war hero. You wouldn't kill me for nothing," Darrell said, clearly unsure.

Dax just raised his eyebrow and waited.

"Okay, fine," Darrell finally broke. "He likes the Mirage. He plays there enough that they usually comp his room. He lives here, but the shark business is open until well into the evening. He likes to crash and head home the next morning."

"And where is home?" Dax asked.

"I don't know that," Darrell said honestly. "Nobody does. He keeps that secret well protected."

"And Gino?" Dax pressed.

"Gino is usually with Booker unless he's collecting. Sometimes he stays at the Mirage, too. Mostly he heads home when he's done. He lives out in Spring Valley, south of here. In a complex called the Esplanade," Darrell provided. "But you want to mess with Gino even less than you want to be on Booker's bad side. That guy is one tough SOB. You should stay off both of their radar."

"Thanks for the tip," Dax said unconcerned. "Is Booker at the Mirage now?"

"How do I know?" Darrell said too quickly.

"I'll take that as a yes," Dax said, releasing some of the pressure from Darrell's neck. "One more thing."

"What?" Darrell said wearily.

"I warned you before, I don't normally give second chances," Dax glared. "I'm making an exception because you're Ken's brother. But you drag him into any more of your shit...you won't even see me coming. You understand?"

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“You...” Darrell began.

“Do you understand me?” Dax said more forcefully.

“Fine,” Darrell agreed. “I didn’t drag him into this and you know it. He came to me.”

“And next time, you say no.” Dax let go of Darrell, the guy understood and hopefully he’d listen this time.

“Fine, I’ll say no,” Darrell took a step back. “But Ken can be persuasive. If he’s looking for trouble, don’t blame me when he finds it.”

Dax didn’t answer. The only time Ken was looking for trouble was when he got desperate. He wouldn’t have asked Darrell for help if he hadn’t been shipping out and worried about his mother. Ken would do anything when it came to Donna. Dax figured it was time he had a chat with the woman in charge, then he’d track down this Booker guy and be done with the entire mess.

Dax pulled into Donna’s driveway and slowly strolled to the front door. It had been too long, but he knew he’d be welcome. Donna was around seventy now if his calculations were correct. She was just as pleasant as ever when she opened the door and invited him inside. Dax took a deep breath and relaxed, the woman looked healthy enough to hear what he had to say. With any luck, she’d agree.

* * * *

Gage pulled his vehicle to the side of the road and motioned for Paige to get out. “We’re on foot for a while.”

Paige grabbed her water bottle and climbed from the vehicle. She never went anywhere without plenty of fluids these days. They had already checked the houses on the list they’d received from the post office and were now making their way through the seasonal homes at the mouth of the canyon. So far, nothing seemed out of order. “If we have to walk in, wouldn’t they have to park a car out here, too?”

“Probably,” Gage admitted. “That’s why I don’t think they’re here but I want to check. I need to know we didn’t leave anyone else’s home unprotected.”

“I agree,” Paige said, practically running in an effort to keep up with Gage’s long strides.

“There are eight summer homes up here. By the time we check them all, it’s going to be nightfall. We’ll pick up with the rest in the morning.”

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“Sounds like a plan,” Paige agreed. By the time they were finished, her leg was going to need a rest. She was slowly getting stronger, but if her doctor knew about this little excursion she would probably be in big trouble. Good thing she didn’t plan to tell anyone.

* * * *

Brandon and Loren stood next to their car, gazing out over the small town. They were on their way back from a day of fishing and anxious to find another vacant house to make their home for a few days.

“I want something cozy this time,” Loren said. “A nice rambler, no stairs and a little sitting area where I can drink my coffee and watch the sun come up.”

Brandon laughed. “You rarely get up before nine, babe. How are you going to watch the sun come up?”

“Fine,” Loren pouted. “Then I want to watch the sun go down.”

Brandon wrapped his arms around the only girl he had ever loved. “You pick this time, then. Whatever you want. Just say the word and it’s yours.”

Loren smiled, “Really?”

“Absolutely,” Brandon said as he gently kissed her lips. “Let’s go find us a home.” He took her hand and led her back to the vehicle. So far, so good. He was happier than he’d ever been in his life. A few more weeks and he’d have enough saved up for an engagement ring. Then, he’d give Loren the wedding she’d always wanted with big bouquets of flowers, the elaborate white dress and everything.

“I love you,” Loren said as she slid into the passenger’s seat. “Daddy was so wrong about us. We’re going to make it, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, baby,” Brandon promised. “We are going to make it.” They casually made their way down the mountain in search of their next oasis.

* * * *

Dax was waiting when Gino pulled into his covered parking spot. He hadn’t had any success locating Booker, so he decided to go for the next best thing. The large man stepped from his car oozing attitude. Dax smiled. The guy wouldn’t see him coming. As Gino made his way to his apartment, Dax moved further into the shadows. The man was all muscle, but not enough brains to pay attention to his surroundings. He hadn’t even noticed the porch light had been broken out. When he slid the key into the lock, Dax pounced. He took one step, planted his feet and cold cocked him. The big man went down...hard. Dax didn’t hesitate, he wrapped the

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sturdy leather belt around the man's wrists just in case, he twisted the lock, opened the door and drug the two hundred pounds of dead weight inside.

Once there, he secured Gino's legs and doubled checked the belt around his arms then waited. They were safely tucked away inside Gino's private home. This could take all night if necessary. Dax was going to get answers. But more importantly, he was going to get Gino's cooperation.

It was several hours later when Gino finally agreed to make the call. The phone rang twice before Booker answered.

"I told you never to call me after nine," Booker growled.

"I know, but this is important," he paused to take the frozen peas Dax handed him and placed the bag on his throbbing face. "Ma called. Dad had a heart attack. I need to head out and help her with...I don't know, stuff. She just said she needs me. I'm leaving tonight and wanted to let you know."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"I'll let you know when I'm back," Gino finally said.

"Are you asking permission?" Booker replied.

"Yeah, sure. If that's what you need, I'm asking," Gino responded. "But whatever, I'm going. My ma needs me. Ma always comes first, you know that."

Booker didn't like it, but he knew he couldn't win this one. When it came to Regina Capitani, Booker would always come second. If she told her son she needed him, Gino would go. If Booker didn't support the decision, Gino may never return. And Booker needed Gino. He'd never admit that to anyone but himself, but he needed the guy. So, Troy would have to step up and take care of things until his top guy returned.

"Let me know when you're back," Booker finally said. "I have a job I need you to do, but it can wait. Hope everything works out with your dad." Then he disconnected the call.

Gino hit the end button and glared at Dax. "You know, this is costing me a good job."

"I disagree, I guess it's all about perspective." Dax had convinced the man to leave the area and not return. He was going to head back to Florida where he could be closer to his folks. As an only child, Gino was already feeling guilty about being so far away from his aging parents.

"Booker is going to be pissed," Gino added.

"Yeah, I got that." Dax studied the man for several seconds. "You're a muscle man but what else? You into anything illegal?"

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“Naw,” Gino shrugged. “I just rough up the clients a little that won’t pay. Mostly I just stand nearby while Booker does his thing and intimidate people. Like I said, a good job.”

Dax pulled out a card and scribbled on the back then handed it to Gino. “I have no idea why I’m doing this, but if you really are clean...call Brent when you get into town. He can always use a good muscle man in his line of work.”

Gino took the card then glanced back at Dax. “Security?”

Dax grinned. “Yeah, for about five minutes. I’m into flipping houses now, but Brent’s still in the business. His main headquarters is in Sarasota. You’ll have to stay clean, but it’s a good gig if you can handle it.”

Gino stood and held out a hand to Dax. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but thanks, man. I think you may have just given me the push in the right direction I needed.”

Dax shook the man’s hand then turned to leave.

“When you deal with Booker, watch out for the hidden gun under the desk. He’s gotten out of more than one tight spot with that piece.” Gino advised.

“I thought you said you were clean,” Dax eyed the muscular man suspiciously.

“I am,” Gino grinned. “He doesn’t need the gun when I’m in the room.”

Dax nodded in understanding then walked casually through the door. One down, one to go. He had a feeling Booker wouldn’t be as easy to deal with as Gino had been. But at least he knew where to find the thief and a few tips on how to deal with him. The rest, he’d just play by ear.

* * * *

Brandon and Loren stepped into the single story home and glanced around. It was a good sized rambler with a large barn in the back. The barn was a perfect hiding spot for their vehicle. Brandon had cut the padlock off the barn door but unless someone came looking, nothing would appear out of place. The house was a different story. They had tried to push open a window, but they were all secured with wooden blocks. After trying several and realizing the owners had inserted the blocks in every window, Brandon had decided to break out the side window next to the back door. The closest neighbor was far enough away, they wouldn’t hear a thing.

“You did good, babe.” Brandon set the fish on the kitchen counter. “Now let’s see what they have to go with our catch.”

Loren pulled open the pantry and rummaged around for a minute. “This soup looks good. And after the long day in the sun I’m beat. Can we just do something easy tonight?”

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Brandon moved in behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He brushed her hair away and gently kissed the side of her neck. “Your wish is my command,” he whispered. “I got this, I’ll put the soup on low while I fry up the fish. Go explore, maybe they have a Jacuzzi tub or something. It will help you relax.”

Loren’s smile widened as she ran down the hall looking for the master bath. “Brandon, oh wow! You have got to come see this.”

Brandon was grinning as he stepped into the room. “Looks big enough for two,” he commented when he saw the large Jacuzzi tub in the center of the room.

