

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Bad Blood ***Season 2, Episode 1***

by:

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Matt Sutton turned to his twin and smiled. He was in the mood for a little fun. “Lookie here.”

Mark looked up from his phone, then glanced around. He too smiled at their good fortune. David Newton, their neighbor and nemesis, was heading to the upper field... alone. “What you wanna do?”

“Let’s get his attention,” Matt stomped on the gas and closed the distance between them. He let up just in time to bump the old Chevy truck then backed off.

David frowned, looked in the rearview mirror and knew he was in trouble. The Sutton brothers were bad news on most days but today they were itching for a fight. One David didn’t have time for. If he pulled over, out here alone, he just might get his butt kicked into next week. If he took off, he might be able to out drive them. It took about half a second to make his decision. He stomped on the gas, flipping dust and gravel in his wake.

Matt and Mark accepted the challenge and followed.

David was driving beyond his skills and he knew it. He took a corner too fast, nearly lost control but pulled out of the slide just in time. He had to slow down but if he did, the crazy twins might force him over the embankment. They were obviously in that kind of mood and he wasn’t entirely sure they’d come to their senses before he ended up dead. No, he didn’t have a choice. It was pedal to the metal or disaster. With any luck, the Sutton’s would crash before he did.

Matt let out an excited whoop as he took another corner and bounced over a series of ruts. He hadn’t had this much fun since... well, probably ever. His brother was grinning from ear to ear... laughing and yelling as they gained on their rival.

David glanced in the mirror and knew what he had to do. They were headed for the S-curve and he had to risk taking the winding section at full speed. He knew he’d probably roll, total his truck and maybe break his neck but he didn’t think he had a choice. If he stopped, the amped up twins would pummel him for sure. Die in a crash, or die from a beating... probably sixes and at least he’d die trying. He took the first turn and his back end started to slide. He let off the gas and the tires caught just before he made the last turn headed for the long, straight stretch of road that led into the back hills. He let out a relieved breath as he glanced in the mirror and realized he’d lost them. Had they crashed? Should he stop? No, it was probably a trick... a ploy to get him to stop so they didn’t have to chase him any longer. He wasn’t going to bite.

Matt took the first turn and realized he’d lost control of the truck. He tried to pull out of it but he was already at the second curve and his truck was sliding the wrong way. “Hold on,” he called as the vehicle left the road and broke through a large bush, over a rock and bounced off

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something... he had no idea what. Finally, he had control again. He punched the gas and rolled over a six-inch ledge before landing back on the dirt road. "What'd we hit?"

Mark glanced back and laughed. "I think it was that tree trunk."

"Should we stop and check it out?"

"Nah," Mark decided. "What's the worst that could happen? We dropped a muffler? I don't see anything and we can stop on the way back if we need to. See if we can catch up."

Matt punched it, but slowed the minute they reached the straight away. David had disappeared. "He could be anywhere."

"Let's check out a couple side roads. If we don't see him, we'll head back," Mark suggested.

Thirty minutes later the twins gave up. David Newton was gone for good and they had horses to feed. "That was fun," Matt said in defeat. "At least we got a good laugh out of it. We'll catch him next time." They headed home, laughing and joking all the way.

Noah gazed through his binoculars and wondered why the trucks were traveling so fast. He turned to gaze in the opposite direction. He couldn't see smoke, so no fire. Maybe something had happened to one of their horses or a cow or something. He pushed his body further into the bushes to get a better view and watched as two trucks sped, nearly out of control toward him. He was starting to get excited. Maybe he'd get a glimpse of his father as he sped by. Unfortunately, he'd never know. He had a name, but his mother hadn't kept any pictures of the man she'd run from. He knew next to nothing about Robert Sutton but he was anxious to learn. He moved forward, hoping to get a better look and realized the trucks were close, too close.

Noah realized he was in trouble but it was too late to do anything about it. The second truck was out of control. He turned just as the first truck sped by, hoping to scramble out of the way but it was no use. The vehicle plowed through the bushes, catapulting his mangled body several feet into the forest. He thought they'd stop, see if he was alright but they didn't. He slowly lifted his head and spotted two teenagers laughing in the cab of the old Ford before it disappeared around the bend. Pain radiated through his torso but he did his best to ignore it. If he could make it to his car, he might be able to drive himself to the hospital. He had to try.

It felt like a lifetime later, Noah forced his body forward through sheer willpower and desperation. He could hear cars passing by and knew he was close. Just a little further. After what seemed like forever, he finally emerged from the forest and fell forward onto the gravel shoulder. Despair engulfed him as he realized he was nowhere near his car. His last thought was of his mother before his world went black.

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One month later...

Paige snatched up the empty coffee mug and headed for the kitchen. It was nearly three in the afternoon but it felt like morning to her. She'd been working graveyards this week to cover for Dean, who was recovering from an emergency appendectomy. Starting today, her schedule was supposed to return to normal, but she was dragging. She had to get a move-on or she was going to be late for work. A smile spread across her face as she ascended the stairs. If she were late Jericho would have to discipline her, which would require an actual conversation. It might be worth it. The man had barely spoken two words to her since he'd returned from his unscheduled "vacation". She stepped into the shower and for the hundredth time tried to come up with a strategy to get the man alone... one that didn't require disciplinary action.

Thirty minutes later, Paige was still contemplating her dilemma as she buckled her duty belt and slipped into her light-weight jacket. She paused to take one last look around then started for the door. She was halfway across the room when her phone began to chime. Paige pivoted in place and stared at the offending object as she debated - *Answer or ignore?* She turned around, took two steps toward the front door then changed her mind again and darted for the kitchen; answering with a breathless *hello*, just before it switched to voicemail.

"It's Margie," a no-nonsense voice came over the line. "I'm glad I caught you before you left. Gage is out at the Newton ranch and he needs your help."

"Are you kidding me? Again?" Paige said in irritation. She was a little shocked Gage had requested her – he was pretty much avoiding her these days. Apparently, childhood friendship didn't count for much when you offended his boss. "I'm on my way but mark my words if those idiots so much as spit in the dirt this time... they're all spending a night behind bars. I've had more than enough from the Newton's and the Sutton's. Some ancient disagreement from 1901 is not a valid excuse for acting like four-year-olds."

"I'll tell Gage you're on your way," Margie ignored the rant.

"Tell him I'll be there in ten," Paige grumbled. Margie was another friend she seemed to have lost after her unfiltered outburst nearly three months ago. A mistake that had sent the Sheriff into oblivion for nearly three weeks. Once he returned, she'd tried... many times, to get him alone and apologize. Unfortunately, the good sheriff had other ideas. The more she sought him out, the more distant he became. He was professional but unapproachable. The last two months had been torture and it was causing problems throughout their tiny department. The guys were taking sides. Gage, Margie and Dean were on "Team Sheriff" and giving her the cold shoulder. They'd back her when necessary, tell her what she absolutely needed to know, but beyond that... nothing. She was basically invisible to the entire lot. Duncan Havilland made it clear he was in her corner; which made things even worse between the part-time deputy and her

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colleagues. She missed the old days when everyone got along... for the most part. Worse, she knew she was the one responsible for the rift.

Eleven minutes later, Paige pulled onto the long dirt road that led to the Newton compound. The place was huge. As the kids grew up, got married and started having families of their own, they never moved away. They simply scouted out a few acres, designed their dream home and settled on the family plot. She couldn't blame them, it was beautiful out here and the clan owned over two thousand acres. They were located several miles outside of town and for the most part never got bothered by the tourists or the locals. The setup would have been ideal if not for the ridiculous feud between the Newton family and their closest neighbors.

The last time Paige responded out here, Charles Sutton had accused David Newton of animal cruelty. He wanted the kid arrested immediately. When Paige pointed out David was on his property and the Sutton pet was running at large, the obstinate man threatened to handle things internally... whatever that meant. Of course, the Newton's accepted the challenge and things went downhill from there. Paige nearly arrested two of the jokers for trying to incite a riot. She would have if Gage hadn't stepped in and separated the bunch. He'd been nearly as frustrated with her as he was with the out-of-control neighbors. Just another reason she was shocked he had requested her on this detail. The former football star turned lawman had informed her, in no uncertain terms, he could handle all future calls involving the two families alone.

Paige pulled up to the main house and looked around. Gage was nowhere to be seen. She'd have to use the radio. "Gage?" No answer. "Hey, Gage. I've arrived but I need your twenty." Silence.

Finally, Margie came over the radio. "Gage's last known location was out at Jasper's place. I can't reach him, either. Can you let him know medical is on the way, but ETA is at least twenty minutes? They just cleared a rollover up Ephraim Canyon."

Paige frowned. Medical? "I'll head over and see if I can find him. Anything further?"

"That's all I know," Margie signed off.

Paige wondered if that were true. Since the thing with the sheriff, Margie had only provided the basics no matter what kind of call Paige was responding to. She worried, a little, that one of these days she would walk into a situation that could have been avoided, but at the moment she didn't know how to fix it. Better to just deal with it until she came up with a good plan.

Paige flipped around and took the main dirt road that led further onto the property. This section of the road was shared by the Suttons on one side, the Newtons on the other. It connected each of the homes to the main highway. Basically, each family had built their own

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subdivision on their land but forgot to designate addresses. Within minutes, she was pulling into the long driveway that led to Jasper and Emma Newton's place. The closer she got to the large home, the deeper her frown. She still couldn't see Gage's vehicle... or Gage. She was just about to contact Margie again when a teenage girl came running toward her. Paige stepped from her vehicle and waited. It didn't take long.

"They're down here," Tanya Newton, a girl of about fifteen, told Paige. "The cop said to stand watch and bring you down immediately."

Paige frowned. She had no idea what she was walking into, which made it impossible to know what to bring. She reached into the backseat and pulled out her forensics bag. She was about to follow the girl into the trees when she remembered Margie mentioned medical. She rushed back to her truck and yanked out another medium sized red bag with a large sturdy strap, and flung it over her shoulder. Hopefully, Gage already had his First Aid kit, but she wasn't going to take anything for granted.

Moments later, Paige and Tanya were pushing their way through thick brush. Twice she almost lost the girl in the foliage. "What's your name?"

"Tanya," the girl called back over her shoulder. "I belong to Benny and Ellie."

Paige paused. "Oh, uh... you're not luring me into the backwoods to shoot me are you? I know your dad wasn't too happy the last time I was here."

Tanya laughed. "No, ma'am. Nothing like that. This is rough going for a few more minutes but it's the easiest way to get to James. That big cop said he was going to rig something to hoist him up the ledge, but he needs help before he can do it."

Paige was filtering through Newton's in her mind, trying to remember who James was. "James is Jasper's oldest?"

"Sure is," Tanya confirmed. "He looks real bad, too."

Paige didn't like the sound of that. "Do you know what happened?"

"Daddy said one of the no-good Suttons hit him with a car then forced him over the edge."

"Was your daddy there when it happened?"

"No... Not exactly," Tanya admitted.

"What does that mean?" Paige pressed. "I know your family and the Sutton's are enemies but did anyone see a Sutton vehicle hit James?"

"No," Tanya said, deflated. "He was alone when it happened. But we all know who done it. Bobby Anderson, his mom's a Sutton... Eileen. Anyway, Bobby was picking on James and

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punched him in the stomach. James turned to try to get away and hit Bobby in the face with his elbow. Bobby's nose gushed like Old Faithful but then Ms. Jenkins came out and said James had to talk to the Vice Principal. We usually walk home together but I couldn't wait on account of BettyLou."

Paige was doing her best to keep up, but she had no earthly idea who Tanya was referring to. "That's BettyLou....?"

Tanya burst out laughing. "Betty's our cow. She's all set to have her baby and last time the calf got stuck, right there - half way in, half way out. Daddy put me in charge just in case we had a repeat. I had to get home to check on Betty so I couldn't wait for James, but he said it wouldn't be long, anyway."

Paige reached out to shove another thick clump of brush to the side and realized they'd finally reached the clearing. She stepped forward, still surrounded by large oak trees and fallen logs, but a few yards out she spotted Gage and a small group of what appeared to be Newton's. There was something on the ground among the wild grass, next to the running creek and Paige assumed it was James. She hoped he wasn't dead.

"How can I help?" she asked the instant she reached the group. Gage was the biggest man there and easy to spot from a distance. She dropped to her knees to assess the situation.

"Did you bring medical?" Gage asked.

