

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Unfortunate Trio *Season 1, Episode 7*

by:

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Paige started the engine and paused. It had definitely been an interesting evening. They were shorthanded again. Gage was in Colorado testifying on a case he was involved in prior to Paige's arrival and Jericho was out sick. She was still curious about that one, the sheriff had been missing for three days. And, Margie was being evasive. Paige just hoped her boss was okay, she had come to like the old man... and she respected him. If he were seriously ill, the entire community would suffer.

She shrugged and backed onto the shoulder then started for home. She'd corner Walters in person when he returned. The ambiguous answers might work for Margie, but the Sheriff wasn't going to get off that easily. Her thoughts shifted to the busy day she'd just completed, which made her instantly smile. From the first call to her last, Paige had encountered one weird incident after another. Must be the full moon. She leaned forward to glance through the windshield at the bright, offending orb and shook her head in amazement. For some reason, every twenty-nine to thirty days, the world went crazy. Law enforcement agencies everywhere joked about the effect of that magical, crescent disc. At the same time, everyday common citizens dismissed their claims as ridiculous. Well, today was proof positive as far as Paige was concerned. The bizarre and outlandish surfaced when the moon was its brightest, even in Manti.

Her morning had started off with two relatively sane women getting into an actual, full-blown food fight at The Farmhouse Restaurant. Why? Because Shannon Townsend believed the waitress had served Tina Nelson out of turn. Clearly, Shannon was there at least ten minutes sooner than Tina. Paige's day had gone downhill from there, culminating in the call she'd just left. Now, that had been the perfect ending to her day. Remember the three teen's shocked and guilty faces when she caught them creeping through Rodney Owen's field almost made the overtime worth it. Almost... but not quite. She sighed and wondered if the Mayor would ever approve Sheriff Walter's request for another deputy. They were drowning here. The city had to know that. Thus, the reason she was still working after dark and dealing with delinquent teenagers.

Rodney Owen was beyond pissed. He didn't find the trespassing incident the least bit amusing. Apparently, this wasn't the first time and he was fed up with adolescent kids harassing his livestock. Paige thought he was overreacting, but wisely chose not to share her opinion on the matter. His ranch was close to town and just a little too convenient when rambunctious youngsters with nothing better to do got the bright idea to engage in a round of 'cow tipping'. She couldn't wait to explain that one to Carmen, her city slicker friend, and former co-worker would certainly get a good laugh at Paige's expense. But that was a conversation for another day. It was after ten in the evening and Paige had worked nearly fourteen hours today. As she approached the fork in the road she debated, ultimately deciding she was too beat to head back to the station. She made a right and started for home. Those last three reports would just have to wait. At least Margie had adjusted the schedule to give her a little down time. Dean's graveyard

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shift would now run over, allowing Paige a much-needed break. She wasn't due back to work until noon. *Hallelujah.*

Moments later, she pulled into her driveway, thankful the day was finally over. With a deep sigh, Paige ascended the stairs, stepped through her front door; a nice smooth glass of wine on her mind, and froze. Something wasn't right. Every instinct she possessed told her someone had been inside her home.

She moved slowly, room to room, carefully clearing her entire residence. It was amazing how often she found herself doing this, creeping around her home, inside or out, searching for suspects. This was supposed to be a sleepy little town with one of the lowest crime rates in the country. Paige stepped into the back bedroom and frowned. Someone had definitely been inside her house. Whoever it was had already left, probably hours ago. But knowing an intruder had been inside - for who knows how long - made her feel uncomfortable. She felt... violated and victimized. A feeling she was starting to get used to.

She silently studied the spare room for several seconds, trying to decide what to do about the damage. Reality hit and she moved to the kitchen to make the call. If she didn't report the situation immediately, she'd be answering to the sheriff in the morning... or whenever he returned to work. As she waited for the call to connect, her mind sifted through possibilities. It wasn't Marnie Breslow, her high school nemesis was behaving for now. Marnie had a court date coming up regarding the threatening notes. There was no way the woman would jeopardize her freedom for something like this.

That left the bane of her existence. An anonymous intruder that had been causing problems since Paige had moved back to town? She just wished she knew why this person was so set on tormenting her. If it had to do with her mother's murder, as she believed, why? *Was it the killer? A frightened accomplice? A friend or relative protecting a loved one...*

"Hey, Dean," Paige said taking a seat at her kitchen table. "I have a problem."

Dean sighed. "Another one?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I'll be right there," he said disconnecting the call.

Paige sat on her front porch and waited. Dean must have been close, because it only took him a couple minutes to pull up.

"Okay," he said stepping from his patrol car. "What now?"

"Come on up," Paige said standing. "Oh, and you're going to need your camera."

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“Didn’t seem to care if you knew they were in here,” Dean said looking at the broken window and the crunched glass ground into the wooden floor. “Not just the window, but whoever did this just climbed in and stomped all over the glass, then moved on.”

“Which is why you’re not going to find any evidence,” Paige said leaning against the doorjamb. “They were careful.”

“Agreed,” Dean said moving toward the window. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to look.”

Paige smiled and began to survey the room. The lack of evidence was blatantly obvious. So, she once again walked through her house. This time she was looking for trace evidence rather than an intruder. As she moved slowly and methodically through her bedroom, she found it. No matter how careful a person was, they always left something behind. “Dean,” she called.

“What’s up?” he asked stepping into her room.

Paige pointed to a rough, slightly splintered piece of wood on the frame next to the bathroom. “Blood,” she told him. “I’ve been meaning to sand that down for weeks. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve snagged my shirt sleeve on it. But I’ve never cut myself.” She moved closer. “It looks like he tried to wipe it off, but you can’t clean up a wood surface like that when you’re in a hurry. Not if you want to be thorough. It takes time, something my intruder apparently didn’t have. Or at least didn’t think he had.

Dean pulled out a pocket knife and a swab then carefully secured the evidence. “Alright,” he turned to Paige. “I think I’ve done all I can do here tonight. I’ll type up my report and leave a copy on the boss’s desk. You’ve had a long shift, and Jericho’s been down with the flu for three days. He doesn’t need to be bothered with this tonight.”

“I agree,” Paige said as she escorted Dean to her door. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” he gave her a friendly nod and strolled to his car.

Paige slowly closed the door and sighed. She glanced at the staircase, knowing she’d never be able to sleep alone in her bed tonight. Just stepping into that room, knowing a stranger had rifled through her drawers, maybe sat on her bed, or worse, laid on it...nope. There was no way she was sleeping in that room tonight. And the spare was out. Between the mess and the broken window, she’d never get to sleep in there. That left the couch. Good thing she owned a comfortable one. Not as good as a bed, but it would have to do.

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Paige was so focused on the report she was filing, she didn't notice Jericho step through the door and disappear into his office. The instant he spotted the report, he was standing beside her desk. "You should have called."

Paige glanced up, confused for several seconds. *Oh, the burglar.* "The house was clear and nothing was stolen. Plus, you've been out with the flu or whatever. There was no reason to get you out of bed for a dead-end report."

"You're sure it's a dead-end?" He studied Paige, it was obvious she'd hadn't gotten much sleep.

"I am," she sighed. "We have blood, but it's highly unlikely the guy's in the system. Otherwise, I think he would have chopped out a section of the wall to prevent me from tracking him. No, this is someone who is clean... and dirty."

Jericho lowered himself into her visitor's chair. "Do you think it has something to do with the job? Anything you've been working on I don't know about?"

"No," Paige sat back to study her boss. "And neither do you. We both know this is connected to the rest. The vandalism, the surprise attack, the brakes... and all the rest."

"Agreed," Jericho leaned forward. "So, what is your gut telling you? Why is someone targeting my newest deputy sheriff? And I want the truth this time. I know you've been holding back."

"If I had to guess, I'd say it's because I'm looking into my mother's murder," Paige said honestly.

"Well," Jericho sighed. "At least you didn't lie to me this time."

"I haven't lied, Jericho." Paige was now positive she could trust him. She'd gotten to know her boss well enough to know he was clean. A good cop and a great leader. But she still needed to know why he hadn't dug into her mom's murder. He was the sheriff, he should have put every man he had on the case until they caught the person responsible.

"Not outright, no. But you have been evasive and misleading on purpose," he stood when the phone in his office began to ring. "We'll finish this conversation later. I've been expecting a call and that might be it." It was probably time to share his file on Chaya with Paige. Her situation was getting more dangerous with each passing day. Maybe if they joined forces, they might actually get to the bottom of this. He hadn't been out sick. He'd been following a lead. Unfortunately, the situation was odd but not related to Chaya's case. Another dead-end, another disappointment. He wasn't ready to give up yet, though. He was sure one of these days his trail would lead him to a better clue, rather than another brick wall. He just had to be patient and thorough. And he was going to bring Paige onboard. Between the two of them, maybe they could finally solve the mystery.

"Sheriff Walters," he said as he lowered himself into his chair. "Yes, sir," he sighed knowing this was going to be a long discussion.

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Paige had just completed her last report when a couple stepped through the front doors. The woman looked shaken, the man looked determined. Margie had disappeared after mumbling something about evidence and misfiling. That left Paige to deal with the new arrivals.

“Good afternoon,” Paige said approaching the pair and extending her hand in greeting.

The man shook her hand then motioned for the woman to take a seat. “We need to make a report, I think. Can we do that with you?”

“Sure,” Paige motioned to the other chair. “Why don’t you join your companion there and tell me what’s going on.”

The man reluctantly settled into the visitor’s chair and took the woman’s hand. “We’re from Salt Lake, just visiting for an extended weekend. We’re staying at the Country Village Motel. We come here a lot in the summer. The mountains are ideal for dirt biking. We both ride, which is why we are here today.”

“Okay,” Paige encouraged. “Sounds like fun.”

“Usually,” the man glanced at the woman then continued. “My girlfriend and I were out riding yesterday. We typically pack a lunch because that way we can cover more territory, you know?”

“Sure,” Paige agreed, not really knowing how much territory you could cover in a day on a motorcycle.

The woman suddenly thrust a cellphone into Paige’s face. “What do you think those are?”

Paige frowned and reached for the phone. “May I?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said handing the phone to Paige. “Of course.”

“If you think it’s suspicious, I can take you back out there. I sort of marked the route the best I could. We stopped there to rest, but it was kind of creepy so we left. Then I realized we might need to know where we were. I didn’t have a GPS, but I marked the trail along the way. It would be fairly easy for me to show you that spot,” the guy offered. “If those aren’t just normal hills that is.”

Paige was doing her best to enlarge the picture on the small screen. She glanced up when the front door opened. Margie was back. “Just the person I needed to see. You have perfect timing.”

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“What can I do for you?” Margie asked. She was getting used to these unexpected interruptions.

“Could you have this lady,” Paige frowned. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Danique,” the young woman said immediately. “Danique Montague.”

“Could you have Danique email that photo to you? I’m having a hard time seeing it on the cell phone.”

“Sure,” Margie agreed as she settled into her chair. She handed the woman a business card. “That is my email address. Just forward it to me and I’ll display it on that television screen up there.” Margie pointed to the 46” screen that was connected to her computer.

“Perfect,” Paige said as she turned back to the man. “Now, while they do that can I get you to follow me over to my desk? I need some information from you. Like your name and how I can contact you if I have questions.”

“Oh, sure.” The man sat in the chair opposite Paige’s desk. “Well, I’m Coen Langley.” He rattled off his cell number, his room number at the Country Motel and his home address. He was just finishing up when Margie turned on the television. The photo was displayed in vibrant Technicolor on the screen.

“Is that?” Margie looked to Paige in shock.

Paige sighed, she’d gotten a bad feeling the instant Danique had shoved that phone in her face. That picture confirmed she was right. “I’m afraid it might be.”

“What?” Danique asked, glancing from Coen to Paige, then back to Coen.

“I was hoping, maybe I was wrong,” Coen admitted. “Honey, I think those are graves just like I told you.”

“Really,” she asked. It was clear she was hoping someone would say they were wrong. “Oh, my gosh. Do you think there are bodies under there?”

“Shut it off,” Paige told Margie who immediately pressed a button and the screen went black.

“Are you okay?” Coen asked Danique.

“I’m...well, no,” she said as she dropped into a chair again. “We found dead bodies, Coen. How did we find dead bodies? We were just out riding, having a good time and we found bodies!”

“We don’t know that yet,” Paige tried to soothe.

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“Yes, we do,” Coen disagreed. “Do you need anything else from us? Do you need me to show you where we were? I can, but I don’t want Danique to have to go back out there.”

“I think if you describe it on a map that should be enough,” Paige said glancing at Margie.

Margie turned the television back on and there was now a map of the area on the screen.

Coen walked forward until he was standing directly beneath the television. “Okay, I think I got this.” He glanced at Margie. “Can you drag it this way? Maybe zoom in just a little?” he made a motion like he was dragging the map to the left. “Okay, there. Stop,” he said seconds later. He pointed to a trail that led off the main road. “This is where we started out. See here, this tiny road that leads off to the right, we took that. Then...” he was silent for several seconds. “Okay, yeah. Here...this is the one we took. It’s pretty overgrown. I don’t think it’s used much, which is why we decided to check it out. We’ve never been on that trail and wondered how far back it went. The picture was taken about here.”

He pointed to a spot on the map that was surrounded by what looked like trees. It was difficult to tell in Google Earth, but Paige was sure she could find the right spot. “Thank you,” she looked at Danique. “Both of you. I just need your personal information, then the two of you can head back to your room. I don’t think we’ll need you to show us in person. I have a pretty good idea from that map. Margie has marked the spots you pointed out, the turns and trails, that is. Once Dean shows up, we’ll head out and see what we can find. Are you staying in town a few more days?”

“I don’t know,” Danique said as she stood. “I mean, we were supposed to go riding again tomorrow, but what if we find something else? I don’t want to see more bodies, Coen.”

“I assure you, that is not likely.” Paige grabbed an Arapeen Trail map from behind her desk. She returned to the couple and pointed out her favorite area. “This is a great ride, the scenery is wonderful from this overlook, see right there. If you haven’t been out that way, I highly recommend it. It’s an easy ride and if you do something fun tomorrow you won’t leave here with a bad experience? Take another day, enjoy the wilderness and go home with all of this well behind you.”

“I agree,” Coen nodded. “I’ll talk to her, but I agree. Unless you hear from me, we’ll be here at least one more day. Maybe two...it all depends.”

“I understand,” Paige said wanting to shove them out the door. She needed to get in touch with Dean and get started. If those were graves, they had a serial killer using their mountain as a disposal site. The instant the couple stepped out the door, Paige headed for her desk.

“Dean is on his way to the mouth of the canyon. He’s a ways out but you shouldn’t have to wait long,” Margie assured her.

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“Thanks,” Paige grabbed her jacket and hurried out the door.

* * * * *

Paige and Dean walked the perimeter as they waited for James Tolman to arrive. They needed to know how to proceed. Technically, they were on Forest Service property. They wouldn't need a warrant, but they would need permission. She pulled out a roll of yellow police tape and began tying it to a tree. The crime scene needed to be secured. They might have to postpone digging until they got permission, but they could at least cordon off the area while they waited.

Dean moved forward and took one end of the roll. “You secure that, and I'll walk over there. Follow me over and we'll find another sturdy tree. It shouldn't take us too long to enclose the square... rectangle, whatever. It beats standing around waiting, that's for sure.”

The two of them worked well together. They were just finishing up when they heard a car stop in the distance. Paige glanced up to see DA James Tolman approaching on foot. “Sir,” she said in greeting as he carefully surveyed the area.

“Paige Carter, you are some kind of bad luck,” he finally said with a somber shake of his head. “There is only one thing that could explain this. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “We know.”

“So what's next?” Dean asked impatiently.

“Next, I contact the Forest Service and see if they want their regional rep involved,” Tolman said pulling out his phone. He moved several feet away, clearly searching for a signal.

“Maybe we should tell him we have immediate contact over the air,” Dean suggested.

“Naw,” Paige grinned. “That's not nearly as entertaining. This way, he'll get some office staff that has to transfer him to someone else, who will send him to Washington, who will transfer him back here again,” Paige shrugged. “It's part of the whole... experience. I'd hate to deprive him of the real live pleasures of field work. Wouldn't you?”

Dean laughed, then turned and headed to his car. He returned several minutes later, took one look at Tolman and grinned. “Still getting passed around?”

“Yep,” Paige said happily. “And I don't think he's all that pleased about it. Did you reach Forest?”

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“Yeah,” Dean motioned for Paige to follow him then they both settled onto a couple of large rocks. “Brandon’s on his way, said he’s about five out.”