Loren moved to stand in front of the man she loved. “Dinner can wait, you have to join me.” She pulled on his t-shirt until it was freed from his jeans then quickly pulled it over his head.

Brandon laughed as he grabbed her hands in his. “Let me go switch off the stove and I’ll be right back.”

Loren tested the water she’d started running the instant she stepped into the room. It was perfect. By the time Brandon returned, the basin was filled and she had already slipped into the hot water to wait.

Brandon glanced at the tub, the dancing bubbles then the amazing woman and smiled. Life was perfect. The world was theirs for the taking and he planned to take plenty from this home before they moved on. He slid in behind Loren and filled his hands with her beautiful, long hair. Loren shifted and their perfect evening together began.

* * * *

It was several hours later when Brandon carried their dinner into the sitting room. He joined Loren on the plush white couch and gazed out the large windows. The sun was beginning to set, exactly what Loren had wanted. A place to sit and relax while she watched the sun go down. He set a plate in front of her then pulled the table in closer before he dug into his meal.

Loren raised her arms in the air triumphantly. “Brandon, this was exactly what I needed tonight. Thank you,” she leaned over and kissed his cheek. “And wow, this fish looks yummy. After dinner can we just cuddle here for a while and enjoy the stars?”

“Whatever you want,” Brandon assured her. “This is your night. The sky’s the limit.”

Loren smiled as she settled in to enjoy the evening. Life was perfect, she knew it would be. Brandon had promised as much. Her father just didn’t understand.

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“Let’s go for a walk,” Loren decided after she’d finished her meal. They had opened the sliding glass door and the air was crisp and cool. The two walked hand in hand as they made their way around the barn and then back toward the house.

Brandon glanced at Loren, she looked amazing in the moonlight. He paused and pulled her in for a kiss. “I will always be here for you, I promise. I swore I would give you the world and tonight, I’m giving you the moon.”

“You’re such a romantic,” she smiled. “Let’s go in and I’ll show you what I want to give you.” As the two of them entered the house, through the sliding glass door Loren snagged the locket her mother had given her on the sheer white curtains. She didn’t notice when the latch came undone and the bracelet came off, attaching itself to the inside of the first fold of the sheer curtain. She was too busy thinking about Brandon and the night ahead to miss her favorite heirloom.

* * * *

Paige skimmed through her notes, trying to decide where they should start this morning. With only two houses, there really wasn’t a pattern to follow. One direction was just as likely as the next. “Okay then...think,” she told herself. *Where would I go to be secluded but comfortable?* She was still scanning the map when Gage stepped into the office. Paige didn’t look up as she called out to her friend. “I made coffee, the bus is leaving in five.”

Gage shook his head as he made his way to the back counter. “I thought I was driving,” he glanced over his shoulder as he lowered the pot back onto the warmer.

“You are,” Paige agreed. “If you can leave in five. We have too many places to check, it’s going to take us all day and we still won’t get finished.”

Gage walked back to Paige’s desk and glanced at her notes. “We don’t need to go to the Barkers. Mom talked to Mary last night, they’re already back in town and their place is fine.”

“She asked?” Paige said, confused. They were supposed to be keeping this whole couple’s destructive retreat thing to themselves.

“She did,” Gage affirmed. “After I told her to ask and no I didn’t tell her why.” He started walking for the door, then glanced up. “The bus is leaving, are you ready?”

Paige jumped to her feet and followed him outside. “So, I was thinking we could start with this area here, to the southeast of town. There’s no direct entrance to the mountains but we don’t have any indication they are spending time up there. Could be they just break in, make themselves at home, watch cable, although that is seriously lacking these days, and then take what they want and move on.”

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“We had several barking dog calls late last night in this area here...” Gage pointed to the area Paige had listed as their second search zone. “I want to check that out first.”

“Really?” Paige mocked. “Barking dogs? You want to suspend our search to go see if Fido caught a squirrel?”

“No,” Gage said as he pulled onto the roadway. “I want to go see if those dogs were barking at our burglars.”

Paige considered that for several minutes. The idea had merit...she supposed. “Well, how many times have we received complaints of those particular dogs barking over the past say... month?”

“None,” Gage said confidently. “Which is why I want to check it out.”

“Okay, you win,” Paige consented. “We’ll go say hi to Fido.”

“Actually the Gallagher’s lab is named Rocky, I believe. But you can go ahead and call him Fido and see how that works for you,” Gage said with a smile.

“You know the offending dog personally?” Paige grabbed the dash as he made a right a little too fast. “Where’s the fire?”

“We have a lot to do today,” Gage said defensively. “You don’t like my driving, we’ll take your car next time.”

“You know I’m still learning my way around here,” Paige frowned. “Plus, I’m still on light duty. I’m not allowed to drive a patrol car.”

“Then buckle up and shut up,” Gage said as he pulled into the driveway and shut off the car.

Paige looked around and frowned. “It’s...”

“Yellow,” Gage finished. “I know. Sissy likes things bright. She thinks it makes for a better disposition, which means a happy home.”

“Sissy and...?” Paige wondered. She was pretty sure she didn’t know anyone named Sissy.

“Sissy and Mark Gallagher,” Gage provided.

“Mark Gallagher,” Paige mumbled. The only Mark Gallagher she knew was... “No way!” She stopped in her tracks to look at Gage. “*The* Mark Gallagher?”

“One and the same,” Gage grinned.

“You didn’t tell me we had two football heroes living right here in Manti.” Paige would never admit she’d had a little television crush on the tight-end that had played for the same team

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as Gage. She'd watched the games as much for Mark as she had to see Gage. Well, sort of. She was loyal to her high school friend, so it was maybe sixty-forty in favor of Gage. She vaguely recalled hearing that Mark had retired last year. She had no idea he'd settled here in Utah. *Was that Gage's doing?* She wondered. "With his money, I'm surprised this isn't more of a mansion." She added when she caught up to Gage.

"He wanted one," Sissy said from the right.

Paige actually jumped, she hadn't even noticed the woman sitting on the front porch swing. "Sorry," she said quietly, not sure how to pull her foot out of her mouth.

Sissy laughed. "Don't be. Mark wanted to build some elaborate fortress out here but I refused. If I'm going to live in the country, I want a country cottage."

Paige grinned. This wasn't a mansion, but it certainly wasn't a cottage either.

"So, what brings my favorite deputy out this way so early in the morning?" Sissy asked as she stood and walked to Gage. The moment she reached him, he pulled her into a hug. Sissy stepped away just in time to see Mark standing in the doorway, scowling.

"How many times do I have to tell you to keep your hands off my woman?" He pushed open the screen door and stepped onto the porch.

Gage shrugged. "How many are we up to?"

"Too many," Mark said moving next to his wife and wrapping a strong arm around her waist.

Paige watched the exchange and realized the man was head over hills in love with the woman. She ignored the slight pang of jealousy that hit her momentarily. She had been crushing on the man for years, it was natural to be a little disappointed.

"We're here about the barking dog last night," Paige blurted. *Now why had she gone and done a stupid thing like that?*

Mark turned an amused look at Gage. "Seriously? You drove all the way out here because that crotchety old man called in a complaint about Rocky barking a couple times last night?"

"No, I wanted to come see if you knew what he was barking at," Gage said casually.

"Why?" Mark asked, more alert now.

"Do you know?" Gage persisted.

"You always do this," Mark complained before he settled into a patio chair. "No, I don't know, not for sure," he admitted.

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“Explain,” Gage pressed.

Mark shook his head and glanced at Sissy when she settled into the chair next to him. “It’s unusual for Rocky to bark like that. And yeah, okay it wasn’t just a couple times. He was really going nuts.”

“I told him to call you,” Sissy interjected. “But you know Mark...no way would he call anyone for help. He’s the macho football star. He can just handle it himself.”

Mark flashed an annoyed look at his wife, then took her hand in his. “I considered it, but then he stopped. I walked out to have a look around and nothing. It was all quiet. Everything was normal, so we decided it must have been an animal or something. Rocky’s used to small critters, but I figured it might have been a coyote or something bigger. The noise probably just scared them back into the hills.”

“Maybe,” Gage said unconvinced. “You mind if we look around?”

Mark studied Paige, then turned back to Gage. “You can vouch for her?”

Gage laughed. “Yeah, Paige Carter, meet Mark Gallagher. He’s a pain, but he’s okay.”

“I thought you were vouching for me, not him.” Paige laughed.

“Yeah, well that too,” Gage said as he turned and walked down the stairs. “Paige grew up here, then she headed off to the city to become a big time FBI Agent. Now she’s back. She’s cool.”

“FBI, huh?” Mark asked. “You get fired or something?”

“Did you?” she countered as she followed Gage around the house. She grinned at the sound of laughter fading into the background. “What are you looking for?” she asked Gage when they were out of earshot.

“Footprints, tracks, anything out of place,” Gage said casually. “I know they said Rocky stopped barking, but that is unusual for that mutt. I have a feeling someone was out here bothering him. Or at least they were close by. I just want to take a look around. Then we can drive the area and see if there are any vacant homes around here.”

“Alright,” Paige agreed. Gage was pretty sure this was serious, so she’d back him. He’d certainly backed her up enough since she’d moved here.

* * * *

It was twenty minutes later when the two officers returned to the front porch. Sissy was gone, but Mark was waiting for them.

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“You going to tell me what’s going on?” he focused on Gage.

“Maybe nothing,” Gage sighed. He knew they had agreed to keep this one quiet but Mark wouldn’t give up until he had answers and maybe he could help. “We’ve had a couple break-ins, not around here, but closer to town. Vacant homes, summer places or houses where the owners are on vacation. With Rocky barking like that, I just wanted to check.”