"They're on their way, but they had a rollover up Ephraim and it's going to take them a bit to get here. We can't make them traipse through those bushes, they'd never make it with a stretcher. Do you want me to figure out a system to get him back up to the road?"

"No," Gage looked at Paige. "I'll take care of that. Did you bring anything with you?"

"My First Aid kit and my Forensic bag," she reached around and grabbed both of them, pulling them forward until they were situated at her side. "What do you need?"

"I finally got him breathing again. He was face down in the creek when we found him. But he could still have water in his lungs and since he's unconscious, we're going to have to turn him sideways and try to clear it ourselves. If he has neck or back injuries, I don't want to make them worse."

Paige reached into her bag and pulled out a neck brace. She pushed it under the teen's neck and had it secured in mere seconds. She was still rummaging through her pack, looking for a way to stabilize his spine without a stretcher when a large shadow engulfed them. Paige looked up into the cold eyes of Benny Newton. He looked dangerous, looming over them like a giant on the warpath. Paige was about to speak when he swung a large panel of wood around and shoved it forcefully into the ground." Paige's mind was filled with blood, gore and shiny hooks where

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hands should be. She swallowed hard, barely holding back her frightened scream. *Just stay calm, she told herself. Sure, that's gonna happen. I'm living a real life horror flick in Technicolor with Farmer Creepy as the lead.*

Gage glanced up, saw Paige's face and focused on Benny. "Thanks, Ben. I think that will work perfectly."

Paige's thoughts shifted and everything finally clicked. She understood what Gage was saying, they weren't going to die. Benny had found the large plank board to use as a back brace to prevent injury. Now, she just needed a way to secure it to James. She was impatiently digging around in her bag for a strap when Benny dropped some rough, frayed yellow rope on her head. Paige brushed it away with one arm, irritated at the interruption, while she continued to search through her bag with the other. *Finally!* Her fingers hit what had to be the tightly wound roll of flat, one-inch strap she'd been seeking. She yanked it out triumphantly and held it toward Gage. Now they just needed to find a flat surface for the board and load up James.

It was nearly an hour later when they finally got James secured, hoisted to the upper road, and loaded into the back of an ambulance. The two deputies stood silently as the vehicle pulled away, kicking dust in its wake as it sped toward the highway, lights flashing... siren blaring. Paige briefly wondered who the driver thought was going to get in the way out here, in the middle of nowhere, on a dirt road. She sighed and tried to settle her emotions. If they were lucky, the kid would survive. Unlucky, they'd be dealing with a homicide. Now came the hard part, she had to find evidence that would tell them what happened.

Paige turned to address Gage. "We need to clear the area so I can look for evidence. That message will not be popular and it might be received a little better if it comes from you. Think you can handle the family while I start my search?"

Gage studied his partner thankful she'd been here to help. He could never have saved James without her and he realized just how much he missed her. They were a good team and her feud with Jericho had disrupted that. He turned to study the faces of the Newton's. Some were clearly worried, most were angry. They were so sure they knew who had done this and no amount of persuasion was going to convince them otherwise. That's what happened when you let things fester and grow. People took sides, friends became enemies and so much more than friendship got lost in the crossfire. "Thanks for your help."

Paige turned, confused. "You thought I'd leave you hanging just because you're mad at me? This is my job, Gage. I do my job and there's nothing that you, or Sheriff Walters, could do to change that." She started to turn but Gage caught her arm.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "I know that doesn't change anything, but I'm sorry. When I got here and saw how bad it was, I knew the only one that could help was you. Even then, I had Margie make the call. I couldn't bring myself to do it on my own. Then you arrived and

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jumped in immediately, no questions or complaints. We got that kid to safety and it was just like the old days. I guess that's when it hit the hardest, it made me sad, what we've lost. I miss you, Paige. I miss working together, solving mysteries together, locking up the bad guys together. We've been friends for a long time and I don't want this thing between you and our boss to change that."

"I'm still your friend, Gage."

"And I'm yours. I really am sorry. I've been angry and worried and you were an easy target," Gage pulled her into a big bear hug. "Look around," Gage whispered softly. "They are so cold and furious. They don't care about facts, they've already made up their mind. The final straw was looking at them and realizing I don't want to become them, ever."

Paige sighed as she took a step back. "They have made up their mind and that worries me. You know how this group is when it comes to retaliation. What will they do to get revenge on the person they think ran down their kid, knowing he nearly drowned - unconscious in a cold river?"

"It could get bad," Gage agreed. "I'll go talk to them. You see what you can find."

The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon talking down the family then scouring the area for clues. They didn't leave until night fell and Paige realized she didn't have a flashlight. "I think that's the best I can do for now. Any chance you might give me a lift back to my truck? It was hard enough bushwhacking through those things in the daytime."

"You got it," Gage agreed. "Climb in, it's a bit of a drive back to Jasper's."

The two of them rode in silence for several minutes. Paige was staring out her side window, wondering if any of the small clues she'd retrieved would help them figure out the mystery and catch the person that tried to kill James Newton.

"They said they wouldn't do anything, not until we had a couple days to confirm the Sutton's are responsible. That's the best I could get and two days doesn't buy us much time," Gage said soberly.

"No," Paige considered. "But we have a piece of a taillight. I might know someone that can tell us what kind of cars had that particular headlight and what years they were produced."

"It's a longshot at best," Gage argued.

"It's the only shot we have so I'll take it," Paige reached between the door and the seat, pressing buttons. "Who's been riding in my chair, big man? I had the setting perfect before..." she trailed off, not wanting to bring that topic up again.

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“Is it going to be weird between us now?” Gage asked. “Because I want my old friend back, the one I could talk to about anything.”

“Not weird,” Paige decided. “Just don’t let Dean mess with my comfort and we’re fine.”

Gage grinned as he pulled into Jasper Newton’s driveway. He waited as Paige retrieved her bags, start her vehicle and headed toward the highway. It was late, he was starving and Jericho was going to owe them both overtime, but life was finally good again. He and Paige had called a truce, one he was determined to maintain until the problems blew over with the sheriff. And James had made it out of surgery. With any luck, the kid would survive.

Paige pulled the blanket over her face, moaned loudly and slowly reached one arm toward the nightstand. *Why oh, why, had she decided to get up early this morning?* After several seconds of blind fumbling, she finally found the correct button. The loud *beep, beep* of the alarm silenced immediately and her room was eerily silent. Paige considered her options. She could get up as planned or bag the whole *Corner Jericho* plan and snag another hour of shut-eye.

Sticking to the plan won by less than an inch. She shoved the covers away, slid into a sitting position and stretched. Every muscle in her body ached from the constant bending, crouching and crawling yesterday as she looked for the smallest piece of evidence. Not to mention bushwhacking through a jungle on her way to the scene. Paige was smiling as she stood and made her way to the shower. Her life might be challenging these days but it still beat living in the city, dealing with self-righteous bureaucrats. Now, if only she could get out of the doghouse, life would be perfect.

The station was empty and dark when Paige stepped through the door. So much for best-laid plans. She flipped on the light and settled behind her desk. Might as well get some work done while she waited for her boss. First thing, try to identify the headlight. Once she was finished with that, she could blow up the photos of the tire tracks and see if the pattern was unique to one size and brand. With a little luck and a lot of work, she might be able to narrow down the vehicle used to strike James. Paige frowned as she waited for her computer to warm up. Who would do something so callous to a young kid like that? Judging from his injuries, James was struck from behind. Most likely, he didn’t even see the vehicle before it veered to the right and struck him with so much force he was catapulted into the creek. There was about a slim to none chance that James even saw the perp before he passed out.

It was nearly two hours later when Gage stepped up to her desk and dropped a sack in front of her face. Paige glanced up and grinned. “Thanks, I’m starved.”

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“I figured that hotshot neighbor of yours is still out of town so you probably skipped breakfast again.”

“I did,” Paige peeled back the wrapper on the breakfast burrito and inhaled the luscious smell of sausage. “I love these,” she said as she shoved the hot concoction into her mouth and took a huge bite.

“I can see that,” Gage grinned and shook his head. “Slow down before you choke on your breakfast. Seriously, you act like you haven’t eaten in days.” Gage frowned. “You did eat yesterday, didn’t you?”

Paige shrugged and tried to remember. She’d forced down a half stale donut with her coffee and was called out to the Newton’s place straight from home. Tanya had brought out some cheese and crackers a few hours after James had been transported. Did that count as lunch? Once she got home, she couldn’t sleep. Her schedule had been knocked completely out of whack. Instead, she got lost in the file from Jericho that pertained to mother’s case. Before she knew it, the clock read midnight. Paige had toasted a couple pieces of bread and called it a night.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Gage said as he settled into his chair. He glanced up when Margie stepped into the room. The instant she realized they were talking, she frowned, snatched up a stack of papers and made her way to the file room.

“I ate...” Paige froze mid-sentence.

Gage looked up and shrugged. “She’ll get over it. Just give her a little more time.”

“Do you know when the sheriff will be in?” Paige asked Gage absently as she studied the doorway expecting Margie any second.

“He took the rest of the week off,” Gage bit off half of his burrito and sipped his orange juice.

“What?” Paige jerked around, surprised by the revelation.

“Don’t worry,” Gage swallowed. “It’s not like last time. He’ll be back on Monday.”

Paige sighed. She should have slept in.

“Is that why you got here so early? You wanted to talk to the boss?” Gage pressed.

“Yeah,” Paige stood and walked to the window. Something had to change. She’d been so sure she could come in early, corner Jericho and work everything out. It was supposed to be the first step in bringing the department back together. Instead, he was gone for another week and

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Margie was mad at Gage... because of her. Apparently getting along with the office pariah was enough to label you a traitor in Margie's book.

Gage moved in behind her. "You okay?"

Paige hesitated, should she tell him what she was planning? She had to. They'd just worked things out, she didn't want that to change again. "I'm going to schedule an appointment with Chief Beckett and see if he has any openings in his department."

"You're what?" Gage barked. "Paige, don't do this. They just need time."

"It's been months," Paige disagreed. "If it was going to blow over, it would have. Havi said he'd put in a good word," Paige added referring to their part-time deputy, Duncan Havilland. He was a regular officer with Laurel Bluffs PD and claimed the Chief liked him.

Margie moved closer to the door so she could hear the conversation better and frowned, she knew Paige was upset and everyone was blaming her for the mess with Jericho but she had no idea they had pushed her that far.

"I need you on this case," Gage countered. "We need you in this department. So, you don't get along with your boss. Millions of Americans can say the same thing. It's not a legitimate reason to bail."

"If it was only Jericho, I'd agree," Paige told him. "But it's not and you know it. Sure, we worked things out, but Dean hasn't forgiven me and from the looks of things he's not going to anytime soon. Even that's not the deciding factor. Margie is."

Margie moved closer to the door the instant she heard her name. Was this her fault? Had her need to protect Jer forced Paige out of a job?

"Don't worry about Margie," Gage shrugged. "If this is about today, it's nothing. I can take it."

Paige sighed. "You shouldn't have to. The act of talking to me shouldn't put you in the doghouse. That's bad enough, but there's more. Yesterday, when she told me to go out and help you... she only gave me the basics. I headed out with no idea which house I was responding to, what the call was, what I would need at the scene. I didn't even know it was a medical call until I arrived and couldn't locate you. She's punishing me and that's fine, but not when it endangers the public. One of these days, not knowing what I'm walking into might put people in serious danger."

"I'll talk to her," Gage offered. "I didn't realize she was doing that and you're right, it's dangerous. I'll talk to her, she'll understand and she'll put her personal feelings aside to get the

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job done right. I know Margie, once she knows, once she realizes the danger, everything will change. There is nothing here that can't be fixed."

"But should it be?"

Gage didn't know how to answer that. If Paige didn't think they were worth the effort, he couldn't change that and maybe she would be happier in Laurel Bluffs. "Promise me you won't do anything until we finish this case. Then if you still feel like you gotta go, I won't stand in your way. I won't like it, but I'll accept it."

Paige considered, this case was a mess and they needed all the help they could get. She had a feeling a civil war between the Newtons and the Suttons was about to erupt and there could be serious casualties. She'd stay, for Gage, she'd stay. "Okay, I guess I can do that. But no stalling, we work the case and once we've done all we can do... I'm heading to the Bluffs to see a man about a job."

