

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Impetuous Flight *Season 1, Episode 8*

by:

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Daniel stood in the shadows, watching his nemeses as she sorted through documents. She was becoming a bigger problem than her mother. If he just knew what she had. If he could get ahold of those documents, then things might return to normal. But he'd tried... and failed. Breaking into her house had been a calculated risk. One he was sure would pay off. But now the place was locked up like Fort Knox and he still had no idea where she kept that file... or what was in it. He noticed movement on Hamilton's back porch and slipped further into the shadows. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end when the pesky neighbor stopped abruptly and focused on the tree lined border... exactly where he was standing.

Dax stepped onto his back porch and inhaled the cool morning air. He glanced next door and grinned. Paige was at it again. Lately, all she did was study the information she'd gathered on her mother. He was sure she'd solve the mystery eventually. Until she did, he'd be a good neighbor and distract her. He was halfway across the backyard when he felt it... someone was watching. Him or Paige? He shifted and studied the line of trees that bordered the property. It was too dark to see anything but someone was hiding in the shadows, he was sure of it. He didn't think, old habits surfaced and he took off at a dead run.

Daniel realized he was in trouble. Hamilton was too observant. The instant Dax stopped and shifted his attention, Daniel cautiously turned and started to make his way back to the car. His steps were slow, deliberate and methodical until he heard the distinct sound of running. Dax was after him and he desperately wished he'd left ten minutes ago as he'd originally planned. His heart was racing and he felt like he was breathing through a straw as he darted for the car. At least he didn't have far to go.

Dax entered the aspen and juniper forest, carefully looking for signs. He spotted the broken branch almost immediately. From there it was easy to follow the deep footprints his prey had made as he traveled across the damp leaf covered woodland and soft sand. He was zigzagging through the trees and rocks when he heard it... his voyeur was running. Dax moved as fast as he dared, careful not to miss a clue as he headed toward the back road. Chances were pretty good the intruder had parked there and walked in, which was also a clue. One Dax would consider...later. He ran faster now, sure he was on the right path as he dodged low hanging branches and leaped over rotting tree trunks and rocks until he reached the rarely traveled dirt and gravel road that eventually connected with Manti Canyon. From there, the culprit could go anywhere.

Dax exited the thick trees and made his way onto the roadway. He rested the palms of his hands on his knees in defeat. The car was gone. A cloud of dust trailed in its wake, twisting and turning with the wind as the vehicle rounded a bend. Dax had caught a glimpse, just enough to recognize it as an older model Chevelle, probably seventies era, but restored or well cared for. Most likely, it was the same car Paige had seen leaving her house while he was out of town helping Jaimie. His neighbor had gotten a partial plate, he hadn't even managed that much. The vehicle didn't have one. Once the driver felt comfortable enough, confident he'd escaped, he'd

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probably pull over and replace it. Dax sighed and slowly made his way toward his residence. He'd been so close but had failed again. Would they ever catch a break?

Paige was standing against the railing when Dax approached. "Morning run?" she asked with a grin.

"Coffee?" he asked as he pulled open her back door and stepped into the kitchen.

Paige followed and waited.

"Someone was watching," he said as he set the carafe back on the warmer. "I started for your place, nothing but a steaming cup of coffee on my mind when I realized someone was in the trees, watching. I gave chase, he won." Dax dropped into the chaise lounge that he was beginning to envy. It was sturdy and far more comfortable than any of his patio furniture.

Paige frowned. "Watching?"

"Looked like a Chevelle, no plate and I couldn't get a good look at the guy. He was too far down the road by the time I exited the forest. Just got a glimpse of the back of the vehicle as it careened around the corner." Dax kicked up his feet and savored the hot liquid.

"How do you know it was a guy then?"

"Footprints," he glanced up. "In the leaves and the loose sand, men's boots. If I had to guess I'd say...size 12."

Paige looked at Dax in disbelief. "You seriously want me to believe you can tell the size of a man's shoe by the quick glance you got as you chased him through trees and over rocks?"

Dax grinned and shrugged. "You don't believe me? Check it out for yourself. They're all over, can't miss 'em. The ground is damp. If you hurry, you can even get pictures and everything."

Paige was out of her chair and through the door in seconds. She had another clue. One that was right up her alley...forensic evidence.

"Don't forget the tire tracks on the dirt road," Dax called as she darted across the back yard.

Paige sat at her desk scrutinizing the pictures. Dax was right, they were size 12. She was impressed. She'd never admit that to him, but she was. He was good. He'd probably make a great cop. She wondered again why he'd left the Army. Her last conversation with Nathan had been difficult and contentious but it left her with new insight into the man Dax Hamilton had

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been. He was a good soldier, really good. Even General Nathan Porter had been impressed, which was rare. Paige had heard it in Nathan's voice. So, why the sudden career change? She might never know and for some reason that bothered her. She wanted to know everything there was to know about her talented neighbor. They'd shared a couple brief kisses, but since then...nothing. Dax wasn't exactly standoffish, but he wasn't pursuing her either. She'd never met a guy quite like him before, and if she were going to be honest with herself, that only made him more appealing.

"Paige?" Margie called.

"Yeah," Paige stood.

"Gage needs your help," Margie paused to speak into the radio. "He's at the Sinclair... down on Main. Just past the Courthouse."

"On it," Paige said as she started for the door. "What's he got?" she paused to ask before heading out.

"Robbery," Margie said absently.

"Robbery?" Paige froze. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," Margie nodded. "Now, go. He needs your help with the scene and corralling witnesses before they disappear."

"I'm on my way," Paige said as she hurried from the building and slid behind the wheel. Within minutes, she was pulling into the popular gas station.

"Ever heard of a radio?" Gage grumbled.

"Sorry," Paige said as she stepped through the door and glanced around. "How can I help?" Clearly, her friend and colleague was in a mood today.

"Two girls around back," Gage pointed to the door. "Said they needed some air, but I think they're just trying to sneak away. I need statements."

Paige studied a long haired guy in dirty jeans standing in the corner, leaning against the wall.

"He's fine," Gage assured her. "The girls..."

"Okay, okay." Paige stepped out the side door, proceeded around the corner and instantly collided with two teenaged girls. She was barely able to grab each of their arms and avoid landing on her behind. "Not so fast."

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“We didn’t see anything and we...uh... we have plans and need to go,” a medium sized girl with too much makeup said as she tried to free herself from the deputy’s grip.

“Plans will have to wait,” Paige said, directing the duo into a large bay door that led to a service garage. She gave them a forceful nudge onto a bench then glanced around. The bay was deserted. Hopefully, Gage had secured the worker before he bolted, claiming he’d been out to lunch or picking up parts. Finding good witnesses was getting more and more difficult these days. She took out a pen and began to ask each girl the standard questions. Paige was nearly finished when a middle-aged man stepped through the open bay door.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“No,” Paige turned. “We were just finishing up. You see the robbery?”

“I already talked to the young man inside,” the guy said shaking his head. “Didn’t see enough, that’s for sure. Why a guy would barge in and demand a free ride is beyond me.” He turned and headed for a vehicle that was elevated by a sturdy lift. The car was clearly getting an overhaul of some kind. Paige smiled as the mechanic went to work, still mumbling about hard work, ethics, and video games.

Paige stepped back inside and motioned for Gage. The large officer casually strolled toward her. “Need anything else?” she asked when he stopped directly in front of her.

“I retrieved the tape and as far as we know he didn’t touch anything but I’d like you to watch it before we go. If he did leave a print, I want it.” Gage turned and headed for the back office.

Forty minutes later Paige had watched the video half a dozen times and still wasn’t sure if the guy had handled anything on isle four. She strolled toward the backend of the store and studied the area. If there was a clue to be found... she was determined to find it. She walked slowly, scrutinizing a display that was positioned in the general area hoping something... anything, would jump out at her. She finally had to admit there was nothing to find. Paige turned to Gage. “He could have handled the shot glasses, but so has every other Tom, Dick and Harry that’s entered this store. If the owner is willing to bag them, we can preserve the evidence for later... if there is any evidence, and that’s a big IF. It’s also possible he was just biding time... waiting for most of the customers to leave before he hit the place.”

“What do you think?” Gage asked.

“It’s your call,” she sighed. “If the owner says yes, I’d take them. But he may balk. He’s gotta know it’s a long shot.”

“We’ll take them,” Gage decided. “He already told me to take whatever I needed. He’ll be fine. Let’s get these bagged. I have a lot to process and it’s already been a long day.”