“And?” Mark pressed.

“And I didn’t find anything,” Gage assured him. “I walked the entire place, Paige is the best at finding evidence if there’s any to be found. You’re clear. I don’t want you to worry and I’d appreciate it if you kept this to yourself for a while. We’re trying to keep it under wraps. If the suspects know we’re looking, they might bolt.”

“I get it,” Mark nodded. “We won’t say a word, will we Sissy?”

Sissy stepped onto the porch, not even phased by the fact she’d been caught eavesdropping. “We’ll keep it quiet,” she agreed. “But you might want to check out the Bernfield place. Kristine said they were headed up to Montana to visit her folks for a spell.”

Mark burst out laughing.

“What?” she turned on him and scowled.

“It always cracks me up when you talk with that hillbilly twang,” Mark sobered when he realized he was in trouble. “Gage tell her she does not have to sound that way to be a local.”

“You don’t,” Gage agreed. “It really doesn’t suit you.”

Sissy flipped them both her middle finger and stomped into the house.

“Good luck with that,” Gage said as he turned to leave. “And when you get out of the doghouse, thank her for me. We’ll head over to Lance and Kristine’s place when we leave. I hope I’m wrong, but their house is close enough to the back end that strangers walking around just might have gotten Rocky’s attention.”

“Agreed,” Mark stood. “You need any help?”

“What do you think I am?” Paige challenged.

“Uh, you are staying in the car,” Gage answered. “And I’m calling Jericho.”

“Gage,” Paige called as she practically ran after him.

“See you soon,” Mark called out before disappearing into the house.

“Light duty,” Gage reminded her. “Jericho will have my badge if I don’t call him on this.”

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“Fine, pamper me. I just hope you don’t lose your suspects over it.” She was still fuming when she climbed into the car and slammed the door. Gage was already on the radio asking Margie for backup.

* * * *

The two deputies sat in the car and waited for their boss to arrive. He was only a few minutes out. Paige knew arguing was futile by the look on Walter’s face. Something was up and he wasn’t happy about it. She was about to ask if he was okay when he ordered Gage to go around back.

“You stay in the car,” he barked to Paige. *Yeah, something was definitely wrong with the sheriff.* She watched as he approached the front door and knocked loudly. No answer. Paige waited, expecting a commotion around back but none came.

“Sheriff,” Gage called.

Jericho moved away from the porch and slowly made his way around the side of the house. Paige wondered what she was supposed to do if the dynamic duo made a run for it out the front door. Several minutes later, Jericho returned to the truck.

“You might as well come help,” he said as he opened the side door. “Window’s broken, looks like they stayed here at least one night. Impossible to tell if it was more. There are tire tracks leading to the barn and the lock’s cut. Either they’re long gone, or just gone for the day. I’ll have Dean head out this way and watch the road for any cars acting suspicious. Gage said he’d like you to do a walk-through. Apparently, you’re the best at finding hidden evidence.”

“Are you okay?” Paige asked as she slid from the vehicle. “I mean, you’re not yourself today. Did I do something to upset you?”

“I’m fine,” Jericho replied and almost left it at that. “It’s not you,” he added. “I just had a call from your friend back east. Seems General Porter’s been snooping around and he’s not entirely sure I can be trusted.” He planned to keep the rest of the man’s accusation to himself. Did the guy truly believe he was somehow involved in Chaya’s murder, or had he just thrown it out to get a reaction? The idea was preposterous.

“What!” Paige practically yelled. “I’m going to...”

“Naw,” Jericho shook his head, surprised at how happy he was to see Paige’s reaction. “He’s just worried about you. I guess I can understand, it just annoyed me. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“Nathan Porter has gone too far this time,” Paige said as she marched to the back of the house. “And he will be hearing about this from me. It’s one thing to check up on me from DC,

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its entirely different to call my boss and... Well, I don't know...question his integrity. He's crossed the line and I won't let this one drop."

"I appreciate that Paige, but really...don't worry about it." Jericho placed a hand on her shoulder in support. "He's an aggravation, nothing more. Let's just leave it be." Jericho wondered if Porter would voice his suspicions if cornered by Paige. That was the last thing the sheriff needed right now.

Paige didn't answer. She wasn't going to argue with the sheriff over this. But she would be giving Nathan Porter a piece of her mind. He had no right to call out here and insult a man he had never met. He had no right to interfere with her job that way. She knew Nathan was used to getting his way, and more often than not he got that way by throwing around his title and connections. But this was Utah, not Washington. His title meant next to nothing here and whatever he was after, he could just go through her from now on.

* * * * *

Paige was still fuming as she made her way through the vacant house. She was so preoccupied with thoughts of Nathan Porter, it took her several minutes to realize there wasn't any damage. "Gage? Sheriff Walters?" she called from the back room.

"Yeah?" Gage said as he stepped into the room.

"They're not finished here," she glanced up and saw Gage smiling.

"Yeah, Gage said that about ten minutes ago," Walters admitted. "What makes the two of you think they're coming back?"

"There's no damage," Paige said absently as she pulled the cap off the drain in the large tub. "Bingo," she smiled as she pulled out her tweezers and an evidence bag.

"Right," Jericho glanced around with that in mind. "So, maybe they left something."

"And maybe they'll be back," Gage said pulling his radio out to call for Dean.

* * * * *

Brandon reached down and gripped Loren's hand as they moved closer to the edge of the forest.

"How did they find us?" she whispered, terrified for the first time since leaving South Dakota.

"I'm not sure," Brandon whispered back. "Maybe they didn't."

"What do you mean?" Loren turned on him.

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“I mean, maybe they are just checking vacant homes and got lucky,” he clarified.

“Oh,” Loren relaxed. She touched her left wrist, expecting to find the locket she had a nervous habit of playing with and remembered it was missing.

Brandon noticed the movement and frowned. “Where is your locket?”

“I don’t know,” Loren admitted. “I searched the bedroom this morning before we left but I couldn’t find it. I must have lost it last night. I know I had it during dinner, maybe in the couch cushion? Or... I guess it could have fallen off when we took that walk around the yard.”

Brandon frowned. “Doesn’t it have your name engraved inside?”

“Yeah, do you think they know who I am?” Loren asked starting to panic.

“Let’s hope not,” Brandon said, trying to mask his anger. He’d been so careful, had taught Loren to be careful. How had she made such an amateur mistake? He turned and headed back to the car.

“Brandon?” Loren said when she caught up to him.

“What?” he barked.

“I’m sorry,” she tried to take his hand, but he just pulled away and opened the passenger door.

“We need to go,” Brandon insisted.

“I am sorry,” she said again once he’d climbed behind the wheel. “I looked all over this morning but you seemed anxious to leave. I thought I could search the sitting area when we got back tonight. If it wasn’t there, I planned to walk the yard and see if it fell off...maybe over by the barn when you kissed me.”

“Loren, I told you we can’t leave anything that will lead the cops to us. When we leave a house, even for the day, we have to make sure we do not leave anything behind. I thought you understood,” Brandon glanced at Loren and felt a little guilty. She was crying now, silently but he could see the tears streaming down her face. He wanted to tell her it was okay, but he was too angry with her to play the forgiving boyfriend. He needed time to stew and she’d just have to deal with that.

The two rode in silence as Brandon maneuvered the car up a steep hill and into the forest.

“Where are we going?” Loren finally asked.

“I saw another house, one that is clearly empty up here. I think we’ll be safe tonight. We’ll decide what to do in the morning,” Brandon supplied. He continued to drive up a long windy

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trail that led to a secluded and private residence. He wasn't worried about being seen. One side of the house faced an overlook of the valley, the other was shrouded in thick trees. As long as they were careful, nobody would ever know they were inside. He pulled into an open carport and shut down the car. Then he exited the vehicle and began searching under the mat, in the flower pot and on top of the shelf for the keys. He hit the jackpot when he stepped into the backyard and spotted a ceramic squirrel in the corner of the garden. His mom had bought one just like it back home. If you didn't know better, it looked like a common garden decoration. But it wasn't, the tail pivoted and opened up, producing a single silver key. Brandon returned to the back door and slid his new discovery into the lock. Presto, the door swung open. They were home free, and he didn't even have to break in this time. He was thankful for that. It was going to be harder to keep a low profile with the cops swarming the area.

* * * *

Paige had finished in the bathroom, hadn't found anything noteworthy in the bedroom and was making her way to the kitchen when something caught her eye. She cocked her head, took a step forward and realized something was caught on the sheer curtain covering the sliding glass door. She moved in to get a closer look and smiled. *Finally!* Seconds later she was holding the thin chain with a single locket attached. Clearly, the links had caught on the sheer curtain as the couple was coming or going. Paige had her first real lead. She held the fragile piece of jewelry in the palm of her hand and smiled.

"What is it?" Gage asked.

"A bracelet," Paige said turning the delicate heart-shaped locket over in the glove clad palm she was holding it in. "And I think... yep," she said happily. "It opens and look at here... there's a name, no...Actually, there are two names engraved inside. I think we got ourselves a clue, Sherlock."

Jericho Walters approached his deputies. "If they planned to come back, I think we scared them. They must have seen us and headed off to find another place to crash tonight. Dean hasn't encountered one car headed this way, other than residents he's familiar with. Let's get out of here. We can pick back up in the morning."