"Then let's get to work," the two of them returned to their desks and delved into finding a nondescript headlight in a sea of a thousand cars.

Margie dropped into the chair she always kept in the file room. Paige was right, she'd been putting people in danger. Margie knew James Newton was injured, she knew medical was on the way and Gage was in over his head, but she'd withheld the information. Not on purpose, not for some nefarious reason but because she was being petty and angry. She wasn't speaking to Paige, and that had bled into her job. Thank goodness Paige had put it together and grabbed her medical supplies before venturing through the woods with the friendly teen, but what if she hadn't? Things could have been so much worse and because of her, Paige was leaving. Jericho would be even more upset when he learned this new development. Paige was an asset to their department in so many ways. Now, she was leaving. Not because she was fighting with Jericho, but because Margie had forced her out. She'd made it clear to all the men right from the start, they had to choose sides. Most had chosen Jericho. Was it too late to fix it? She had to try.

Margie was still deep in thought when her phone started ringing. She darted from the room and snatched up the receiver, thankful for the distraction. The instant the woman began to speak, Margie knew there was trouble. She listened to the hysterical woman, trying to determine the problem through sobs. "Hey, Gage?"

"Yeah?" Gage looked up and realized something was wrong. He moved to Margie's desk and tried to make out actual words through the hysterics he could hear coming through the phone. "What's going on?"

Margie placed a hand over the mouthpiece and spoke softly. "It's Diana Sutton. She said the barns on fire and Christopher is trying to evacuate the horses. They need help out there immediately."

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Paige jumped to her feet and snatched up her jacket. "I'm coming with you." She watched as Margie handled the phone and began typing information into the computer at the same time. That meant the fire department would be notified immediately. Chances were pretty good they were already on their way.

"I'll drive," Gage said as he jumped into his car.

Paige climbed in next to him and reached for the mic. "Reed, you there?" No answer.

"Why are you calling Logan Reed?" Gage asked as he flipped on his emergency equipment and headed out of town.

"I asked him to hang out on the ridge this morning," Paige admitted. "I was worried about trouble and thought if he was close he'd at least have a quick response time if nothing else."

"Try him again," Gage said as he took a turn then sped up on the straightaway.

"Reed?" she called. "Car 22, are you there?"

"I can't reach him either," Margie's voice came through the speaker. "And he's not answering his phone."

"Keep trying," Paige decided. "But he may already be out there and if the barns engulfed, they're probably busy."

"Copy," Margie answered. "I'll keep you posted."

Paige frowned and turned to Gage. "She heard us."

"Probably," Gage agreed. "But that's good. I told you, once she realized the danger things would change."

Paige grabbed the handle above her door as Gage took a turn onto the dirt road that led to Christopher and Diana Sutton's home. She needed to concentrate on the call, but the situation with Margie bothered her. Had the problem really been resolved? And if it was that easy, was she part of the problem? She should have talked to Margie weeks ago. Instead, she let it get to her, let it fester until it seemed too big to fix. She pushed the problem from her mind when Gage made a sharp right and slammed on the brakes. The truck slid then came to a complete, abrupt stop directly behind a line unit the part-timers used when on duty. Logan Reed was already here.

Logan thumbed through his email on his tiny phone, bored to tears. He knew police work wasn't all car chases and bank robberies, but somehow he always seemed to get the lousy

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assignments while Paige and the others worked the fun stuff. He guessed that's why they called it paying your dues. Well, if that's what it took, he'd do it. He'd be a team player and eventually they'd see he was a good cop and could handle himself under pressure.

He stood and moved to the edge of the cliff to scan out over the clearing. He'd been doing this every twenty minutes for the last two hours. *Wait! Was that smoke?* Logan frowned, snatched up his binoculars and zeroed in on the area. Something was on fire and it was growing more rapidly than it should be. *Arson?* He rushed to his truck thankful for the opportunity to prove his worth.

Within minutes Reed was pulling up to a large barn. Smoke was billowing out from both large doors. He reached in the back, snatched up a medical mask and secured it over his mouth and nose as he rushed to the barn. It wouldn't do much, but it was all he had. As he entered the building, he came face to face with a man and a very angry horse.

"Take him," Christopher Sutton ordered. "He needs to be locked in that corral with the others."

Logan shook his head. "You take him, you need the fresh air. How many others?"

"Two," Christopher yelled as he rushed the horse away from the barn.

Logan stepped into the barn and crouched as low as he could to survey the stalls. He finally spotted a horse in the far corner. It seemed to take forever to make his way through the thick smoke and scorching heat. No wonder the horses were terrified. Flames shot out from the far wall and a large shelf toppled, sound echoed throughout the small space as contents collided with the concrete floor. Suddenly, the flames intensified and the heat grew so hot Logan's body felt like it was on fire. Whatever they stored on that shelf was highly flammable.

He reached for the latch on the metal door then froze. Was that a cough? Was somebody still inside? Were they injured? Logan frantically searched the area for any sign he hadn't imagined the noise. He was still looking when Christopher moved in, shoved him aside and grabbed his horse.

"I thought you were here to help," he grumbled as he rushed the animal out the door.

Logan ignored the man's anger and focused on the sounds around him. There it was again, coughing. Where was it coming from? If he had to guess, he'd say the far corner. If he was wrong, they might both die but he was pretty sure he was right. He began moving as fast as he could in that general direction. Suddenly, he saw it. A small lump curled up on the floor in the corner of an empty stall. Logan inhaled, coughed and immediately dropped to the ground. The air was too thick to breathe now. When he reached the body, he realized it was a small boy and the kid was now unconscious.

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Logan reached out to lift the child and frowned. He'd just found the reason the boy hadn't left. Five tiny kittens were snuggled up against the kid's chest. How was he supposed to save the boy and the cats? He snatched two of them up and shoved them in his jacket pocket then grabbed two more and shoved them in the other side. One left, it would just have to join its siblings. Hopefully, none of them would fall out of the cramped space. He was balancing the boy, who couldn't be more than eight, in his arms while trying to secure his pockets when strong hands grabbed his shoulders.

Logan turned around and came face to face with a dark figure wearing a large mask and carrying an ax. He took a step back before he realized it was a fireman. He opened his mouth to ask for help and was overcome by smoke. His throat felt like it was on fire and he began to cough uncontrollably.

Paige watched in fear as two firemen helped Logan from the building. A third fireman rushed out holding a small child in his arms. She ran across the expanse and pulled Logan into a hug. "I thought you were dead."

Logan grinned, ripped off the mask and wanted to speak but once again, he started to cough. This time the fit was so bad, he fell to the ground and couldn't catch his breath. Two paramedics rushed in, loaded him onto a stretcher and rolled him to a waiting ambulance. They locked the wheels once they reached the back doors, placed an oxygen mask over his face and left him lying there alone.

Paige stepped forward and scowled. "What were you thinking? You could have been killed."

Logan grinned, removed the oxygen mask and focused on Paige. "How about a goodbye kiss for the road? You know, for luck. Or maybe a hero's welcome? I did just save a kid and five kittens."

Paige shook her head and smiled. "You wish. I saw three firemen save the kid, the kittens, and one pigheaded cop."

"You saw wrong," Logan responded as one of the paramedics returned, shoved the oxygen mask back on his face, and lifted him into the back of the ambulance.

"You coming or staying?" the other one asked.

"Staying," Paige climbed inside and kissed Logan's cheek. "Savor it kid, you'll never get another one." She took a step back, grinning then sobered. "I have to help Gage with this."

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We'll head to the hospital as soon as we can." She jumped to the ground and waited for the vehicle to pull out.

Logan gave her a thumbs up and a big smile just before the medic slammed the back door and moved around the truck. Within seconds they were headed up the dirt road on their way to Gunnison.

Paige watched as the vehicle disappeared then turned to address the fire chief. "Did the kid make it?"

"So far," he turned to call directions to his men then studied Paige. "They're all lucky. There were several ignition points. Suspect made sure the building was a total loss."

"So you've already determined it was arson?"

"No doubt about that," he said grimly. "Sounds like the owner got all the horses to safety. They'll need a vet and they're not out of the woods yet. If they got too much smoke in their lungs, it's the same as a human. They'll die of smoke inhalation. Sutton said Doc Potter's on his way. Excuse me, I have to get back to this."

"No problem," Paige watched as he moved toward a group of men and began giving orders. She looked around and finally spotted Gage. He was standing near a tall, skinny guy and a sobbing woman. *Must be the Suttons*, she thought as she headed that way.

"Chris," Gage said the instant Paige joined their group. "This is Deputy Paige Carter. Paige this is Chris and Diana Sutton, the owners."

Paige reached out and placed a hand on Diana's forearm. "We need to get you to the hospital." She looked at the line unit and frowned. She hadn't thought to snag the keys from Logan.

Gage dangled a set of keys over his pointer finger. "He handed them to me while you were preoccupied."

Paige rolled her eyes. "How about I drive you over and you can call a family member to join you later."

"I think I'll drive," Chris said taking Diana's hand. "That way we can stop and grab Zula on the way."

"Zula's our daughter," Diana said. She was trying to compose herself but it was difficult. "She's only three. MaryJo has her today so she can play with Carly, that's Jo's daughter. They're about the same age."

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“Maybe you could ask MaryJo to keep Zula a little longer,” Paige suggested. “She’ll be more content playing with her cousin than at the hospital.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Diana frowned.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Chris gave her hand a squeeze. “Let’s head for the car and you can call Jo on the way. We’ll come back in a couple hours, once we find out how Scotty is. Jo might even bring her to us if we ask.”

“Okay, if you think that’s best.”

Paige watched as the couple walked, defeated to their vehicle. “The Fire Chief said the kid survived, but he has to be in bad shape. He’s lucky Logan, the idiot, walked through fire for him.”

Gage grinned. “He has a little thing for you.”

“Shut up,” Paige looked away and regretted it. The vet was climbing from his vehicle, headed toward a corral with five very spooked horses. He had his work cut out for him today. Especially with a blazing inferno still raging within site of the enclosure. Those horses were not going to settle until the barn was a soggy pile of rubble. She glanced at the structure and realized that might be sooner than she originally believed.

“I don’t think there is anything we can do out here at the moment,” Gage rested his big arm around her shoulder. “You okay?”

“I was so scared,” she admitted. “I mean, I’m the one that told the kid to stand watch. We both know he’s trying to prove himself. If he had died... I’m not sure I could have lived with that. It would have been all my fault.”

“Wrong missy,” Gage objected. “It would have been the fault of the person who set the fire.”

“Chief Rosen, the Fire Chief, said there were several ignition points. That means arson on the heels of yesterday’s incident with the car.”

“I know,” Gage said soberly.

“If they keep this up, somebody is going to get killed,” Paige held out her hand for the keys. “Let’s head to the hospital. I need to talk to Christopher and Diana. That kid should have been in school and his parents seemed genuinely surprised when he was carried from the barn. It’s going to be another long night. Once we get all we can from the family, I’ll talk to Logan. Then, I want to get back out here before nightfall and see if there are clues.”

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“Not in the barn,” Gage disagreed. “That’s going to be a soggy mess and anything the suspect left would have been destroyed by the fire.”

“I know,” Paige stopped next to Logan’s car. “I meant in the surrounding area. There could be footprints, a discarded cigarette, anything. I have to get back here before dark.”

“Okay,” Gage sighed. “But you’re buying dinner. I was starving when I got home last night and judging by the way you wolfed down that burrito this morning, so were you.”

Paige pulled the driver’s door open. “Deal. Hope you like hospital food.” She could hear Gage grumble as he climbed into his car and waited for her to lead the way.

Gage pulled into a stall marked “Police only” and headed for the emergency room. Paige was waiting just inside the door.

“They moved Reed to a private room,” she pushed off the wall and headed down the hallway. “He’s fine but they want to keep him overnight.”

“That’s good news,” Gage took small steps so Paige could keep up. “Where are we going?”

“Scotty Sutton is also in a private room,” she provided. “We’re on our way to see the family.”

“Can this wait?” he finally asked. “I mean, it seems wrong to interrogate his parents when he’s in such bad shape.”

“I’m not going to interrogate them,” Paige glanced up. “If that’s your plan, I agree... you should wait a few days.” Paige stopped and knocked gently on the frame of the door to her right.