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Paige frowned. Something was up with Gage Clayton and she was going to find out what.

It was past dinner time and Paige was starving. Turns out Gage did have a lot of evidence to process. She immediately offered to stay and help, it would give her a chance to speak to him about his mood. Turns out Dean was thrilled about their new part-time addition, but Gage... not so much. Duncan Havilland had dated Gage's younger sister awhile back and it hadn't ended all that amicably. If Gage had seen Duncan oh... never, it would have been too soon. Tensions were running high and Duncan was making things worse. His cocky attitude was beginning to push Gage's buttons and that was never a good thing. Sooner or later, Paige knew the situation was going to come to a head. She just hoped neither one of them landed in the ER as a result.

She pulled into her driveway, shut down her car and started for the front door, then paused. The issue this morning, combined with the break-in and everything else that had happened since her arrival, had her on edge. She rested her hand on her weapon as she slowly made her way around her entire yard. As she approached the back door, she nearly jumped out of her skin when the door opened and a large man stood shadowed in the doorway.

"You plan to shoot me with that thing?" Nathan asked casually as he stepped onto the back porch.

"Nathan?" Paige asked in disbelief. "When did you get here? Why did you come here for that matter? I thought you had a big mission in the works and wouldn't be available for at least a couple weeks."

"It was postponed a few days and I had a little time on my hands so I thought I'd sneak away and check out my favorite girl." Nathan Porter settled into a chair and pulled out a cigar. Within seconds the air was filled with the pungent smell that Paige had always hated. She'd never tell him that, he was enough of a gentleman he'd snuff it out, and she liked seeing him relaxed. It was something the good General rarely did these days. Paige wondered if he'd ever settle down and just enjoy life a little. She smiled to herself, *not likely*.

"I know that smile," he studied her. "Up to something are we?"

"Nope," Paige said as she settled in next to him. "I assume Dax let you in."

"I haven't actually talked to Dax yet. You told me where the spare key was, I waited around for nearly an hour but when you didn't show, I decided to make myself at home. Quaint little place you got here. Not exactly what I imagined, but I think it suits you." He took a long draw on the cigar then blew out a cloud of smoke.

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Paige knew he was acting casual, but he was watching her like a hawk. Something was up, she just had no idea what. “Did Dax tell you about this morning? Is that why you flew out?” she finally asked.

“No,” Porter frowned. “Like I said, I’ve been busy. When I realized I had a break, I headed straight here. If that Ranger of yours tried to call, I didn’t get it.”

Paige was about to respond when her stomach growled, loudly. “Sorry,” she laughed. “Long night.”

“I stopped in Ephraim and grabbed a pizza at that Papa Murphy’s place on the way here,” Nathan told her. “It’s ready to throw in the oven, I was just waiting for you to arrive.”

“Seriously?” Paige grinned. “I love their pizza, let’s go.” She casually glanced at her neighbor’s house but it was completely dark. Dax must be busy or out somewhere. Tonight it would be her and Nathan. Even better, they had a lot to catch up on. “How’d you know about Papa Murphy’s anyway?”

“Carmen,” Nathan said as he tapped out his cigar and left it outside. By the time he made it into the kitchen, Paige had already unwrapped the large pie and was placing it in the oven.

“You remembered,” she said as she closed the oven door.

“How could I forget?” Nathan moved forward and wrapped Paige in a fatherly hug. “I’m glad you are doing so well, sweetheart. I’ve been worried about you.”

Paige smiled and enjoyed the contact. Nathan Porter was the closest thing to family there was without sharing a bloodline. “I told you I was fine.”

“Yeah, you did. I guess I just wasn’t sure I believed you,” he admitted. “I mean so much has happened since you arrived. I had to see for myself.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. I’ve missed you old man,” Paige teased. “Now, I hope you don’t mind but I thought we’d use my finest paper china. No dishes that way.”

“Paper is fine,” he agreed as he settled in for a relaxing evening of catching up.

Nathan was still on Eastern Standard Time so when five o’clock rolled around, he rose before the sun and headed downstairs. Once the coffee was brewed, he moved outside. The air was cool and crisp, a touch of winter embraced him and he suddenly missed his amazing wife. He’d invited Sophie to join him but she’d had a previous commitment and the notice was too short to change it. As he glanced across the dark expanse he wondered what it would be like to

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live in a small town, to slow down, watch the sun come up each morning with his beautiful bride lounging by his side. Every once in a while it was tempting to take that leap, but then reality set in. He and Sophie were two of the same. Both led busy, sometimes chaotic lives, but they loved it. He might slow down, but they'd never leave the big city. They might, however, try to come visit Paige a little more often.

Movement next door caught his attention and he slowly strolled across the expanse. He paused at the top of the stairs and studied the man who currently sat motionless in the shadows. "Dax Hamilton, I presume."

"Hello, General," Dax said softly.

Nathan studied a man he felt like he knew but had never actually met face to face. Dax was large in stature, fit and a little too solemn. "You heard about your team?" he finally decided, moving forward and taking a chair next to Dax.

"Heard what?" Dax asked, glancing at Nathan then back into the dark nothingness.

"Okay," Porter shrugged. "Probably better this way, plausible deniability."

Dax focused on Nathan. "Why are you here?"

"Here?" Nathan glanced around. "As in at your house, or here as in Manti?"

"Both," Dax asked, watching Nathan for the slightest tell.

"Here on your porch because I wanted to talk to you in private. Here in Manti, again to talk to you, but mostly to see Paige. I had some time and wanted to head out to see for myself the setup, the community, the danger."

"Makes sense, for a man like you that is."

"It's a relatively straightforward mission. In and out. These guys are trained for far worse. It's not like the last time," Porter added.

"It's never straightforward when the Rangers are involved. You wouldn't be sending them if it wasn't risky," Dax objected.

"True enough," Nathan conceded. "I know what happened in Zabul. That wasn't your fault. And this mission is completely different."

Dax looked away, a little surprised Porter had looked into the details of his last mission.

"It's really not," Nathan pressed. "Sure, it's dangerous. I'll give you that. But it's always dangerous when we call in the Rangers. But this is more like... Kandahar."

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“What?” Dax studied the General. “Did you read my entire jacket?”

Nathan smiled. “Of course.”

Dax shook his head in disbelief. There had to be hundreds of pages of missions, commendations, and letters. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It kind of does,” Nathan disagreed. “Look, I didn’t know Sanchez. I know of him. I know he was respected, hard-working and well liked. I also know he gave his life for his country... willingly. Grieve for him, but don’t hold it against him that he died while you lived.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dax objected.

“You know I do,” Nathan said with more compassion. “Let me tell you a story. One that is much like your own, only reversed. I was a young Lieutenant. We were traveling through one of a hundred hellholes in Vietnam. Things went south almost immediately. I was faced with the same scenario as Corporal Sanchez. The difference, he saw the big picture. He knew you had to live for the rest of the team to survive. I was more shortsighted than that. I let my Captain take the risk. Oh, I argued. I volunteered to go in his place, but in the end, I obeyed his order. He died, I lived. That’s when the devastating reality set in. Our commanding officer was dead. It was my responsibility to get the team out safely. I failed on that front. You see Captain Redding had received updated plans just before we were attacked. He didn’t have a chance to relay the new exit strategy. I led our team into a massacre, not knowing the chopper was several clicks to the left. Three of our men died, several others were injured severely before we got out. Had I died and Redding survived, those men would still be alive today.”

“That’s not your fault,” Dax said softly.

“No,” Nathan agreed. “Not really. I couldn’t have known what we were walking into. But it’s always weighed on me just the same. Sanchez knew what he was doing. He’s a hero, that doesn’t make you less of a soldier or a leader. A good man died, and that’s a tragedy but the rest of you lived and that is entirely because of you.”

“I didn’t...” Dax began.

“I read the file, remember. I know what happened. You saved those men. One man didn’t get home to his family. Six others... did.”

The two of them sat in silence for several minutes remembering the gruesome reality of a war they never wanted and the responsibility they felt for the men who depended on them to survive.

“Anyway,” Porter finally said. “I’ve been thinking. I could use you on my team.”

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“My life is in Manti now,” Dax answered immediately. “And Paige needs me, whether she wants to admit that or not.”

“I agree,” Nathan sat back. “I need an adviser on my team. Someone who understands the Middle East, someone whose been there... in the capacity you have. Someone I can trust.”