Paige was disappointed. They had spent the entire day in this house, hiding out, hoping the two burglars would return. Either they actually were finished, or they'd been spooked. But the sheriff was right. If they hadn't returned by now, they weren't coming back. So, she'd head home, shower, get a good night's rest and pick things back up in the morning. After she booked the hair and the locket into evidence. And after she called Carmen to see if the wiz kid could track down the names inside the bracelet. If anyone could find answers to that puzzle, it was Carmen Fennelly, her trusted friend and computer hacker extraordinaire. Nathan Porter could just deal with it if he found out Paige was enlisting the help of his newest employee. She still wasn't happy with him, anyway.

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Dax settled into the comfortable executive chair to wait for Booker to show. He'd already searched the office thoroughly. He'd confiscated the weapon normally hidden under the desk, the one in the counter drawer next to the coffee pot and the one secured in a bracket under the bookcase shelf. Clearly Booker Jones was paranoid. Now, he was unarmed and vulnerable, just the way Dax liked it.

He didn't have long to wait. Booker sauntered into the room, confident and cocky as ever. He was halfway across the floor before he noticed Dax. The man paused, scowled then started to turn.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Dax warned.

Booker took another step toward the door, thought better of it, pivoted and marched back to his desk. "Get out of my chair," he demanded.

"Have a seat," Dax motioned to the visitors chair directly across from him.

Booker moved forward, but instead of sitting in the chair, he stood behind it. If the intruder found his weapon under the desk, he wanted some kind of concealment.

"If you're worried about the nine mil you had stashed under the desk, I already removed it." Dax opened the desk drawer and placed the Glock on the surface in front of him. "Now, sit. We need to talk."

Booker slowly moved forward and lowered himself into the uncomfortable chair. He didn't like the situation he was in and he blamed Gino for this. If the man hadn't deserted him, he'd be right here in this room, protecting his boss. The way he should be. "Who are you?"

"I'll get to that," Dax assured him. "But first we are going to talk about Ken Woolsey and his wife, Jaimie."

"I don't discuss business with strangers," Booker spat.

"You're going to make an exception," Dax said calmly.

"There's nothing to discuss. The woman knows my terms. Five thousand before the end of the week or seven at the end of the month."

Dax dropped an envelope on the desk. "Thirty five today and it's over."

Booker laughed. "You can't be serious."

"I'm dead serious." Dax was a little out of his league here. He wasn't used to negotiating. For him it was go in, shoot anyone that got in his way and get out. As long as he had the asset,

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the mission was a success. This time it was different and he was walking a thin line...one he didn't have a clue how to maneuver.

"My fee is far more than five hundred dollars. Woolsey borrowed that money a year and a half ago. The interest alone would be..." Booker stopped abruptly when Dax picked up the pistol.

"The original loan was five, Jaimie already paid you two," Dax glanced at the envelope full of cash. "There's the other three and five to cover the interest. I don't really care what your usual fee is. That's what you get. That's all you get," he pretended to study the loaded weapon in his hand as he turned it over then set it back on the desk. "Any questions?"

"I have a right to know who you are before I agree to anything," Booker tried again.

"A friend of the family," Dax replied.

"As I stated earlier, Ken and I entered into an agreement," Booker was trying to sound like a condescending businessman, but he was failing miserably. "I loaned him five thousand in cash. He agreed to pay that back to me over a two-year period at an interest rate well above five hundred dollars. Our business is not complete until he pays me the full amount he owes me. Five now, or seven at the end of the month."

Dax picked up the gun and fired a round into the far wall. He knew the room was sound proof and nobody outside its walls would hear a thing. Another little tidbit he'd gained from Gino.

Booker jumped, fear coursed through his entire body. This man was not playing around. He understood that now. As he locked eyes with the intruder, he saw the same look of determination he usually held. Better to back down now, cut his losses and go after Jaimie at a later date. A much later date when this man was long gone and not a threat any longer. "What do you want?"

Dax pushed the envelope toward Booker with the tip of the gun. "Thirty-five and it's over. You never go near Jaimie again, you never go near Ken and you stay away from their sons. That family is off limits."

Booker scowled. He could just agree and cut his losses but he wanted the woman for himself. That was still a possibility. Her husband was in the military, he was gone all the time. The woman could be easily controlled when she was alone.

"I can read you like an open book," Dax said, pointing the gun at the loan shark. "You think you can bide your time and then move in for the kill once I've left the city. But you see, I have eyes and ears everywhere. This was a courtesy call. Next time, you won't see me coming."

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“If you think you can threaten me, in my town and get away with it, you are sorely mistaken.” Booker wasn’t sure who this guy was, but he was definitely afraid of him. The man was too confident to be bluffing.

Dax stood, unloaded the weapon and dropped it back on the desk. He dropped the bullets in his pants pocket. “Leave the Woolsey’s alone, it’s the only warning you’re going to get.”

Booker stood, not entirely sure what to say, but he knew he needed to say something. He needed a shift of power, he needed to take control. As he took a step toward the stranger, he found himself trapped against the wall, unable to breathe.

Dax was prepared for a reaction. When Booker stepped forward, he reached out and wrapped his hand around his throat, pushing him backwards until Booker collided with the wall. Booker opened his mouth to say something and Dax tightened his grip, lifting up slightly so his opponent was forced to stand on his toes if he wanted to breathe. “You can’t win this one, surrender and you just might live.”

Booker nodded, relieved when the stranger loosened his grip and he was able to stand flat on both feet again. “You win, for now. But if word of this gets out, I will come after you. I’ll wipe out that entire family and then I’ll come after you. Do you understand me?”

Dax let go of the man completely and walked out the door. His silence was more of a threat than an answer. Hopefully Ken would be able to handle things from here. Honestly, at this point, he didn’t even know if his friend was going to survive the night.

* * * * *

Dax walked into the hospital waiting room and took a seat next to Jaimie. “Any word?”

“The nurse said they are out of surgery. I’m just waiting for the doctor to come in and explain things.” She studied her husband’s former superior and current friend, wondering if he’d worked things out with Booker. “How about you? Any word?”

“I took care of it,” he said glancing out the window. He was pretty sure that was true. “If you hear from Booker again, call me right away. That includes any of his men.”

“Okay, but...” she started.

Dax turned to face her. “It’s over, just call me immediately if you have any further trouble.”

“Dax,” Jaimie sighed. “I don’t know what to say.”

Dax looked up when a man in a white coat stepped into the room. “How about thank you? Now, let’s see what the doctor has to say.”

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The middle-aged man was Ken's doctor. He explained the procedure, told them it had been a success and that they expected to move Ken into a private room the following day. If all went well, he could be released in a few days.

Jaimie started to cry, Dax stood and walked to the window. He wasn't naive, Ken was not returning to the Army. His injuries were too extensive. He'd be given a medical discharge and sent on his way. Hopefully, his friend had some skills he could use in the civilian world. Otherwise, he'd have an even more difficult time adjusting. Regardless, Dax decided his work here was done. It was all up to Wooley from here on out.

"I assume you'll be leaving now," Jaimie voiced his thoughts out loud.

"In the morning," he agreed. "I'll stop by first thing and see if Wooley's awake, say goodbye and then get back home. I have things waiting for me there that need my attention." He was curious what was happening with his neighbor, a little too curious but he wasn't going to dissect that just yet.

"I understand," Jaimie said softly. "But can you tell me about Booker? You know, just so I'm not caught off guard or lied to about all this."

Dax turned to look at the attractive woman. "You need to watch your back. If he does anything, no matter how small, you call me. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Jaimie promised.

"He has a thing for you. He was hoping to get Ken out of the way so you would be alone, vulnerable and indebted to him. He's dangerous. You and Ken need to stay clear of him from now on. I talked to Donna. She understands the situation. She promised not to let things get so bad again. And for the next while, if there's trouble she'll be calling me, not Ken. He needs to focus on recovering, not Donna's problems...and certainly not Darrell's." Dax moved back to the couch and sat down.

"Okay," Jaimie nodded. "But you're sure Booker won't be a problem? Or Gino?"

"Gino's gone," Dax settled back against the hard cushion. "He won't be back. And Booker's been warned. He might test the waters, and if he does I need to know. I'm not as confident about him. If he gets out of line, I can handle it. But I need to know, do you understand?"

"Yes," Jaimie swallowed the lump forming in her throat. Knowing Booker wanted her for some twisted courtship or fling made her skin crawl. Knowing he wanted Ken out of the way terrified her. Knowing Dax would step in and help if she called, made things a little better but he was so far away. Could they handle this on their own?

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“I don’t mean to worry you, but Booker is a lowlife thug. I can’t predict how he is going to react. Once Ken is better, I would seriously think about moving. I know he wants to stay here...for Donna’s sake. But Donna’s not opposed to moving. She told me as much. Ken is going to need to find work and maybe he can do that outside Vegas. Move somewhere less volatile and take his mother with him. She can sell the house and buy a condo, less upkeep for everyone that way. Or a gated community, those seem to be popular with the older generation. I know you can’t make that decision now, but you should seriously think about it. You, Ken and Donna. Have an open conversation about all of it. In the meantime, call me if you need to. I’m in Utah, but I’m not really that far away.” Dax stood. “Now, I need to go pack and get some rest before the long drive in the morning.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Jaimie also stood. “I want to see if they’ll let me go in. If they’ll let me see him before I head home and get dinner for all of us. Jake and Tommy will be starving and the least I can do is send you off with a good meal.”

Dax smiled. “Okay then, I’ll see you when you get back.”

* * * *

Paige shut down the stove and headed for the table. She was beat. These long days were taking more out of her than they should. She sat down the steaming bowl of soup and her grilled cheese sandwich and dug in. She was starved, but she was too worn out to savor the meal. She wolfed it down, dumped the dishes in the sink and headed for bed. She intended to look through the file on her mother for awhile, but the minute her head hit the pillow, she was out cold.