Christopher Sutton cautiously slid the door open a few inches. When he spotted the deputies, he swung it open wide and stepped into the hallway. “I have to warn you, my brother is inside. I know there’s tension on account of the dog incident but you were nothing but kind to me and Di. I just wanted you to know there’s no hard feelings on my part, or my wife’s. Uh, but... well, Charles doesn’t feel the same.”

“Maybe I could talk to Charles over here and the two of you could find a waiting room close by. We have just a few questions and then we’ll let you get back to your son,” Gage suggested. “By the way, we heard the good news. I’m glad Scotty is going to be okay.”

“Thanks,” Christopher said, clearly relieved. “The doc said he’ll have to stay here a few days, but it looks like he’s going to be fine. We owe it all to that other deputy,” Chris frowned. “Do you know where he went? I’d like to call him and say thank you and apologize.”

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“Apologize?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Chris looked down. “We had no idea Scotty wasn’t in school. He’s so obsessed with those kittens, we should have checked. Both Diana and I thought he was safe, nowhere near the barn. Looking for him never even crossed my mind. I wasn’t very kind to your colleague. There were two horses left and he was just standing there, I thought he was scared or something and I snapped at him before taking the horses to safety. I was so sure I was going to lose one of the last two and I took it out on him. Now I know, he was looking for Scotty. The fireman that brought them out said the officer heard something and thought a person must be inside the barn. When I think of what could have happened to my son... I was so focused on those horses, I nearly lost someone more important.”

“Chris,” Paige soothed. “It all turned out okay. Scotty was rescued, the kittens were rescued and so were all the horses. All-in-all, I’d say we were all lucky today. But in answer to your question, Logan’s here. He inhaled too much smoke and they want to keep him overnight.”

“Oh,” Chris looked up. “I’m sorry to hear that, maybe I’ll stop by later and talk to him. Will his family be there? I don’t want to interrupt.”

“I don’t think so,” Paige pushed open a door and stepped inside. The room was small but it would do. She flipped a lock and moved to sit in one of the chairs that had big cushions but still looked extremely uncomfortable. “Logan isn’t from here. His family lives up north. He wanted to get away from the city and took a job with us. Logan spoke to his parents but asked them not to come all the way down tonight. They’ll visit him at home tomorrow once he’s released.”

“I know you have questions,” Chris changed the subject. “But I’m not sure how much I can tell you. Like I said, Scotty was supposed to be in school so I know he wasn’t a target. I was in the lower field, working one of the horses. I spotted the fire pretty quickly, but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. When I’m working, I tend to have tunnel vision. My attention is on the animal, not so much my surroundings. It’s essential when I’m working with a young, untrained stallion like Red.”

“I understand,” Paige told him. “What about Diana? You guys said your sister had Zula so what was Diana doing?”

“My wife is a web designer and works from home. She’s good and her company gives her a lot of leeway on the projects they assign, but it’s hard to get work done with a three-year-old. Jo takes our daughter at least a couple times a week so Diana can work on her web development stuff. She was down in the basement and didn’t realize the barn was even on fire until your officer sped down the driveway with his siren blaring.”

“Okay,” Paige considered. It didn’t look like Christopher had any more answers than she did. Had he been chosen at random simply because he was a Sutton? “You train horses, do you

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think there's anyone out there that would have a grudge? A competitor that might want to harm your horses for some reason?"

Christopher paused to consider. "I can't think of anyone. I mean, there are competitors out there and it gets kind of intense on the auction block when I outbid one of my rivals. Or at the arena when one of my horses out competes theirs. It's not serious, though. Just normal sports rivalry stuff, nothing over the top."

"Okay," Paige wasn't getting any vibes from that line of questioning but she'd check it out, anyway.

"Charles is certain the Newton's did this," Chris said hesitantly. "Are you saying you don't agree?"

"I'm saying I want to explore all possibilities," she watched him. "Do you think the Newton's did this?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I mean we have that stupid feud but I never really got involved in that. I always thought it was senseless. I just can't think of why any of the Newton's would target me. I mean, we're not friends but we've never really been enemies either. That's more Charles and Robert's thing."

Interesting, Paige considered. If one of the Sutton brother's doubted the Newton's involvement in this, maybe she should question it too. They'd all just assumed it was the typical hate stuff between two families. What if they were both being targeted by someone else? It seemed unlikely, one family maybe... but both? The odds had to be astronomical on that one. They didn't hang in the same circles, didn't have the same friends. It should follow that they wouldn't have the same enemies, either. Right? Something to think about anyway. "I've taken up enough of your time for today. If I have any other questions, I know where to find you. If you think of anything, give me a call." She handed Chris her business card, then followed him out the door.

Paige pulled into her driveway and climbed wearily from her truck. It had been another long day and she didn't feel like they had anything to show for it. Chris Sutton had been cooperative but clearly, he had no idea who would burn down his barn or why. Gage's talk with Charles hadn't gone as well. The only thing they'd gotten from that exchange was a warning. Charles and Robert were on the warpath. Diana didn't know anything, like Chris said she was working until Logan had pulled past her house. Most of the children were in school and not around to spot a stranger lurking. The adults that were home had been hard at work and didn't notice anything unusual. It was all just a big dead end.

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She reached the front porch but stopped abruptly when a noise next door caught her attention. She glanced at the house, wondering if she was imagining things and a smile spread across her face. Dax was helping what looked like an injured man into a patio chair. She pivoted and rushed to greet the man she had missed more than she liked to admit. A man who excited and confused her – usually at the same time.

“Hey,” Dax smiled the instant he saw her. He’d missed her... a lot. More than he was willing to admit. That terrifying ‘L’ word came to mind and he brushed it aside. He wasn’t even willing to say the word, let alone acknowledge the emotion.

“Need help?” Paige frowned when she saw the man’s condition up close.

Zeus looked up and smiled at the beautiful brunette standing just a few feet away. “You must be the legendary Paige Carter. I’m Zeus.”

Paige grinned. “Infamous is more like it, at least in this town. I thought your name was Travis. Unless of course, Dax had two adrenaline junky friends rotting in a Mexican prison.”

Dax frowned. “No progress on the Jericho front, then? I was hoping that situation would be resolved by the time I got back.”

“No such luck,” Paige grumbled. “But enough about that, I think Zeus, not quite a Greek God... needs a doctor.”

“Saw one,” Zeus chuckled and shifted slightly in an attempt to get comfortable. “He said I’ll live.”

“Only because that thick skull of yours is too stubborn to crack,” Dax settled into the chair next to his friend, ready to step in if necessary. Zee was putting up a good front, but the man was in a lot of pain.

Paige smiled, she’d only seen this mother hen Dax once before... with Ken. He was obviously different with his Army friends, more alert but more himself somehow. “I take it Ken got home okay.”

“Better than this guy,” Zeus provided. “Ken got out of there without a scratch.”

Paige frowned. “You got scratched?” she asked Dax. Not sure what that meant, but knowing it wasn’t good.

“Something like that,” he said cryptically.

Paige narrowed her eyes. Was getting a straight answer from this man really too much to ask? Apparently, it was when it came to Dax. She decided to ignore her concern, he wouldn’t

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answer anyway. "I'm starved and was just on my way in to order takeout? Have you two eaten already?"

"Actually," Dax relaxed. "Zee's in the mood for Chow Mein, I thought I'd do a pickup. You want to join us for Chinese?"

"Sure," Paige's stomach rumbled and she grabbed at it, embarrassed.

Zeus laughed.

"Have you been eating anything while I was gone?" Dax asked, frowning.

"Here and there," Paige brushed off his questions. She had eaten... a little. "You want me to take care of ordering?"

"That'd be great," Dax told her. "Thanks." He watched as Paige turned and made her way across the short expanse to her back door.

"You're an idiot," Zeus scolded. "Now I remember why you're still single. That girl's a keeper, I hope you don't screw it up with that invisible barrier you've erected."

"Somehow," Dax leaned forward. "I don't think I'll take relationship advice from someone who's had.... oh, yeah zero relationships."

"I don't need more than one night to understand a woman," Zeus answered, not in the least bit offended.

"That's lust my friend, not a clear understanding of the female species," Dax grinned. He'd missed Travis Boudin... Zeus to all his friends. A name Dax refused to adopt, it was too ridiculous. Instead, he just called the man Zee. He was a goofball that would never change, but Dax had missed him. He hadn't realized just how much until he stepped into that Mexican hellhole and saw the mangled mess the guards had made of his brother. Zee had a habit of chasing adrenaline and living on one-night-stands but he was also fiercely loyal and the bravest SOB Dax had ever met. And if they'd been one day later, he would also be dead. It was just dumb luck that Ken had run into an old friend who saw Zee arrested. Going after him was a given, neither man had questioned it.

"All kidding aside," Zeus sobered. "I'm good here. Go give that lady a proper hello."

"I can't," Dax frowned. "I'm responsible for you."

"I'm going to sit here and enjoy the peace and quiet while I gaze at a few stars. What's the worst that could happen? I nod off and fall out of my chair? Get over there and care for your woman."

Dax hesitated.

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“Go on already,” Zeus pressed. “You’re blocking my view.”

Dax grinned as he made his way off the porch, across his lawn and to the back of Paige’s house. She was just reaching for the doorknob when he appeared around the corner. “Hey,” he called.

Paige was still frowning as she reached for the door. She was more than a little disappointed. Dax was so distant tonight, not the passion filled reunion she’d imagined. What did it all mean? Had he changed his mind? She froze and turned in place when she heard his friendly call. Cautiously, she stepped to the edge of the porch to greet him. “Forget something?”

“Yeah,” he ascended the steps and pulled her against him. “This,” he pressed his lips to hers and delivered the most mind blowing kiss Paige had ever encountered.

Okay, maybe he hadn’t changed his mind. But could she live with the constant flux between cold and hot? For now? Yes. She shifted to move even closer then jumped back when Dax cringed. “You are injured.”

“Just a scratch,” he said pulling her against him again. “Nothing to worry about.”

Paige resisted and reached out to pull up his shirt. She frowned when she saw the ugly deep bruising around his ribs. “How bad?”

“I broke a couple ribs,” Dax provided. “Nothing I haven’t done before. They’ll heal.” He sucked in a breath when Paige gently touched the bruises surrounding his injury.

It bothered her, the fact that he tried to hide it. The fact that he never told her anything. Especially since she told him everything. “I’ll take care of the order, you probably need to get back to your friend.” She turned and escaped into the kitchen.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, following her inside.

“Nothing,” she tried to evade. Two could play at this game.

Dax wasn’t buying it. “What’s wrong?”

“This,” she motioned between the two of them. “I don’t even know what this is. I don’t know what you want from me and to be honest, I’m not sure I have the energy to figure it out.”

Dax studied her for several seconds before he took her hand and led her into the living room. Once he had settled onto the couch, he pulled her down with him, positioning her between his legs as he forced her against his chest. “I’m sorry,” he whispered as he gently rubbed her back. “I didn’t mean to abandon you and I just realized how bad the timing was on this thing with Zee.”

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“Don’t worry about it,” Paige settled against his chest, accepting the comfort of his embrace. She hadn’t realized just how much she needed this. How much she needed him.

“This thing with Walters has gotten worse than I thought it would,” Dax continued. “I can see that now. I should have seen it months ago, but I was preoccupied. I get that way when one of my men needs me. It’s a flaw I guess, but one I couldn’t change even if I wanted to.”

“He’s bad,” Paige observed. “Will he be okay? I could tell he was faking it.”

“Eventually,” Dax kissed the top of her head. “But I’ve spent enough time focused on Zee. Tell me, what has you so tied up in knots?”

Paige sighed, where to start. She explained the situation at work and how disappointing it had been to learn Jericho was in the wind again. Then she told him about Gage and how they had finally worked things out. The damn broke and she added the situation with Margie, admitting that she felt responsible for that as well. “We have a big case and I can’t concentrate. If I don’t find a way to stop this war, someone is going to end up dead. Not exactly part of the exit strategy. It would look pretty bad on a resume.”

“Exit strategy?” Dax asked, worried.

“Yeah,” she took a deep breath and explained her plan to quit and look for work at another department.

Dax considered his words carefully, things had to be worse than he thought. Worse than she made it sound. It was the only explanation. The only reason Paige would bail. “You sure that’s the best solution?” he finally asked.

“You think I should stay?”

“I do,” Dax said honestly. “I think you’ll regret leaving in the long run and I don’t think you really want to go.”