James Tolman spotted the deputies lounging on the rocks and moved toward them. “You’d think they’d fix that bureaucratic BS already.”

“Did you finally get an answer?” Dean asked.

Tolman shook his head. “Said they’d have someone call me back. If I don’t get a response in the next five minutes, I’m making my own decision.”

Just then they heard a truck in the distance. “That’s probably not necessary,” Paige confessed.

“Why not? Who did you call?” Tolman frowned.

“I flagged Brandon on the radio,” Dean admitted. “You didn’t seem to be getting anywhere so I thought I’d just tag him directly and have him head this way.”

“Brandon?” Tolman pressed.

“Yeah,” Paige stood. “Brandon Mah-something or other. He’s the Forest Service Rep for this area. We just call him Forest, easier to remember.”

“Brandon Mahanta,” Brandon said shaking his head. “It’s really not that difficult, but Forest works. Pleasure to meet you, sir,” Brandon said as he glanced around. “Now, what do we have here?”

“It looks to us like a dumping ground. We need to start digging, but I know how ballistic the Feds go if we don’t ask first. Can you approve this, or do we need to go higher?” Tolman asked.

“Give me a minute,” Brandon moved up the trail a ways and dialed a number. Within minutes he was back. “I just need a few pictures to send to the office, you have a problem with that? I can add a classification if you’re worried about containing this.”

“That would be great,” Tolman agreed. He turned to Dean and Paige and narrowed his eyes. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“What?” Paige asked innocently.

“You know exactly what. I assume that was some kind of initiation test,” he was looking at Paige.

Paige shrugged. “Maybe,” she confessed. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to deprive you. I figured you should experience all the pleasures of working in the field. And Jericho always

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interferes with the fun. I decided to strike while I could, there may never be another opportunity quite like this one again. It will make you appreciate us a little more.”

James Tolman laughed. “Where is that no good sheriff of yours anyway?”

“He’s on his way up,” Dean admitted, glancing at Paige.

“I thought he was still sick,” Paige frowned. “He doesn’t have to be here, we’ve got this.”

They heard the sheriff’s car pull up and watched as he and Brandon re-joined the group. “We’re all set on this end.” Brandon turned to Jericho. “I heard you’ve been under the weather, looks like you’ll live.”

Jericho smiled, but didn’t elaborate. “James,” he said as he moved forward to get a better look. “Paige found this?”

“No,” Paige said, annoyed. “I did not. I took the report, a couple visiting from Salt Lake found it. So don’t go blaming me, it is not my fault.”

Jericho laughed. “I’m guessing James already mentioned your bad luck.”

“Guilty as charged,” James said moving in next to the sheriff. The two of them moved forward, away from the group. “So, Brandon says we have the go ahead. How do you want to handle this? We’re going to need to start digging, but at the same time be extra cautious. If there is the slightest hint of evidence in there, I want it preserved.”

“Paige,” Jericho called.

Paige moved in next to the two men. “Yeah?”

“I’m putting you in charge here,” he studied her for a reaction.

Paige widened her eyes in shock. “Really? I mean, won’t Gage be back in the morning? He’s senior around here. Won’t he be upset?”

“No,” Jericho said without hesitation. “Because he was out of town when we made the discovery and because this is your case. You’re primary and you already have a rapport with the witnesses. But mostly because you are the only one here that has the necessary experience. All that time working with the FBI, you must have at least assisted with incidents similar to this. You do specialize in forensics after all.”

“Unfortunately I do,” Paige affirmed. “Okay,” she looked around. “Well, you stay.” She pointed to James Tolman. “I need you close in case I unearth something that requires legal maneuvering.” She turned to Brandon. “I need you to stay just in case we have to do more than move around a little dirt.”

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Brandon nodded. “Just try to make me leave. Now that you’ve got me here, you’re stuck with my company until we’re done.”

“Good,” Paige turned to Dean. “Now, we need shovels and plenty of evidence bags. I need to walk the inner perimeter and see if I can see anything out of the ordinary. Dean and I were careful. We kept to the outside of that tape. Nobody goes inside until I give the okay, any problems with that?”

“None,” Jericho grinned. He turned and disappeared back down the trail.

“Is he leaving?” Paige frowned. She needed him here in case she had a disagreement with Tolman.

“Naw,” Dean assured her. “He’s just getting his folding chair. Sheriff Jericho Walters is always prepared. Plus, he’s been around long enough to know if he’s headed up the canyon, he’s going to need a chair.”

Paige’s frown deepened when Jericho returned with one folding chair. He settled in and watched as Paige began to walk the area.

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It was several hours later and approaching dusk when Paige finally unearthed the first body. It was obvious the corpse had been there for several years. They would have to send the skeleton’s off to the lab for testing to determine just how old they were but Paige was guessing about four years based on decomposition. She straightened and walked toward her boss.

Jericho glanced up and saw Paige headed his way. He stood and waited to greet her, hoping James would not reveal the conversation they had been having. No such luck.

“So,” James also stood. “Jericho tells me you’ve been having a bit of trouble since you returned to town.”

Paige scowled at Jericho then ignored him. “A bit,” she said briskly. “I’m finished with the first body. So far, there’s nothing that will lead us to either the victim or the suspect. Whoever did this was thorough. It’s fairly old, though. So it’s possible there was evidence years ago and it’s been disturbed or eliminated by the elements. I’m not going to be able to see well enough to start on the second site. I’d suggest we call it a night and return first thing. We’ll need the Medical Examiner to respond tonight if possible. Unfortunately, someone is going to have to guard the scene until we return. Once word gets out we’ll have to ward off curious reporters and onlookers.”

“Reporters?” James frowned. “Why do you think we will have to deal with reporters?”

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Paige just grinned. Clearly, this man had no idea the kind of media attention he was about to encounter. Not just local either, he'd be dealing with the national syndicates. Paige figured twenty-four hours tops before the circus began. "Uh, because you have a serial killer dumping bodies in your grid. Three graves makes this serial and breaking news. The instant someone talks - as in we call for the ME, who knows how many bored and eager reporters will hear our radio traffic. Or when the couple at the motel who actually located the site, mentions what they found to the motel receptionist, the store clerk or their brother in Salt Lake, you'll have so many cameras raining down on this town you won't know what hit you."

"That's an exaggeration, right?" James Tolman asked.

Paige just smiled. "So, boss," she turned to address Jericho. She was still angry with him. There was no reason to bring the District Attorney in on her trouble. "Who is going to pull guard duty?"

Brandon approached the group. "I'll do it."

"We need someone to guard this place all night. You don't have backup," Jericho observed.

"No," Brandon acknowledged. "But I have your frequency. If I encounter trouble, I'll call. You guys are shorthanded already. Once Gage gets back, we can work out a schedule. But for now, let me handle the night shift. I can also call up to the regional office and request additional personnel. They'll send a couple guys, no problem. We're dealing with a National Forest, getting reinforcements... for this? That's going to be a breeze."

"Alright," Jericho agreed. They could use the extra help. "Paige, you head home. I need you back here first thing. You're our resident expert on evidence collection. If there's something there to find, I know you'll see it. Now, I'm beat. Let's head out. I'll call Benny at home and have him respond immediately. He has a radio, but Paige is right, once the words medical examiner go over the air, it's going to grab unwanted attention. A more private conversation might buy us a few hours before the media frenzy. Brandon, don't hesitate to call if you need anything. I'll advise my guys to keep an ear out."

Paige turned to stare at Jericho. "What guys?"

Jericho smiled. "Something I've been working on."

"Which is?"

"We have a couple Reserve Deputies that work for us now," he announced. "I've been negotiating with the mayor for weeks. He's adamant he doesn't have money in the budget for another full-time guy, but he was willing to compromise. We get two Reserve Deputies and one part-timer."

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“Part-time?” Paige frowned. Who would be willing to do that? Part-time workers didn’t get any benefits.

“Yeah,” Jericho shrugged. “Duncan is starting tonight. He’s going to use the line unit, the one you parked out back. I assume it’s ready to go now that you have your replacement.”

“Sure,” Paige started for her vehicle then stopped. “Who is Duncan? I mean, doesn’t he need training?”

“Duncan Havilland,” Jericho said casually. “He’s worked for Laurel Bluff for about five years now. He’s our new part-time guy.”

“Oh,” Paige looked at Dean who was grinning.

“We get Dunc,” Dean finally asked. “Way to go sheriff.”

“I take it you approve,” Jericho smiled.

“Yeah, Duncan’s solid.” He glanced at Jericho then Paige again. “I mean it, his driving sucks, but he’s a good cop.”

“Driving?” Jericho frowned. He’d forgotten about that connection. “No racing, I mean it.”

“No, sir,” Dean sobered.

“Another racer?” Paige moaned. “Seriously?”

Dean grinned. “He’s a pro...like me.”

“Goodnight,” Paige finally said. “I’m beat. I’ll be back first thing. I want to get an early start. It’s slow going and I’d like to uncover the last two bodies before dark.”

“If there’s any trouble at your house, Paige, call Dax. He’ll know what to do?” Jericho called before he got into his vehicle and pulled away.

Paige frowned. “Why is that?” she asked Dean. But her fellow officer had already climbed into his truck and was closing the door. Well, alright then. She pulled open her door and paused when James Tolman called her name.

“Sir?” Paige answered as the District Attorney stepped in next to her vehicle.

“I just wanted to say Jericho did the right thing. I mean, when he notified me that you’d had some trouble. I could see that upset you and to be honest Jericho warned me you might not approve, but he did the right thing. If you guys ever catch the suspect, I’m going to need the details. It’s better to keep me up to speed throughout the investigation instead of springing it on me at the last minute.” He studied her closely then continued. “Do you think this has anything

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to do with your mother's murder? I mean we all thought the guy had to be a drifter but now...well, it just leaves questions. For me anyway, and Jer." He waited patiently but when Paige didn't answer he took a step back. "Well, goodnight Deputy Carter."

"I don't know," Paige finally said. "But right now, that's the only thing that makes any sense. I was just a kid when I moved. The incidents started almost immediately when I returned. I just don't see this having anything to do with me. It's more likely it has to do with mom and her murder. And we both know, if that's the case, the perp wasn't a drifter."

"I agree," James said softly. "Well, if there is anything I can do to help just let me know. I'll keep this quiet for now. My staff won't be read in unless it's necessary. Have a good evening."

Paige watched silently as James Tolman walked away. Was it the right thing to do? Clearly Jericho had thought so. So many things to consider. She gave one brief honk to Brandon then pulled away. Her conversation with Tolman reminded her of yesterday's incident. Someone had broken into her home. She'd searched the place completely and nothing was missing, but what had they been after? The diary? The secret folder she kept in the wall? Something else that Paige didn't even know existed? The possibilities were endless. She continued to go over what she knew all the way home. When she pulled into her drive, she spotted Dax on his front porch. Maybe this time she'd visit him.

* * * * *

"Hey stranger," Paige said as she approached Dax's front porch.

"You look like sh..." Dax grinned. "Like you've had a rough day. Wrestle a pig?"

"Funny," Paige said as she dropped into a chair. "Rough day, rough night, rough week I suppose."

"Anything you can share?" Dax asked as he pulled a beer from a small cooler and handed it to Paige.

"Well first," she said as she took the cold bottle. "I need to ask if you noticed anything suspicious last night."

Dax frowned. "No, why?"

"I worked a double, didn't get home until around ten. When I stepped inside, I knew someone had been there. I did a quick search and found a broken window. Someone came in through the back... on the other side of the house. It would have been impossible for you to see

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them, but I thought maybe you might have heard something. I'm just trying to get a better idea of timing, no biggie."

"I wasn't around last night," Dax admitted. "I had to head up to Nephi. My friend, Ken... well, he decided to move. He and his wife were checking out the town up there and asked me to join them for dinner. I didn't get back until nearly midnight." Seemed like every time he left town to help out Ken, something happened to Paige.

"Oh," Paige settled into the chair and wondered if she would ever get back up, maybe she'd just sleep here tonight. She was so tired and the thought of returning to her house alone, gave her the creeps. She silently scolded herself, she was a cop. A little B&E was no big deal.

"So, that explains the bags under your eyes. What's up with the dirt?"

"Gee, stop with the compliments," Paige scowled. "I don't have bags and it's rude to tell a woman she does."

"Sorry," Dax grinned. "My mistake."

"I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm tired and I seem to tell you everything," Paige closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the chair.

Dax patiently waited.

"An out of town couple found a burial ground up the canyon. It's going to get crazy around here. Once news gets out every reporter from every television show around the country is going to descend on our little town. Jericho and Tolman have no idea what they're in for." Paige lowered her bottle over the side of the armrest, nearly dumping its contents on the patio floor.

Dax frowned, reached out and took Paige's bottle and set it aside. "You're saying bodies, does that mean a serial killer?"

"Has to be. There were three graves but I only had time to uncover one. The bones were pretty clean so I'm guessing four years or so." Paige opened her eyes and studied Dax. "That make you nervous, Ace? From the scowl on your face, I have to wonder what you're hiding."

"Nervous? No," Dax stood. "I have a spare bedroom, queen bed and everything. Why don't you crash here tonight? I'll take a look at that window tomorrow. You have enough on your plate, you don't need to deal with damage from a break-in."

"Oh," Paige stood. "That's okay, I'm fine." She glanced longingly into his living room and wondered what it would be like to sleep in the same house as Dax. She'd feel safe, that's for sure.

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“I know you’re okay,” Dax opened the screen door. “But I’d feel better about this if you stayed here. Otherwise, I’m going to have to sleep on your couch and I’m pretty sure that thing is way too short for comfort.”

“Are you serious?” Paige asked, amazed.

“As a heart attack.”

Paige glanced at her house, her car and down at her clothes. “I need a shower and some clean clothes.”

“I know it’s shocking, but I actually do have a shower. And the clothes? I’ll loan you a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. We’ll deal with your place tomorrow. Come on in and get some sleep. You’re going to need it if you’re chasing a serial killer.”

“Okay,” Paige finally agreed. “But I have to get up early. Will you promise not to let me sleep late? I need to be back on the mountain at first light.”

“Scouts honor,” Dax said as he headed up the stairs. He turned back to see Paige surveying his living room. “It’s nearly done. I like how it turned out, much better than when I started.”

“I’ve only been in here once before and it was the quintessential construction zone. You do amazing work. Maybe I should hire you to help me.” Paige turned to study the man waiting patiently on the stairs. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Dax shrugged. “And thanks for the compliment. I’d be happy to help you with anything you want demolished. I already told you that when we knocked out that wall. What did you have in mind?” he asked when she stopped on the stair below him.

“I was thinking of knocking out that divider wall in the bathroom. You know, the one with the pocket door. I hate that and I think if I take out the entire wall, the bathroom will look bigger. Probably will be bigger, actually.” Paige followed Dax to the top of the stairs, he turned left, she followed.

“Would be,” he said as he opened up a door on the end. “Here’s the guest room and that door there leads to a full bath. Feel free to shower. I’ll grab you something to wear and toss it on your bed.” Dax watched Paige as she cautiously stepped into the room and looked around.

Paige was smiling when she looked back at her neighbor. “I guess you’re not just a pretty face. You also have skill. I love this room. Not too feminine, not too masculine. Perfect for any guest. If I didn’t know better, I’d wonder if you were gay.”

Dax scowled.

Paige laughed then sobered. “Can I ask you something?”

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“Sure,” Dax moved closer.

“Well,” Paige took a long, deep breath. “Marnie said she wrote those notes because she thought I was trying to take you away from her. But I’ve never seen her here, with you. Did you date her? I mean before I moved back to town?”

Dax laughed. “Not on your life.”

Paige relaxed. She wasn’t entirely comfortable with the feelings she was having toward her sexy neighbor but she did know she didn’t want one of Marnie’s old flames. That would be a deal breaker...whatever that meant. Could she act on her feelings for Dax? Things were so complicated in her life right now she didn’t know if it was fair to him. “Well, good then. I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

Dax was smiling as he walked away. Once he provided the promised clothing, he returned to his own room. It was going to be strange having Paige Carter sleeping in the room down the hall. It was a little strange having her ask about Marnie. Did that mean she was fighting the same interest he was? And did it matter? He was still talking to General Nathan Porter behind her back. He was still protecting her. She was still part of a job he had accepted. No, he wasn’t getting paid. But that was irrelevant. Hooking up right now was simply out of the question. And yet...

* * * * *

Paige slid into the dark, empty mill and pressed her back against the wall. The floor was covered in sawdust and the air smelled musky. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness then cautiously moved forward. A high pitched scraping sound caught her attention. It was similar to someone scratching their fingernails down a chalkboard and she cringed. All of her senses were focused on the top corner of the loft.