Once again, Paige woke with a start. Someone or something had jolted her out of a deep sleep. She climbed from the bed, grabbed her gun and rushed down the stairs. She flung open her front door and stepped onto the porch. That’s when she spotted the vehicle. It was an older model Chevy Chevelle, maybe early seventies, and clean. Someone had clearly rebuilt it back to its original condition. She ran to the edge of the roadway but could only get a partial plate HNW. The rest wasn’t visible as he fishtailed around the corner.

Okay, a trespasser in a suit. Someone lurking in a restored 70’s model Chevelle. The clues kept piling up but she didn’t have a viable suspect. Her thoughts returned to that photo of her mother and the two teenage friends. She was sure if she could just track down the woman in the photo, she might just be able to find some answers instead of always having more questions. Paige stepped back into her house, locked the door and considered her next move. Whatever it was, it would have to wait until they caught the burglars but with any luck, they’d tie that one up in the next couple days.

She shut off the lights and returned to her room. Even with all the adrenaline, she was exhausted. It only took a few minutes before she was once again sound asleep.

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Brandon woke and realized he was alone in the bed. Where had Loren gone off to? He stood, pulled on his jeans and went looking. He found her sitting on the back patio with a cup of coffee.

“Are you still mad at me,” she asked.

“A little,” he admitted. “But there’s nothing we can do about it now.” The two of them sat in silence for several minutes. “I just keep thinking about all those porcelain dolls. Do you have any idea how much fun we could have had destroying those ugly things?”

Loren grinned. “Yeah, I thought about that, too. Oh, Brandon. I am sorry. It won’t happen again. I swear. I will never leave anything else behind.”

Brandon stood and moved to Loren’s side, she moved forward and he settled behind her on the lounge, wrapping his arms around her as she settled back against him. “I know and I’m not that mad about the bracelet anymore. I’m just frustrated about the dolls I think. I was really looking forward to letting loose on those things. You know destroying things calms me. I didn’t get my release.”

“Well,” Loren sat up and twisted to face him. “I saw something you might like here.”

“Yeah?” Brandon asked, intrigued.

“Yeah,” Loren said as she stood and held out her hand. “Come on, you’re going to love this!”

The two of them walked hand in hand back into the house and down a winding staircase. Loren flipped on the lights and before them in the center of a large room was an elaborate train set. The table was at least nine feet long and the train wound through mountain tunnels and an elaborate town with houses, tiny people, park benches and city skylines. Whoever made this must have spent thousands of dollars. The detail was incredible.

Brandon turned to face Loren. “This is amazing and it’s going to be so much fun to destroy.”

“I knew you’d love it as much as I did. Just think if we could find a bat or something the destruction would be so fulfilling.” Loren once again glanced around the room but couldn’t see anything that would fill her needs.

“We have the tire iron in the car,” he suggested. “After breakfast, let’s go get it and have a little fun.”

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Loren took two steps forward then launched herself into Brandon's arms. "Now am I forgiven?"

He caught her, held her close and pressed his lips to hers. "Absolutely," he finally said. "Absolutely baby. Let's go. I can't wait to get started."

* * * *

Paige was studying her map of the town. Dean had said that nobody had even tried to drive past him that didn't live in the area. He'd recognized every car and driver that had entered the roadway. That meant that if the burglars saw them, they had to have been up above. She compared the upper road to the vacant homes they had identified and realized they had to be staying in Nolan Lindquist's house or the Rasmussen's old Cabin. She and Gage had talked to all the other residents the previous day.

She reached for her desk phone when the front door opened and Jericho walked in.

"Sheriff," she called and stood but before she even took a step, he headed toward her.

"What's up?" he glanced at the map on her desk then back to Paige.

"I've been going over the map and I think I know where they might be." She turned the map so it was facing her boss. "Dean said nobody came by him that didn't belong. That means if the suspects spotted us and ran, they had to have escaped up this road. There are only two possibilities up there. The old Rasmussen cabin and Nolan Lindquist's place. He's in Hollywood working on some new blockbuster or something."

Jericho cringed. There would be hell to pay if the perps destroyed his pride and joy. That man did not like anyone touching his stuff. And there was so much stuff to touch, some of it irreplaceable. "Okay, I'm sold," he said glancing back at the map. She had a pretty good point and she was probably right. They'd need to at least check it out or Nolan would have the Mayor's ear the second he got back in town. "We're heading to Nolan's first. That man is a tyrant and I for one don't want to try to explain what happened to his precious posters if he gets home and his house looks like his latest slasher film."

Paige laughed. She'd never met Nolan Lindquist, but she'd heard stories. The sheriff was probably right, they'd need to be able to assure the Mayor his home had been their first priority. They had just stepped into the parking lot when Gage pulled up. "Road trip," she said cheerfully.

"Meet me at Nolan Lindquist's place," Jericho said as he climbed behind the wheel. "Paige can ride with me. I also need you to call Dean, tell him to meet us there. Don't use the radio. Nolan sometimes leaves his scanner tuned in. I do not want them to know we are coming."

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Brandon stood in the doorway, relaxed and satisfied. It had been a rush, destroying the entire village that way. Loren had helped, but as usual, she left most of the destruction and mayhem to him. She knew how happy it made him to take his frustrations out on other people's belongings. They had loaded up the car with a few odds and ends and made a left toward Gunnison when Loren sat straight up in her seat.

"What's wrong, baby?" Brandon asked as he took her hand.

"I don't know," she said glancing back at the empty road. "But I have a bad feeling. That same anxious, heavy sensation in my chest I had when we ran out of the house and dad chased after you. Something is wrong, Brandon. I know it."

Brandon rubbed his finger over her palm trying to sooth her. He knew what would make her feel better. She didn't know he knew, but it was Loren's eighteenth birthday today. He was going to buy her that ring the minute they reached Centerfield. He'd already called the Lazy D Pawn Shop and made sure they had something in his price range. Maybe after he gave her a little TLC, she'd calm down and relax again. They rode in silence the rest of the way out of town.

* * * *

"We missed them again," Gage said in frustration. "How do we keep missing them?"

"Looks like they leave first thing," Paige said as she walked around the mess in the basement. "We're hot on their trail, but they apparently get an early start."

"So, do we check out the Rasmussen cabin or hide out and see if they return?" Gage asked the sheriff.

"I sent Dean to check out the cabin. He's going to call once he gets there. But I doubt they are staying there. Could be they settle in later tonight but if we're lucky, they just might return to Nolan's place."

"Not likely," Paige disagreed. "I think they destroy the place then pack up and move on."

"I'm keeping you here anyway," Jericho decided. "They didn't get to go at the Bernfield's with any gusto. It just might be they took their frustration out on Nolan's train when they got here."

Paige considered, it was possible. And if Walter's was right, they still might catch the duo when they returned. "I need Margie to call Centerfield today. I left a message at a pawn shop there, but they haven't returned my call. The shop...Lazy D or something, they aren't exactly being cooperative. I spotted an entry on one of the pawn card entries that I think may have

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property belonging to the Holloway's. Gary's drill, the one with the duct tape, matches the card. Maybe Margie can get them to answer and respond to her questions. So far, the girl I spoke to said she didn't know anything and she'd have the owner call me back."

"Yeah," Gage grumbled. "Good luck with that. I don't think we're going to get any cooperation unless Steve sends a man over in person."

"I can arrange that," Jericho said as he pulled out his phone.

"Steve?" Paige asked.

"Chief Steve Newton, Centerville's top cop." Gage kicked at the debris scattered all over the basement floor. "You know Nolan's going to go ballistic when he gets back. This looks like it took a lot of work and I'm pretty sure it wasn't cheap."

"I take it you don't care for Chief Newton," Paige surmised.

"I like him fine, as long as he stays in his own town." He turned and faced Paige. "Okay, yeah, we don't get along all that well. I'm pretty sure Jericho is the only man on earth that gets along with that man. If the Sheriff asks the Chief to send a guy over, Steve will do it. If anyone else asked, Steve would tell them where to shove the request."

Jericho walked up and grinned. "That's not exactly true, but close."

"So?" Paige asked.

"Steve will call when they know something," he glanced at the rubble that was once a train city. "Any idea what to do here?"

Paige shrugged. "I photographed it. I think that's all we can do until Nolan returns. He can tell us if anything else is missing. Until then, I guess we wait."

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It was over an hour later when the call came back from Steve. His man said a couple kids brought in the drill and they had just left the shop ten minutes before the officer showed up. Steve's man collected the new items to be held until Nolan could confirm whether they were his or not. Paige was just about to voice her frustration over missing the two criminals again when her phone rang.

"Hello," she said with a smile.

"Hey, it's Carmen."

"What you got?" Paige asked, hoping for something solid. "Any news on those names in the locket?"

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“Well, the mother...Olivia Stockwell died five years ago. Loren just turned eighteen today. She’s listed as a runaway out of South Dakota but that listing expired at midnight on account of her being an adult now.”

“South Dakota?” Paige mused. “She’s a long way from home.”

“Yeah,” Carmen continued. “Missing Report says she took off with an older boyfriend. A guy by the name of Brandon McRae. Brandon turns twenty in two months. Neither one has a record. Brandon has a traffic ticket in Missoula, that’s it. No prints, no DNA, nothing to help you connect the dots I’m afraid. If those two are your bad guys, they’ve escalated quicker than usual.”

“I agree,” Paige considered. “Thanks for the info, I owe you one.”

“Naw,” Carmen disagreed. “You gave me Porter. I’m still in debt over that one. I could give you my first born and that still wouldn’t make up for you getting me out of the dungeon and away from Gray.”