“I don’t have a choice,” Paige stood and moved back to the kitchen. “Let’s order the food. I’m starved and Zeus has been alone too long.”

Dax let her go. It was her way of dealing and pressing the issue would only make her dig her heels in deeper. He stood and made his way to her back porch, silently moving past her as she placed their large dinner order. He felt guilty, knowing he’d abandoned her when she needed him. But what was the alternative? Leave Zee in a Mexican prison to die? No, he’d made the right decision, but knowing it didn’t change the fact that his actions had exacted a toll. One he couldn’t easily overcome.

Paige stepped onto the porch. “They said fifteen minutes, I guess business is slow this time of night.”

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Message received. “I’ll head out then.” Dax stopped by to check on Zee then climbed into his truck and made the run. He wasn’t going to let her push him away, not tonight. He needed her and like it or not, she needed him too.

Dax hoisted Zee to his feet and guided him through the door. “Let’s get you into bed, then you can see about eating.”

“Just leave the container on the nightstand, grab my meds and get back to your girl,” Zeus ordered as he slowly sat on the edge of the bed and swung his legs onto the surface. It took determination, but he finally settled against the headboard.

“I’m heading over once I get you settled but I won’t be long. I’ll check in when I get home.”

“Seriously?” Zeus shook his head in disbelief. “I’m fine, Dax.” He snatched up the pain pill Dax offered and swallowed it dry. “Thanks. I hate to take those, but I need it tonight. Which leads me back to my point. I’m going to enjoy a good meal and crash. Those pills will knock me out for at least eight, maybe ten hours. There’s no need to check in on me. Spend the night with your girl and I’ll see you at breakfast.”

Dax hesitated. He knew Zee was right, the pills would knock him out completely. More than most because the man normally wouldn’t even take aspirin. He could spend tonight with Paige, a good first step toward making up for his absence. He grabbed Zee’s phone and attached it to the charger. “Call me if you need anything. I’m just next door and I can be here in two minutes, tops.”

“Not likely,” Zeus eyed the phone. “I wouldn’t call even if the house was on fire. Go make things right. Ever since that bimbo reporter, you’ve closed down and it needs to stop. Paige is not... I forget her name. Maybe because she was always Satan’s spawn to the lot of us.”

“This has nothing to do with Piper,” Dax said defensively.

“It has everything to do with Piper Weber,” Zeus disagreed.

“Thought you didn’t know her name.”

“She was all wrong for you, everyone could see that. You gave that woman everything and she still wanted more. She was using you and if you’d stayed in town for ten straight days, you would have figured it out before she stole your life’s savings.”

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“How did you know about that?”

“She bragged,” Zeus supplied. “Then she nearly peed her pants when Thor cornered her at some murder scene and had a little one on one. Never heard a peep afterward so I’m guessing she got the message.”

“It’s nice to know my guys collectively decided, behind my back, that I can’t deal with my personal problems on my own. Anything else you questioned about my character. Might as well get it all out in the open tonight. I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“It’s not like that,” Zeus disagreed. “We know you can handle anything. The thing is, you’re always handling us. My problems in Mexico, Ken in Vegas, Jeeves and the crazy transvestite. We saw a chance to return the favor and we took it. It wasn’t that hard, really. We just asked ourselves... what would Hamilton do and then went with it. Thor got there first and I have to admit he was probably the most effective. Anyway, you do have something better to do and she’s waiting next door for her dinner.”

Dax sighed and took the hint. He did handle his guys, Zee was right about that. So he couldn’t be mad when they handled him. He snatched up the large bag containing dinner and made his way next door.

Paige glanced up when Dax stepped through the door. Seeing him standing there, should have calmed her but not tonight. Her emotions were all over the map. Her entire life was crumbling around her and she didn’t know how to get back on track. The one decision she had believed was the right one... leaving Sanpete County, didn’t seem right any longer. Dax and Gage had the same reaction, which made her rethink everything and settle on nothing. In response, she pushed away the only person in this town that still liked her, the one man who understood her. The complicated neighbor who was always there for her... until he wasn’t.

Dax set the bag on the kitchen table and went in search of Paige. She wasn’t hard to find. He paused in the doorway that separated the kitchen from the living room and studied the stubborn beauty. Paige looked up and offered a half smile before looking away.

Dax was across the room in half a second. He’d never seen her look so defeated and he didn’t like it. He took her hand and pulled her to her feet then silently led her to into the bedroom. He’d always been better at action than words. Tonight was no exception.

Two hours later, the couple sat at the kitchen table scarfing down cold Chinese. Paige was finally talking again and Dax listened as she described her current case. When she was finished, Paige looked up and waited. Dax always had insight when she was stuck.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Dax finally told her. “Why are you so sure it’s a war between the neighbors?”

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“What do you mean?” She shoved the timeline she’d developed in front of Dax. “It all started with the dog.”

“Maybe,” Dax studied the outline. “But who let the dog out?”

“I think that is supposed to be accompanied by a booming bass.”

“I’m serious,” Dax pressed.

Paige frowned. “David, I guess.”

“But you don’t believe David was really involved. You told me that already. Charley Sutton claimed David snuck onto his property and released the dog. Then he lured it over to his house and ran it down with his truck.”

Paige shook her head. “I don’t believe that. David was upset. I mean, really upset. He loves animals and was horrified that he hit that dog.”

“So, who let the shepherd out?”

Paige considered. Charley told her the gorgeous German Shepherd was in the kennel because he was helping Chris train a difficult horse. They were afraid Zeek would cause more problems if he were left to roam free. Plus, German Shepherds were guard dogs by nature. Would a loyal pet quietly tolerate an enemy messing with his kennel? Not likely. “I have no idea.”

“Answer that, and I think you’ll solve your mystery,” Dax decided.

“You really think it’s that simple?”

“I do,” Dax stood and began clearing the table. “Don’t get mad but I want to share an observation with you.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed.

“Forensic evidence is your strong point. You solve crimes because you show up and gather evidence, then you follow the lead and let it take you where you need to go. This case is different, all of you seem to have some preconceived notion of who did it and what happened. You’re chasing ghosts in an effort to prove you’re right. What if you’re wrong? Start focusing on what you know and follow the clues left at the scene, where ever it leads. That’s how you work, Paige. It’s why you’re good at your job and I think ignoring your usual technique is the very reason you’re so frustrated and miserable.”

Paige stood and moved to wash the few dishes they had used. She silently pondered what Dax had said and decided he could be right. Both families might still be guilty, but following the evidence would prove it - or disprove it. She’d let the facts decide, rather than try to generate

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facts to prove a theory. When they finished, she asked the question she hadn't dared to voice all night. "Are you staying or going?"

Dax pulled her into his arms and held her close. "Staying if that's an invitation."

"Always," Paige relaxed.

"What about Jericho?" Dax asked as they headed back to her room.

"I don't think there's anything I can do about Jericho. If he'd rather leave town than talk to me, I have to accept that."

Dax laughed. "What makes you think it has anything to do with you?"

Paige stopped abruptly. "What does that mean?"

"It means, before your fight, Jericho was leaving town all the time. A day here, a week there. He's still investigating. I doubt that's stopped. I'm just wondering why you think it's all about you?" He settled onto the bed and waited. "I mean, that's the story of my life but I'm not sure you rank that high with the rest of the town."

Paige considered. Nothing had happened, nothing that explained his abrupt departure. Could Dax be right? Had Jericho simply left to follow another lead? Or maybe he wanted a quiet place to think, to go over everything and plan his next move. "I need to crash, looks like it's going to be another early morning."

"Meaning?"

"I'm going to check out Jericho's cabin," Paige said sliding between the sheets. "I need to see if he's just regrouping or if he actually left."

"What about the case?"

"I've been benched," she smiled. "Seems I rub Benny and Orville Newton the wrong way. Gage thinks he'll have better success if he takes Havi with him instead. I planned to work on the headlight again but I have time to take a detour. Shouldn't take long to swing by Walter's cabin and take a look around."

"Do you think maybe you'll stay? Or at least reconsider?"

"I don't know," Paige admitted, knowing he was asking about the job. "But I promised Gage I'd stick until we solve this case. For now, I'm sticking."

"Good," Dax pulled her against him and settled in for the night.

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It was nearly noon when Paige pulled back into town, tired, grumpy and freezing. Her shoes were caked in mud, her pants were filthy and her hair had dirt clumps ground into her ponytail. She approached the station, expecting it to be empty. Gage and Havi should still be out at the Newton's interviewing family members. But both cars were parked in the front lot. Paige made an abrupt turn and shut down her car next to Gage's large truck. She climbed from her vehicle, brushed at her thighs, gave up and headed inside.

The instant she stepped through the door, Gage, Haviland, and Margie looked up and studied her in surprise.

"Wrestle the Abominable Mud man?" Havi asked, grinning through a white cloth that was now stained pink.

"I got stuck, drop it. Why are you here?" she demanded. "I thought you were going to interview the Newtons. And who broke your nose?"

Gage mumbled something under his breath that Paige couldn't catch.

"It's not broken," Havi told her. "But it's going to be sore and bruised for at least a week."

"Run into a doorknob? Trip on a rock?"

"No, I ran into Charley Sutton's fist."

"Wait," Paige moved forward. "Charley clocked you? I hope you arrested him."

"He's in a cell, next to Benny Newton. But I don't think I was his target," Havi provided.

"We went out to talk to the Newtons as planned," Gage explained. "Things were tense, but under control. We weren't getting anywhere, not really. They insist they had nothing to do with the trouble. Not with James and not with Charley Sutton's dog. Benny started in on how we were part of the problem. He said they called us in when Zeet was hit because they didn't want trouble and we just made things worse. We had finally calmed him down when Charley and Robert showed up. The three of them went at it and then words turned into fists. It was a mess and escalated from there when the rest of irrational, wacky bunch gathered around us."

"I was sure we'd have to blast our way out," Havi added. "It was ugly, I mean seriously crazy town out there. I stepped between Benny and Charley, hoping to separate them and caught Charley's fist with my nose." He glanced at Gage. "Then linebacker Joe over there did the one man tackle and broke through the line. Benny and Charley earned a night in a cell and the rest of the group decided it was time to head home."

Paige glanced at her favorite football star. "You hurt?"

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“No,” Gage grumbled. “I’m pissed.”

“Well,” Paige moved to settle in behind her desk. “Charge them with starting a riot. That should cheer you up.”

“Funny girl,” Gage grumbled but he smiled as he remembered the lecture he’d given her a few weeks back when she wanted to do just that.

“I need to head home and shower then I thought I’d head to Salem,” she turned to Gage. “You busy?”

“Why are we going to Salem?”

“Chris called this morning. He said the only person that really had a beef with him over his horse enterprise is Brian Silverston.”

“Is Brian associated with the Newton’s?” Havilland asked.

“No,” Paige said absently. “Not as far as I know.”

“So why are we talking to him?” Gage pressed.

“Brian’s big in all the horse circles,” Paige offered. “I think we should ask him a few questions.”

“I’m still not following,” Havi said. “What does this have to do with a fight between two neighbors?”

“What if it’s not between two neighbors?” Paige questioned.

“You mean... you think they didn’t do it?” Havi asked, clearly shocked at the suggestion.

“They said they didn’t,” Paige shrugged. “What if they didn’t?”

Havilland laughed. “When you’re done, you might want to swing by the prison and interview a few of the inmates.”

“Why would I do that?” Paige scowled.

“Because the place is full of guys that didn’t do it,” he pulled on his jacket and headed for the door. “I’m outta here. After I stop in at home to change my shirt, I’ll be around to handle any calls that come in. Take your time, I’ve got things covered here and with those two in jail, we just might get a much needed break from the action.”

Gage pulled onto the highway and glanced at his partner. “You really think they didn’t do it?”

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“I really think we need to follow the evidence. Chris gave us a lead, if it were any other case, we’d check out the lead.”

Gage was silent for several seconds. “We would, but this isn’t any other case.”

The following morning, Paige was at her desk comparing the photo on her computer screen to the broken piece of headlight she’d recovered. The back door opened and Stan Donaldson stepped inside, spotted Paige and made a beeline for the back cells. Paige frowned, for some reason she got the distinct impression she made that man uncomfortable. Which was odd since she’d never actually had a conversation with him.