“I thought you were the advisor,” Dax frowned. “Why do you need me?”

“That’s true,” Nathan admitted. “I am. But I haven’t been there. The Pentagon develops the plan and forwards it to me for review and input. I have Carmen do the hard data collection, she’s amazing by the way. Paige really came through for me on that one. But I can run strategy all day long, study maps till doomsday and still not know the terrain. I’ve never been in the mountainous region. I’ve never been on the ground. You have. I’ve been given permission to bring someone in, an assistant so to speak to counsel on a case by case basis - as needed. You don’t have to move. You never have to step foot in Washington if you don’t want to. We can issue you a secure line and give you a government email. The upside... you get your security clearance back and the boys can talk freely about upcoming missions. It’s a win for everyone here, just think about it. I’ll leave the papers when I go.”

“Hey,” Paige said as she climbed the stairs to Dax’s back porch. She immediately realized she’d interrupted something. “I thought we’d head to the Farmhouse for breakfast. The old man has to fly out later this afternoon. He should have a good meal under his belt before he tackles that airplane food, right?”

“You guys go,” Dax suggested.

“I was hoping the three of us could do this together,” Paige argued. “It will give the two of you a chance to get to know each other and me a little more time to harass my favorite General.”

“Retired General,” Nathan added as he stood and wrapped an arm around Paige’s shoulders. “What do you say, soldier? Breakfast on me?”

Dax glanced from Paige to Nathan then back. “Fine,” he stood. “I need a second to lock up and grab my wallet.”

Two hours later the group was still occupying a table in the back of The Farmhouse Restaurant. Dax was in a better mood. Nathan was right, his men... former men that is, were good. If the mission was like Kandahar, that had been pretty straightforward. Go in, grab the prisoner and bolt. Was this another rescue mission? One the US didn’t want the world knowing they’d executed? How many of those had Dax led throughout his career? Too many to count

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and he was proud of the fact that, at least on those occasions, he'd never lost a man. His team, his friends, would be okay. He had to believe that. So, what about the job offer? Was he ready to consult? He knew he'd never return to the life no matter how many times Solo and Bucket begged him to. But maybe he could ensure their safety from behind the scenes. It might be worth taking a closer look. Dax was jolted out of his thought by Paige's cell phone.

"Hey," Paige answered. "Seriously? I'll be right there."

"Go," Nathan urged. "I'll call you when I get back home. Sophie will want to say hello anyway."

Paige jumped up, gave Nathan a big kiss and a hug then turned to Dax. "Sorry."

"I've got this," Dax smiled. "Go save the world."

Paige was laughing as she rushed out the door.

"So," Nathan studied Dax. "Make any decisions?"

"Yeah," Dax pushed his plate away. "I'm in. I'll take you back to Paige's. While you pack, I'll fill them out and you can take them with you. Stop back by the house before you leave."

Nathan grinned. "I'm happy to hear it. This arrangement, well I think it's going to be perfect. Once we get those credentials reinstated, I'll send you the instructions to access your email. I have something in the works I could really use your input on. Different team, but guys you might know. This one is going to be dicey."

Dax stood. "I got this."

"Naw," Nathan also stood. "I'd like to buy. You can treat me next time."

Dax raised an eyebrow. "Thought you said I wouldn't need to travel."

"You won't," Nathan shrugged as he handed the cashier his card. "I'm planning to bring Sophie out here to see the country. I think she'll like it. And Thanksgiving is coming up. We might just plan a real family holiday with turkey, stuffing and the whole messy event. Paige makes the best pumpkin pie. I don't know what her secret is, but I've never tasted a crust as good as hers. Maybe you can help me convince her it's for a good cause."

"Maybe," Dax chuckled. "What about Paige?" he asked soberly. "Did you tell her about my consulting gig?"

"No," Nathan shrugged. "I would have but I was waiting to get your answer before I said anything. Go ahead and tell her. The jobs not a secret and she's used to me not sharing the details with her. She'll understand."

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“I hope so,” Dax worried a little. They’d always shared an open and honest connection. Would this damage that part of their relationship? *Only time would tell.*

Paige stepped into the Chevron and looked around. Gage and Duncan were there. *Oh, goody!* “Hey guys,” she said cheerfully. “Tell me he left a clue this time.”

“Manager is pulling the tapes,” Duncan supplied.

Paige glanced at Gage, who was involved in a serious conversation with a middle-aged woman at the moment. Must be a witness, she wasn’t wearing a name tag. She slowly began to walk the area. Duncan followed.

“Do you think he left a clue?” Duncan asked seriously. “I’ve walked through here already but didn’t see anything suspicious.”

“I don’t know,” Paige said absently as she studied the door to one of the refrigeration units. “Stay here and guard this. Do not let anyone get near this door.”

Duncan frowned. “Why?”

“Just do it,” Paige moved forward and caught Gage’s attention.

“What’s up?” he asked immediately.

“I need to see the video. I need to know if the perp went anywhere near that glass door back there,” Paige insisted.

Gage motioned for the lady he’d been talking to. “Ma’am, can you tell me if the suspect was at the back of the store? Over by where that other officer is standing?”

The woman furrowed her brows in concentration for several seconds. “I believe he did go back there. Yes, he came in the door with a young lady. I don’t know if they were together, in fact, I don’t think they were. She went over there and got some coffee then left. He turned right and headed for the coolers. He was back there for several minutes before he slowly made his way to the counter and pulled the gun. I’m sure of it,” she added.

“Thank you,” Gage guided her away from Paige and spoke for a few more seconds then returned. “What’s up?”

“I need my kit,” Paige smiled. “There is a clear palm print on the cooler. I want it. We can compare it to any fingerprints on the shot glasses from yesterday. If any of them match, we

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know we found our guy. I'd also like to watch the video to make sure it was him, not someone else that created those prints."

"You pull the prints, I'll track down the manager and we can go from there." Gage headed for a back room as Paige headed out the front door.

The group was now back at the station gathering fingerprints from tiny shot glasses.

"You guys do know that we now have fingerprints for every six year old within a hundred miles, don't you?" Duncan shoved the shot glass he'd just finished away and sat back. "What makes you think he even touched these?"

"We have a witness that saw him pick up one of the glasses as she walked by," Paige said casually. "What's wrong Hav? Too much work for you here in the big city?"

Duncan laughed. "Manti? The big city? Are you serious?"

"Compared to Laurel Bluff? Yeah," Gage added.

Duncan frowned and Paige felt a little bad. She wasn't taking sides on this one and didn't want Hav to think she was. Gage and Duncan were going to have to work things out soon because she didn't like walking this fine line every time she spoke.

Margie approached the group with a frown.

"What's up Marge?" Duncan asked.

"The Norton's are at it again," she shook her head in exasperation. "Weston is apparently drunk and insisting he can plow the field. Gerald is trying to stop him but Nancy says the two of them are engaged in an all-out brawl. She's terrified one of them is going to get injured and they won't get the crops finished before it freezes this weekend. They're predicting that big storm come Friday."

"I've got it," Duncan stood. "I need a break anyway. Wes just needs a firm hand. Unless you need me, I think I'll deal with this and check off for the day."

"Thanks, Duncan," Margie said, obviously relieved. "Go ahead and clear once you talk some sense into those two boys. I'll let Jer know you won't be in until next week."

Duncan pushed through the door at the same time Gage asked the question Paige had on her mind.

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“Why not until next week?” Gage pressed. “I mean, with Jericho headed out of town tomorrow aren’t we shorthanded?”

Paige frowned. “Where is the sheriff going tomorrow? Nobody told me he was headed out of town.”

Margie smiled. “Guess he didn’t know he was supposed to ask the new guy for permission.”

“You know what I mean,” Paige said defensively. “If we’re short, all of us should know that. Who’s in charge anyway? We do have a robber on the loose.”

“Jericho will be available by phone and if we have an emergency, Chief Strong is available,” Margie countered. She always sounded like an annoyed mother speaking to a petulant child when she used that tone of hers. A tone that told the two deputies not to push this any further. It didn’t go unnoticed that Margie had not revealed anything about their boss’s mysterious trip.

“I think I’ve got something,” Paige said nearly two hours later. “These look like a match.”

Gage stood and walked to Paige’s desk. “I agree. Let’s send them to the lab to verify then we can run them through the system and see if we get a hit. We just might have a name to go with that picture by tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Paige sealed up the prints and handed the bag to Gage. “But he also may not be in the system at all. Let’s wait and see what we find.”