“You’re right,” Paige immediately agreed. “You’re still in debt. I’ll let you know when you can pay up next time.”

“I’ll be waiting with bated breath, my love,” Carmen laughed. “Carmen out,” she disconnected the call.

Jericho stepped up beside her. “Anything new?”

“Not much,” Paige relayed the information. “We have two names, but until we catch them we’ve got nothing.”

“Then we’ll catch them,” he said confidently. “I’m going to head into the office, catch up with Margie. Call me if you need me. And Paige, remember you’re still on light duty. I do not want you running, chasing, or wrestling with any suspects.”

“Yes, sir,” she gave him a sarcastic salute.

“I’m serious,” he said as he left the room.

* * * *

Dax stepped into the dimly lit room and glanced around. He straightened his shoulders when Wooley opened his eyes and watched him approach.

“Jaimie said you came through for us,” Ken said soberly. “I’m sorry she called you in on that. I told her I could handle it. Mind filling me in?”

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Dax studied the man who had worked under his command for several years. When he saw resolve and strength rather than defeat, he made himself comfortable and began to relay the events that had unfolded since he'd arrived in town.

"You shouldn't have talked to my mother," Ken said when Dax finished.

"I did what needed to be done," Dax disagreed. "I'm going to tell you the same as I told Jaimie. I scared Booker for now, but he's not one to back off that easily. If he bothers you, I need to know. It's my reputation on the line here, not yours."

"I'll handle Booker," Ken scowled.

"No, you won't." Dax ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "It has to be me. You know that. Not because I'm tougher than you. Not because you can't handle it yourself. You know, I know you can. It's because I am the one that threatened him. Plus, he doesn't know who I am. Just a guy that showed up and put him in his place. It's me, Ken. Don't fight me on this."

Ken was silent for several minutes. "Okay," he finally agreed. "But only because I understand. I get it. It's Operations 101. I don't like it, but I get it."

"Good," Dax relaxed.

"Now, we need to talk about you going to my mother."

Dax grinned. "I think we covered that. Think about what I said. All of you would be better off if you moved. Booker is under control for now, but I have no idea how long that's going to last. Recover from this, then find a job in another state."

"I promise to talk to ma about it. If she agrees, we'll start looking. I won't leave her here. Not with Darrell. It's going to be up to her." Ken turned to look out the window. "Thanks, Dax. I mean it. I owe you big time for this one."

Dax stood. "You don't owe me anything. Ranger's stick together. When one of our brothers calls to ask for help, just step up. Then we'll call it even," he reached out and grasped Ken's hand. "Take care of that family of yours. You're a lucky man and they need you."

"That I can promise," Ken smiled. "I'll call you, when I know anything or...you know. I'll call you."

"Take care of yourself, Ken." Dax slowly left the room, anxious to hit the road. He had already said his goodbyes to Jaimie and the boys. As he strolled to his truck, he realized just how much he'd meant what he said. Ken was a lucky man. He had a woman who loved him and two boys that worshiped him. His thoughts strayed to Paige, she'd make a man happy...he was sure of that. When his mind shifted to his past, to the woman who had betrayed him, he scolded himself. Paige might be fun for a season, but he was destined to be alone. He'd better remember

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that because his sexy neighbor was starting to get under his skin in a big way. Those feelings needed to be shut down immediately. He climbed into his truck and started for home.

* * * *

Paige left Nolan Lindquist's residence in search of lunch. She and Gage had been hiding out in the vacant home all morning. She'd gathered all the evidence there was to collect hours ago. Gage had finally given in and let her take his car to find sandwiches for both of them. She spotted a deli and pulled in front of the collection of stores that ran the length of the street. As she climbed out of the vehicle, she spotted a flower shop next door. That wasn't what caught her eye, though. It was the woman in the window.

Paige stepped forward to get a closer look. There was no doubt in her mind, she was looking at an older version of the woman in the photo. She took a deep breath and pushed open the door. The instant the woman looked up, Paige knew she was right. There was a moment of recognition, a second of panic and then the mask.

"May I help you?" she asked politely.

"I hope so," Paige said pulling the photo from her wallet. "I found this in my mother's things at the house and was hoping I could talk to you."

The look of terror on the woman's face almost made Paige feel bad. Almost. "Obviously you knew my mother, but who is this other girl with the two of you?"

The florist began to shake. "Would you..." she cleared her throat. "Would you mind flipping that sign around? I um...I need to sit down for a minute."

Paige turned the Open sign to Closed and then studied the fragile woman. "Why are you so afraid?"

"Yes, that is me in the photo," Samara said.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Samara," she said. "Samara Vega. I went to school with your mother and Tracy. That's the other girl you asked about. Tracy Douglas."

"Does Tracy still live around here, too?" Paige asked.

Samara looked at Paige in shock. "You don't know?"

"Know what?" Paige asked.

Samara took a deep breath and calmed a little. "Tracy died just after that picture was taken. She fell. It was a freak accident. She was up hiking in the canyon and fell over a cliff. Chaya

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and I were devastated. It tore us apart.” She pointed to the picture. “We went from being inseparable to complete strangers. Then Chaya moved away.”

“Did the two of you pick back up when we moved back? After I was born and we came back to Manti, were you and my mother friends again?”

Samara shook her head. “No, too much time had passed. We were different people. Both of us had changed so much. We ran into each other once, but we both realized it was too late and that was that.”

Paige wasn't buying it. There was a reason the woman was a nervous wreck. But the look on Samara's face told Paige that was all she was going to get for now. She'd be back. She'd continue to press. The information about Tracy was disturbing, though. There had been some kind of incident; then all of a sudden Tracy was killed in an accident? Paige's Spidey sense told her there was definitely more to that story. Yes, she would be back but for now, she needed to grab a couple sandwiches and get back to Gage. “Thanks for the information and it was nice to meet you. Maybe I'll see you around sometime. Do you want me to flip the sign back when I leave?”

“Huh?” Samara glanced up. “Oh, no. I think I'll take my lunch break now.” She watched in fear as Paige stepped out of her shop and entered the deli next door. She had known eventually she would meet Chaya's daughter. Chaya's cop. But somehow she'd convinced herself that it would be a casual meeting. A meeting where she knew all about Paige Carter, but her best friend's daughter wouldn't know anything about her. *Well, that certainly hadn't gone according to plan.* Now, she just had to figure out what to do about it. If Paige was anything like her mother, Samara would be seeing a lot more of the girl. She needed to get her act together. Otherwise, the daughter just might go down the same dangerous pathway Chaya had traveled. Samara couldn't stand by while another innocent woman was injured. That was pretty much the only thing she was sure of. Her life had just become complicated. She'd need to stay out of Paige's way, but that didn't mean she couldn't find a way to protect her. She owed Chaya at least that much.

* * * *

Brandon pulled the car to an abrupt stop and immediately backed into the cover of trees.

“What's wrong?” Loren asked, worried again.

“I think you might be right, baby,” he said trying to sound casual.

“Right about what?” she asked, even more concerned now.

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“I think the cops have arrived. We need to find another place to stay,” he pulled her close as he shut off the car. “We’re hidden here. I don’t think that car saw us, but we need to make a quick getaway. You up for that?”

“I’m scared, Brandon,” she admitted.

“I know, but it’s going to be okay. I promise,” he assured her.

“Okay,” she took a deep breath then buckled her seatbelt and gave him a quick nod.

Brandon watched the car at the end of the road carefully. When he was sure the deputy inside was looking the other way, he pulled out and forced himself to keep his speed down. Once he was around the corner, he floored it. He took a turn so quickly, he almost collided with another car from the opposite direction. He turned left, then right and then right again. When he was sure nobody was following him, he made three additional turns, then headed toward the house he’d spotted the night before. They could hide out there and then sneak away in the middle of the night. It was time to move on to another town. They’d overstayed their welcome in this one.

* * * *

Paige swerved to miss the car that was speeding down the winding road, annoyed she’d nearly crashed another car. Gage would never forgive her if she totaled his ride. Jericho and the Mayor would never forgive her if she totaled another police car. She’d be on desk duty for a year.

She pulled into the driveway and was surprised to see Gage waiting impatiently on the front porch. The second she came to a stop, he was standing next to the door.

“Move over,” he barked.

Paige jumped to the passenger seat and frowned at Gage. *What in the world had gotten into that man?*

“Did you see a car on the way up here?” he asked as he backed out onto the road and followed Dean back the way she’d just come.

“Uh, yeah,” she tried to picture the car that had almost taken her out. “Why?”

“I think that’s our burglar,” he pressed the gas a little harder to keep up with Dean.

“Wow,” Paige was distracted by Dean’s driving. “Where did he learn to take a corner like that?”

Gage grinned. “Apparently Dean hasn’t told you everything about his down time.”

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“Meaning?” Paige asked. “Watch out,” she slugged Gage. “You nearly took out that light pole.”

“Don’t distract me,” Gage took another corner a little too fast. “We’ll talk about this later. Tell me what you remember about the car.”

Paige thought back. She’d been distracted by her meeting with Samara. Too distracted apparently. She’d come around the bend and surprise...there was a car in her lane. *Okay, think.* She closed her eyes and tried to envision the vehicle. “It was dark...blue I think. There were two people inside that I could see. And yeah, it was male and female. The male was driving. He had...brown hair I believe and the girl was...brunette.” Paige growled. “I don’t know if I remember that from the vehicle or if I just know that so I’m projecting.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Gage decided. “We know she has brown hair. We’ve gathered enough of it from the drains. Focus on him.”