Stan moved through the backdoor of the police station, spotted Paige Carter and left the room as quickly as possible. He hadn’t heard of any trouble concerning the savvy cop recently, but he hadn’t gone looking either. So far, Daniel had left him out of his current scheme to handle his... problem. Stan preferred it that way. He’d been serious, if Dan did something illegal and it crossed Stan’s desk, he wouldn’t hesitate to prosecute the madman. Doing so could harm his reputation and make things sticky with the DA but that didn’t change the fact that he would go after Daniel if he had to. The man had used him to steal a cop car after all. He was still livid over that mess and would be for a very long time. He glanced at the closed door that led to the office area. Just seeing Paige sent tendrils of fear down his spine. She sensed something, he could tell, which was the reason he tried to avoid stepping foot in the small department. Unfortunately, it couldn’t be helped - not today. Tolman had ordered him to the jail forthwith to release the prisoners. Assault on a PO wasn’t going to stick because the man hadn’t meant to strike the cop. He’d been aiming for his neighbor and neither man was interested in pressing charges.

Gage frowned as the local prosecutor escorted their two prisoners from the back room. He’d known they’d be out soon. He had just hoped they’d have another day or two before it happened. Especially now that Paige was chasing leads that led nowhere. He humored her yesterday, drove to Salem and tracked down a wealthy horse trainer. What did he get for his trouble? A big fat nothing. He’d known the information would lead nowhere but Paige had insisted, so he caved. Well, next time he’d just have to take a stronger stand. The battle between the real suspects was intensifying and they had to find a way to stop it. There was simply no other option. He watched as Margie stepped into Sheriff Walter’s office and shut the door behind her. *What was that all about?*

“Hello Margie,” Jericho answered immediately. “I’ve been meaning to contact you. I saw I missed several calls. What’s up?” Jericho was dead tired and probably shouldn’t be driving at the moment. He’d tracked the mysterious drifter to Colorado, staked out his motel room and

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finally got the chance he'd been waiting for. Unfortunately, the effort was all for nothing. The man was convincing and if he was telling the truth, he had an iron clad alibi when Chaya was murdered. Jericho would check it out, of course. But his gut told him another suspect had just been crossed off his list.

"We have trouble," Margie informed him. She proceeded to explain what had been happening with the Newton's and the Sutton's. "I know why Gage and Havilland arrested them, both of those men needed to cool down, but I think it had the opposite effect. Trouble's in the air and I'm not sure any of us can stop it."

"I'm just pulling into Moab," Jericho informed her. "I need to make a quick stop at home to shower and change, then I'll be in. Do what you can until I arrive."

"There's one more thing," Margie said reluctantly. She proceeded to relay the conversation she'd overheard about Paige leaving and confessed her part in all of it. She felt guilty and insisted it was her fault Paige planned to quit.

"It's not your fault, it's mine." Jericho would do his best to rectify the wrong but there was no guarantee Paige would stay. "I'll talk to her. Stop stressing about this Margie, Paige will do what's best for her. That's how we got her in the first place. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Margie disconnected the call and sat silently in her boss's office for several minutes. Jericho was right, Paige couldn't be controlled. It was the reason she was so good at her job. They'd take whatever came in stride and move forward the best they could.

Two hours later, Margie was knee-deep in budget reconciliation when her phone rang. She'd just picked up the call when her second line buzzed. She glanced at the flashing light and cringed. June Newton, the matriarch of the family, was buzzing like a hornet. Margie clasped her hand over the mouthpiece and motioned toward Paige. "Can you get line two, we have another issue out at the Newton place and I can't grab it."

Paige frowned and snatched up the ringing line. "Deputy Carter. Slow down, MaryJo. Tell me what happened without the diatribe about the Newton's this time. Okay. Right. Did you call Doc Potter? I'm on my way, don't do anything rash until I arrive."

Gage was standing over Paige when she hung up. "You first, then I'll fill you in on the Newton's."

"All of Chris Sutton's horses have colic," Paige stood. "MaryJo said someone fed them bad hay. They found the remnants in the corral and its littered with mold. The entire family is busy working to keep them on their feet while they wait for Potter to arrive. Sounds like he's going to load them up and take them to the clinic for around the clock care. The prognosis isn't good. They were still recovering from smoke inhalation."

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“June Newton gave Margie an earful,” Gage provided. “Seems someone made the rounds at their place, too. Every car has all four tires slashed. It’s going to cost a fortune to replace them.”

“Call Havi,” Paige decided. “Tell him and to bring in Lovato and head to the Newton’s.” Mike Lovato was their most recent addition, a part-time officer who’d retired from Salt Lake and moved to Manti for the change in pace. He was good, but his definition of part-time was very subjective. He worked when he wanted to work. “Make sure Havilland knows not to take no for an answer. You and I will deal with the Sutton’s. I have a feeling, this might be another long night. Good thing we headed home early yesterday. Might be the last free evening we get for a while.”

Gage pulled into Christopher Sutton’s driveway and followed Paige to the corral. Chris was doing his best to coach a sick horse back on his feet. He glanced up when he heard them approach. “Come on, Argo. Just a little longer then you can take a nice long nap.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Paige asked the worried owner.

“You can catch whoever did this,” Chris didn’t look up. He ran his hand over the horse’s side and gave the reins a tug. The horse finally stood and allowed Chris to lead him around the pen.

“I intend to do that already,” Paige continued. “In the meantime, what can I do to help until the vet arrives?”

Chris glanced up and frowned. “I asked Toby to get me some water, but he disappeared. Said something about a deep cut in his palm. Claimed he needed to wrap the wound to avoid infection. Ask me, he just wanted an out. If you want to help, snag those buckets and fill them with fresh water. The colic can bring on dehydration, especially after the fire.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Gage offered. “Maybe you could check on the boy,” he gave Paige a knowing look.

“Right,” she watched as Gage disappeared. “Any idea where Toby was headed?”

Chris paused and gave her a knowing look. “What else happened?”

“Nothing much,” Paige evaded. “I just thought I’d talk to Toby and see how he’s doing.”

“He’s with his mother, but Jo won’t let you near him.”

Paige nodded and headed for the home of MaryJo and Jonah Davis. Chris was probably right. MaryJo was not a fan and Paige suspected anything to do with her boy was strictly off limits. She had to try though. If she got a quick peek at his hand, she’d have her answer without

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asking a single question. She had just reached the end of the drive when her phone rang. “Yeah, Havi... what do you know?”

“I know someone here is responsible for the mess you’re dealing with,” he said confidently.

“What makes you so sure?” Paige pressed.

“Because I found the bad hay,” he confided. “So far, I’m getting the runaround but if someone doesn’t start talking... I’m hauling them all in.”

That gave Paige an idea. “I think that’s a great idea. Call Captain Wingate. Let’s get a transportation van out there and send one here as well. I think it’s time we hauled in every adult in the area. We’ll interrogate them one by one until we’re satisfied.”

Havilland grinned. “I’ll call Cosgrove, he owes me a favor. Why start at the top when you can handle it in-house?”

Paige smiled. If Sgt. Cosgrove was willing to send a couple of his vans out for the pickup that was even better. She continued onto the porch and rang the doorbell. MaryJo might be uncooperative, but then again... a little time in isolation just might get her talking.

Jericho stepped through the front door and shook his head in disbelief. His deputies had transported every Newton and Sutton adult over the age of eighteen to the station. And by the sound of things, neither family was happy about it.

“Uh, Paige...” Gage cocked his head toward the front door. “Do you think we’re in trouble?”

“Not we,” she corrected. “This was my idea. I’ll take the heat.”

They watched as their boss moved through the sea of angry patrons toward them.

“I can explain,” Paige began.

“No need,” Jericho grinned as he looked around. “Is it working?”

Paige raised an eyebrow in shock. That was not the response she had expected. “Not yet.”

“If you haven’t spoken to Orville Newton or William Sutton, I’ll handle them. I just need a minute alone with the two of you to get up to speed. Margie filled me in this morning but clearly, I’m missing something.”

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The three of them stepped into his office and shut the door. They explained what had happened with the hay and the tires and went on to provide their conclusion.

“So,” Jericho considered. “Toby had something to do with the tires at the Newton place but you can bet he didn’t act alone. If I had to guess, Harlan was the instigator. He idolizes Chris and would have been livid after the barn was torched. Since Toby idolizes his brother, he would have jumped at the chance to assist.”

“I agree,” Gage sighed. “But we have no idea who fed those horses bad hay. There was one bale left at Alice and Spencer’s place but Alice insists she had half a dozen bales set aside to use at the upcoming Summer Festival. Says she wanted to decorate the stage and since they knew the hay was bad, it was the perfect solution.”

“Do you believe her?” Jericho asked.

“I wasn’t there, but Havi and Lovato do. They said she was shocked it was missing, wouldn’t even believe it was gone until she checked for herself. Then she clammed up and hasn’t said another word.”

“I think they’re all protecting their kids,” Paige provided. “Jasper’s kids are too young to do something like that on their own. James was the oldest and he’s still in intensive care. Jasper and Emma have spent every waking minute by his side. I think we can rule them out.”

“Okay, for now,” Jericho considered. Orville was a horseman himself, he wouldn’t approve of the hay fiasco, but he’d want to protect his family.

“I don’t think the Wilson’s would have done this,” Gage provided.

“Because?” Jericho asked.

“Because it was their hay. It’s too obvious. I think Alice might know something, maybe who was around when it went missing, but I don’t think it was them,” Gage said confidently.

“Then that leaves Benny’s kids,” Jericho surmised. “And he won’t crack.”

“I don’t think it was Tanya,” Paige provided. “We talked on the way to help with James and I got the feeling she goes along with the fight for show but she doesn’t really agree with it. Kind of like Christopher, she’s basically neutral.”

“What about David or Keith?” Gage asked.

“David’s almost eighteen. We can use that to our advantage,” Jericho considered. “Logan got released and he’s itching to help. I talked to him about an hour ago. I think I’ll have him pick the boy up and bring him in. Let’s bluff. Benny might talk if he thinks his boy will be charged as an adult. Poisoning horses won’t go over that well in these parts. Benny might cut a

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deal to save his son. In the meantime, I'm going to have a chat with Orville Newton. A little added pressure can't hurt."

Paige stepped from the room and marveled at the way her boss had taken their actions in stride. She'd been sure her head would be on the chopping block when he found out what she'd done.

"Hey Margie," Logan was frustrated and not sure how to handle things out here.

"Logan," Margie frowned. "Are you on your way back?"

"No," he said reluctantly. "I um... well, I'm in a bit of a jam and I'm not sure what to do. The sheriff said to head to the house and pick up David... period. He warned me I was not to go anywhere but the house while I'm here. Thing is, David and Dylan headed out to the back field to deal with a problem. I'm not sure how much trouble I'll be in if I check it out on my own."

"Don't go anywhere," Margie decided. "I'll send someone out to back you. Any idea what kind of trouble?"

"The girl's not talking," Logan admitted. "I tried, believe me, I tried."

"Would that be Tanya?"

"Yeah," Logan affirmed. "David's sister."

"I'll send Paige," Margie decided. "Sit tight, Tanya might open up to Paige. They got to know each other the other day."

Thirty minutes later, Paige had arrived, pried the information out of Tanya and was pulling out of the driveway, Logan in her passenger's seat. "We're headed for the upper field. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Tanya said Rachel was riding with a friend and they saw a dead cow. It was one of their prized bulls so David and Dylan headed out to check on it. They've been gone over an hour so there could have been trouble."

"Should I know who Rachel is?" Logan asked.

Paige smiled. "No, I guess not. You know, I'm getting to know these two families better than I know my own. Rachel is Alice and Spencer's oldest daughter... Dylan's sister."

"Okay, got it."

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Paige came around the corner and spotted the boys on an ATV. She instantly knew something was wrong. David was covered in blood and it looked like Dylan was ready to pass out. She jumped from the car and rushed to investigate.

“I... I couldn’t stop the bleeding,” David said, defeated.

“What happened?” Paige asked. “Never mind, help me get him to my truck. He needs medical attention and we don’t have time to wait for an ambulance. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

Logan joined her and the three of them were able to wrestle Dylan into the back seat.

“I’m coming with you,” David insisted. “I’ll leave the four wheeler here. It’s safe. I need to come with you.”

Paige agreed. She needed to know what was going on here. Had one of the Sutton’s taken revenge over the horses or had Dax been right and there was someone else making it look like an old feud? She sped down the dirt road as fast as she dared. Logan reached for the radio mic and called it in. Moments later, Margie confirmed the Newton’s were headed to Gunnison. If they kept this up, an entire hospital wing might be funded by the Newton and the Sutton medical bills before the week was over.