Gage took the bag and returned to his desk. He pulled on his jacket and turned to leave. “I know you are getting caught in the middle of this and I’m sorry. I’m working on it, I promise.”

“I’ll manage,” Paige assured him. “But Teddy, I won’t take sides. I know he hurt your sister, but he’s been nothing but nice to me. He’s been professional and as much as I love you and Sabrina, this is work. It can’t be personal.”

“I know,” Gage grinned. “I’m kind of getting used to that nickname again. Never thought I’d say that but it’s true. I don’t want you in the middle and Sabrina is mad Dunc is here in town but she’s coming to grips with that reality as well. I will, too. Just give me a little time.”

“That I can do,” Paige smiled. “Now, I think I’ll stretch my legs, take a spin around town and then head home. I think we’re on to something here.”

Margie stopped them before the two deputies left the office. “I’m going to send the photos to the media. Someone might recognize him. Phil got the hotline set up earlier today. If we do a statewide press release, we might get some good tips. I just wanted to warn you because we are

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going to get a lot of bad one's as well and tomorrow might be a busy day running down leads. Most of which will be false."

"Got it," Paige smiled. "Even more reason to do a quick sweep then head home. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a late one."

Paige straightened her shoulders and knocked on Dax's front door. Hopefully, he'd be up for dinner and some conversation. She knew Nathan had pressured him for something and she needed to know what.

"Hey," Dax said as he took a step back to let Paige in.

"Hey yourself," she said, handing him her coat. "You busy?"

"Just threw dinner in the oven. You want to stay?" he offered.

"Love to," she moved to the couch and settled in.

"I saw the news. Robberies, huh? Guess that's why you bugged out so quickly this morning."

"Yeah," Paige sighed. "We're short on clues, though. He's good. I'd say he's a professional."

"Have you checked the prison?" Dax suggested as he handed Paige a glass of wine. "Could be a recent release. Career criminal that was rehabilitated and released."

Paige laughed. "Dax Hamilton, I think you're more cynical than I am."

"Probably," he grinned. "Doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"We might have prints," she told him. "If so, we'll run him through the system and see what pops. If you're right, he'll be easy to identify. If not, we'll have a bigger challenge."

"I haven't seen him around town," Dax pondered. "But he has to be staying here. If he's hitting places here in Manti, he has to be close. Might want to check out the summer homes again. See if he's squatting."

Paige stretched out on the couch and sipped her wine. "So, what did Nathan want from you?"

Dax relaxed into his chair. "Knew you'd get to that eventually."

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“And?” she glanced at him and waited.

“He asked me to be a long-distance adviser or consultant I guess. He’ll send me stuff, I’ll look over the plan and get back to him.”

“So that’s why he came to town?” she frowned, a little hurt it had been business, not pleasure that had him flying across the country to her little town.

“I’d say maybe 25% me, 75% you. He could have just asked over the phone and mailed the docs but since he was coming to see you, he brought them with him.”

“I doubt that,” Paige disagreed.

“Think what you want, but I know I’m right. He told me as much. He enjoyed spending time with you. In fact, he said he wants to stop in more often. We might need to get started on that guest room overhaul sooner than we planned. You might need a place for Nathan and Sophie to crash in the near future.”

“What?” Paige sat up. “He said that?”

“He said he was going to talk to Sophie about flying out for Thanksgiving. He also said you make a mean pie. I’m hoping you will prove him right,” Dax grinned. “Pumpkin pie is my favorite part of the holiday.”

Paige considered. Was it possible Nathan had come out for her? “What did you tell him? About the job, I mean? You going to take him up on the offer?”

“For now,” Dax sobered. “I’m going to give it a try.”

“You left because something bad happened, didn’t you?” Paige decided.

“You could say that.”

“Will you tell me sometime?” she practically whispered.

Dax sighed. “It was a mission. One I can’t talk about. We were in Afghanistan and things turned on a dime. We had been suspicious and weary of our interpreter for some time but our driver, Salah, confirmed it. Sayeed, we learned later, was working for the Taliban. Salah overheard a conversation he was translating between Solo – one of my top men - and a local farmer that we believed was assisting us with Intel. Salah quietly got my attention and translated the actual exchange. The farmer and Sayeed were coordinating an arms deal. Once they had the merchandise they planned to turn on us and take out the entire team.

We were able to intervene and Sayeed mysteriously disappeared. I have no idea if it was the Taliban or friends of Salah’s that made that happen and I can’t say that I care. We took a large team in to take down the farmer and were unprepared for the numbers we encountered. We

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were pretty sure there would be resistance, but the guy was apparently a Tribal Leader. We thought he was a low-level operative. Things went south and one of my guys ended up saving my life at the expense of his own.”

“I’m sorry,” Paige said sincerely. “I know it’s not enough but I’m sorry for your loss.”

Dax shrugged. “I left and thought I’d never look back.”

“Then General Nathan Porter entered your life and you couldn’t resist?” Paige studied him. “I don’t get it. Why accept if you want out?”

“The night before I met your General, I got a call,” Dax admitted.

“From one of the men,” Paige assumed.

“Yeah,” Dax nodded. “From Solo. He and Bucket are headed back in. Back to Afghanistan. Until now, they’ve been able to avoid the area. This time is different. It brought back memories and anxieties for all of us. Solo especially. He couldn’t tell me much but I think they’re headed back to Zabul, or at least somewhere close. He was a little freaked but trying to play cool. The fact that he called me told me everything I needed to know.”

“And then you freaked a little?” Paige said in understanding.

“A little,” Dax shrugged. “I can’t explain the bond to someone on the outside. I’m going to worry until they are safely on American soil. Most of the guys bolted when I did, or soon after. Bucket and Solo stayed. They have a few more good years then they too will retire, move on to a nice cushy desk job at the Pentagon or something. Until then...”

“Until then, you need to be able to check in. See that they are okay. Know what mission they are assigned to carry out. Working with Nathan will give you that backdoor in. I get it. Just know, Nathan doesn’t like to let those close to him go. When it comes time for you to bail, he’s going to fight you like nobody has ever fought before. He respects you. He may have given you an in, but you earned it. And that means you have earned the right to leave anytime you want. Don’t let him tell you otherwise.”

“Voice of experience?” Dax asked.

“On steroids,” Paige grinned.

Just then the alarm went off on the oven. “Soups on,” Dax said as he stood and moved toward the kitchen. “Table or living room picnic and a movie?”

“Picnic and I get to choose the flick,” Paige followed.

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Bethany Kirkwood stepped into the bank and slipped off her coat. As she glanced around, she was relieved to see the branch director was nowhere to be found. She had a good job and would never complain to anyone but Mr. Owens made her uncomfortable. Nobody would believe her if she told them he watched her sometimes, in a creepy, middle-aged guy way. Everyone knew he'd married the prettiest woman in town. A former cheerleader who still wore too much make-up and clothes made for a woman in her twenties, not her fifties. But Janice thought she looked hip and the town humored her. Who was Bethany to argue? Invisible, that's who. Which is why people would laugh if she suggested her boss treated her inappropriately, or passed by just a little too closely, or stared at her boobs sometimes. So, Bethany trudged along, hoping this was the year she'd get that scholarship and could move away for good.

She worked quickly, preparing her workspace for customers. Her manager, Gracie Timmons, stepped up beside her and motioned for Bethany to follow. Apparently, Owens had already been there to punch in his code, because Gracie hit a few keys and the large vault door slid smoothly across the floor. They worked together, counting money, recounting then locking up. Bethany slid behind the counter just as the clock hit nine and Gracie unlocked the doors and moved to her own desk out in the open. The bank was open for business.

Vito Copley double checked his go bag, for this job everything had to be perfect. Once he hit the place, he'd need to skip town for good. But that was all in the plan. He had enough dough to get him to Texas, but this last hit would give him a little buffer just in case. One nobody needed to know about but him. Hopefully, Danny still had that apartment over his garage. He'd crash for a few days then light out for the coast. Just another week tops, and he'd be living the life he deserved. His thoughts shifted to the good old days and his heart started to race. There was nothing like a good heist to get the blood pumping. And that last heist... well, that had been the bomb for sure. It's what had kept him going for the past five years. The rest of the crew was gone now. Bennie had been busted for snuffing out that prostitute in Orlando and would be in for life. Colin was popped nearly two years ago. The moron always had overestimated his abilities. Vito wasn't the least bit surprised when he'd heard his friend got into a deadly shootout with the local police. That meant the loot all belonged to him now. Served them right for laying him out that way. After stashing their load, he'd returned to Vegas only to be shackled and hauled off to prison. At least neither one of them had any idea where he'd stashed their bootie. Five years in a maximum security cage had taught Vito not to trust another soul. He was out and he was staying out. If he never saw Ely, Nevada again... it would be too soon.