She moved forward, slowly, careful not to make a sound. She spotted the stairs and rushed toward them, anxious to save the missing girl. She had only ascended two stairs when large hands wrapped around her neck, pulling her backwards. Her foot caught and the entire staircase collapsed. Suddenly, Paige was free falling into a dark hole. She frantically grabbed at the edge of the opening. Dirt crumbled beneath her fingers as she tumbled through space. She landed with a thud, mud oozed around her seeping into her thin t-shirt. Then, she screamed as the ancient remains of a skeleton landed on top of her body. She frantically flailed her arms and legs in an attempt to get free, to knock the feel and stench of death away.

Dax burst through the door and switched on the lamp. He took a second to glance around then sat on the bed next to Paige. “Hey,” he soothed as he pulled her into his arms.

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Paige was breathing hard, she reached up and brushed the cold sweat from her forehead. Before she could get her bearings, strong arms wrapped around her. Dax. She was thankful she'd stayed, but at the same time she was embarrassed. She hadn't had one of those dreams since her last serial case. Moving to Manti was supposed to cure her of that particular ailment. "Sorry," she finally choked out. "I didn't meant to wake you. Guess you probably regret the sleepover."

Dax leaned back and looked Paige in the eyes. "You okay now?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "I guess I should explain."

"No need, I can figure this one out on my own. You were obviously having a nightmare. Does that happen often?"

"No," Paige pushed her body backwards until she was pressed against the headboard. "Not since I moved here. I had a few... back in Virginia, but I thought I was done with that part of my life."

"The bodies?" Dax asked knowingly.

"I guess," she shrugged. "Brings back old memories. It kind of got all mixed and tangled together. Old cases, this new one. I guess my mind is still processing."

"Why'd you let Jericho give it to you then?" Dax wondered.

"I'm a cop, Dax. This is my case. I took the initial on it. I talked to the witnesses. I get the case. And it doesn't matter, not really. I'll handle it. It's not like we're going to have another murder in Manti anytime soon. This was just bad luck and I'll cope." She hoped that was true. She had to cope. If she kept having these episodes, it would be harder to concentrate and get the job done.

"Move over," Dax said sliding into bed next to her. "I hope you don't snore."

"What are you doing?" Paige asked, a little panicked at the idea of sleeping in the same bed as Dax.

"I'm going to make sure I get at least a few more hours sleep before I kick your butt out of my house to chase serial killers." He pulled the blanket around him and snuggled in next to her, closing his eyes as he draped an arm over her waist.

Paige had no other option than to accept it. She'd sleep better this way, she was sure of that... if she could just get her heart to stop racing that is. She closed her eyes and smiled. Dax had a way of pushing her to the brink and calming her at the same time. Her body wasn't shaking like it usually did, the cold sweats were gone and she was left with a racing heart for an

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entirely different reason. She shifted backwards and let her body relax into a man she wanted but knew she shouldn't have. A short time later, she was fast asleep.

* * * * *

Dax stood in the doorway, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. He should wake up his guest, the sun would be up soon and she wanted an early start. He watched as she shifted, stretched and finally woke on her own. It was time to come clean.

Paige slowly woke and pushed herself into a sitting position. Nothing seemed familiar, where was she? *Oh, yeah. Dax's guest room.* She'd actually slept with Dax. Well, not with him but... with him. She wondered where he'd gone when she heard a noise near the doorway. As she looked up, their eyes met.

"Hey," Dax said softly as he walked casually across the room and handed Paige her morning elixir.

"Hey yourself," she said as she accepted the cup. "Thanks."

Dax settled onto the edge of the bed and waited. He wasn't entirely sure how this morning was going to start.

"What time is it?" Paige finally asked as she placed the half empty mug on the nightstand. "It's still dark."

"Yeah," Dax relaxed. "If you hurry, you might get to see the sunrise. You said you wanted an early start but I wasn't sure what that meant exactly."

Paige maneuvered around Dax and stood. "I'll join you downstairs. I um... just need a pit stop in the bathroom first." She only took one step before Dax gently grabbed her wrist.

"Hey," he waited until she looked at him. "This doesn't have to be weird."

Paige nodded.

"Forget you're a macho, independent cop and I'm the carpenter next door. Forget everything that is running through that head of yours. You needed a friend and I was there for you, that's it. It's no more or less complicated than that."

Paige studied Dax and wondered exactly what that meant. Was he saying he was just a friend, no interest in anything more? Or was he telling her he was here for her? Was she reading too much into all of this... or not enough? *Uggg*, she was so horribly bad at this. She forced

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herself to smile. “I agree, meet you downstairs?” she hoped that sounded light and casual enough.

Dax stood. “Meet you downstairs.”

Paige finished up in the bathroom and slowly made her way to the kitchen. Something smelled heavenly. Was that bacon? She should spend the night with the hot neighbor more often. She stepped into the room and hesitated. For the first time, she realized Dax wasn’t really himself. Was something wrong? She’d been so caught up in herself she hadn’t even asked him how he was. She moved forward to stand next to him. “Bacon and Eggs? Certainly, beats donuts in the morning.”

“Hey,” Dax shrugged. “I thought you might be hungry and if you have to spend the day digging out murder victims it might be the only meal you get for hours.”

“I appreciate that,” Paige said as she snagged the plates and silverware off the counter. “Inside or out?”

“I was thinking inside, but we could take this out on the patio if you’d like.” His mind was racing a million miles a minute. In the last twelve hours, so many problems had suddenly risen out of nowhere.

“Inside is fine, it might be a little chilly out there,” she moved closer, next to the stove. “Is everything okay? You seem... I don’t know, upset. Is it your friend? The one you went to see in Nephi?”

“No,” Dax shook his head. “Ken’s doing great. But there is something I need to talk to you about. I’m not upset, just have a few things on my mind.”

“Okay,” Paige leaned against the counter and waited. “Talk.”

“Here,” Dax handed her a plate that contained the bacon and two eggs. “I’ll join you in a minute.”

She took the plate and sat in one of his comfortable kitchen chairs. Within minutes Dax was standing next to her. He refilled her coffee mug and settled into the chair across from hers.

“This is great,” Paige said as she swallowed and reached for her coffee.

“I don’t know how you are going to take this. I figure you’ll probably get pissed so no matter what your reaction, at least finish breakfast okay?” Dax began.

Paige straightened and studied her neighbor. “Go on.”

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“Well,” Dax sighed. “I think it’s time to tell you that Nathan Porter contacted me awhile ago. He asked me to keep an eye on your place. I was doing that anyway so the call didn’t really matter one way or the other.”

“Nathan called you?” Paige seethed. She should have known the man couldn’t stay out of her business. “How do you know him?”

“I don’t,” Dax said firmly. “Not really. I didn’t know him at all when I got the call. But, well... I guess I do now.”

“Because you’ve been reporting in, telling him everything that’s been going on around here... with me?” Paige glared.

“Not everything,” Dax objected. “But yeah, I’ve been checking in when I thought it was important. If he doesn’t hear from me, he checks in.”

Paige stared through the sturdy French door into the darkness. She was pissed, but not so much at Dax. No, she was angry with Nathan Porter. The man had nerve. She’d thought he was finally accepting her independence. Thought he was giving her the respect she had demanded. Now, she knew he never would. “I find it hard to believe you didn’t know Nathan at all but suddenly out of the blue he called you. It’s even more unlikely that you would agree to his demands if he were a complete stranger.”

“I guess I can see why that would be difficult to understand, but it’s the truth,” Dax insisted. “I’m guessing you must have mentioned I live next door. Prior to that first phone call, that is. From what I’ve learned about General Porter, I’m sure he immediately started to dig. With his access and contacts it wouldn’t have been hard to learn my history... well, enough to convince him I was the right man for the job.”

“What does that mean?” Paige studied Dax. She had known, deep in her gut that he wasn’t just a carpenter.

“I’d appreciate it if you would keep this information to yourself. Even if you decide our friendship is over. I’d like my past to remain in my past,” Dax said softly.

“More secrets?” Paige shrugged. “Unless you’re a wanted fugitive or a drug lord hiding out from the cartel, I can keep it to myself.”

Dax laughed. “Good. Before I got out, I was Army. A Ranger actually. Most of my missions are top secret, classified. Some are covert. I’m sure somehow Nathan gained access to most of it but my point is this... I won’t be able to discuss them with you. I don’t want to. That is a past life, one I tried to put behind me for good.”

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Paige sat back. Dax did not look happy. Realization hit almost immediately. Nathan had used that, manipulated that to force Dax to watch out for her. He was exploiting Dax and that fact infuriated her even more than the secrecy did. “I’m sorry Nathan forced you into this. I’ll have a talk with him. Whatever he promised or threatened is over. Your obligation is over. And if that is why we became friends, then that can be over if you want, too.”

“Damn it, Paige.” Dax stood and pushed open the back door marching onto the porch.

Paige frowned, then remembered Dax had said he had a lot on his mind. This couldn’t be all of it. She stood and followed him outside. “I guess I didn’t help the situation but I’m not sure what you want from me.”

Dax leaned against the back railing. “I told you about Nathan because I can’t be your friend, not really, and keep that kind of secret from you. I’m not spending time with you because Nathan told me to. In fact, if you’ll recall, I said I was already looking out for you before he even contacted me.”

He had said that. Okay, she had inadvertently taken her anger out on Dax. He didn’t deserve that. He’d been nothing but kind and protective since she’d arrived. He’d agreed to Nathan Porter’s demands, maybe even reluctantly for her sake, not his. She reached out and touched his arm. “I’m not mad at you. Nathan is a different story, but I’ll deal with him later. Now, tell me what else is bothering you.”

Dax glanced at Paige, for the first time since she’d moved in he couldn’t read her. “Do you mean that?”

“I do,” she said honestly. “I was mad at first, but I know how Nathan can be. I had hoped he was respecting my privacy but I should have known better. This is between me and him. Not us. It’s not going to come between us. The only thing I ask is that you tell me when he calls. I want to know how much you’ve told him and what you plan to tell him in the future. It’s up to you if you keep whatever arrangement you two have but I want to be in the loop from now on.”

“Deal,” Dax agreed. “I think he will continue to call and to be honest, I’ve kind of come to admire the man. I mean, he had a rep while I was in the service. Everyone respected him whether you knew him or not. But now that I’ve gotten to know him a bit, I actually like the old codger.”

Paige grinned. “Me too. Now, tell me what else is bothering you.”

Dax once again stared into the darkness. The sun was starting to rise now, so a pink hue was slowly pushing the gray background away as light flooded the horizon. “You said this case is going to bring in the national media.”

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“Oh,” Paige frowned. That was the last thing she had expected him to say. “And why is that a problem for you?”

“I guess it depends on who shows up,” Dax said softly. “There’s a particular anchor I’d rather not deal with. And chances are pretty good that she’ll be right in the middle, stirring the pot and manipulating her way into the hearts and minds of the locals.”

“Old girlfriend?” Paige was surprised at the pang of jealousy that ran through her.

Dax turned to study Paige. “Ex-fiancé from hell.”

“Really? Wow,” Paige leaned against the railing. “So, any chance you two will... I don’t know, want some privacy?”

Dax frowned. “Not even a little. In fact, if you see her I’d appreciate a little help. Please, come over and save me. She’s arrogant, spoiled and doesn’t like to take no for an answer. I’m not sure I even have a soul left, Piper probably sucked it dry before I escaped.”

“Piper?” Paige sorted through all the national anchor women she could think of. “Seriously? You were engaged to Piper Weber? The Piper Weber?” The woman was supermodel hot and the public loved her. No wonder Dax just wanted to be friends. Piper Weber would be one hard act to follow.

“Yeah, and I’d appreciate it if you kept that one to yourself as well. I don’t need the entire town questioning my judgement. The woman oozes congeniality and girl next door sweetness in public, but she’s a raging lunatic in private.”

Paige smiled. “You don’t think maybe your experience has clouded your judgement a little?”

“Not at all,” Dax disagreed. “My experience has shown me the real Piper Weber. I’m not exaggerating. If anything, I’m being kind.”

Paige had a hard time believing that, which is why she’d keep this little revelation to herself. Dax was right, the entire town would question his sanity. The anchor for WZTV was quickly becoming America’s sweetheart. Nothing Dax said would change the public’s mind. Not even for the town hunk. And rumor had it, Dax had achieved that title the instant he moved in. Manti loved their sexy carpenter, but would that change if they knew he’d dumped America’s Sweetheart? Paige had no intention of finding out. “My lips are sealed but if she arrives, if she does what you warned and tries to pry into the hearts of the locals, won’t she use your history to gain entry into the gossip mills?”

“Probably,” Dax said defeated. Once again, Piper was going to ruin his life.

“Hang in there, maybe she won’t show.” Paige said hopefully.

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“If this really is a serial killer using our mountains for a disposal site, she’ll come. She’s gaining popularity. She’s finally achieving everything she ever wanted. She won’t pass up the opportunity to dominate the news cycle. Piper is nothing if she’s not thorough. Which means she’ll discover our friendship and do her best to exploit it. I hope you won’t let that happen.”

“Don’t worry,” Paige grinned. “I hate her already. I’m with you. Now, I need to head out. Thanks again for breakfast... and the shoulder. I hate to admit it, but I would never have gotten a lick of sleep at my own place. I won’t forget that Dax.”

Dax followed Paige back into the kitchen. “I meant what I said earlier. I hope you won’t make this weird. There’s no reason to feel uncomfortable about staying here or needing a shoulder. I was happy to oblige. And if Piper does march into town, extravagant entourage trailing behind her, I might be the one needing a shoulder.”

“And you will have it,” Paige smiled. “We’re good. No weirdness here. Talk to you later.”

“Hey,” Dax followed her onto the front porch. “Did you want me to fix that window today?”

“Umm, sure. If you have time,” Paige smiled. “I never pass up free labor. I’ll leave the door open, just lock up when you’re finished. It might be late when I finally wind down tonight. There are three graves. I only processed one last night. It’s tedious and time-consuming to slowly and methodically remove the dirt then sift through the pile for evidence. I may not get them both finished, but I’d like to. Once we’ve processed the scene I can start on the real investigative work. It’s going to take time to track down the identities of these victims.”

“Does that mean you’re putting your personal mystery on the backburner again?”

“For now,” Paige sighed. “I have no choice. All my energy will need to be focused on identifying our victims and tracking down the nutcase that did this.”

“I’ll help in any way I can. I hope you know that,” Dax pressed. “I’m here for you, whenever you need me.”

“I know,” Paige said as she turned and headed for home. She had a million things running through her mind right now. Brandon would be ready for a break, she was going to call Nathan and ream him a good one, she also needed to stop by the ME’s office and see if Benny had any success getting DNA samples from the tiny bits of flesh still attached to the bone. Yet, the most pressing thing on her mind right now was Piper Weber and her relationship with Dax. And that fact seriously annoyed her. Her neighbor’s take was interesting, though. The entire world thought Piper was sweet and innocent as the girl next door. According to Dax, nothing could be further from the truth. And Paige was willing to believe him. Dax had never been one to exaggerate or make things up. He was the most grounded, honest man she’d ever met. Which

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meant Paige would have to watch out for one Piper Weber. The woman just might make her job more difficult and that was the last thing she needed right now.

* * * * *

Paige stepped into her empty house and looked around. Everything looked normal. She ascended the stairs and stepped into the guest room then immediately smiled. Dax was good at his job. The window had been replaced with a new, energy-efficient model. He'd even painted the border and cleaned up the floor. The man was an angel. She moved forward and snatched up the small folded paper he'd taped to the middle of the glass.

*One window repaired
Dinner is in the fridge
Eat! Then crash.
We all need energy to survive.*

Paige was still grinning as she pulled open the refrigerator door and spotted the takeout box from Dirk's Farmhouse. Within minutes she had the smoked pork and luscious potatoes sizzling in the Styrofoam container. No need for a plate, this would do just fine. She took a huge bite of the parmesan bread stick and settled in for one of her favorite meals. Did Dax know how much she loved Dirk's pork? No way, he must have guessed. She smiled, her neighbor was one of a kind and a true friend. She'd remember that, if Piper did come to town. And she'd be there for him, just like he was always here for her.

Hours later Paige tossed and turned as she suffered through another nightmare. This time she was sinking in mud, her arms flailed wildly as she tried to swim through the wet dirt and dark bones to reach the top of the shallow grave. She gasped for air and jolted upright as she slowly regained consciousness. After several deep, soothing breaths she climbed from her bed and stepped into the bathroom. Once she'd splashed cold water on her face, she slowly made her way to her back porch. The sun wouldn't rise for another hour, but she'd never get back to sleep. Not without Dax's strong arms and warm body to sooth her. No, this time she was on her own. Might as well start working. She waited impatiently as the coffee brewed, then took her mug and her file outside. Once she settled into her lounge chair, she was lost.