Several hours later, Paige had returned to the scene of the crime. In addition to the bull, a calf had been killed as well. Two arrows were pointed toward the sky, protruding from the torso of the large bull that looked mean, even in death. The calf had fallen on his arrow and the end had broken off during impact. She might not learn anything from the initial attack, but she had to make an attempt. As she circled the area, she tried to determine where the shot had come from. It seemed logical that the perp had fired all the arrows from the same location. She moved forward, identifying the spot where Dylan was standing when he got hit. Blood had stained the wild grass and dirt making it easy to locate. David was a smart kid, he’d used a tow strap as a tourniquet, loaded his cousin onto the ATV and sped towards home.

Paige looked up when she heard the sound of another vehicle. Jericho and Gage had met up with Logan at the hospital so it could only be Havilland. He strolled casually across the field and stopped in front of the dead bull.

“What a waste,” he sighed and pulled on a pair of rubber gloves.

Paige continued to scan the horizon. By her calculations, the shot had to come from the trees next to the road. That made sense, especially if David was right and the suspect had sped away in a white SUV. It was the best clue they had so she’d go with it. If they found the

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vehicle, they'd be able to identify it. David also said he spotted a red sticker on the bumper. He couldn't make it out, but it was another piece of the puzzle. "David said the shot that hit Dylan came from over there," Paige pointed to a shaded opening in the trees. "I have to believe they all did."

Havilland studied the section Paige had identified, then moved to stand behind the bull. After several seconds, he pointed to a section well hidden in shadow. "I'd say there, let's have a look."

It was several minutes later when Paige looked up and sighed. "I think a woman did this."

"Are you out of your mind?" Havi asked. "All the adults were at the station when Dylan was shot. Let's go through the Sutton kids... the girls. I can't believe any of them had the nerve to shoot another kid. It had to be one of the boys."

"So," Paige took a deep breath. "Just so I'm clear. None of the girls had the nerve to shoot another person, but the boys did? Have you always been sexist or is that a new development?"

"You say sexist, I say realist."

"I think you're wrong," Paige pressed. "Because not one of the Sutton's owns a white SUV... with a red bumper sticker or without."

"That you know if," Havilland refused to give up. "Who says one of the boys didn't pay cash for a ride and he's fixing it up? Maybe he hasn't registered it yet, so you didn't find it."

"Just because you don't like the evidence, it doesn't mean you should discard it." Paige moved forward and stopped abruptly. She removed her camera and took several pictures of a small footprint. Another indication she was right. She knew she was and from the looks of things the woman responsible had shot the cows then camped out, waiting for someone to fall into her trap.

"Why are you so sure it's a chick?" Havilland asked, following her out of spite.

Paige ignored the chick comment, her colleague was just trying to get a rise out of her and she had no intention of biting. "Other than those footprints?"

"Yeah," Havilland frowned. "Other than that."

"First, the penetration was shallow. If a man was responsible, it would have been deeper, especially with Dylan." Paige paused to study a small object nestled in the dead leaves under the trees. She opened her forensics bag and pulled out a set of tweezers. When she retrieved the object, she held it up to the light, trying to figure out what it was.

"String silencer," Havi provided.

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“A what?”

“It silences the string,” he glanced her way then continued. “If you’re out in the middle of nowhere and you fire off an arrow, you don’t want the string making a pinging sound. Your hunt will hear it and spook. So, you add a silencer. Good find.”

“Gee, thanks.” They continued further into the forest and Paige stopped again. To the right of the path, she saw a branch that contained several strands of dark brown hair. Once again she pulled out her tweezers and an evidence bag. “Still think it was a guy?”

“I think...” Havilland studied her find. “That none of the Sutton’s have dark hair... not that dark. It might not belong to our suspect.”

“True,” Paige conceded. “But then again it might and our suspect isn’t a Sutton.”

Havilland shook his head and waited. “Could be a long haired male hippy out hugging trees, literally.”

Paige stepped from the trail and made her way through the thick brush looking for any sign the person responsible had headed this way.

“I only have one question for you, Forensics Expert Extraordinaire.”

“What?” Paige asked absently.

“If you’ve ever spent time in the woods, you know the only reason someone would make this detour is to take a dump. I’m wondering if you plan to use the tweezers or just grab the object with your hands. And if you use the tweezers, won’t that contaminate any future finds?”

Paige stopped abruptly. “If it’s a guy, you’re right. But if I’m right, she could have been looking for a place to pee. Unless you brought a shovel, I doubt we’ll be able to collect the liquid and have it analyzed. However, I’m happy to mark it if you want to come back and give it a go.”

Havilland grinned, he always enjoyed working with the Brainiac cop. Today was no exception.

Paige reached down and pulled out a pink and purple feather that was stuck in a bush. “I guess you still think our shooter was a guy?”

“Men like pink,” Havilland insisted.

“Really?” Paige pressed.

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“Sure, loads of them.” Havilland wasn’t ready to give in. “Gay men, Tranny’s... men who are secure in their masculinity. Why else would all the stores sell pink button downs, pink ties, pink...?”

“Okay, I get it,” Paige conceded. “But have you ever known a macho, arrow shooting man to use pink and purple camo feathers in their arrows?”

“No,” Havi drawled. “But there are a lot of guys I’ve never met and by the way, it’s called fletching not a feather.”

Paige shook her head and sighed. “It looks like the trail ended, so unless you want to get down on all fours and sniff for urine, I say it’s time to head back.”

“I don’t see any obvious wet spots,” Havilland observed. “Again, I think you’re jumping to conclusions with that feather. It could be the dark haired man or woman who was out here months ago... or last year. There is nothing tying that stuff to our case.”

“Says you,” Paige ignored him and returned to her car. “I’ll see tomorrow. It’s getting dark and I still have to book this stuff in at the station.”

Paige was seated at her kitchen table, sipping her second cup of coffee when Dax arrived with breakfast. He’d opted for McD’s this morning and Paige was thrilled. It had been a long time since she’d had a hot Sausage and Egg McMuffin.

“So,” Dax settled in across from her. “What’s the plan for today?”

“I think I’m going to drive the back roads. David was sure he saw a white SUV tearing away after Dylan was shot. There are a lot of cabins in those hills. If someone’s living out of one, I’ll find them.”

“You taking Gage along?”

“No,” Paige admitted. “I think I’m doing a solo run this time. Nobody believes me. They all think I’m crazy for pursuing someone other than the Newtons or a Sutton.”

Dax reached out and took her hand. “I think it’s smart, but I don’t think you should do this alone. I’d go...”

“But you can’t leave Zeus alone all day,” she understood his dilemma. “How’s the infection?” Zeus had spiked a high fever yesterday and after a trip to the local clinic, Dax discovered his friend had developed a serious infection in two of his wounds.

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“Stable,” Dax sighed. “I wish I could help you. I don’t like you headed so far into the wilderness alone. What about Logan? He might not believe you but he’s eager to please and he’s on light duty. At least it would give you another body, someone that could signal for help if you needed it.”

“I’ll call him,” Paige decided. Dax was right, she probably shouldn’t do this alone.

“That’s my girl,” he stood, pulled her forward for a brief kiss then headed for the door. “I’ll be anxiously awaiting your return. Be careful.”

Paige watched him leave and smiled. Since he’d returned, things had changed between them... for the better. For once in her life, she might actually be in a relationship that mattered. That thought both pleased and terrified her.

“I know it’s probably nothing,” Paige told Logan. “But I have to check. Stay here and watch for trouble. I’m just going to take a quick peak, then we can head home.”

Logan frowned. He didn’t like it, but she was the boss and he’d comply...for now.

Paige made her way through the thick trees and ultimately ended up on the edge of a clearing. The cabin was small and rustic but occupied. She settled in to watch and wait. The air was cool, but not cold. The fireplace must be the only source of heat. Made sense, they were out in the middle of nowhere. There was a small propane tank and she hadn’t spotted an outhouse so they must have running water. Most likely a well, the river was close by so they wouldn’t have to dig too deep before hitting their mark.

Paige caught her breath in surprise when a woman she recognized stepped onto the porch and began heating dinner on the outside grill. The smell of cooking meat settled over her and Paige realized just how hungry she was. She continued to watch for several minutes before she slid back into the shadows and made her way to the truck. The woman had dark brown hair... nearly black just like the strands she’d located near the Newton’s upper field. But why? There was no motive. There also wasn’t a car. Paige stood next to her vehicle, trying to remember the mother’s name. Holly? Her..Hannah. It was Hannah Russell. And her car must be parked in the small outbuilding next to the main cabin. Why not park closer to the house? To hide her white SUV? Or because she was worried some animal might destroy it? There was a million and one reasons she might park in the small building. Attempted murder wasn’t necessarily one of them.

Paige settled into the truck, started the engine and hooked a U-turn. She was done for the day. First thing, she’d start looking into the grieving mother who had lost her son in a hit-and-

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run accident over a month ago. There was a reason Hannah Russell had stuck around their small town. Paige was going to uncover that reason.

The following morning, Paige sat at her desk, stunned. Hannah Russell was her prime suspect... in everything. But why? Paige still didn't have a motive. Apparently, Hannah had been born and raised here in Manti. The cabin she was living in was still in her father's name so Paige assumed it was Hannah's childhood home. When she dug further, she found Hank Russell had died shortly after Hannah's eighteenth birthday. He was killed in a pileup on I-15 during a winter storm. Hannah surfaced in Price a few months later. As far as Paige could tell, the woman had lived there until a little more than a month ago when her son was found on the side of the road... Killed in some kind of accident. That case was still open and would likely remain that way forever. There were simply no clues to follow, no suspects to question, nothing to indicate how he died and who killed him. Even more strange, there hadn't been any tracks. The young man had died right next to the highway, on a dirt and gravel shoulder. Normally there would be tire tracks or black skid marks on the asphalt. Not this time. Paige had scoured the entire area and hadn't found a single clue. The final reason Paige knew she was on the right track? Hannah Russell owned a 2012 Jeep Cherokee, white in color.

Paige waited twenty minutes before she made her decision. She was alone in the office, well nearly alone. Jericho was in his office with the door shut. She had no idea where Gage was, but he'd complain if she tried to drag him along anyway. He still wasn't sold on the whole... a mysterious woman in a white SUV did it, theory. She slipped on her jacket and silently made her way to her car. She'd stop in, question Hannah with nothing too damning and get a feel for her reaction. Then she'd come back, enlist Gage and return with backup.

Jericho stepped from his office just in time to see Paige walk through the door. Where was she going this early? He instantly wondered if there was more trouble. She couldn't handle either family alone. Not with tensions running so high. He snatched up his keys and hurried out to follow her. Things had been so hectic since he returned, they hadn't had a chance to talk. This might present the perfect opportunity. When Paige made the left turn onto the dirt road, Jericho knew he was right. What was the girl thinking? With all the trouble, she had no business trying to handle any problem out here alone. He was surprised when she drove past the last family home and continued into the wilderness. He was even more surprised when she made a right turn onto a road that hadn't been used for years. Jericho racked his brain, trying to remember who had lived here.

Finally, it hit him. It was a man, that's right, a man and his daughter. What was his name? Henry... Harold... Hank. Hank Russell. He couldn't remember the kid's name but Hank's wife was not cut out for the rustic lifestyle Hank had chosen for his family. Tina Russell had skipped

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town with the first man that offered her a ride. She'd never returned and Jericho had always pitied the girl. It had to be a hard life, living off the land in the middle of nowhere with no mother and a father that was... Jericho's eyes widened. Hank Russell lived off the land. He hunted for his meat and since poaching was illegal, he used a bow and arrow. The man had won every archery competition at the Summer Festival up until the year he died. Paige could be walking into danger and not even know it.

Jericho parked his truck behind his deputy and searched the area for a sign she was near. Other than the truck, the place was vacant. He moved swiftly through the trees, he knew exactly where the cabin was located and hoped he made it in time.

Paige arrived at her spot from yesterday and continued walking. She'd just knock on the door, act surprised when she saw Hannah and go from there. She'd tell some tale about searching all the cabins in the area and ask her if she'd seen anything suspicious. Paige would know immediately if she'd found her suspect. As she ascended the stairs, she glanced around the patio and froze. This may have been a bad idea. She turned, knowing she had just found her suspect and hoping she could escape and return with help.