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His mind returned to his most recent job and the bimbo broad that could have ruined everything. Good thing he was in Podunk. No way would a small town cop catch the prints on the back cooler. But still, he hated loose ends. Lucky for that skank teen he was blowing this town for good. Otherwise... well, revenge was sweet that's for sure. He glanced around the trailer, making sure he'd gathered up everything. He didn't have time to think about some chick he'd never see again. He had work to do. The trailer had provided the perfect hideout but if he left one fingerprint, one stray hair, one little clue, the locals would figure out who he was. It might not matter, but again... he hated loose ends. When he was sure every trace was gone, he locked up and headed for the car.

Now the hard part. He'd need to stash the clean ride somewhere and hope nobody noticed it. Then walk back here and hook up with the throwaway. It was going to take at least an hour. That would put him at the bank just before lunch. Hopefully, he could beat the crowd because he wasn't willing to wait one more day. He'd hit this small town on purpose, knowing the cops wouldn't have a chance of catching him. But, the downside was smaller takes, which meant more jobs. There was always a tradeoff. He climbed behind the wheel and headed for the south end of town.

Bethany glanced up and saw the man enter the foyer. Dang, she was so hungry. If she dealt with the guy quickly, maybe she'd still make it to the diner before all the tables were full. "Can I help you?" she said forcing politeness.

"Keep your mouth shut and give me everything in the till," Vito ordered.

Bethany's eyes widened in stunned disbelief. She must have gone too slow because the man pulled a gun from his pocket and fired one shot toward Gracie. Her boss fell to the floor and Bethany screamed.

Daniel Owens was in his back office when he heard the commotion. He rushed to the front and froze. *They were being robbed?* He silently slid around the corner and headed for the back door. Maybe he could escape before anyone saw him. He heard the gunshot and then one of the women screamed. They didn't pay him enough to deal with this kind of danger.

Gracie was in pain but she knew it wasn't life threatening... not if she could get the bleeding under control. She reached under her desk and pressed the panic button. At least the cops would be here soon. Then she slid out the bottom drawer of her desk and grabbed the scarf she'd placed there this morning. Once she had it secured around her upper arm as tight as she could get it, she peeked around the corner to see how many patrons were trapped inside. She let out a relieved sigh when she realized it was just her, Bethany and the robber. Well, and Mr. Owens

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must be somewhere in the back. Hopefully, he'd stay hidden, maybe contact the police and let them know what was going on.

"What is that noise?" Paige complained as she stepped back into the office area from the back evidence area.

Jericho rushed from his office. "Bank alarm." Then he was out the door.

"What bank?" Paige called after him but he was long gone. "What bank, Margie?"

"Zions on Main," Margie said with a sigh. "Looks like our thief has upped his game."

"Probably," Paige agreed as she rushed to her car. She pulled in beside her boss and scowled. "Weren't you supposed to be out of town on something mysterious?"

"You'll be glad I'm here," he said as he glanced around. Then he pulled out his phone and disappeared.

Paige studied the area carefully. There had to be a getaway car. She glanced up when Duncan Havilland pulled in behind her car, followed by Dean and Gage. Knowing they'd cover the front, Paige cautiously headed around back. The car had to be there somewhere. Within minutes she spotted an old Saturn with truck plates across the street in the market parking lot. "Hey Margie," she called through her radio. "I need a plate run." Within seconds Margie had confirmed her suspicions, the plate was stolen. Paige glanced around, wondering how to disable a car quickly but effectively. She jumped when Gage stepped in behind her.

"Slash the tires maybe?" he asked casually.

"Are you serious? Can we do that?" Bank robberies were technically the FBI's ballgame, but Paige hadn't actually worked one before. She was out of her element here and knew it. The best she could do was look for evidence and clues then let her colleagues do the rest. The feds would arrive any minute, anyway.

Gage pulled out a pocket knife and had flattened two tires within a matter of minutes. "Hope you were sure that's our car." He grinned as he strolled purposefully back toward their boss. "So, what's the plan?"

"As far as I can tell, he doesn't know we're here yet," Jericho decided. He was about to continue when the back door opened and a man stepped outside.

Paige watched Gage walk away then decided to check out the car. If there was anything in plain sight it might help them get a warrant. She was about to give up when she heard the back

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door open behind her. She pulled her gun and darted across the street, pointing her weapon directly at the man sliding through the back doorway. “Stop right there, mister.”

“What?” Owens froze and stared wildly around looking for an escape. He had come face to face with Deputy Paige Carter and a very large gun. “Wait, I’m not... I’m...”

“Well?” Paige pressed.

“He’s in charge at the bank, put the gun down Paige,” Jericho moved forward.

“Yeah, slider,” Gage joked. “Can’t you see he’s about to pee himself?”

Owens scowled but let out a sigh of relief when Paige lowered her weapon.

“Hav, you take him across the street and get a statement. The Mayor’s aware of what’s happening and will have a room available in the City Building,” Jericho turned to look at the car. “Looks like you took care of that problem.”

Paige watched and Duncan escorted the strange man across the street, then across Main to the City Offices. When had he snuck up behind them anyway? And who was watching the front? She was about to ask when several black SUV’s pulled into the lot of the Market. Agents in black suits exited and began to study the bank.

“Looks like the feds arrived,” Gage surmised.

“Is that...” Paige grinned. At least one of Agents was Sean and he was headed their way.

“Agent Wilkins,” Jericho reached out a hand in greeting.

“Sheriff,” he glanced at Paige and grinned. “I don’t remember there being this much excitement when we worked together. Are you sure you haven’t found a bad penny or something?”

“Not funny,” Paige scowled. “How is this my fault?” She turned to Gage and pointed with her thumb. “Blame him... the other two robberies are his. We’re pretty sure this is the same guy.”

“Yeah?” Sean focused on Gage. “Any leads?”

“We’re waiting on a print verification, then we can run it through AFIS and see if the prints hit on anyone in the system.”

“I’m on it,” he headed back to his vehicle and the other agents. Within minutes, the entire bank was surrounded by feds and the locals had been relegated to the Command Center for a briefing by the SAC. The FBI had taken over an entire section of the City Office building and was using their large conference room for central command.

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Vito paced the floor. *Now what?* This wasn't supposed to happen. It was supposed to be an easy job, in and out, then on his way to freedom. The minute they realized who he was, this was all over. He would not go back to prison. Five years had nearly killed him. Once he'd stepped out of that prison a free man, he'd known what his life would be. A life on the run, living as someone else, always careful not to leave a trace, a life without crime. But he had to get to Texas first and that meant a couple jobs, some easy cash and a long, lonely stretch of road.

This was not in the plan. How had the police discovered the hit so quickly? Had he been spotted? Had a citizen tried to come in, only to see the gun? Had someone heard the sound of the shot? Or...he shoved the gun against the teller's head. "Did you press the button?"

"Nnn..no," Bethany sobbed. Tears were running down her face but she didn't care. Would it matter how she looked if she was dead? She didn't think so. Her mother would certainly disagree but at the moment Bethany really didn't need the nagging voice of Kathy Kirkwood pounding in her head. "No," she said more forcefully. "You've been here, with me, this whole time. I couldn't have done it without you seeing me. I swear, I wanted to, but I couldn't." *Bright idea, moron. Tell the guy you wanted to get him arrested. He'll be thrilled about that confession for sure.*

Vito looked around. The woman was right, she hadn't signaled for help. The other woman was still lying on the floor. He hoped she wasn't dead because that would only make things worse. Not that he'd be getting out of here alive as it was. He couldn't go back in a cage. He wouldn't. That left offing himself or taking out a few cops before they got him. A vivid image of Colin entered his mind and he finally understood what had led his friend to a gunfight with the cops. If you were going to go down, might as well go down fighting – right? He thought so and so had Colin. It was something they had discussed at length... in another lifetime. At least it seemed that way. "Who else was here? There had to be someone else."

"Umm..." Bethany hoped Mr. Owens had found a way out of the building.

"The director," Gracie said weakly. "Our director was in his office." She rested her head against the cold tile floor, wishing the pain in her upper arm and shoulder would subside.