Paige was still focusing on photos when Dax stepped up beside her. "Couldn't sleep?" he asked as he set a bag onto the small table next to her chair.

"Another nightmare," she admitted. "I'm afraid they might be my constant companion until this case is over."

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“You could always stay with me,” Dax found himself saying then silently berated himself. He didn’t know where this thing with Paige was headed, but if she spent another night in his arms, he had a pretty good idea.

Paige studied Dax, his offer was tempting. “Thanks, but I think for now at least, I need to deal with them on my own. My schedule is sporadic and at least I woke early enough to do a little digging before I head into the office.”

“Did you find anything in those pictures?”

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged and opened the bag. She smiled and pulled out her wrapped breakfast. “McDonalds. You drove all the way to Ephraim again?”

“It’s not that far and I was in the mood for sausage and hash browns.” Dax settled into the chair next to her. “Well, just remember the guest room is always available. If I know you’re coming, I’ll just leave the back door unlocked. That way you can sneak in like a delinquent teenager and I’ll never know you missed curfew.”

“Ha, ha.” Paige gathered up the photos and shoved them into her bag. With a deep sigh, she stretched out her legs and forced her body to relax. “It’s a beautiful morning, not too chilly, not too hot.”

Dax narrowed his eyes at her. Paige Carter had something on her mind.

Paige peeked through one partially open eyelid. “The media started to arrive last night. A few of them stopped by the station but Margie handled them like a pro. So far, they haven’t located the actual site, but that’s only temporary. I uh, well I just thought you should know there are rumblings that Piper is on her way. The reporter from CNN was complaining, loudly. I guess you’re not the only one she’s rubbed the wrong way.” Paige groaned as she thought of rubbing and Dax... and Piper.

“Don’t even go there,” Dax warned. “You do not get to have vivid fantasies about me and Piper and our... previous intimacy. Which was mostly nonexistent anyway. I was gone more than I was home, which is the only reason that relationship lasted as long as it did.”

“How long did it last?” Paige knew it was none of her business, but she wanted to know.

“In years? Two. In time together... maybe a couple months.” Dax reluctantly offered.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I was still a ranger when I dated Piper. That was her biggest complaint and my only salvation.”

“But if it was that bad, why the engagement?” Paige wondered.

Unfortunate Trio

“I thought I was in love with her. I told myself I loved her when I was away on a mission. I convinced myself I missed her, but the instant I got home, I couldn’t wait for the next call. The next covert trip anywhere but there. She confronted me one day, the second I walked through the door from a particularly long and difficult assignment. She insisted we either get married or break up. I had just spent fifteen hours on a plane after two weeks in hell. I agreed to a wedding then crashed. When I woke up, it was painfully obvious I had made the wrong choice. Then, I was called away on another job. Twelve hours of rest and a monumental mistake, then back on a flight to...well, it doesn’t matter where. Anyway, it was downhill from there. Ultimately, I broke it off. Told her I made a mistake. She didn’t take it well. I did my best to avoid her, she did her best to change my mind. It infuriated her that I kept getting called away. What she didn’t know was that I was volunteering just to escape her whining and the many attempts to manipulate me back into her bed. “

“So, she loved you?” Paige asked.

“No,” Dax disagreed. “She loved the idea of me. She thought if we were married, I’d be more open with her. She thought I’d tell her about my assignments and then she could exploit them to further her career.”

“You wouldn’t have done that,” Paige said immediately. “Did she not know you at all? Because I have never dated you and even I know that never would have happened.”

“My point exactly,” Dax shrugged. “So no, I didn’t love her, she didn’t love me and we were never all that close to begin with. Piper was the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. I had hoped it was finally in my past. Apparently, some mistakes haunt you forever.”

Paige smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, missy.” He stood and made his way across his back yard.

Paige watched him go. Dax Hamilton was a complicated individual. One she wanted to get to know better. Neighbor or not, she was attracted to the man. And one day, she might find herself acting on that attraction. But today was not that day. Today, she had victims to identify. Benny had retrieved enough DNA from the first body to test. He was thrilled with his accomplishment, Paige was skeptical. In her experience, the victims were rarely in the system. No, she was sure her next few days would be filled grasping at straws and tracking down needles in the proverbial haystack. She gulped down the last of her coffee and headed inside, it was time to officially start her work day.

Hours later, Paige sat at her desk sifting through dirt with a magnifying glass. She glanced up when Gage dropped into her visitor’s chair. “Rough trip?”

“The trip was fine,” Gage said. “We won, but I knew we would. It was a slam dunk. So much evidence, even Johnnie Cochran would have lost.”

Unfortunate Trio

“So why the long face?” Paige asked setting down the bowl of soil to study her friend.

“It breaks my heart,” Gage sighed. “Those girls, young women who never had a chance to really live. I know it’s wrong, and I’m sorry, but I’m glad it was you, not me that had to find them. I don’t think I’m cut out for big city crime and psycho serial killers. I took the job here because it’s a small town. Mostly we deal with cow tipping and speeding. A few barking dogs now and again. Not sadistic killers who abduct women, do heaven only knows what to them before they are dumped in a shallow grave in the mountains. It’s just not right.”

“I know,” Paige understood. This was Gage’s first horrific crime and he was struggling to deal with it. She still remembered her first case, many years ago. The first one usually made a lasting impression. For her, it had been a real eye opener. One she relieved on a regular basis. It had been the case that had brought her and Sean so close. The case where she’d made a near fatal mistake, the case she still dreamed about... had dreamed about last night. “I won’t lie, it’s going to be tough. The first one always is.”

“How do you get through it?” he asked.

“I guess by knowing it’s up to me. There is a sick, detestable individual out there taking the lives of innocent women. We know that, all three bodies were from young girls. And it’s up to us to stop him. A man that murders three women, that buries them in shallow graves like that, doesn’t stop on his own. We have to stop him. So, I muddle through the horror and do my best not to personalize it until I find the sick SOB and throw him in a cage. If we’re lucky, he’ll remain there for the rest of his miserable life.”

“He’s killed more, hasn’t he? There are more than just those three,” Gage observed.

“I’m fairly confident the answer to that is yes,” she said softly. “The three bodies we discovered are old. I’d say at least four years. That means there are more. A man like that doesn’t stop. He could have a break in pattern if he was arrested for something else, or hospitalized or something, but he won’t stop until we stop him. Knowing that, tells me there are more victims. The challenge will be finding them.”

“How can I help?”

“First, get on NLET’s and find out if there are any like crimes in the area. Go big, do a regional broadcast but not just our region, include all the surrounding states. If the guy doesn’t live in the area he could be dumping bodies in Reno, Delta, the Uintah’s... anywhere. And if he’s been doing this for years, we might get lucky.”

“On it,” Gage stood. “Do we need to head back out there? To the actual scene? Do you need anything from there today? Because the media is gathering quickly. There are at least fifty cameras out front and the number is growing by the minute.”

Unfortunate Trio

“I think I’m going to work from here today. I don’t want to lead them to the actual site. My focus is on my victims for now. Jericho or Tolman can deal with the media.” Paige picked the bowl back up and began to study its contents.

“What are you looking for?” Gage asked from his desk.

“Particulates,” Paige said absently. “Dirt particles that don’t fit. Something that might tell me where these girls came from.”

“I know they didn’t come from here, not Manti or Sanpete but do you think they are from further away? Another state? A completely different area?” Gage asked surprised.

“Not necessarily a different state,” Paige looked up. “Most likely they are from close by. But we don’t have any missing persons that fit. Neither does Gunnison or Laurel Bluff. So, I’m expanding my search. I’m checking NCIC for missing person’s within a hundred mile radius for starters and I’m looking for anything that might indicate a different geological region. For instance, if I find volcanic particles they could be from St. George. Pickleweed would be near Salt Lake, Ogden or anywhere close to the Great Salt Lake. Things like that, this soil might be the only clue we have to identify the women.”

“You’re good at this, aren’t you?” Gage observed. “I bet the FBI wishes you were still working for them.”

Paige smiled. “Thanks, but right now I just hope Jericho is glad I’m working for him. By the way, did he tell you why he was out? Did he have the flu or something more serious?”

“He didn’t say,” Gage logged into the Utah Criminal Justice database. “And when I asked him, he gave me that look. You know, the one he gives you when he doesn’t want to answer your questions. I dropped it.”

“Probably wise,” Paige agreed. She deposited the contents of the bowl into an evidence bag and opened a new container. Once she spread out a fresh sample, it took less than a minute for her to realize she’d hit gold. She reached for her phone just as it began to ring.

“Hey,” came the familiar voice of Sean Wilkens.

“Hey, Sean,” Paige smiled. “How’s Amy and Jason doing?”

“Back to their old, irritating habits,” he laughed. “I hear you got yourself another big case.”

“Guess that means the Feds plan to swoop in and wrestle it away,” Paige frowned.

“Not exactly,” Sean grinned. “But they are sending me out there to help you.”

“Really?” Paige asked more enthused about the interference.

Unfortunate Trio

“Really,” Sean affirmed. “The boss figures we already have a good working relationship, which is always a plus in these things. And since Amy lives out your way, I’ve arranged to stay with her and the new baby. I don’t know how much quality time I’ll have with the family but it got me assigned to your mystery so I’m not complaining. Does trouble just follow you everywhere?”

“Don’t start,” Paige grumbled. “This is not my fault. Those women were abducted and murdered years ago. I was nowhere near here when it all went down.”

“Catching flak from the locals, huh?” Sean observed. “Don’t let ‘em get to you. It was a joke. They should be celebrating their good fortune. This thing is already going to be a circus, having you in their pocket is about the only thing they have going for them.”

“These guys are good cops, Sean. Don’t breeze into town and treat them like they are rednecks or something. They’re good, honest cops and I’ve actually learned a lot from them,” Paige insisted.

“Don’t worry, I’ll behave. What I was trying to say is that any police department, Sanpete or Vegas would be lucky to have your forensic knowledge working this case. Do we have anything yet? Any thread to tug?” Sean wondered.

“Actually,” Paige hesitated. “Are you officially assigned? As in you are packing as we speak and will be arriving in a fancy jet before dinner?”

“I’m officially assigned. I’m headed home as we speak to pack and catch a commercial flight to Salt Lake. From there the local bureau is supposed to have a car waiting for me to drive the remaining distance. I’ll land at my sister’s house well after dinner but hopefully before sunrise. Why?” his senses told him Paige had a clue.

“Because I need a soil sample tested. I think I found something.”

“Something big, or something that might help but it’s more likely Haiti will build a rocket ship and fly to Mars.”

“Something big,” Paige laughed. “And you are not funny.”

“You’re laughing,” he disagreed.

“I’m laughing at you, not with you. I found what looks like red soil. Not a lot, but enough to test. The women were wrapped in a white dress like thing, no shoes, nothing else. We found remnants of the cloth with the decomposed bones. But this soil doesn’t fit with the mountainous region out here. I’m thinking it could be either Moab or St. George. I won’t know until we do testing.”

Unfortunate Trio

“It could be anywhere in the Colorado Plateau. You know that, right? Why are you limiting it to those two areas?” Sean considered.

“I want to start with those because Moab is not far from here. It would be easier to snatch up a tourist, maybe a girl traveling alone and dump the body before anyone even realized she was gone. St. George, same thing. Tourists attending that outdoor play thing they have, a girl headed for Vegas. It’s just a starting point. If I have to, I’ll branch out from there. I’m hoping the lab can narrow the search. Moab’s redrock country is distinct. That’s my first choice. But you’re right, it could be anywhere. Even down into Colorado and the Mesa Verde area.”

“You’re right,” Sean decided. “We have to start somewhere. When I get to Salt Lake, I’ll see if I can get an agent to follow me down, snatch up the sample and hand deliver it to the lab. The sooner we know the better, right?”

Paige grinned. “Work that magic of yours, I’ll see you when you get in. Stop by the house, I’ll package it up and have it waiting. That way we can maintain a good chain of evidence. Jericho let me install a safe in the trunk of my vehicle. It’ll be secure until I can do the handoff.”

“See you when I see you then,” Sean disconnected.

“Moab is a good starting point,” Gage said the instant she hung up the phone. “Want me to contact them directly and see if they have any missing girls?”

“Not recently missing,” Paige agreed. “I’m still waiting for confirmation but look at anything three to six years out. I’m thinking four but let’s cover all our bases.”

“On it,” Gage grabbed the phone and began to dial.

Jericho stepped through the back and made a beeline to Paige. “We’re going to have to hold a press conference. James will take lead, but he wants you and me in the background. He’s going to allow limited questions. So be prepared.”

Paige groaned. “Seriously Jericho, I hate press conferences. By the way, Sean is on his way. The Feds assigned him to this case. We got lucky. Be nice, I know how much you love the FBI butting in, but this one was unavoidable.”

“I know,” Jericho shrugged. “And I have no problem with Agent Sean Wilkens. I requested him.”

“Why?”

“Because he was involved in that baby snatching case and he impressed me. Sean Wilkins is welcome to join us anytime he wishes. As long as he does it alone. I don’t need suits arriving in hoards but I’ll take what I can get right now.” Jericho glanced out the front window. “Those people are vultures. How you did this for so many years, I will never understand.”

Unfortunate Trio

“Usually, I waited in the conference room while the important people spoke to the vultures.” Paige smiled, then thought of Dax and his ex, Piper. Would that vulture be circling? Of course she would. Paige wondered if she’d be able to mask her dislike for the curvy brunette. She was abruptly pulled from her thoughts when James Tolman stepped through the door.

“Next time I’ll take you more seriously,” he said to Paige. “I had no idea things would get this crazy so quickly. You two ready for this?”

“I’m just a prop, right?” Paige asked. “I mean, I won’t need to give a statement or anything?”

“No statement, but if they ask a question that would be better answered by the police I’ll refer to you and Jer. The two of you can work out who answers. Just make it quick. I don’t want a lengthy debate up at the podium.”

“I’ll answer most of the questions myself. Just be prepared to step in if I motion for you. Keep it short and don’t tell them anything about the location of the bodies or... well, you’ve done this more than I have. You know what to tell them.”

That would be a big fat nothing, as far as Paige was concerned. She hated this, but knew it was necessary. To her it was a waste of time, time she could be spending identifying victims. But if they didn’t give the press something, they would just get in the way and ultimately interfere with their case. It was better this way, even though Paige hated it with a passion she reserved for things like...oh, scalding herself with hot water, mammograms...oh, or scrubbing tiny rocks out of a fresh case of road rash. She smiled as she stepped outside and waited for her signal. She could keep this up all afternoon.

Paige spotted Piper Weber almost immediately. The woman had maneuvered through the crowd until she was standing front and center. She had a smug, confident look on her face as she waited for her opportunity to pounce. Paige disliked her immediately. And, she realized she would have had a similar opinion even if Dax hadn’t shared his history. The anchor was used to getting her way. DA Tolman was nearly finished with his explanation. Paige watched as Piper gave her long silky hair a seductive flip then licked her deep red lips. *Putting on quite the show now aren’t we? Wonder how you’re going to react when it’s all for nothing. We might be small town, but none of us are stupid.* Piper Weber was going to leave here today with very little more than she’d arrived with. One look at Jericho told her he was onto the sexy vixen’s tactics as well.

“I’ll now open this up for questions. However, I’m going to reiterate once again that this is an ongoing investigation. We will not be providing any specifics or answer any question that will jeopardize the prosecution of this case in any way.”

“Can you tell us where the bodies were located?” Piper called out.

Unfortunate Trio

“I’m afraid I cannot disclose that at this time,” Tolman answered.

“How many bodies are we talking about here?” A male from the back asked.

“We have located three victims. That is all I am going to say on that matter,” Tolman answered.

“Will the FBI be taking over the investigation?” Piper asked, Paige realized she thought she would have an in if they did.

“Sheriff?” Tolman stepped back.

“The FBI was notified of the situation and they will be sending an agent to assist in the investigation. However, this is a Sanpete County case and will be coordinated through our office. The FBI will not be taking questions or handling any press conferences in this matter.”

Paige grinned at the obvious disappointment that flashed across Piper’s face.

“Who is the primary investigator?” Piper instantly masked her disappointment and looked past Paige for her next target. Clearly, she was hoping for a man. Once again, she was going to be extremely disappointed.