“Okay,” Paige closed her eyes again then immediately opened them. “Wait,” she pulled out her phone. Remembering it had buzzed when she was in the flower shop and she’d ignored it. “Carmen was going to text me their photos.” She punched in her code and hit Carmen’s message. A dark haired, brown eyed kid stared back at her. It was definitely the driver that had nearly run her over. “That was definitely him. The driver of the car... it was him. We’re on the right track, now we just need to find them again.” Paige wanted to kick herself. If she hadn’t been so engrossed in her personal problems, she would have realized she’d just encountered their suspects.

“Good,” Gage gave her a nod. “That means we’re closing in. I told Dean to head to the Rasmussen’s cabin. That has to be their destination. It’s the only vacant building in this area.”

Paige relaxed. Gage was right. They’d been all over this area two days ago. The only two options for the kids to take refuge had been Nolan’s place and the Rasmussen cabin. They hadn’t lost them after all.

* * * *

“How is this possible?” Gage said as he kicked a rock. It tumbled across the open expanse then over the embankment and disappeared.

“I don’t know,” Dean shook his head. “I called Jericho in. He’s on his way.”

The three of them walked the entire perimeter, then split up and walked several feet into the forest just to be sure the vehicle wasn’t tucked away somewhere in the woods.

“There was nowhere else for them to go,” Paige insisted.

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They all looked up when Jericho pulled into the open field. He stepped from his vehicle and moved in to greet them.

The three deputies had just finished bringing their boss up to speed when a gunshot echoed in the distance.

* * * *

Brandon pulled behind the house and shut down the car. He knew it had been a close call. He was sure that car they almost hit was another police car. How had this happened? How had they located them so quickly? He turned to look at Loren and realized she was crying. “Don’t,” he said softly. “I am going to take care of you. I made a promise to you and I swear I am going to keep it.” He brushed a kiss over the ring he’d just purchased that morning. “We are going to be together forever. You know that, right?”

“I’m trying to believe that but I am so scared,” she sniffed.

Brandon stepped from the car, then went around and opened her door. He pulled on her hand and she climbed from the car. “Okay, they don’t know we’re here. We just have to be really quiet until say...midnight. Then we can load up the car with anything of value and be out of here in no time. Okay?”

“Okay,” Loren sniffed again then tried to pull herself together.

The two of them walked hand in hand toward the little house next to the small lake. If Loren wasn’t so scared, she would have thought it cozy. The instant they reached the back door, Brandon started looking for a key.

Loren had learned from this ritual. She walked to the side window and lifted a flower pot and smiled. She grabbed the key and rushed back to Brandon’s side. He slipped it in the doorknob and turned. The couple stepped into the small room and glanced around. It was cozy, there was a sitting chair in the corner and a small kitchen table. The dining area and kitchen were open and connected as one large room. There was a fireplace at the other end, again open and cozy. Loren smiled and turned to face Brandon, that’s when she spotted the gun. Her eyes widened in disbelief and she started to speak.

Brandon put a finger to his lips in a sign for Loren to be silent. He thought he’d heard a noise at the end of the hallway. He moved in close and whispered in Loren’s ear. “Stay here.”

Loren watched in horror as Brandon disappeared down the hall. *What was he doing? And where did he get that gun?* Well, she wasn’t just going to wait here and see what happened. She was going after him.

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Brandon tiptoed across the hardwood floor. His heart was beating fast and he hoped he was wrong. He reached the last door and slowly turned the knob. The instant he stepped into the room, pain radiated at the top of his head. Someone had struck him...hard. He turned and shifted the gun in the direction of his attacker. As something struck his wrist, the gun fired. Brandon dropped the weapon and gripped his wrist as he watched the shadow fall to the ground with a loud thud. He turned to flee and collided with Loren. "We've got to get out of here," he yelled.

Loren calmly crouched, retrieved the pistol and took Brandon's hand. She guided him back down the hallway, out of the house and to the car. Once she had him settled in the passenger's seat, she started the car and backed away from the house. They couldn't stay on this road. The shot would bring the cops for sure. She took the first trail she came to and drove as fast as she could down the dirt road. She had no idea where she was going but she had to find a hideout soon. Brandon was in shock. She could help him, but not while they were driving. When she came to another fork, she turned right and hoped this path would lead them back down the mountain. It was their only hope. She had to get out of town...now.

* * * *

Paige jumped back in Gage's car and the three vehicles rushed down the dirt road. There was only one other residence in the area. She just prayed Astoria was okay. She and Gage had stopped in and checked on the woman two days ago. She lived alone, always had. It was the first time Paige had met the lovely, cheerful woman. She wondered why the middle-aged lady had never married. She was pleasant enough. Maybe she liked living up here in solitude. A woman didn't need to marry to be happy. *Right?* But she did need to live. And it was highly unlikely Astoria was the one who had fired that shot.

All three vehicles came to a stop at nearly the same time. Jericho and Dean rushed to the house. Gage hesitated. "Stay here," he ordered then jumped out of the car and rushed to the house.

Paige ignored his command. She climbed from the passenger's seat and made her way to the front of the house. There wasn't a vehicle in sight. She walked back toward the car and around to the other side. That's when she saw the tracks. The couple was gone. But where? She returned to Gage's vehicle and pulled out her file. She was studying her map when Dean stepped outside, pale and clearly shaken.

"How bad?" Paige asked when she reached her colleague.

"She's alive," he assured her. "I need to call an ambulance. It's bad. She's been shot in the stomach, there's a lot of blood. Jericho has it under control but she's bad."

"Go on, call for medical," she returned to the cabin with her map. Once inside she headed towards the back of the house. "You back here?"

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“All the way to the back,” Gage called. “You should have stayed in the car.”

“We need to go,” she said ignoring his censure.

“I’m a little busy here, Paige,” Jericho gave her that look of his that meant he thought she had lost her mind.

“Not you,” Paige shook her head. “Seriously? I know you have to wait for medical. I think Dean should wait with you. Gage needs to come with me.”

“Where?” Jericho asked as he continued to put pressure on the wound.

“I think they headed up the road and veered off here,” she pointed to a backroad. “That’s the only possibility. We didn’t pass them on the way up and they left before we arrived. They must have gone left. The only road big enough to accommodate their car is this one. It winds back around and ends up...”

“Right where we were ten minutes ago,” Gage said pointing at the Rasmussen cabin.

“Go,” Jericho agreed. “But take Dean with you. I have things under control here. There’s nothing he can do. You need him. This just got messy. They’re desperate, young enough to be reckless and they’ve got a gun and clearly not afraid to use it. Don’t argue, just go.”

Paige studied her boss for several seconds then ran down the hallway and out the door. Gage followed. The three deputies climbed back in the vehicles and headed for the cabin they had just left.

* * * *

Loren pulled up to the cabin and parked the car around the side, hoping it was out of sight enough to keep them hidden. If they could just get through the rest of the day, she was sure they could sneak away after sunset. She climbed out of the car and rushed to the back door, shocked to find it open. She gripped the gun in one hand as she pushed open the door with the other. Once she was sure they were alone, she returned to the car expecting to find Brandon still inside. He wasn’t. He was leaning against the trunk, a defeated look on his face.

“I...”

“Let’s get inside, then we can talk,” she took his hand and pulled him alongside her. Once they were securely tucked away, she pulled him close. “It’s okay, Brandon. I know you did what you had to do.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said lowering himself to the floor. The cabin was nearly empty so there was no place to sit. He leaned against the wall and lowered his head into his hands. “I

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didn't mean to," he said again. "She hit me over the head and I was just trying to get my bearings when she hit me again, in the wrist. The gun just went off. I didn't mean to."

Loren sat down next to Brandon. She marveled at how broken he looked. He had done what he had to do. He shouldn't be this upset over it. "It's okay, baby."

"It's not okay," he shook his head. "I shot that woman."

"I know," Loren pulled him into a hug. "But you didn't mean to and you didn't have a choice. It's going to be okay. We're together and we have a plan. We're going to stay here until it gets dark and then we'll leave just like you said. We'll head out of town and find another place to live. We were pretty much done here, anyway. I'll take care of you this time. I love you, we're a team. Let me deal with the planning and you just relax."

Brandon was amazed at how calm Loren was about all this. He had just shot someone. How could she think it would be okay? They were in serious trouble here. He loved her more than anything but he'd failed her. The cops would never stop looking for them now. He closed his eyes and wished they had just kept going. After they bought the ring in Centerfield, they should have headed south to Arizona or New Mexico. But, it was too late now. Now the only place they were headed was to jail. He wasn't sure he would make it in jail.

* * * *

Paige spotted the vehicle first. She pointed it out to Gage who called it into Margie. He knew the instant the ambulance arrived at Astoria Dwyer's place Jericho would be on his way back to the Rasmussen's. He pulled into the trees, hoping for a little concealment and cover. Dean did the same. The three of them watched the vehicle and the door as they tried to develop a plan. There were only three of them so going in after the couple was out of the question. Their only option was to surround the structure and try to call them out. They all knew that was going to end in a barricade situation but they didn't have any other choice.

Gage called Jericho on his cellphone and the sheriff ordered them to surround and wait for him to arrive. They were only to take action if the couple tried to leave. So, they waited.

Jericho arrived with a bullhorn. "Okay, Paige I want you on that side, Dean you take the left. Gage, I need you around back. I'll cover the front. I have backup on the way but we're going to call in and see what these two do."

The officers moved into position and waited. Jericho pulled his vehicle to the front of the house and moved in behind it. "We've got you surrounded. There's no escape. Come out with your hands up and nobody will get hurt."