"Gracie!" Bethany jumped to her feet in surprise. She had only taken two steps toward her friend when pain radiated across her cheekbone. The monster had hit her, slapped her across the face. She crumpled to the floor, holding her palm against the throbbing pain.

Vito walked across the room and aimed the pistol at the woman on the floor. "Where is this director?"

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Gracie glanced up and cringed. Maybe she should have kept her mouth shut but she knew Bethany. The girl wasn't good under pressure. "He was in his office in the back."

"You move, you die," he said as he turned and headed down the short hallway that led to the back offices.

Bethany jumped to her feet and moved to Gracie. "Are you okay?" Tears continued to roll down her face but she ignored them.

"I think so," Gracie tried to sit but decided it was too difficult. "We need to get out of here."

"Do you think the boss is still back there? Is he in trouble for sounding the alarm?" Bethany pressed.

"He left," Gracie admitted. "I saw him. He came out of his office, saw it was a robbery and snuck out the back."

"Maybe I can get you to the door," Bethany glanced toward the front entrance and chewed on her bottom lip. "You need a doctor. Maybe..."

"Who can access the vault?" Vito demanded, he moved a little closer, an aggressive but deliberate action. He needed them to be intimidated and scared.

"The Director," Gracie choked.

"Who else?" Vito said as he kicked Gracie in the stomach.

"Nobody," Gracie wheezed.

"I don't believe you," he began opening drawers and scowled when he spotted a ring of keys. "What do these go to?"

"My car, the outer doors and the vault. But, you need two. That key plus the one that Director Owens has will open the door. One key does nothing."

Vito kicked her again in frustration then walked away. Once he located the large, secure door, he slid in the key and tried the knob. Nothing. That's when he spotted the second keyhole. So, she'd been telling the truth after all. There were a lot of precautions for such a small town. Had they been robbed before? Once again, Vito began to pace.

"Yes!" Sean jumped from his seat and approached Paige and the crew. "Found him."

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“You sure?” Paige asked, knowing the answer. Sean wouldn’t be this excited if there were doubts.

“Positive,” he held up his hand for a high five.

Paige humored him.

“So...” Sean said slowly. “One Vito Copley was released from Ely Correctional Facility on the twentieth of last month. He was assigned a parole officer, given his instructions and ordered to check in the following week. He hasn’t been seen since.” He dropped a prison photo in front of the group. “Meet Vito,” Sean dropped a still photo obviously taken from the camera in the bank.

“That’s my guy,” Gage snatched up the picture for a closer inspection.

“Your prints were a match,” Sean confirmed. “I sent the PO an email, he’s on his way as we speak. Now we just need to talk him out.”

Special Agent in Charge Clive Rickman, Sean’s new boss – a guy Paige happened to know Sean hated – stepped forward and held out a hand in demand.

Gage looked up, obviously considered, waited, and studied the photo a moment longer.

“Paige Carter,” Rickman practically sneered. “Maybe you could explain the proper procedure in this kind of situation to your... colleagues. If you can remember protocol that is, which I highly doubt. There was a reason you didn’t make it as an agent.”

Gage shifted, Paige stomped on his foot. He glanced at her, took another good, long look at the paper he was holding then finally held out the photo. Rickman snatched it away and stomped out of the room.

“I think our job here is done,” Jericho said as he stood. “Thank you, Sean. As always it’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“You’re not leaving are you?” Sean asked, clearly upset. “I mean, that’s just his way. I hope he didn’t offend you.”

“Don’t worry, we have other work to do. Just make sure you catch our guy.” The sheriff turned and headed for the door. He paused just outside the conference room. “Otherwise, we’ll let you know when we’re finished with him.” Jericho disappeared, his men followed.

Paige paused when Sean gave her a desperate look, then shrugged and left the room. She sighed as she pushed open the exterior door and stepped outside. The sun was warm for a change and she took a minute to soak in the rays as she tried to push the encounter with Rickman aside. She failed miserably. *Might as well get back to work*, she thought as she glanced around

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wondering where everyone had gone. She finally spotted them near the disabled car. When she approached the group she noticed Jericho was on the phone.

Duncan stepped up next to her. “He said he needed to check in with Margie.”

Paige nodded and waited impatiently.

“Let’s hear it,” Jericho turned to her as he disconnected the call.

Paige frowned, her boss was annoyed but time was crucial so she didn’t ask why. “I want a warrant for that car. Do you think Tolman can get one... like now?”

“Why?” Jericho asked.

“So I can go through it thoroughly. I want this guy for the other robberies and this car is our best chance to make that happen,” Paige argued.

“Why now?” Jericho pressed. “James is going to ask why we are in such a hurry when there is a hostage situation going down just a few feet away. He’s going to insist we wait for the Feds and work with them to process the car. Why now?”

“Because if we wait, we’re going to lose it,” Paige explained. “I know these guys. I know Rickman. He can’t wait to take every last shred of evidence out of my grasp and leave us begging for crumbs. If we wait, you will never see this car again. Professional cooperation is a fairytale when it comes to him.”

Jericho raised an eyebrow. “Something you want to share with the group?”

“Let’s just say there’s history... an indirect one. If we don’t do this, we’ll never get the chance.”

Sheriff Walters studied his deputy for several seconds then pulled out his phone and dialed James Tolman. Within minutes he had a promise for a warrant. “Dean, you head over to the courthouse and get a certified copy, in duplicate. I want this kept out of the system until it’s finalized.”

Dean smiled and headed for his unit. Sometimes living in a small town had its perks. By the time the Freakin’ Bureau of Impertinence discovered what they were up to, it would be too late to stop it. His boss had just ensured they won round two.

Twenty minutes later, Paige was underneath the car scraping weeds, dirt and debris from the undercarriage. When she heard Rickman’s voice, she ignored him.

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“Agent Carter,” Rickman said a little louder. “I demand to know what you are doing under there.”

Paige slid the material into an evidence bag and pushed her body completely under the vehicle.

“Sheriff Walters,” Rickman sounded relieved. Paige smiled when she spotted the sheriff’s distinct set of cowboy boots. “Your employee is even more insubordinate, disrespectful and downright unprofessional than she was when she worked for us. Would you please take care of this?”

“What might that be?” Walters asked coolly.

“She is tampering with evidence and I must insist she cease and desist immediately.”

“Come again?” Walters narrowed his eyes at a man he was coming to despise.

“This car,” Rickman flailed his hand toward the vehicle. “It’s evidence. I need it preserved. My case just might depend on it. I have already made arrangements for a federal truck to respond to pick it up.”

“Then I’d say you have a serious problem,” Walters said calmly.

“I don’t understand,” Rickman pressed, sighed then continued as if he were addressing a child that was misbehaving. “Let me be as clear as I possibly can. This is federal evidence, a truck is on the way to remove it from this parking lot. If your employee does not come out from under the car immediately, I will have no choice but to arrest her for obstruction of justice and tampering with evidence.”

A local tow truck pulled into the lot and parked directly behind the car in question. Frank Hopkins jumped from the truck and approached the group. “This the one, sheriff?”

“That’s it,” Jericho grinned. “Take it to the lot we discussed and keep the location to yourself.”

“Exactly what do you think you are doing, Sheriff?” Rickman moved to block Frank’s path.

Paige slid from beneath the car and gave Jericho a nod, then quietly retreated to her vehicle. Once the bags were locked securely inside, she returned just in time to see her boss casually present SAC Rickman with their warrant. Frank latched onto the car and was pulling away before Rickman exploded. Paige cautiously approached the duo. “I hate to interrupt but Sheriff, can I borrow Gage for an hour or so?”

Walters studied Paige then nodded.

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“Wait just a minute missy,” Rickman took two steps and was in her face before she realized what he was doing.

Paige didn't back down. “That's Deputy Carter.”

“One of my Agents will be joining you,” he motioned for Sean. “He reports to me and you better believe he's going to tell me if you find anything. Don't think you'll have the time to pull another stunt like this one.” He began shaking the pages the warrant was printed on.

“If you say so,” Paige turned and headed for her car.

“I'm not sure kicking the dragon is your best course of action right now,” Sean whispered when he caught up to her. “Rickman is pissed. What did you guys do?”

“Took away his toy,” Paige opened her door. “You driving or riding?”

Sean considered. “Driving. I'll follow you.”

“Gage,” Paige called. “Boss says you're with me.”

Gage slid into the passenger's seat and studied his friend. “Where we going? The guy still has two women in there.”