“Paige Carter will be heading up this investigation,” Jericho motioned for Paige to step forward.

“Deputy Carter has extensive experience in forensic analysis and investigation. We couldn’t be in better hands.” Jericho glanced at her proudly then focused on the crowd. “One more question before we conclude this.”

Piper raised her freshly manicured hand but Jericho ignored her and pointed to a less attractive woman in the corner. Piper’s eyes widened, then she scowled and shoved her way through the crowd, not stopping until she reached her van.

Interesting, Paige thought. She barely caught the last of the question the woman had asked.

“Paige?” Sheriff Walters motioned for her to take this one.

“We have not identified the victims as of yet,” Paige answered. “That is currently our main focus. For anyone who has a missing loved one, it is important to remember, these murders did not happen recently. They did not occur within the last six months, or even the last year. If your loved one has only been gone a few months please do not call the hotline. It will only add to the number of leads we will need to follow and make our job more difficult. The priority is to identify our victims. I’m not saying your case is not important, it is. I wish you the best and hope you can locate your missing loved ones soon. But again, if they have not been missing for at least a year, our victims are not your victims. Thank you.”

Unfortunate Trio

“That went well,” Tolman said once they had reconvened in the conference room. “That Piper Weber does not like to be ignored.”

Jericho laughed. “Caught that too did you? Guess she’s not the sweetheart reporter we’ve all been led to believe.”

“Guess not,” Tolman agreed. “But I think she might be trouble.”

“I agree,” Paige added. “She’s not going to give up. And whoever asked that last question, must be a rival. Piper was shocked to see her, then a little angry. Might be something to watch over the next few days.”

“I’ll put Dean on it,” Jericho decided.

“Are you sure?” Paige asked skeptically just as Dean stepped into the room.

“Paige,” he said, clearly annoyed.

“Dean,” she acknowledged.

“I realize Paige is primary on this so she has a say, but I’m just wondering if any of the rest of you doubt my loyalty and integrity,” Dean was trying to sound casual but failed.

“I didn’t say that,” Paige argued. “It’s just...”

“It’s just that you don’t think I can keep my pants zipped when a beautiful, famous reporter licks her lips and offers her body in exchange for information,” Dean grumbled.

“No,” Paige said through gritted teeth. “But you are single. You are exactly what Ms. Weber was looking for. She’s a temptation, that’s all.”

“And if I said I wasn’t tempted?” Dean countered.

“Why not?” Paige challenged.

“I have my reasons, but that woman wouldn’t even get past go.” He studied Paige for several seconds. “Never mind, Sheriff... assign someone else. I’m busy anyway.”

“Dean,” Jericho said calmly. “I trust you. And I need you on this.”

Dean had started to turn away, but stopped. He purposefully avoiding Paige and settled into a chair several seats down.

“I trust you. I’m not at all worried. I know you won’t let something slip or give Piper Weber the scoop she’s looking for,” Jericho said again. “But, she doesn’t know that. If you can tolerate her constant advances, it would really help me out here.”

Unfortunate Trio

“I’ll keep her busy,” Dean promised.

“Okay,” Tolman continued. “Now that we have that settled. Where are we on the case?”

“Sean called, he’s the agent working this for the FBI. He’s on his way as we speak,” Paige informed them. “We got lucky on that one. Sean is solid, we can trust him not to seek out the media or blab about anything. I’ve been sifting through soil this morning and I think I may have found something.” She continued to tell them what she found, why she was starting in Moab and St. George and the plan to send the sample to lab with an agent sometime tonight. “Gage has also been looking for missing persons in those areas.”

“I haven’t found anything concrete,” Gage admitted. “I talked to both agencies, Grand County and Washington County as well as St. George PD. They are all pulling cases between three and six years old. They agreed to email me photos and reports as soon as they have them compiled. I guess now, it’s just a waiting game. Once I have the documents we can start sifting through the information. Hopefully, we can narrow down our options.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” James said as he stood. “Now, I’m heading back to the office to brief my staff and explain how important confidentiality is during times like this. We might have to tolerate a hundred reporters but they will not get information from any of us unless we want them to have it.”

“I’m going to check on the couple at the motel. They said they were checking out, Coen said they don’t want to deal with the media frenzy, but I’d like to make sure,” Paige supplied.

“Don’t you think they will just follow you out there? And if the couple is still in the area, they’ll be hounded until they give up the location of the site,” Tolman warned.

“No,” Paige grinned. “Because I’m going to stop at every shop, every restaurant and every motel along the way. If they follow me, they will not get a thing. And as a bonus, I just might keep them occupied for another day.”

Jericho laughed, Tolman left the room. Paige followed him out.

Dean stood to leave but was stopped by Jericho. “She didn’t mean it the way you took it.”

“With all due respect, sir. You have no idea how she meant it,” Dean disagreed.

“I know how much you hate reporters. I know the history. How they swarmed in, did their best to destroy your uncle and your family then casually walked away without so much as an apology when they realized they had it all wrong. I’m probably the only one in this town that knows. But that’s not the only reason I trust you. Remember that. I hired you, I respect you and I trust you because you are Dean Bridges. Not because of your history. Paige may not know you well enough yet to understand that, but give her time. She’ll figure it out,” Jericho stood.

Unfortunate Trio

He had made it to the door before Dean spoke. "I had no idea you knew about that."

"I know everything," Jericho smiled. "I keep telling you guys that. One day, you will finally believe me."

* * * * *

"The results just arrived," Paige announced several days later. "Gage, they have positively identified the particles as iron oxide. They further indicate with ninety-two percent certainty they originated in Moab, Utah."

Gage grabbed a file and headed for the conference room. "Okay, these are the women that have been reported missing from Moab." He began tacking photo after photo to the cork board.

"All of those women went missing during our time frame?" Dean asked.

"Yes," Gage confirmed. "These are missing women reported three to six years ago."

"Okay," Paige settled in. "Let's divide up the reports and see what we have. Look for women that were visiting the area. For now, separate out those believed to be runaways. The ME concluded all three bodies are in their late teens to early twenties. That means adults."

Gage stepped forward and pulled three of the photos from the board. "These are out, they're underage. This one has a history of running and the other two had fairly good reasons to bolt."

"Okay good," Paige said sliding a folder across the table to Dean. He still wasn't speaking to her and she regretted that. She liked Dean and she had to admit he was handling Piper like a pro. So far, the woman hadn't realized Dax was living in the same town she was working her story. Paige was pretty sure that would change eventually, but for now it was a good thing.

"Alright," Dean finally looked up from his file. "Kendra Weiss was nineteen. She loved horses and traveled with a friend to Moab four years ago. Her friend was terrified of horses and decided to spend the day at the Sorrel River Ranch Resort & Spa relaxing while Kendra rented a horse and went riding. Because Kendra was an advanced rider, the stable allowed her to rent the horse and venture out on her own. When she didn't return, they sent out a search party. Late that evening, the horse returned home on its own. Kendra was never seen again. Her friend... uh, Rhiannon Farley insists she would never leave like that. And according to this report, Kendra has not been seen or heard from since the incident."

"She is a definite possibility," Paige decided. It fit the profile she was looking for.

Unfortunate Trio

“I have a Shelia Gibson,” Gage told them. “My gut says no on this one, but she went missing five years ago. The investigator notes that her friends believed she was in an abusive relationship, but nobody knew who the guys was.”

“Okay, let’s keep her as a possible but move her to the far right of the board. We need to classify the women somehow so let’s make a determination on the most likely to the left, least likely to the right. The rest will fall somewhere in the middle,” Paige decided.

“Joanne Chapman...” Sean provided.

The group went through the entire list, classifying them and arranging the board based on each situation. Margie stepped into the room with an armload of pizza. “Thought you guys might be hungry.” She paused to look at the board and moved forward. “Are you sure this girl is not a likely candidate? I know you have seven women listed as your most likely victims,” she pointed to the grouping on the right. “But are you sure this girl isn’t very likely?” She pointed to a photo in the middle group. Gage had labeled the sections with likely, not likely and maybe across the top of the board.

“Yeah, based on the file why?” Jericho stood and approached the board. “Do you see something?”

“Maybe,” Margie pulled out each pin then rearranged the photos. “When did these three go missing? Was it the same year or different years?” She had selected two from the most likely group and one from the middle group that were possible but didn’t fall into the pattern.

Paige slid a slice of pizza onto a paper plate then moved to the files. “Uh, looks like... Kendra Weiss was four years ago.” She set the file aside then picked up another. “Peyton Frazier also four years ago,” Paige frowned as she rummaged through the middle stack of folders. When she located the one she was looking for her frown deepened. “And Celine Borges... four years ago.”

“What made you single out those three?” Gage asked.

“They all have a similar look,” Margie shrugged.

“How do you figure?” Dean objected. “Peyton is blonde, Celine has jet black hair and Kendra’s is...I don’t know what color that is. Brunette with red highlights.”

“Yes,” Margie said impatiently. “But they all have long, silky hair. Delicate noses and thick eyebrows. Their eyes are vibrant and distinctive, even though they are different colors. They just jumped out at me as having the same look.”

“And they all went missing in October,” Paige said dropping into a chair.

Unfortunate Trio

“What?” Sean asked grabbing the folders. “That has to mean something. How did we miss that?”

“We’ll have to get dental records, but I think it means we identified our victims,” Paige provided.

Jericho gave Margie a proud smile. “It means Margie identified our victims.”

* * * * *

Hours later, Paige pulled into her driveway and shut off her car. She glanced at Dax’s front porch longing for his company. The house was mostly dark, maybe he’d turned in early. She made her way through her living room and into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of wine and stepped onto her back patio. That’s when she heard the argument.

“Piper,” Dax warned. “Get it through that thick skull of yours, I’m done. This was over years ago. I have no interest in picking up where we left off. If I did, we wouldn’t have left off. Go back to your hotel, do your job and leave.”

“Dax,” she pouted. “Baby. I know things didn’t work before but that was because you were never home. Now that you’re done with that awful job, it would be different. We’re not getting any younger and I need you.”

“No,” Dax corrected. “You need a man. Someone to show off at those pretentious parties you love so much. Someone to validate you, to help you get a little further ahead in the business. I’m not that guy, never was.”

Piper gasped and was about to respond when Paige stepped onto the back patio.

“Hey neighbor,” she grinned as she settled into one of his lounge chairs. “I know I’m later than we originally planned but things got a little hectic at work.”

“You’re that detective,” Piper slid closer. She reminded Paige of a snake and Paige momentarily wondered if this was how Eve had felt in the Garden of Eden.

Dax gave Paige a grateful smile then settled in next to her. Piper might think she’d just been presented with an exclusive interview, but she didn’t know Paige Carter. This might be fun to watch.

“I am,” Paige said taking another sip of her wine.

“And things were hectic you said, at the office? Something came up that was so important you had to work late?” Piper asked.

Unfortunate Trio

“Yep,” Paige stretched out, making herself comfortable on the chaise lounge she was now occupying.

“Well?” Piper said impatiently. “What was it?”

“Oh,” Paige said casually placing her glass on the table between her and Dax. “It’s complicated, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Deputy Carter,” Piper marched forward and got right in her face. “I am a smart woman. I’ve covered more homicides than you’ve seen in your small-town life. More homicides than you will encounter in your entire career out here in Podunk. I assure you, I would understand.”

“So,” Paige said not the least bit intimidated by Piper’s outburst. “You’re a real smart gal then?”

Dax spewed beer across the deck. Note to self, no beer until this showdown was over.

“Really Dax?” Piper scolded. “How old are you?”

Dax didn’t answer, he was curious where Paige was going with this.

“Yes,” Piper finally spat. “I’m extremely intelligent. That’s why I get the real stories. Why people confide in me. Why you’re going to fill me in on what you were doing tonight. Trust me, it’s not too complicated for me to understand.”

“You’re right,” Paige agreed lifting her glass to take another sip. “It’s actually very simple. And it’s something you already know. Our local District Attorney, James Tolman and Sheriff Walter’s explained it in direct and easy to understand terms. Shucks, I’m sure if I can understand their stand on the flow of information, someone as intellectually superior as you must have caught it the first time around. You know, since you’re so smart and all.”

“You little bitch,” Piper reached for the wine glass but Paige was quicker.

“You know,” Paige said calmly as she took another sip. “Throwing a tantrum doesn’t quite fit with the public image you try so hard to maintain. Wonder how your fans would feel if they had the opportunity to witness the real you... in the middle of a tantrum, no less.”

“Dax,” Piper seethed. “Are you going to let her talk to me this way? After all we’ve been through? I know you still love me. Aren’t you even going to defend me?”

“Nope,” Dax shrugged. “I very distinctly recall you yelling, at the top of your lungs no less, just how capable you are when it comes to defending yourself. Deal with it on your own, I was finished with you long ago. Which I already explained before Paige arrived. You simply don’t want to hear it. I wonder... does that make you smart or...”

“Oh, shut up.” Piper marched down the stairs and disappeared around the side of the house.

Unfortunate Trio

“Guess my work here is done,” Paige said, standing.

Dax didn't think, he just reacted. He grabbed Paige and pulled her against him then lowered his mouth to hers. She was amazing and he could no longer fight this undeniable attraction he felt for the sexy, sarcastic cop next door.

Paige stood immobilized, shocked at first, then elated. She shifted and deepened the kiss, taking everything she'd been fantasizing about for months.

“So,” Piper pouted. “That's why you rejected me. You've been cheating with the cop next door.”

Paige started to move away. Dax stopped her by wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her gently against him. “Piper. I asked you nicely to leave. Now I'm ordering you off my property. I was very clear two years ago when I explained the situation to you. Now, if you do not vacate the premise immediately, I'm going to have Deputy Carter here arrest you.” He grinned at Paige. “Piper Weber is an unwanted guest who is trespassing. Can you please get rid of her for good?”

Paige grinned and shook her head. “I think maybe this just became a conflict of interest. I'll have to call the new guy, Deputy Dunc.”

“Oh, you've got to be kidding me,” Piper fumed. “What's next? Barney Fife jumping out of the bushes? You will regret this, Dax. I'm famous. I have become everything you could only dream of. I have fortune and fame. You have a small town deputy, a tiny house and an old pickup truck. One day you are going to wake up and realize what you threw away. And when that day comes, it's going to be too late. I'm done with you. Our relationship is over.” She turned to leave, raised her nose in the air and marched toward her car.

“Phew,” Paige said, laughing. “Do you think she's gone this time? Because this small town Deputy is having an extremely difficult time holding back. I'd like to throat punch that woman, then follow it up with a fist to the nose.”

Dax didn't care about Piper. He gently turned Paige around until she was securely situated between his body and the wall. Then he bent and kissed her again.

Paige's mind was racing, so fast it had almost caught up to her heart. She came up for air and gently pushed Dax backward. “Okay,” she said as she dropped into a chair. “How about we take just a small step back. Don't get me wrong, the kissing...well, that was...”

“Amazing?” Dax asked settling in next to her.

Unfortunate Trio

“Amazing,” Paige agreed. “But I have a case to solve and you just had an ugly encounter with your ex. I think that...” she waved her hand in the air toward the wall they’d just left. “All of that was probably enough for tonight.”

“You’re probably right,” Dax agreed. “Although this has nothing to do with her and I hope you know that.”

“I think you are right,” Paige stood. “But just in case we are both wrong, I’m going to head home.” She was halfway across the lawn when she pivoted and gave Dax a satisfied grin. “Coffee at eight?”

Dax laughed. “I’ll bring the donuts.”

* * * * *

The instant Paige’s head hit the pillow, she was out cold. She should be wide awake, debating the wisdom of getting involved with her neighbor but a week of nightmares and death had finally taken its toll. So when her phone rang jolting her out of a deep, and a dream filled sleep about kissing her enticing neighbor, she was tempted to throw it against the nearest wall.

“Hello,” she barked.

Duncan Havilland laughed. “I never would have pegged you for a debutant that needs her beauty sleep. I’ll make a note.”

“What do you want, Havilland?” she said impatiently. “It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“Jericho told me to call you,” he sobered. “We have more bodies.”

“What?” Paige jumped from the bed and began pulling on her jeans. “Where?”

“The other side of the mountain. A few hundred yards down a secluded trail on the east side of Skyline Drive. Just follow the main road to the top and I’ll be waiting. You can follow me the rest of the way in.”

“I’m on my way,” Paige said as she silently shut her front door. She only hesitated a minute then she pulled out a notepad and pen, scribbled a short note and attached it to Dax’s front door. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she’d bailed because of their kiss.

* * * * *

Unfortunate Trio

Paige slowly followed Duncan into the secluded wilderness and wondered how the bodies had even been discovered. She slammed on her brakes as her colleague came to an abrupt stop. Apparently, she was about to find out.