* * * *

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Brandon practically jumped out of his skin when he heard the announcement. “Let me go,” he said taking Loren’s hands. “I did this. It’s my fault, let me go. I’ll tell them it’s only me. You can hide in the rafters or something. When we’re gone, you can run out the back.”

“They have us surrounded baby,” Loren said calmly. “We’re not running. We’re a team. I told you I would figure this out and I will. Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” he said as he pulled her close and kissed her softly. Loren deepened the kiss. After several minutes, she pulled the gun from her waistband and, still kissing Brandon, she shot him.

Brandon looked at Loren in shock. What was she doing? He didn’t want to die. He fell to the ground on his back, his head turned toward her.

Loren lowered her body to the ground and laid opposite the man she loved, her head next to his. “I love you, baby. I promise, I have a plan. I won’t let them take you away from me.”

“Is everyone okay in there?” Jericho asked. “Are you hurt?”

“We’re fine,” Loren called out. “Just go away and leave us alone. We are going to be just fine.”

Brandon was so weak. He couldn’t even speak. He wanted to hold Loren, but he was sure he was dying. Why had she shot him? What was her plan? He was so confused. Didn’t she really love him? She’d been so sincere...so caring this whole time. Had he fallen for the wrong girl? He just didn’t know anything anymore.

“I love you, baby. You said you trust me. Don’t ever doubt how much I love you,” Loren said as she watched Brandon lose consciousness. She stood and began to pace the room. Once she was sure he was gone, she’d start the fire. Then she could disappear out the back. The love of her life was gone now, but she could go on for both of them. She could live the life they dreamed of. She could have it all and she would do it for Brandon.

* * * *

Jericho grabbed his walkie, unable to wait any longer. “We need to go in. Gage, you in position?”

“I’m good to go boss,” Gage came back. “On three, I’ll go in the back, Dean will take the front.”

“The vehicle is disabled,” Dean added. “I’m making my way to the front of the house.” He crouched peeked into the window. “Uh...boss?”

“What?” Jericho came back.

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“It’s not the girl that’s shot. It’s the guy.”

Paige was confused. She figured Brandon had shot Loren in a homicide-suicide pact. Was it the other way around?

“Doesn’t matter,” Jericho decided. “Go in on three.” He waited one second then started his announcements again, hoping to distract the woman with the gun. “We don’t want to hurt you. This is your last chance, come out with...”

Boom! Gage went in the back, Dean in the front.

Paige heard a loud thud and was sure Gage was up to this linebacker tricks again. Loren screamed then started to curse like a sailor. Paige wondered if Brandon had known the real Loren, or if she’d fooled him into believing she was sweet and innocent. She stepped through the door behind Jericho and moved to check on Brandon. “He’s alive, barely,” she called out. “Any chance some of the ambulance crew is still at Astoria’s?”

“Nope,” Jericho smiled when the second ambulance pulled into the open field next to his car. “I told them to head up this way once they got Ms. Dwyer packaged up and headed out.”

“In here, boys,” Paige called. “I have another gunshot wound. He’s got a pulse, but it’s faint.”

The two paramedics stepped into the cabin and glanced at Loren. “What about her?”

“She’s fine,” Gage said pulling her to her feet. “You wouldn’t know it by the way she’s howling but we’re good here. Just take care of him.”

Dean dropped the pistol into an evidence bag and handed it to Paige. “You collecting the goods?”

“I guess I am now,” she walked back to Gage’s car and secured the weapon in a lock box.

Brandon was transported to the Gunnison hospital, the same place they had taken Astoria. Loren was secured behind bars by Gage. Paige and Dean stayed to process the scene. Jericho left to go check on their patients and inform Chief Strong he had a prisoner in his jurisdiction that needed to be guarded at all times. Paige was pretty sure her boss would get Chief Patrick Strong to provide a couple men to handle the job. Especially since Brandon was going to be easy to secure for the next while.

Paige pulled into her driveway and smiled. Dax was home. She hoped all went well with his friend. She paused on her front porch, debating. Should she wait and drop by first thing in the morning? Maybe with coffee and donuts or swing by now and say hi? Her internal debate was halted when her phone rang.

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“Hey, Carmen. We caught the bad guys.”

“Bad guy and girl?” she asked.

“Yeah, we got them both,” Paige settled into her lounge chair prepared to give the deets to her friend. “You won’t believe it, but Loren shot Brandon. He’s pretty serious. I’m not sure he’s going to make it.”

“Actually, I do,” Carmen said, clearly unfazed by the news.

“You found something,” Paige said, knowingly.

“Seems I was wrong,” Carmen paused. “I know, mark the calendar. Neither of those two had ever been arrested but Loren was questioned in the mysterious death of a neighbor.”

“Mysterious how?” Paige asked, intrigued.

“Five and a half years ago, just a few months before her mom died, a neighbor kid went missing. He was gone for three days. They had the whole alert thing and the entire community turned out the help look for the kid. He was fourteen at the time and reports indicate he and Loren were inseparable. Loren and her mother even assisted in the search. Three days go by and nothing, no sign of the kid. Then, the morning of the fourth day...he’s found in a nearby cave. Dead.”

“Okay, so what was the mysterious part?” Paige pressed.

“Autopsy showed cause of death hypothermia due to near drowning.”

“Huh?” Paige was confused. “Was there water in the cave?”

“No, that’s the mysterious part,” Carmen advised. “There was a creek nearby. Police decided he must have fallen into the creek and somehow pulled himself out, then crawled into the cave and died of exposure and hypo. I’m not buying it, though. They pulled Loren in for questioning because the neighbors saw the two together just before the kid disappeared. She said she didn’t see anything, but the neighbors wondered how that was possible.”

“You think she drowned the kid then dragged him into the cave?”

“Maybe,” Carmen considered. “But here’s the thing, a few months later the mother dies. Apparent suicide. Overdose. She was taking Xanax. Apparently, she started having panic attacks after little Jimmy disappeared and was found dead. The entire bottle was found in her orange juice.”

“Do you think we have a serial killer on our hands?” Paige sat up straighter. *It was possible.*

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“I do,” Carmen said with conviction. “I don’t know if you could ever prove it, but with the information I’ve gathered so far, I think little Loren got into some kind of argument with Jimmy Hovey and drowned him. He may have been able to pull himself into that cave, but it seems improbable to me. I think Loren either pulled him in there or helped him in after she nearly drowned him in the river, then left him there to die. I have to wonder if mom found out and lost it. My records show she was completely healthy before this incident. Maybe Loren decided it would be much easier if mommy dearest went away. So, she dumped happy pills into her mother’s morning OJ and cheerfully skipped off to school, knowing the problem would be resolved when she got home. Dad worked the graveyards shift and arrived home to find mom’s body. Then, things get a little dicey out there in Utah and sweet little Loren tried to off her new partner in crime. I think she’s a sociopath, but that’s more your expertise than mine.”

“I’m beginning to agree with you. She acted unusually calm after she shot him, then she freaked when she got caught. I think you might be right, Carmen. Thanks for calling.” Paige was so deep in thought, evaluating the possibility that Loren just might be a cold-blooded killer that she didn’t notice Dax until he lowered himself into the chair next to hers.

“Keep me posted, I’d love to hear how this all turns out. Gotta go. Later,” Carmen said as she disconnected the line.

Paige grinned and turned to her neighbor. “Rough couple days?”

“You have no idea,” he said with a sigh. “I caught part of that. Did you seriously catch a serial killer, here in Manti, while I was away?”

“I’m not sure,” she filled him in on what he’d missed. “It’s a distinct possibility.”

“Huh,” Dax considered. “I guess the local sheriff is lucky to have you.”

“So, tell me about your trip. Is your friend okay?” Paige stalled. She wanted to talk about finding Samara but she didn’t want the conversation to be all one sided.

“Ken is going to pull through. It was touch and go there for a few days but he’s gonna be fine, thanks.” Dax studied Paige. She had news, he could tell.

“And the...problem?” she pressed.

“The problem worked itself out,” he grinned. “Now, what is it you are bursting to share?”

Paige sighed. She was supposed to be the stoic cop but Dax could always read her like a book. “I found the girl in the picture,” she proceeded to tell him about her encounter.

“So now what?” he wondered.

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“I don’t know. I have a sociopath to crack and I’m still on light duty so I guess I’ll have time to come up with a plan. For now, I think I’ll just stew on it.”

“Really?” Dax stood. “That sounds so unlike you.”

“You’re leaving already?” she asked, disappointed.

“Yeah, I’m beat. I was headed to bed when I noticed you on the porch. I decided to stop by, check in and let you know I’m home,” he studied her. “Is there something else you haven’t told me?”

“I guess you should know, I had a couple visitors. I think one tripped over the garbage can and left a button. If I had to guess it came from a suit coat. Then, something woke me in the middle of the night. By the time I got out here, the car was flying around the corner. I got a partial plate, but I think it was stolen. Those letters don’t match any Chevy Chevelle I could find. Not only around here - but anywhere in Utah.”

Dax frowned. He should never have gone to Vegas. But if he hadn’t, Ken would still be in a bind. “How about I come by in the morning? Let me sleep on it and we’ll brainstorm over breakfast.”

“I like donuts,” she grinned as she stood. “I promise, I’ll have coffee.”

“It’s a deal,” Dax said as he walked away. “Eight work for you?”

“Perfect.”

Dax was calling himself all kinds of a fool as he strolled back to his house. He had missed Paige while he was gone, more than he should and learning she’d had trouble in his absence stirred a protective instinct he hadn’t felt for years. He was afraid he was fighting a losing battle and sometimes...he couldn’t find a reason to keep fighting.