“Rickman is pulling rank. The feds are in charge of bank robberies so Jer is giving it to them. We are investigating your two open armed robbery cases,” Paige supplied as she pulled onto the highway and headed south.

“I don't like putting Bethany and Gracie's lives in their hands. You sure they can handle this?” Gage pressed.

“Gage,” Paige glanced his way then focused on the road ahead. “Rickman is a control freak. He's arrogant, condescending and likes to flex his muscles. Back there, he'll relegate us to rubberneckers. Out here, we're doing something and I think I know where Copley was staying all this time.”

“What? How?”

“From the car,” Paige shrugged. “It's what I do. You know that. And I might be new around here but there is only one place I can think of where we can find brown trout, domestic grass, sand, charcoal and cedar with a little sagebrush and quacking aspen thrown in for good measure.”

“And a cozy place to stay without suspicion,” Gage grinned. “You got all that from the bottom of a car?”

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“Yeah,” Paige floored it abruptly. Gage grabbed the dash, Sean honked as he was left in her dust. Paige laughed and continued on.

The two deputies had driven the entire area of Palisades State Reservoir and had started on the outlying area by the time Sean caught up to them. Paige pulled down a rough, dirt road that led off into the trees. When she spotted the abandoned trailer, she knew she had her site. Now, how to deal with Sean. She would never ask him to do anything that would get him into trouble with his boss. But calling Rickman meant turning over the evidence. There was no doubt he’d done this on purpose. But his arrogance may just be his downfall.

“Funny, Paige,” Sean grumbled. “You trying to get me fired?”

Paige shrugged. “I’m sure Jericho would hire you.”

“Not the point,” he marched passed her without another word.

Gage watched the two friends, worried this case would damage their friendship.

“Don’t worry big man,” Paige moved forward, in the opposite direction from Sean. “He’s a forgiving guy and I had to make him mad. Now, we get to work.”

“You did that on purpose?” Gage wondered if she’d ever done something like that to him.

“I needed a good look at these tracks before Sean noticed them,” Paige crouched to study the imprint. “Sports car of some kind. Lightweight. Blue.”

Gage snorted.

Sean grinned. Paige had done it again. “Never underestimate our girl here, Gage.”

Paige stood. “Now what?”

“Now, I call Rickman and tell him we believe we’ve located the guy’s hideout, Sean provided. “He told me if you find a car, a house, any property whatsoever... he wants to know about it. So, I’ll tell him.”

“Sean,” Paige warned. “You know when he finds out I have another lead and you didn’t mention it... he’s going to blame you.”

“Oh contraire my dear,” Sean grinned. “Because I’m going to tell him. I am going to give him a choice. You always did underestimate me. Why I claim you as a friend, I’ll never understand.”

Paige laughed. She didn’t underestimate Sean. He was just always two steps ahead of everyone, including her.

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“Sir,” Sean said into the phone. “We located a trailer and believe it’s where Copley was staying. Here’s the thing, the locals are heading deeper into the woods to.... well, if you ask me it’s a long shot but there’s another set of tires. Carter wants to see if she can find the car. You want me to stay here, wait for a warrant or follow her around the wilderness?” Sean’s smiled widened. “Got it. I’ll watch for them.” He disconnected and laughed. “Rickman says you never did have any sense and I should stay here and wait for the additional manpower he’s requested to get here and help me. They’ll bring in a federal warrant but they’re coming by air. You’re not going to have much time I’m afraid. Fly away my free bird... make me proud.” He fluttered his hand towards the side of the house.

“You are brilliant,” Paige said as she gave her friend a quick hug then darted for her vehicle.

Gage slid onto the passenger’s seat and waited for Paige to pull away. “Are we really looking for another car?”

“Yes,” Paige said as she pulled onto the dirt road that headed south. “We’re looking for a blue Firebird.”

“How do you know that?” Gage asked, perplexed.

“Because, Sean just told me,” Paige answered. “I told you it was a sports car and blue, Sean told me it was a Firebird. When it comes to cars and tire tracks, there’s nobody better. Trust me, we are looking for a royal blue Firebird.”

“There is no way you could possibly know that,” Gage argued.

“Care for a little wager?” Paige challenged. “If I’m right, you take Sean and me out for a nice hot meal. If I’m wrong, I’ll take you and the guest of your choice out... wherever you want. Dinner on me.”

Gage considered, was it a bad bet? He didn’t think so. “You’re on.” His phone rang and he immediately answered. “Sir?” “Is she okay?” “Right.” “I’ll call as soon as we know something.”

The minute he hung up, Paige demanded answers.

“Gracie’s out, they talked the perp into releasing her for a hot pizza. She was shot and lost a lot of blood but she’ll make it. The bullet went in through her upper shoulder from the front and exited her triceps in the back.”

“And Bethany?” Paige pressed.

“Still inside,” Gage said worried. “The guy’s acting a little crazy. Says he won’t be taken alive and refuses to release his last hostage. I’m worried, she’s just a kid.”

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“I know,” Paige frowned. “But one good thing about having Rickman here... he brought Messer with him. Corey is the best negotiator the Bureau has. He’s Bethany’s best hope. I have faith in him. And you may not have noticed, but Agent Fenner is positioned on the rooftop across the street. Dillon’s a marksman, competes year round and usually wins the gold. If anything goes down, he’s fast Gage. It’s bad, but Bethany is in good hands. I wouldn’t have left if I didn’t believe that.”

“Okay,” Gage turned to study the tree line. “Blue car. You do know this is like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Not quite,” Paige disagreed. “Royal blue is going to stand out. And... if he drove the car out here he couldn’t have gone far. He’s been acting alone. I doubt he’d trust anyone enough to hitch a ride back. We have a narrow field of possibilities but not nearly enough time to search them out as thoroughly as I would like. You’re from here. Where would he hide a car for a quick getaway? He’s going to be coming from the bank, in a hot car. Possibly cops on his tail, although he probably believed he’d get away with this and have the time for a switch. So far, he hasn’t shown much by way of an alternate plan. Where would you park the car so it’s close to the highway, but not too close, and within walking distance of the trailer?”

Gage considered. “Turn up there, to the right.”

Paige turned.

“Okay, there’s a road that butts up against that wilderness region and leads you directly out to 89. If it were me, I’d hide the car somewhere in the trees just before the bend... near that farm up ahead.”

“Bingo!” Paige said triumphantly. “Gage you are brilliant.”

“And that’s a royal blue Firebird.” Gage mumbled under his breath. He pulled out his phone and dialed the sheriff.

“Tell him we need a warrant to print the outside of the car,” Paige called as she pulled out her phone.

“Tell me you got it,” Sean said in answer.

“I found it,” Paige responded. “Can you do me a favor?”

“I can try. The boys just arrived with a warrant to search the residence. For now, they’re inside. How can I help?” Sean asked.

“I snagged that rusty piece of metal with the blue paint on it and I’ve compared the two. It’s a match. For the warrant, I’m going to need the old tires preserved and that emblem you spotted and pointed out with your whole free bird flight hand signal.”

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“The tires... easy,” Sean agreed. “No problem on that one. The emblem? That might be tricky. Any chance you can leave Gage to secure the scene while you head back and collect the evidence yourself? I’ll keep an eye on it, and can even testify I saw it but if this goes to court and there’s a chain of custody issue... well, that could get me in hot water with the new boss.”

“Right,” Paige considered. “Okay, I’ll be back. Don’t let your goons mess with my evidence.” When she hung up, she realized Gage was scowling.

“What?” she tried to sound innocent.

“An emblem?” he said soberly. “I hope you don’t think you’re collecting on this whole sneaky bet thing. You lied, the bets off.”

“Sore loser,” Paige accused. “I have to go back, grab and bag it. Did you relay everything to Jericho? We’re going to need that warrant before the feds realize we’re two steps ahead of them. If I can pull prints and get a match with Copley another warrant’s a slam dunk. We can wait and go through both cars at the same time.”

“He’s on it,” Gage pulled out a folding chair from the back seat of Paige’s unit. “I’ll be waiting in the shade, hurry. I also told Walters to send Frank out. He just dumped the other car so he’s on his way. Best you get back before he arrives. You know Frank doesn’t have a lick of patience.”