Paige stepped from her car and approached Duncan, Forest and four kids. The girls were sobbing hysterically, the boys were obviously in shock; they were whiter than a ghost. “I take it you guys found the graves?” The girls sobbed harder, the boys just stared.

“Before we go any further, Paige, you need to see this.” Duncan motioned for her to head deeper into the forest. They had only gone about a hundred yards when she spotted the body. Not graves, a body. She looked back at Duncan and understood why the kids were so shaken.

“It’s fresh,” she carefully approaching the young girl. As she crouched to get a closer look, she realized this girl had been murdered mere days ago. Was she the only one? “I need your flashlight,” she demanded. What if the killer was still in the area? “How long ago did they find this?”

Duncan shrugged. “Well, I got the call around two thirty. It took me a bit to rouse Walters and he immediately referred me to you,” Duncan provided.

“And are you the one that received the original call? When did you call Forest?”

“I called him,” Brandon corrected. “I was out doing my rounds when I came across those kids. They were cutting across the field, headed for Skyline. It was immediately obvious something was wrong. Those girls were as hysterical then as they are now. I drove out to meet them and eventually realized we had another murder. They climbed in my truck and directed me in. I had them wait for me while I checked for myself. Then I called Duncan.”

“What has you so upset?” Duncan asked, knowing it wasn’t the body or the condition of the kids.

“That’s a fresh dump,” Paige said looking around. “It’s possible the kids spooked our killer. We need to fan out. Forest, you stay with the kids. I don’t want him doubling back and taking hostages if I’m right.”

“I’ll call Gage,” Forest said as he rushed back to check on the kids.

“We need Dean as well,” Duncan added. “And you should probably notify Jericho.”

“I heard,” came a gruff voice. “Just get Gage and Dean headed this way. Also, call James. We’re going to need him to deal with the press again. Come on Paige, you lead the way.”

“I think we should split up,” she argued.

Unfortunate Trio

“Not gonna happen,” Jericho disagreed. “Not until we have more men. We are not bursting into the forest with a measly flashlight to be ambushed and picked off one at a time.”

“I agree,” Duncan nodded. “We start searching, together. When Gage and Dean get here, they can hook up and follow that trail. I’m pretty familiar with this area. Haven’t been out here in years, though. Growing up, we’d sneak out and... never mind,” he gave Jericho a guilty look.

“You think I don’t know this was a popular hangout for underage drinking?” Walters asked, grinning. “When are you going to learn...?”

“Yeah, I know. Jericho Walters knows everything,” Duncan shook his head. “Anyway, there’s a cave near here. I’d lay odds that’s where those four were headed. Might be worth checking out.”

Paige’s walkie crackled, announcing the arrival of Dean.

“Give me that,” Jer ordered.

Paige held it out to him.

“Dean,” he paused. When his deputy acknowledged his traffic, Walters continued. “We’re headed to the Perry cave. When Gage arrives, I want you to take the trail that leads to the left.”

“The one that heads down to the gully?” Dean asked.

“Yeah,” Jericho affirmed. “Take it as far as you can and keep an eye out for fresh prints. We think the perp might still be in the area.”

“If he is, he’s working on a way out,” Dean surmised.

“Exactly,” Jericho agreed. “So keep that in mind as you look. He may also be spooked. We don’t know anything about this guy. Watch your back, I don’t want any of my people ambushed.”

“Copy,” Dean cut out then came back on. “Agent Wilkens just arrived. What do you want me to do with him?”

Jericho looked at Paige. “Take him with, Sean’s used to tracking serial killers. He’s the professional here. If our guy is still in the woods, Sean will locate him for sure. Or at least his trail,” Paige said without hesitation.

“Take him with you,” Jericho relayed. “And listen to him, Paige says he knows what he’s doing.”

“Copy,” Dean sighed. “Gage just arrived. I’ll keep you posted.”

Unfortunate Trio

“Thanks,” Jericho handed the walkie back to Paige.

“These come in real handy,” she teased. “Great form of communication. And an excellent way to lead your men when you’re separated. Maybe you could get the mayor to spring for one, you know... for you. So you can do your job without having to steal mine.”

Jericho ignored her. Duncan laughed.

It was nearly an hour later when they heard from Sean. Paige, Duncan and Jericho had already searched the cave and the surrounding area until they were positive their suspect wasn’t hiding nearby. Paige was confident he hadn’t come this way at all.

“Paige?” Sean’s traffic came over the walkie.

“Go ahead,” she answered.

“Our guy definitely came this way, but he’s long gone.”

“How can you be so sure,” she argued. “He could be hiding, just waiting in the shadows until we leave before he backtracks to wherever he left his vehicle.”

“Nope,” Sean said confidently. “We followed his tracks all the way to a dirt road. It’s not an easy drive in a full sized vehicle but it’s definitely possible. There are fresh tracks. Our guy’s long gone. What’s your twenty?”

“We’re nearly back to the staging area. I thought I’d touch base with Forest and go from there,” Paige provided.

“Leave Duncan with the kids, I need to talk to you and the sheriff. Head up the trail we took. I’ll meet up with you shortly. There’s a side trail I want to check out.”

“That was a little cryptic,” Duncan observed.

“That’s Sean,” Paige advised. “He’s found something and didn’t want to say so over the radio.”

“If the suspect is long gone and Forest is handling the kids, why do I have to wait?” Duncan asked.

“I need you to call the ME,” Jericho answered. “Do not let him get anywhere near that body until I give the okay. Tape off the area and then head down to the turn-off and tape that off as well. With all the media camped out in town, there’s bound to be a crowd. I want them contained down there. Nobody comes near this body. If they do, arrest them.”

“Got it,” Duncan headed for his truck.

Unfortunate Trio

“What do you think your agent found?” Jericho asked when they reached the overgrown trail and headed into the wilderness.

“I’m afraid to guess,” Paige answered. “Uh, you should know something. But I don’t really know how to tell you this without breaking a confidence.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll protect it,” Jericho assured her.

“Well,” she sighed. “Piper Weber and Dax have a history. When I got home, she was there. I promised I’d have his back if he needed it, when it came to her that is. So, I headed over, intervened a little. She tried to do the whole condescending routine, thinking she’d get an inside scoop. When that didn’t work, she left angry. It might come back to bite us, I probably shouldn’t be the one giving the next press release. I’m thinking she might scream discrimination.”

Jericho grinned. “I have a feeling you did that on purpose.”

“Never,” Paige grinned back. “I truly didn’t, but if it works in my favor I’m not above using it.”

As the two of them continued down the trail, it took a sharp left turn. As they emerged, they came face to face with Sean, Gage and Dean. All three of them looked a little sick.

“What?” Paige asked.

“More bodies,” Gage whispered.

“More graves,” Sean corrected. “Fresh ones.”

“How many?” Jericho asked.

“Two covered, one open,” Sean said moving forward. “I’d say he was headed in to bury the last victim when those four kids spooked him. He dropped the girl and took off. I think he was long gone before we ever arrived.”

“Show us,” Jericho said through gritted teeth. Whoever was responsible for this mess was going to pay. Nobody came into his county and used it as a dumping ground for their own perverse, psychotic...his thoughts came to an abrupt halt when he saw the scene before him. He’d thought the other site was bad. But seeing the fresh mounds, knowing young women rested just beneath the overturned dirt, demonstrated just how depraved and evil a human could be. He moved forward and studied the open hole just a few feet away and frowned. “What is that? The white thing?”

Paige swallowed hard, then glanced at Sean. They knew what it was. “I’m guessing once he got that girl up here, he planned to undress her and wrap her in that white cloth, dress thing.

Unfortunate Trio

Then he'd take her clothes and other belongings with him. Probably keep a souvenir and destroy the rest."

"Right," Jericho nodded. "I should have thought of that. The other skeletons had some kind of white garment inside the grave with them as well."

"You don't need to see this," Paige decided. "Jericho looked more upset than she'd ever seen him before."

"Tell me what we need to do here," Jericho said ignoring Paige for the moment. He couldn't stop thinking about her mother. Chaya had also been murdered by a madman. It was different, the woman he loved hadn't been buried in a shallow grave. No, Chaya Carter had been left out in the open, in an abandoned warehouse, but the result was the same. And he couldn't help the overwhelming feeling of grief that was suffocating him at the moment. Grief he hadn't been free to express. Grief he'd held inside, suffered in private and publically pretended didn't exist. It was too much. He had to step away, he needed a few minutes of solitude to recover and regroup.

Paige watched as her boss turned abruptly and headed further up the trail. Something was wrong, she just didn't know what it was. And now wasn't the time to deal with it. She had a crime scene to preserve, a killer to catch and three more victims to identify.

* * * * *

It was nearly noon when Paige found her first solid clue. They had carefully uncovered the bodies of the other two victims. One was blonde, the other a brunette. And just like the others, they had similar features. Features that matched their original victims. Paige wondered if that was truly the case. Had Peyton, Kendra and Celine been the original victims or were there more out there. More missing women, other young, vibrant females who had only just started to live their own lives? It was too depressing to think about. She carefully shoved the dirt away and uncovered the holy grail of evidence. Well, it would be if it belonged to her suspect and not the girl lying next to it. That was a big if.

"What is that?" Sean asked stepping in next to Paige.

"Water bottle," she said raising the object with her tweezers and dropping it into an evidence bag.

"You don't think..." Sean paused. "Look,"

Paige glanced down and studied the woman's fingers. She grinned. "Maybe this one made him angry enough to slip up."

Unfortunate Trio

“Or he was so confident we wouldn’t find them for another four years he got sloppy,” Sean countered.

“Either way,” Paige carefully lifted the girl’s hand and slipped it into a bag. “We have DNA.”

Jericho approached Paige and wondered why she appeared happy. This was the last place anyone should smile.

“Hey,” Paige said when her boss approached. “We have good news.”

“Relatively,” Sean added as he glanced around. “Nothing good can come from this place ever again.”

Jericho agreed. “What’s the news?”

“DNA,” Paige blurted. “Under her fingernails. She fought back. We also found a water bottle buried with her. It will have to be tested, but from that bottle, I think we can discover their names fairly quickly.”

“From the batch number on the bottle,” Jericho understood. “That means hours, not days. I can handle things here if you want to head out, track the bottle and start requesting files.”

“Naw,” Paige disagreed. “I want to keep looking, see if there’s anything else I can use. As you pointed out before, Forensics science is my specialty. I can do more good here than at the station. Maybe you can have Duncan or one of the other guys take care of this.” She handed Jericho the bag that contained the bottle.

“Gage then, he’s a big teddy bear at heart and I think this is really getting to him.” He walked away before Paige could respond.

“Yeah,” she added. “He’s not the only one.” She watched as her boss walked away and knew she was right. Jericho Walters’ heart was breaking and there was nothing she could do to help him cope.

Paige and her team worked through the night and well into the next afternoon. Their tenacity paid off. Gage had tracked the bottle to a store in Green River, Utah. Sean was on his way to investigate the sale and see if there was any video of the transaction. Once he was finished, he’d head to the local PD with photos of the three victims to see if any of their missing persons matched.

Unfortunate Trio

Margie and Gage had sent messages to all the departments in the surrounding area, including a request to forward photos of all their recent missing persons immediately. So far, they had received thirty responses. Each photo had to be compared to the crime scene photos, which was Paige's job at the moment. Jericho had sent Dean and Duncan home to get a few hours' sleep. It was nearly time for them to return so Gage and Paige could take a break.

"I think I might have a match," Gage stood and moved to stand next to Paige. "A girl just vanished three days ago from Grand Junction, Colorado. Her name is Tasha Gee and she looks a lot like the last victim. The one that didn't make it to the grave site." He handed Paige the photo.

"Okay," Paige pulled up a map. We have a possible hit in Grand Junction and a hit - at least on the bottle - in Green River. Let's focus on that area. What other choices do we have?"

"Do you think he would head back to Moab?" Margie asked. "That's a popular tourist spot and the other three girls were taken from there four years ago."

"Possible," Paige considered. "But I'd be surprised. I think if he were going to do that, he would have taken them all from there. We have a four-year span, why?"

"What if we don't?" Gage asked. "What if he didn't leave a gap, we just haven't found the bodies?"

"I don't even want to think about that," Margie answered. "Let's just deal with what we have and try to figure out the rest later." Her phone rang and she moved back to her desk. Moments later she returned with a photo. "Reina Darst. Went missing from Mesa, Colorado on October 8th."

"Do we have any details?" Paige asked. "She's the one that had a long stemmed rose, seems personal to me."

"I just spoke to the sergeant. He's pulling the report. But he told me that Reina was a nature photographer. She was in the area on a project, some publication about Colorado's natural beauty. She'd already hit Rocky Mountain National Park and White River National Forest. Mesa took the report because she was staying in a hotel there. The investigator thought she was headed toward Aspen, maybe to get pictures of the fall colors. She spoke to the clerk at the front desk before she headed out. Said she was excited because most of the best photos of that area were in the winter. She was hoping to get a great autumn shot, thought it would make her work unique."

Paige scrambled around on her desk until she found the information she needed. "Peyton was also blonde. She was the only one of the first three to have a rose in the grave with her. Is there something significant about blondes?"

Unfortunate Trio

“But then why wouldn’t all his victims be blonde instead of just two?” Gage asked.

“Good question,” Paige said absently as she arranged the photos.

“What are you doing?” Dean asked glancing over Paige’s shoulder as he walked into the room.

Paige relaxed. Maybe she’d been forgiven. “Uh... maybe nothing. I was just thinking, the blonde is always in the middle. It might mean something.”

“In the middle?” Duncan joined them.

“The middle grave. In the first site we had Kendra Weiss, then Peyton Frazier and finally Celine Borges.” She placed the pictures in order of the graves. “Peyton had a rose, the other two did not.”

“Okay,” Dean said leaning over to arrange the photos. “So you think these are the recent victims.” He placed them in order with Reina in the middle. “And she also had a rose.”

“Are you guys sure those are the victims?” Duncan asked, impressed with what they had accomplished in his absence.

“No,” Paige shrugged. “But Reina Darst does look like Jane Doe #2. And I’m almost positive Tasha Gee is Jane #3.”

“Yeah,” Duncan studied the photo Grand Junction had sent over. The two were nearly identical. He dropped into a chair. “So, what does it all mean?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Paige yawned and searched for her mug. She needed coffee.

“No more for you,” Margie scolded. “Go home. Get a couple hours sleep then come back. Jericho should be here by then and we might have something from Sean.”

“But...”

“Nope,” Margie said narrowing her eyes at Paige. “I have strict orders from the boss. Once these two showed, I was to physically carry you out the door if I have to. Go home, Paige. Those girls are already dead. It’s different than the babies. We were on a tight schedule. Time was an issue then, it’s not now.”

“But we spooked him. What if he disappears? Three more girls could be dead,” she argued.

“We have four years to figure it out,” Duncan grinned. “I think you’ll be awake before then.”

Unfortunate Trio

Paige sighed, stood and headed out the door. They were right, she knew it but she didn't want to stop. What if Gage was right and he didn't wait four years between killings? She slammed her door in frustration before she backed out of the lot and headed for home.

* * * * *

Dax watched as Paige climbed from her vehicle and zombie walked toward her front door. She nearly tripped over him before she realized he was there.

"Oh," Paige stepped back, tripped and nearly fell on her butt.

Dax caught her. "Here," he took her keys and shoved open the door. "Are you sure it's safe for you to be driving?"

"Probably not," she admitted. "But I had to get home. Hey, will you do me a favor?"

"Sure," Dax said as he followed her into the living room and watched as she dropped onto the sofa.

"Let me sleep two hours then wake me?"

Dax frowned. "Is this case that important?"

"I think so," she yawned and rolled onto her side.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable in your bed?"

"Not sure I can make it up the stairs," she mumbled.

Dax laughed, then left her alone to sleep. He might wake her in two hours, but then again, he just might wait three.

* * * * *

Paige rolled over then landed with a thud on the hard wooden floor. She groaned, rubbed her elbow and sat. What time was it anyway? She forced her tired body to rise, spotted the clock and scowled. She had just pivoted, intending to march over to Dax's house and confront him when the aggravating man stepped into the kitchen doorway.

"Oh, good. You're awake," Dax smiled.

Do not let him get off that easy, Paige told herself. "No thanks to you. I thought you agreed to wake me an hour ago?"

Unfortunate Trio

“Naw,” Dax moved forward. “You told me to wake you, I never said I would.”

“Dax,” Paige dropped back onto the couch. “I trusted you. I need to get back to the office. What is that amazing smell?”