Paige returned to the trailer, bagged the evidence and convinced one of the feds to secure the old tires for her. He claimed he wasn’t afraid of Rickman and wasn’t worried about retaliation. Paige hoped he was right because she knew Rickman and his buddy Todd Gray were the most vindictive people she’d ever met. She also knew the hostility Rickman was displaying had to do with Carmen’s untimely escape from Gray’s control. They both blamed Paige for that move. Gray was still furious and had done his best to undo the transfer. Too bad he was trying to undermine one of the most powerful ex-generals in Washington.

When Paige pulled up, she spotted Gage circling the vehicle. He looked up when she approached. “We got the warrant. Judge Potter granted as much as he could. If we find prints, we’ve got the rest.”

“Great,” Paige started for her car then stopped. “Anything further on the hostage deal at the bank?”

“Not yet,” Gage sighed. “I was thinking, he probably believes this one is safe. I mean, I ran the plates and they match with the VIN. Comes back to a Benjamin Trevino. The guy’s doing life for killing a prostitute. But nobody reported it missing. I figure it could be a friend of Copley’s. When he got out, he paid the registration fee and had himself a clean, easy ride.”

“Could be,” Paige agreed. “So...?”

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“So, he probably didn’t wipe it,” Gage provided. “There could be prints all over this thing. Door, trunk, even tires. They’re new by the way, probably bought them with the money he stole from the stations.”

“I’ll grab my kit and we’ll see if you’re right,” Paige rushed to her car and back, ready to find a surface with a print.

“Try the trunk first,” Gage prompted. “Come here, look at this. I think it’s a print. Makes sense, though right. I mean he probably stashed his clothes and stuff in the trunk and slammed it shut.”

“Good eye,” Paige smiled. “I think maybe we just might have SOB.”

“Hey, Margie,” Paige said in greeting. “I just sent you some prints, can you call the lab and see if they can do a quick comparison for me? Tell them I need to know if they match the previous prints on Vito Copley. Thanks, I owe you one.”

Paige looked up just in time to see Frank pull off Highway 89 at the same time a large cloud of dust billowed in the distance. She was running out of time. “Come on Margie, I need you on this one.”

“I’ll deal with Frank,” Gage offered. “Him, I can stall.” He glanced knowingly at the cloud that was getting closer.

Paige kicked her tire and cursed just as her phone rang. “Margie?”

“It’s a match,” Margie told her. “I sent the findings over to Judge Potter. He’s signing a new warrant as we speak. If you hear a ding... that’s your eWarrant giving you the authority to seize the vehicle and search it thoroughly inside and out.”

“You’re an amazing woman,” Paige did a little dance when her phone pinged. “And I think that’s my warrant. Do me a favor and notify Jericho. I have company to deal with and a car to impound.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Margie assured her. “Call Jericho if it gets ugly. He’s had about all he can take of that Special Agent in Charge out there. Are all SAC’s that arrogant and pigheaded or just him?”

“Just a few,” Paige admitted. “Gotta go.” The instant she hung up, she skimmed the warrant and gave Gage the thumbs up. Then, she strolled to the new arrivals, ready for a fight.

Sean climbed from the vehicle and approached Paige. “Situation is over at the bank.”

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“What happened?” Paige asked, knowing something was wrong.

“Turd used the girl as a human shield and started shooting,” Sean ran his hand through his hair. “She took a bullet. Dillon thought he had a clean shot, but the guy ducked and jerked the girl to the side. The bullet went through her side and lodged in his stomach. She’s in surgery with a collapsed lung. Copley’s in surgery but expected to live.”

“Shit,” Paige closed her eyes and leaned against the hood of the vehicle. “I know it’s always a possibility but Bethany is so young. She’s been applying to colleges, hoping to make something of herself.”

“She’s like you,” Sean supplied. “Gung-ho to get out of Dodge and expand her horizon.”

“Exactly,” Paige brushed away a tear. She banked there. Talked to Bethany nearly every week. The girl was a little shy, stifled by her mother’s constant nagging but a really good, smart, happy kid.

“Sorry,” Sean pulled her in for a hug.

“I’m fine,” Paige sighed. “Now, I was able to get a warrant for the car. Gage found prints on the trunk. It’s a match. The court just sent me the warrant. Frank’s gonna hook it and I’ll go through both cars tomorrow.”

“We’ve got him on the bank robbery hands down,” Sean watched as Frank secured the Firebird and moved forward to speak with Gage. “Let’s finish up here and let the attorney’s fight it out.”

“Gage owes us dinner, but I’m afraid he thinks we cheated. He probably won’t pay up.” Paige teased as her coworker and friend joined them.

“You did cheat,” Gage insisted. “You withheld valuable information pertinent to the case.”

“Then I’ll buy,” Sean offered. “I’m starved and I was the one that concealed a very small portion of the truth. Sorry man, old habit.”

“So the two of you have done this before,” Gage asked, shaking his head.

“All the time,” they said in unison then burst out laughing.

It was late when Paige finally got home. The case was closed. Vito Copley was in jail. Gracie was recovering at home with family. Bethany was out of surgery but still not out of the woods. At least she’d made it through so far, Paige hoped the girl was strong enough to make a

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full recovery. Physical healing was only the first hurdle. Emotionally, the girl had been through a rough few hours and that was going to take time. Dillon Fenner was also struggling. He was good, one of the best... and he'd shot an innocent today. That wound was going to haunt him for a very long time. Paige wasn't sure it would ever get over it completely. She glanced at her neighbor's house and was surprised to see him strolling across the front lawn.

"Hey neighbor," Dax smiled. "Another long day, huh?"

"You know," Paige said as she pushed open her door. "I moved to Manti for a slower paced, easy going, neighborly experience. This job is turning out to be exhausting."

Dax shut the door behind him and turned to look at Paige. "Can I help? I mean you work hard all day and well into the night sometimes then you head home and immediately pull out that file on your mom. Can I help with that? Do something to give you a little down time?"

"Let me think about it," she said as she dropped onto the couch and pulled off her boots. She handed him a notepad with a list of names on it. "I've been trying to think of anyone and everyone that could possibly be that mysterious "J" my mom was writing to. I think he might be able to help but so far, none of those names seem likely."

Dax settled into the chair across from hers and considered his words very carefully. "How did you decide who made the list and who didn't?"

"What do you mean?" Paige asked, settling back. "If your name has the letter J, you make the list."

"Not true," Dax disagreed. "Judge Potter's not on there. Keith Judd's not on there, Jericho's not on there."

Paige frowned. "I hadn't considered Steven Potter but when you throw in Judge, maybe I should." She held her hand out motioning for her list back. Once she jotted down the name, she considered. "Keith Judd, was he around when mom was killed? I can't remember. For some reason, I thought he was in Africa on one of his hunting safaris. And as far as Jericho goes, well that's just... I don't know, it's not possible is it?"

"Why not?" Dax countered. "If you're going to make a list, make a list. Include both Keith and Walters. Then you can start eliminating them one by one. If you want to clear your boss, start with him."

Paige focused out the window, considering. Could Jericho be the mysterious man her mother was in love with? But if so, why would he have moved heaven and earth to find her killer and demand justice? She'd have to think about that one. "Anyway," Paige turned back to Dax. "What brought you out so late anyway?"

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“Oh,” Dax cringed. “Well, Nathan called earlier. He and Sophie are definitely coming for Thanksgiving dinner. He said they would arrive on Tuesday and fly back home on Saturday.”

“That doesn’t give me enough time to get the spare bedroom prepared, or furnished. What am I going to do? The room only has that full sized bed. It was fine for Nathan but not both of them.”

“Relax,” Dax said moving to sit next to her. “I told Nathan to plan on staying with me. My guest room is finished and it has a nice queen size bed and everything. It’s just next door and Nathan will be up before both of us. He can relax at my house until you wake up, besides you’re working Tuesday and part of the day on Wednesday. I’m happy to entertain and you can pay me back in other ways.” He leaned over and gently kissed her lips, then the top of her head as he stood. “Now, I have an early day and you have had a rough night. I’ll grab breakfast and should get back around.... maybe eight?”

“Sounds good,” Paige stood. “Thank you, Dax. Once again, you’ve saved the day.” She watched as her neighbor...? Friend? She didn’t know what Dax was right now but he was here and for now, that was enough. She’d meant to ask him about his friends, but she probably wouldn’t get an answer anyway. Dax Hamilton was now entering the world of Nathan Porter. The job would bring the two of them closer together. She just wondered if it would tear the two of them apart. With a sigh, she headed up the stairs, pondering Dax’s casual suggestion. Obviously, he hadn’t ruled Jericho out. Why had she?