Dax grinned, disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a plate of hot, scrumptious looking food. “Eat up.”

“Did you cook this?” Paige just stared. She was starving. “I can’t. Thanks... I really mean it, but I can’t. I have to get back.”

“Margie just called,” he informed her. “She said Gage checked in and said he’s dying of hunger so he’s going to grab a bite before he returns. Duncan and Dean are going through something Sean sent in and she said Sean has crashed in a hotel in Green River. He’ll call back when he wakes up.”

“And Jericho?” Paige asked.

“Jericho is meeting with James Tolman on something or other. In other words, you have time to eat. So, eat,” Dax pressed.

Paige was so starving, she couldn’t take her eyes off the food. If everyone else was eating and sleeping, she could take a few minutes and refuel, right? “Okay,” she finally decided and took a huge bite of pork covered in gravy. “What is this?”

“Crockpot,” Dax grinned and cut off a slice of his own. “I learned it from my mother. Easiest way there is to make a great meal with very little effort. Just my style.”

“Easy and no effort huh?” Paige glanced up. “Doesn’t sound like you. The Dax I know enjoys a challenge.”

“True,” Dax conceded. “But sometimes easy is good too. So, tell me about this case. Are you getting close?”

“I think we are at least close to identifying all the victims,” she admitted.

“Six of them, huh? That’s tough.” Dax knew what it was like to deal with death, he’d done his share of it for too many years to count.

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “We didn’t get there in time. Those kids are lucky. This guy, he could be a raving lunatic. Rather than bolt, he might have just as easily attacked.”

“I don’t know,” Dax disagreed. “Four against one are pretty bad odds. Not many guys would stick around unless they’ve been trained for it.”

“Trained like you?”

Unfortunate Trio

He studied her for several seconds. “Yeah, trained like me.”

“I know you are trying to leave that behind you, but it’s not a bad thing Dax. It’s something to be proud of. You were serving your country,” Paige added

“Which tells me you don’t have the slightest clue what you are talking about. What I did, what I was required to do, is not something to be proud of. It’s something I did. I didn’t have a choice. My country needed me and I delivered. End of story,” he pushed his plate away clearly agitated.

“I guess we will just have to disagree,” Paige said as she swallowed her last bite and took a long drink of water to wash it all down. “And now I need to change and head back into the office.”

Dax stood and watched as Paige headed for the stairs.

She stopped and turned, took a deep breath and began. “Dax, what are we doing here?”

“I thought we were having dinner,” he said moving toward her.

“I mean this, are we dating? Thinking about dating? Just friends with benefits?” she added, not at all okay with that idea.

“I don’t know,” Dax admitted. “But we don’t have to figure it out today. You have work and I have dishes. Don’t stress over what this is or it isn’t. Solve this case, then we’ll figure it out together.”

Paige studied him for several seconds, then she leaned in and gently pressed her lips to his. “Thanks for dinner.”

“You’re welcome,” Dax said taking a step back. “Go back to work, I’ve got this.”

“And thanks for that too,” Paige said as she ran for her room. Within minutes she was darting back down the stairs. “I’m outta here,” she called once she reached the landing.

“I’ll lock up and check on you tomorrow,” he called back. “Good luck, hope you get the bad guy.”

Paige stood and walked to the coffee pot, growled then slowly began to brew a new pot. She ran a frustrated hand through her hair, leaned against the counter and considered what they knew for about the hundredth time.

Unfortunate Trio

Sean had made it back from Green River. He had video of the suspect, a partial plate... two letters to be precise and a big fat nothing. He had identified the third girl. Serenity Tisdale was their final victim. She'd been missing since October 12th. Serenity had stopped in Green River on her way home from a college reunion trip. She and her friends had hooked up at the Four Corners, spent a week touring the area then split up and headed their separate ways. The other two girls made it home, Serenity didn't. The lab was still verifying her identity, but it was pretty much a given they'd found their girl.

Margie and Dean were riffling through the database, trying to locate the vehicle by two freakin letters. A nearly impossible task.

"You need to relax, Paige." Sean had joined her and was doctoring his own favorite brew. "We'll figure this out, we always do."

"I just keep wondering if we're wrong. What if he doesn't wait a full four years before he grabs his next victim?"

"There's no data to support your theory," he disagreed. "You know that. I know you've been gone awhile but don't throw all your training out the door and rely on emotions. It's what always trips you up."

"I know," Paige relented.

"So," Sean settled in next to her. "Let's go over what we know."

"That's the problem, we don't know anything," Paige argued.

"That's not true," Sean said undeterred. "We know that he hits every four years. Why is that? Travel? Work? Play?"

"What about Leap Year?" Paige asked.

"Okay," Sean brightened. "Let's go with that. Isn't this year a Leap Year?"

"Uh," Paige tried to remember. "Yeah, it was."

"Okay," Sean continued. "For now we will go with that because we know these guys latch onto weird rituals that only makes sense to them."

"But four years is a long time to go between murders," Paige argued.

"We are looking at what we know, remember? Possibly something he hates."

"Okay," Paige sighed. "So, Leap Year is significant for some reason. Should we try to search the data for three murders that happened eight years ago?"

Unfortunate Trio

“That’s an idea,” one he had already considered. “But let’s focus on him for now.”

“Okay,” Paige considered what they knew. “From the gas station where he purchased that water, we know he’s young. Late twenties, early thirties tops.”

“Right,” Sean pressed. “So if we did go back eight years, he’d been late teens, early twenties. I’m fairly confident we won’t find anything prior to that because he’d only be sixteen or so.”

“Right,” Paige agreed. “So what’s his trigger? Maybe that was eight years ago.”

Sean smiled. “Now you’re thinking like an agent.”

“Okay,” Paige ignored him. “So that would put him in his early twenties at best. Something triggers him and he kills every Leap Year as a result. But how does that help us?”

“Maybe it doesn’t, yet.” Sean conceded. “But I think he’s local. Not here in Manti, although he could be. But I think he lives somewhere close. I don’t think this is a traveling salesman or an autumn hiker. I think he lives in the area and there is something significant about the time he kills. October, but not Halloween. No, he kills at the beginning of the month. Columbus Day?”

“What if…” Paige trailed off.

“What?” Sean asked.

“What if it has something to do with college? Like a college sweetheart?” she pondered.

“Okay,” Sean considered. “If it all started eight years ago, that would fit. He’d be the right age for college. And…hey Duncan?”

“Yeah,” Duncan responded.

“When is Homecoming in college?” Sean asked. “You were just talking about college football. When was the homecoming game?”

“Uh…” Duncan considered. “Well for the Ute’s it was the first week in October I believe.”

“Is that the trigger?” Paige darted forward and grabbed something from her desk.

“What’s that?” Sean asked.

“A timeline,” she said absently. “Every one of these murders happened in October. The beginning of October. Well, at least the abductions did and he doesn’t keep them for long. We have the abduction, the murder and his attempt to bury Tasha Gee. We have the timeline nailed on just that. Her body had been frozen, which means he knows about decomposition and rigor.”

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“So,” Dean asked. “How does that help us?”

“Every little bit helps,” Sean told them. “As the clues come in, we compile them. You never know which clue will click and tie everything together.”

“I found a white Nissan Sentra stolen out of Shell. It’s not far from Green River.” Margie called out.

“Do the plates match?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “We only have two letters but yeah, they match.”

Paige looked at Sean. “How do you feel about returning to Green River?”

“Let’s go,” he glanced around the room. “Keep thinking along those lines. College football, Homecoming, something triggered this guy. We’re also thinking Leap Year.”

“How come they get all the fun?” Duncan scowled.

“Find your own body and you can be in charge,” Margie countered. “Scratch that, the last thing we need around here are more bodies. And speaking of that, where are all the reporters? They’ve been camped out front for days and today... nothing.”

“I think they located the original site,” Dean told them. “Piper said something about GPS coordinates and hiking. I decided to pass.”

“Don’t we need to secure the area?” Gage asked.

“I called Brandon. He said he’d take care of it. Those Feds can be real mean when challenged,” Dean grinned. “Plus, I reminded him that Jericho approved arrests if necessary.”

Gage shook his head and laughed. “Okay, football.”

“Yeah,” Duncan smiled. “That should be right up your alley.”

“Let’s start looking for colleges in the area. I know there’s Colorado State, BYU, the U, what else? Let’s make a list.”

Sean watched as Paige went through every nook and cranny of the stolen vehicle. Lucky for them it was still in the police lot. He’d forgotten about this side of her. The side that drove him absolutely nuts. The side that usually found something that none of the rest of them would have because they were not patient enough to be this thorough.

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Once she finished with the trunk, she moved to the interior of the vehicle. “Do you know if they dusted for prints?” Paige asked Sean.

“The report says yes, but nothing was found. Looks like the usual places were all wiped clean. Nothing on the door, the trunk, the gear shift,” Sean read aloud.

Twenty minutes later Paige had thoroughly searched the driver’s area, the seat, the floor board, the console. She had now pushed her way forward, leaning over the steering wheel as she shone a light into the heater vent. “Woman, what are you doing?” Sean said in exasperation.

Paige shifted, smiled then climbed out of the car. “Do you happen to have a fingerprint kit with you?”

“No,” Sean grumbled then dialed a number.

“Who was that?” Paige asked.

“I called the detective. The one inside. He’s on his way out with a technician. They will fingerprint anything you ask. Don’t blame me if he argues, though. I already heard how they’ve checked every possible surface without success,” Sean warned.

“Not every surface,” Paige’s smile widened. She’d scored, she knew it. She just hoped the prints were in AFIS. The database had most everyone in there. Criminals, government workers, foster parents, daycare employees, the system was much better than the limited CODIS. Accessing DNA was much more restrictive.

“Okay,” the cop grumbled. “We’re here. I told you we already did this. Did you even read my report?”

The technician smiled. “Ignore him, you pulled him away from dinner. What did you find?”

“I need prints off the back of the rearview mirror. I looked, there are several. It’s instinct, just a natural subconscious reaction when you climb behind the wheel,” Paige explained.

“That’s true,” the tech agreed as she started pulling items from her bag.

“But wouldn’t that mean every person who has ever driven that car has touched that surface?” The detective asked.

“True,” the tech answered. “And chances are pretty good that I’m going to pull more than one print. But we can separate them out. The last person to touch that mirror will have the strongest prints. Then, I just compare them to the ones we got from the victims and eliminate those.”

“You already printed them?” Paige was surprised.

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“Yeah,” the tech affirmed. “We thought we had a good print the other day, but it turned out to be the owners. I had to print both of them, you know, to rule them out.”

“That helps,” Sean said as he studied the detective. “Do you need to be here? I mean, I hate to interrupt your dinner.”

“Casey lies,” he shrugged. “I just thought this was a waste of time. I changed my mind.”

Sean laughed. “Yeah, Paige has that effect on people.”

Casey, the tech, pulled the prints and handed the card to the detective. “You can run them, I have a date.”

“Let’s head back in. This should only take a minute. I’ll get Brenda to help. She’s our resident print expert. Casey’s great at retrieval but Brenda is amazing at deciphering.”

It was nearly an hour later when Paige and Sean walked out of the station with a name. Brenda was amazing with fingerprints. She’d separated out the car owners from clean print that didn’t match anyone associated with the vehicle. She’d run it through AFIS and they got a hit. Now, they just had to locate Griffin Wasser. He was in the database because he worked for the Forest Service. A biologist, but that was the extent of their information.

“I’ll drive, you call Margie,” Sean suggested. “That woman can find anyone. I’d steal her away from you if I could.”

“Margie loves us, don’t even try.” Paige pulled out her phone and dialed the number. She immediately put it on speaker. “Hey, Margie. We have a name. Not too much more than that. Griffin Wasser, some biologist for the Forest Service.”

“Hold on,” Margie put the phone on speaker. “Okay, the gang is all here. You said Griffin Wasser?”

“The bio guy?” Forest asked.

“You know him?” Paige wondered.

“Not really. I saw him a few days back, though,” Forest admitted. “I actually wondered why he was out so late in the year. He’s regional. Travels the entire area, Utah, Colorado, Arizona too, I think. How did his name surface?”

Paige walked them through the car, the prints and the hit.

“Wow,” Forest said. “I think I need to call Frank.” His boss needed to know the Forest Service might be employing a serial killer.

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“I have something,” Margie said. “Looks like there’s a Griffin Wasser that lives in Gunnison.”

“Right here in our own backyard?” Jericho scowled.

“No,” Margie corrected. “Gunnison, Colorado. Near the Gunnison National Forest. Makes sense, I guess. If he works for you guys.”

“Completely different division,” Forest argued. “Not the same.”

“So now what?” Paige asked. “Do you want us to head that way? Touch base with the locals?”

“Maybe,” Jericho hesitated. “Let me call James first. We need to see how he wants to proceed from here. I’m not sure that’s enough for a warrant. I’ll call you back.”

“Before you go,” Gage said. “I think I have something. I’ll run the name through the system and see if it hits but eight years ago a girl went missing from Colorado State University. The report was filed on October 12th, a Sunday. And it was two days after the Homecoming Dance. The game was on the 10th, that Friday.”

“Only one girl?” Paige asked. “Why do you think it’s connected?”

“I’ll text you the photo,” Gage told her.

A few seconds later, Paige received a text.

“She looks just like them,” Sean observed. “Could be the trigger. Maybe we should send someone over to Colorado State and see what they can dig up.”

Paige didn’t respond because her phone interrupted. “Hello.”

“James says to head to Gunnison and go straight to the police station. He’s going to hook up with the DA and see what he can do,” Jericho said.

“We were thinking maybe we should follow up on the information Gage found. Maybe send a team up to talk to college security,” Paige suggested.

“Who?” Jericho asked.

“I was thinking Trent,” Sean told Paige.

“Is he nearby?” she asked.

“Yeah, and I trust him to handle this discreetly,” Sean added.

“Who is this Trent?” Jericho asked.

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“Agent Trent Brinkley,” Paige offered. “He’s a good guy. Good cop. I trust him but it’s your call.”

“Do it,” Jericho decided. “I don’t have anyone here that I can spare for that long. Once you get to Gunnison, call me and let me know how things are going. I’ll have Margie find a hotel and book the two of you for the night. If it looks like a go, the rest of us will join you tomorrow.”

“The bureau will cover this,” Sean advised. “I have a card.”

“Even better, you two get settled then check in.” Jericho disconnected and turned to Margie. “I want to know everything there is to know about that man.”

“I’m on it,” Margie pulled out a pad and then looked back. “What are you going to do about them?” She motioned to the growing crowd of reporters that were once again mulling outside the station.

“James is on his way over,” Jericho advised. “He said he’s going to give the update this time.”

“Hallelujah!” Dean said with a grin.

“What? Babysitting Piper Weber not all it’s cracked up to be?” Gage asked.

“You have no idea,” Dean dropped into his chair and pulled up a map of Colorado. He had an idea he wanted to look into.

It was nearly eleven when Paige called the office. “We have a warrant.”

“James already told us,” Jericho admitted.

“That man is amazing,” Paige added. “I seriously have no idea how he convinced a judge to issue based on what we have.”

“Don’t tell anyone else that,” Jericho warned.

“My lips are sealed. But if he didn’t tell you, they also included a DNA swab. We can test his sample against the skin and tissue we found under Serenity’s fingernails as well as the saliva on the water bottle. If this is our guy, he messed up royally.” Paige was exhausted.

“James said the locals are watching the residence, I hope they are being careful.”

“Seem to be,” Paige affirmed. “Sean and I went on the first run. The white company truck is in the driveway and there were a few lights on. We don’t have a search warrant, just an arrest warrant so we decided to catch him when he leaves the house. Less likely to cause a standoff that way.”

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“I agree,” Jericho sighed. “I think I’ll send the crew home. We’ll head your way first thing tomorrow morning. I just hope we don’t have anything serious come up in the meantime. The reserves will be covering while we’re gone.”

“Can’t you get Chief Beckett to hold down the fort until you return?” Paige asked.

“Already thought of that,” Jericho told her. “Tim and Pat have agreed to cover for me. They both understand the importance of catching this guy. Chief Strong also said he’d have his Gunnison guys swing through town a couple times over the next few days. I think we’re covered for now.”

“Then I guess we’ll see you in the morning,” Paige told him. “And with any luck, we’ll have our guy by the time you arrive.”

* * * * *

Dax sat on his front porch, worrying about Paige. She’d had very little sleep the past couple days. Nathan had called, worried because he hadn’t heard from his favorite deputy. Dax explained the situation and informed the good General that his Goddaughter knew he was keeping tabs. That was certainly a pleasant conversation, but they’d worked through it. The bombshell had been Nathan’s revelation about Paige’s nightmares. Dax could understand why those memories haunted her. An extremely sadistic serial killer had ambushed her, tried to choke her to death and Sean had saved her life. He was glad Sean was with her tonight. But a little jealous if he were being truthful. Those two would share the same kind of bond he had with his men. Like Ken, who was currently camped out in Nephi deciding if he was going to move there permanently. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. It would be nice to have Ken close again...and Jaimie and the kids. Most likely Ken’s mother would round out the pack. But that was okay, too. He liked Donna, always had.

He glanced up in time to spot Piper headed up the walk. She was the last thing he needed at the moment.

“Dax,” she said slowly lowering herself into the chair next to his. “I was wondering if I could speak with your girlfriend.”

Dax didn’t answer. He wasn’t stupid, Piper knew Paige had left town and she wanted to know where she was.

“It’s personal. I just wanted to apologize for the other night. I know I was acting childish,” she pulled the pouty face Dax had always hated. She thought it worked, and to be fair it had. But only because giving in to her always wiped that pathetic look away, until she wanted

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something else that is. “Anyway, if you could just tell me where to find her, I’ll get out of your hair.”

She waited. Dax closed his eyes as he waited for her to get the message and leave.

“So that’s how it’s going to be?” she finally said. “I don’t remember you being this childish. Seriously, ignoring me? That’s what you’ve stooped to? I only wanted to tell that woman I was sorry. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yep,” Dax said without opening his eyes. “Because that’s not what you want and we both know it. I’m not helping you locate Paige or anybody else for that matter. I’m not providing you with the big scoop you desperately want, so go back to your hotel, go back to your studio, I really don’t care... just go.”

“You know Dax Hamilton,” Piper stood. “I am beginning to wonder what I ever saw in you. You are nothing like I remember. The man I loved was gentle and kind. He cared about someone other than himself. You’ve changed, and not for the better. I just now realized I am better off without you. I can do so much better.”

“Good luck with that,” he mumbled as she stomped down the stairs. He watched as she got into her rental and sped away. With any luck, that would be the last time he saw the irritating woman. But she was right about one thing, she was better off without him. Hopefully, this time she’d accept that and move on for good. He stood and entered his empty house, once again thinking about Paige Carter. He was a little worried about this thing that had developed between them. Especially after spending time with his ex. Maybe he wasn’t cut out for relationships. Maybe Paige deserved better, too. He was so exhausted he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep almost immediately.

* * * * *

The house was surrounded and Griffin Wasser had been called into work. The road was blocked off and spike strips were positioned at either end of the street. So far, he was ignoring the call.

“Do you think he knows?” Paige asked Sean.

“I don’t know how he could,” Sean whispered back. “But he has to come out sometime.”

“Did the news report the road closure?” she pressed.

“This is a subdivision, not a main thoroughfare. Why would they?” Sean countered. “Now be quiet. I think I heard something.”

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Paige scowled but turned to focus on the house. Either the guy knew and was hunkering down to wait them out or he was up to something. She glanced through the trees just in time to see a tiny trap door open and a man climb cautiously from the opening. He gently closed the door and began to run. "That's him!" Paige yelled as she jumped to her feet and began to chase after the fleeing suspect.

It took a minute for Sean to figure it all out, then he too gave chase. The three of them darted through the forest, bounding over fallen tree trunks and the occasional rock. Sean berated himself for not considering the guy might have an escape plan. Yeah, they were in a subdivision, but the guy's house butted up against the National Forest. He could build anything out there and nobody would ever know... they'd never even consider it.

Paige was slowly closing in on her prey. She was not going to lose him, no matter what happened she would not lose this guy. If she did, he'd be in the wind and they'd never catch up to him. She flew over a log, dodged a branch he had flipped in an attempt to slow her down and bounded over a large boulder. Where in the world was this man going? She figured it out mere seconds before he vaulted over a cliff and plummeted into a large river. Paige followed without a second thought. Now they were both swimming with the current, hoping to gain the slightest advantage. Him to escape, her to capture.

Paige's eyes grew wide when she realized they were approaching a waterfall. It wasn't huge, but Griffin was obviously afraid of the fall. He gripped a branch on the side of the bank and waited, clearly hoping Paige would tumble over the edge. Then, he could climb to safety and disappear. Well, she wouldn't let that happen. She reached out, gripped a nearby branch and clung with all her might.

That's how Sean and the other cops found them. Griffin was trying to pull his body up the bank but it was too steep, clearly he'd latched onto the wrong branch. He was now a muddy mess. Fighting the river and the slope was impossible. It became even more difficult when an officer jumped onto the edge of the bank and handcuffed the monster.

Paige, on the other hand, wasn't trying to get out. She was just holding on, watching Griffin, ready to follow no matter where he led. "You're crazy, you know that?" Sean grumbled as he reached down and pulled her to safety. They both ended up on the ground, Paige on top, shaking from the cold and Sean laughing hysterically as her wet body soaked through his jeans and sweatshirt. A local officer moved in and dropped a wool blanket over the two of them. Paige joined in, laughing until tears slowly streamed down her face.

"Alright you two," Jericho said as he approached the dynamic duo. "Enough. The sane officers think you need the psych ward. I'm inclined to agree. What in the hell did you think you were doing? It's one thing to engage in a foot pursuit through a forest. It's idiotic to jump off a cliff and land in a river. You could have been killed."

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Paige stood and helped Sean up. “Awe, I had no idea you cared so much Sheriff. I like you too.”

Jericho shook his head and gave her shoulder a push. “Get to the car. I need you to clean up and question this guy. The detective up there will be transporting him and obtaining the DNA sample for testing. Now we just need to know why and if there are other victims that haven’t been located.”

Paige and Sean disappeared into the forest. Jericho stood motionless, watching her go. That woman had nearly given him a heart attack. What was the woman thinking?

“She’s okay,” Gage said moving in beside his boss. “She’s crazy as a loon that one, but she’s okay.”

“I guess,” Jericho sighed. “For now, anyway. Let’s get back. Sean needs to call his friend Trent. I’d like to know what they found on that campus.”

The group gathered at the police station. Paige had stopped off at her hotel for a hot shower and fresh clothes. Sean did the same. They were just entering the station when Sean’s phone rang.

“Tell me you got something,” Sean said in greeting.

“Such the consummate professional,” Trent shot back. “I got something.”

He proceeded to explain the case of Dana Shaw to his friend. Dana was a music student attending Colorado State University’s Center for the Arts. She was an avid guitar player but she loved all music. She complained to her friends there was a creepy guy that wouldn’t leave her alone. Unfortunately, she never told them his name. Either because she didn’t know, or she was embarrassed. When she disappeared, the friends insisted he was their man. They just needed to identify this strange, creepy guy and they’d locate Dana. The cops investigated for months, but nobody seemed to know who the guy was. And yes, Griffin Wasser did attend Colorado State at the same time Dana went missing. His records show he completed that semester and returned the following year to finish off his degree in biology. He immediately applied and got a job working for the Forest Service. Nobody really knew much about Griffin. And Trent couldn’t find anyone who saw him with Dana.

“So, this Griffin guy could be the stalker Dana complained about, but it’s pretty much a dead end. Eight years is a long time and most of the students are long gone by now,” Trent concluded.

Sean ended the call. He and Paige stepped into the conference room and spotted their group. Dean was excited about something but Jericho looked skeptical.

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“I’m telling you, it fits,” Dean insisted.

“What fits?” Paige asked.

“Your guy here thinks he knows where that first victim is buried,” the detective told her.

“Really?” Paige asked. “Where?”

Dean pulled out a map. “Well, I was thinking... if this is really our guy and his first victim was this guitar student, he’d probably take her to the forest, just like back home.”

“I agree,” Paige said looking at Dean’s map.

Sean moved forward to join them.

“So,” Dean continued. “What’s close by the campus?”

“Roosevelt National Forest,” Sean provided. “And with this guy looking to become a federal biologist, he was probably very familiar with the area. But that’s a huge piece of land to cover, Dean.”

“Which is why I utilized Google Earth. I can see an aerial of the entire forest.”

“Okay,” Paige wondered where he was going with this.

“And I found this,” he pulled out a close-up of an area. “I think that’s where he took her.”

“Why there?” Paige asked.

“Because it’s one of the few places that has a drivable road leading in. And the road is rarely traveled... just like at home. Then, there’s the building. How easy would it be to hide a body in that building?” Dean asked.

“What is that?” Sean looked closer.

“I have no idea,” Dean admitted.

Paige looked up at Jericho. “I think we should at least check it out. Dean’s obviously been working on this for a while now and I trust his instincts.”

“You do?” Dean asked.

Paige smiled. “I do.”

“I can stay here and question our suspect,” Sean suggested. “Trent is still in the area. You could hook up with him and go check it out.”

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“Alright,” Jericho finally agreed. “Gage, I want you and Duncan to head back to Manti. When you get there, give James the details and tell him that Sean will be in touch as soon as he has anything.”

“I’ll take care of that,” a distinguished-looking man in a suit approached the group. “James and I have been coordinating the legal end of this already. I’ll continue to keep him up to speed.”

“Sheriff Jericho Walters,” Jer held out his hand.

“Sorry, District Attorney Devin Marshall.” The two men shook hands. “Now, Sheriff. Will you be heading to Fort Collins or will you be staying here?”

“I think I need to head out,” he looked at Sean. “I’m leaving you in capable hands.”

“And Paige needs a babysitter,” Sean added. “I’ll warn Trent you’re coming. He needs to be prepared.”

Paige rolled her eyes and motioned for Dean to precede her out the door.

* * * * *

“What is this place?” Trent asked as they approached the dilapidated cabin and what looked like an old barn. The thing was barely standing.

“No idea,” Paige told him as she swung open the wooden door. The metal hinges creaked loudly and the entire barn shifted.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Dean objected. “If you go in there and the place collapses, Jericho will blame me. I don’t want that kind of responsibility.”

“I promise not to blame you,” Jericho grinned. This was his area of expertise, being an old time farm boy. The building was fine. A little old, but still sturdy enough. He stepped through the door and looked around.

“I’m pretty sure a body would be obvious in here,” Trent said immediately. There’s not really anywhere to hide.”

“How about here?” Jericho asked as he crouched to study the floor beneath an old rusted out Farmall tractor. If he wasn’t mistaken, it was a vintage 1940’s, could be a valuable antique. “Help me move this thing.”

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Dean glanced at Paige, then Trent and moved forward. He studied the controls for several seconds before he lowered a lever and began to push. Paige and Trent joined in and the tractor was across the barn in no time.

“Okay,” Jericho brushed the dirt and old weeds aside and gave the sturdy metal ring a forceful tug. Everyone but the sheriff was surprised when the trap door opened. Jericho dropped the door backward and let it fall with a thud. Then he switched on his flashlight and aimed the beam into the hole.

“Wow,” Dean said in amazement. “That had to be difficult to build. It’s ancient, how’d they dig that out like that?”

“The better question is why?” Trent said studying the uneven concrete stairs that led to an elaborate cellar.

“Probably prohibition,” Jericho provided. Just cover that door with a tractor and the Feds walk right by, none the wiser.” He laughed as Trent opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again then turned away.

“You’re lucky you’re a sheriff. Otherwise, I’d have a few choice words in response. No respect these days,” Trent grumbled.

Jericho shook his head and proceeded to lower himself onto the first step. If he’d said that to Paige, or even Gage they would have just flipped him the bird and moved on. He could have fun with this Fed, but he wouldn’t.

“You’re really going to go down there?” Paige asked. “And you called me crazy?”

“You jumped off a cliff and landed in a river. You could have drowned, or worse broke your neck before you even hit the water. I’m simply walking down a flight of stairs. Big difference my dear,” Jericho grinned.

“Yeah,” Paige grumbled as she followed her boss. “Down a creepy, scary flight of stairs. There could be anything at the bottom. Hope you have a bear gun handy. What if a nice big happy family is hibernating for the winter?”

“I’m pretty sure they don’t drive,” Dean offered from behind her. “How did they get past that tractor?”

“Shut up,” Paige barked. “This is my story, don’t ruin it with logic.” The men laughed and Paige scowled. “Okay, so we can rule out animals. But in case you haven’t noticed, people get killed by ax murders when they follow the brave guy down creepy stairs.”

“Where?” Trent asked.

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“Where what?” Paige said, annoyed.

“Where do people get killed when they investigate old cellars?” Trent pressed.

“In the movies, stupid. Just like showers. Never go into a shower alone at night,” Paige argued.

Trent laughed. “Now that is something we can agree on, sweetheart. But hey, I’ll take one for the team. You just give ol’ Trent a call later tonight, I’ll protect you.”

“In your dreams,” Paige gave him the one finger salute. “Some things never change, Brinkley.” She was so engrossed in her conversation she nearly bumped into the back of her boss. He had come to an abrupt stop at the bottom of the stairs.

“Geez,” Dean complained as he did bump into Paige.

“Sorry,” Jericho said moving further into the empty space.

“Well,” Trent said when he joined them at the foot of the stairs. “I think we just found Dana Shaw.”

“And a little moonshine,” Jericho added, pointing to a shelf that contained old bottles.

“Guess we better call in the cavalry,” Trent turned to head back up the stairs.

“Wait,” Paige moved forward to inspect the skeleton. “Definitely a girl,” she glanced down and spotted what looked like a purse. She only hesitated a minute then reached through the cobwebs and latched onto the strap. She gave it a good yank, then threw it across the room when a spider crawled onto her hand.

Jericho laughed and moved to investigate. He crouched down, unsnapped the clasp and dumped the contents onto the floor. Several spiders scurried away.

Paige was still frantically shaking her hand, hoping she’d dislodged the offending eight-legged insect when her boss dumped out the purse. She jumped back and wrapped her arms around her torso. “Really, Jericho?”

He flipped open a wallet and saw the picture of a vibrant blonde staring back at him. “It’s Dana Shaw, well her purse anyway. Chances are pretty good we also located her body.”

* * * * *

Once Griffin realized they had discovered all the bodies, he sang like a canary. Sean got more than a confession, he got the details. Including the reason it all happened in the first place.

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Griffin Wasser was a shy, loner. A mama's boy that was sheltered and a little deprived. He'd gone off to college with high hopes. The first time away from mom, his first chance to make his own decisions, his first chance to date. So, when he fell for the blonde guitar player, he already had the fantasy fully developed in his mind. He'd ask her out and she'd accept. It would be the beginning of a wonderful and beautiful life together. Unfortunately, Dana wasn't interested. He first cornered her after class one day, they were in the same English class...although they sat on opposite ends of the lecture hall. Dana had politely refused. Griffin believed her when she said she was busy. So, the following week he approached her in the library and offered to buy her dinner. Again, Dana said no. Griffin decided to give it one more shot. He followed Dana to her car and asked her to the Homecoming dance. Her rejection was the final blow, the trigger that started his downhill slide. Griffin began to stalk her. He followed her everywhere, watched her every move. The day after the dance, he got his chance. She was leaving the Arts and Music building late at night. The campus was nearly empty. Griffin knew she was headed for her car, he stayed a few feet behind, careful to remain in the shadows. Then he pounced. He shoved her into the car and quickly drove away. He knew he loved her and if she'd just give him a chance she could learn to love him, too. Instead, Dana yelled and screamed, she threatened Griffin and tried to jump from the car. He had to tie her up, but where could they go. That's when he remembered the old cabin in the woods.

Griffin took Dana to the cabin and tied her to the old tractor. She continued to fight and screamed for hours. Eventually, Griffin had enough, he grabbed an old rag and shoved it in her face. Then, he held her down until she stopped screaming. That's when he realized she was dead. Rather than panic, he carried her down the old stairs and set her against the wall. After he said goodbye, he moved the tractor to cover up the door and hurried home.

Every four years, he kills three girls because Dana rejected him three times. And he leaves a rose with the blonde to symbolize homecoming and the rose he bought for the girl who was supposed to be his date. Why every four years? Paige was right about that one. The year this all occurred was Leap Year, so every four years, Griffin sets out to find his true love. If his target rejects him, they have to die. He insisted it was up to them. If one of the girls had just loved him, the cycle would be ended. Somehow, that made perfect sense to Griffin Wasser.

As Paige pulled into her driveway, she glanced toward Dax's place. It was dark inside. Of course, it was after midnight. At least his annoying Ex was long gone, hopefully for good. Paige grinned, for once Piper Weber had to wait for the details just like everyone else. As she slid the key into her lock, Paige was once again reminded just how complicated life and love could be.