Hannah had obviously spent her evening making pipe bombs. Someone was in serious danger. There was no other explanation for the items on the front porch. Individually, sure. But when you put sections of cut and discarded four-inch black PVC pipe with the empty cans of black powder and the nearly empty package of cannon fuse... there was only one possibility. Hannah was going to blow something up and Paige had to figure out what and stop her. She was halfway across the clearing, headed for the forest when she heard the distinct sound of the screen door slamming shut.

"I wish you hadn't done that," Hannah said calmly.

Paige froze, then turned around to face the woman who had been causing trouble for the past few days. *Maybe longer*, she thought as she remembered Dax's question. Who let the dog out? Hannah Russell? Paige closed her eyes and tried to come up with a plan, but it was difficult when you were alone in the wilderness with a shotgun pointed at your chest. "Hadn't done what?"

"Nosed around where you don't belong," Hannah provided.

"I had a few questions, that's all," Paige tried to stall. "There was trouble down below, at the Newton's ranch yesterday. I was just making the rounds to see if anyone saw anything suspicious. You didn't happen to be home in the afternoon did you?"

"I know you saw what you shouldn't have seen. I just finished up and didn't have time to hide the leftovers. I hate to do it, but I can't have you interfering. Robert Sutton is going to pay for killing my boy."

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Paige frowned. “What makes you think Robert did it? I told you over a month ago Noah died in a hit-and-run accident. There weren’t any witnesses. Nothing to identify the person responsible. You pointed the finger at Robert back then but you never said why. And, I looked into it. Sutton has a solid alibi. He couldn’t have been on that road the day Noah died.”

“You’re lying,” Hannah accused. “You just want to protect him. Everyone protects Robbie.”

Jericho frantically tried to come up with a plan to save Paige. Only one thing came to mind. It was risky, but he had to try it. “Ms. Russell, drop the weapon and put your hands where I can see them. We’ve got you surrounded. There’s no way out of this. Cooperate and nobody has to get hurt.”

Paige was shocked the instant she heard the Sheriff’s voice. How had Jericho followed her without her knowing? Because she was so focused on the case, she hadn’t bothered to look around. Her worry intensified when Hannah left the porch and moved further into the clearing. She was focused on the forest and seemed to forget Paige was only a few feet away.

Suddenly, Hannah lifted the shotgun and aimed it into the trees. Paige didn’t stop to consider the risks. She lunged just as Hannah fired off her first shot. Paige collided with the side of Hannah’s body and they both tumbled to the ground. The shotgun slipped from Hannah’s hand and slid out of reach. Paige flipped the woman onto her stomach and cuffed her before Hannah even knew what happened.

“Nice arrest, deputy.” Jericho stepped from the shadows and stood next to Paige. “What did you find on the porch?”

“Leftovers,” Paige said grimly. “From pipe bombs. Big ones.”

“Robert Sutton?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say yes.” Paige glanced around, wondering where the others were. With the Sheriff, Gage, and Havi they certainly couldn’t have the place surrounded but Hannah didn’t know that.

“I’m it,” Jericho admitted. “I’m the force that had the place surrounded.”

“Are you nuts?” Paige asked, realizing they both could have been killed.

“No more than you are,” Jericho shrugged. “Any idea where she stashed the car? We need to know if the bombs are still here.”

“Don’t they have to be? I mean they won’t go off on their own. She’d have to light them.”

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“Probably,” Jericho agreed and pulled out his phone. “I’ll have Margie send help and notify the ATF. The feds are going to want to take over and I’m inclined to let them.”

Paige agreed, for the most part. “What about the rest? We turn the bombs over to the feds, but what about James, Dylan, the barn?”

“We’ll wait for the warrant,” Jericho decided. “The federal boys will bring one. Then, once we step inside you and I will keep our eyes out for a bow and arrow. Once we find it, we’ll get our own warrant and go from there. She’ll pay for what she’s done. And maybe this will be a valuable lesson for our good friends up the road. They were all so sure the other one was out to get them. They were both wrong.”

“So were we,” Paige admitted.

“Except you,” Jericho pointed out. “Even when the boys called you out and thought you were crazy, you still stuck with it. That’s what good police work is all about.” He walked away, pulled out his phone and made the call.

It was several hours later when Paige stepped into the interrogation room and studied Hannah Russell. The woman looked resigned, she knew her fate and she had accepted it. They didn’t really need a statement from her, the ATF had arrived with a warrant just as Jericho had predicted. The pipe bombs were stashed in the back of her white Jeep Cherokee, ready for transport. An SUV that happened to have a red bumper sticker on the back. Jericho had located the bow and several arrows with pink and purple camo fletching just like the one she’d found in the trees. A confession would tie everything together with a nice shiny bow, but Tolman said he was confident he could get a conviction without one.

The door opened and Agent Ricker with ATF settled into a chair across from Hannah. Paige moved forward and took the seat next to him.

“Ms. Russell,” Ricker began. “I will be conducting this interview for the ATF, Deputy Carter is representing the local police. I’m told the officer that transported you already read you Miranda. Do you understand that you have a right to remain silent and to have an attorney present during any questioning?”

“I do,” Hannah never made eye contact, she just stared blankly at the wall behind the two officers.

“And are you willing to talk to us today?”

Hannah nodded.

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“Hannah?” Paige began. “Do you remember me?”

“Yes,” she said flatly.

“From today or a month ago?”

“Both.”

“I know you suffered a terrible loss. The death of your son was a tragedy but when I spoke to you over a month ago, you indicated you would be returning to your home in Price. Can you tell me what happened to change your mind?”

Hannah shifted her gaze to look directly at Paige. “My son deserved justice.”

“I agree,” Paige told her. “But can you explain what you mean by that?”

“I told you Robbie killed my boy,” Hannah’s expression turned hard. “You wouldn’t listen. Robbie has this town wrapped around his finger. He was getting away with murder. I had to stay. I had to do something.”

“And what did you do, Ms. Russell?” Ricker asked. “Can you tell us how this all started?”

Hannah shifted her gaze to the stranger. “I drove out to daddy’s place. I thought maybe being there, where I grew up, might clear my head and... I don’t know, inspire me. It did, too. I was on my way home one night, driving up the dirt road when I saw ‘em. Charley and Chris were out there with the horses. The Sutton’s always loved their horses. That’s when I spotted the dog in that cage and I knew what I had to do. It was so easy. I grabbed the burger I’d bought for dinner and slipped onto the property without anyone noticing. Then I fed that stupid dog a little meat, slipped open the latch and watched, expecting the mutt to spook the horse. I was looking forward to the accident. I wanted to see a Sutton break his neck. I wanted to see them experience pain. That family had to pay for what they’d done. But it didn’t work. Instead, the dog ran across the street and got hit by the neighbor. I enjoyed watching the Newton’s panic and Charley get so mad he nearly had a stroke. That’s when I realized the feud was still going... daddy was sending me a message.

I hid at the cabin and watched and waited. Finally, I got my chance. I saw that boy walking home all alone. He looked so much like Robbie, I was sure it was one of his twins. I was so angry, it wasn’t right, his boy was alive and mine was dead. My entire body started to shake, I saw red and knew this was my chance to get even. I didn’t think, I just reacted. The truck jerked forward as I stomped on the gas. I hit that kid before he even knew I was coming, just like Robbie had hit Noah. Then I left him there, like Robbie left my precious son on the side of the road. He was supposed to die like Noah died, cold and alone. I was in town the next day when I learned I’d hit a Newton instead of a Sutton.” She shrugged as if that didn’t matter at all.

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“I was upset at first, but then I realized it was all part of daddy’s plan. He was guiding me from heaven, I felt it in my bones. The Newton’s would blame the enemy next door and nobody would suspect I had anything to do with it. The decades- long battle was going to work to my advantage. I’d have my revenge and nobody would ever suspect a thing.” A sadistic smile spread across Hannah’s face. “Burning down that barn was the most satisfying thing I ever did. I was looking through my old closet one night, trying to find my comfortable boots when I spotted the bow daddy gave me when I was ten. I remembered the stash of arrows on the shelf and a plan began to develop. Like I said, the Sutton’s loved horses more than most people. I knew this time my plan couldn’t fail, it was perfect. I soaked a bunch of rags in gasoline and attached them to the wooden arrows with twine. Then I wrapped three arrows with extra rags that I could catch on fire. I just shot a half dozen saturated arrows into the building then lit the others on fire. Once they hit their mark – whoosh! Mission accomplished. I headed back to the cabin and spent the night enjoying the succulent smell of burning barn.” Hannah frowned. “If your department hadn’t gotten involved, they would have lost a few of their precious animals.”

Paige sat across from a woman she had felt sorry for, horrified at the monster she had become. “And the Bull? The calf?”

Hannah shrugged. “They were just collateral damage. I shot them to get Robbie’s attention.”

“I don’t understand,” Ricker prompted. “They belonged to the Newton family. Were you punishing them as well?”

“No, they were just convenient,” Hannah shrugged. “I don’t have anything against the Newton’s. Not really. They were just handy. Robbie routinely rode to the upper field every afternoon like clockwork. I was lying in wait, prepared to make him pay. Killers are supposed to get the death penalty. It was justice, something this office wouldn’t act on. I didn’t have a choice. So, I killed those cows to get Robbie’s attention. I needed him to stop, to focus on the dead animals and provide the perfect shot. Once Robbie was out of the picture, I’d go home knowing my son’s death had been avenged.”

“So why did you shoot Dylan?” Paige needed to know. “You said you didn’t have anything against the Newton’s.”

“I didn’t want to,” Hannah admitted. “I was just there for Robbie. But he didn’t show and those two boys pulled up on the ATV. I thought I was well hidden, I didn’t think they’d see me, but that boy did. I saw the expression on his face change the instant he spotted me. Still, I didn’t react until he took two steps toward me. It was the only way I could slow them down long enough to escape. It was just an inconvenience, I could have killed him if I wanted to. His leg will be fine.”

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“Then what did you do?” Ricker asked. This was the part he needed, the information on the bombs.

“I was frustrated. Every plan I came up with was spoiled by someone else. That’s when I knew what I had to do. I had to take care of Robbie and his entire family. I had to do something big enough that nobody could interfere. I had to blow up his house,” Hannah provided. “I drove to the sporting goods store and got what I needed then I went home and cooked dinner. I cut the pipe into pieces last night and finished assembling the explosives this morning. I had just loaded them into the truck and stepped in the house to grab a garbage bag when you stuck your nose where it didn’t belong.” Hannah turned to glare at Paige. “You ruined everything. Robbie will never pay for what he did. He’s going to get away with murder and it’s all your fault.”

“I told you this before but I’m going to tell you again,” Paige took a deep breath. “Robert Sutton did not have anything to do with your son’s death. You claim Robert was angry when Noah showed up and informed him of his parentage. But there’s a huge problem with your theory, Robert Sutton didn’t know anything about Noah. Your son never made it to the Sutton farm.”

“That’s a lie,” Hannah screamed.

“It’s not a lie,” Paige said calmly. “Why would he lie? Why would I? Robert Sutton would have nothing to gain by denying it? Noah was nineteen, nearly twenty. Any relationship Robert had with you occurred long before he met his wife. He couldn’t be blamed for abandoning a son he didn’t know about. What is his motive? I’m sorry, but you have it all wrong. Your son died in a tragic hit-and-run accident. A heartbreaking incident that Robert Sutton had nothing to do with. I did investigate your claim... thoroughly. Over a month ago when you made the allegation. Robert Sutton has an air-tight alibi. He was not even in town the day your son was killed. I know losing your child was difficult, but you are blaming the wrong man. You attacked the wrong man.”

“Liar,” Hannah screamed again.

“This interview is over,” Ricker decided. “You will be transported to a federal facility where you will await trial on domestic terrorism charges. Get used to living in a cell, Ms. Russell.” He stood and motioned for Paige to join him as he exited the room.

It was nearly an hour later when Paige stepped through the front door, released her gun belt, kicked off her boots and dropped onto the sofa. What a day. First, she could have died. The only thing that saved her was Jericho. His comment about being a good cop had caught her by surprise. Obviously, Margie had overheard her telling Gage she was leaving and had ratted her

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out to the boss. Oh, well. That was a problem for another day. Tonight she was going to veg on the couch and be grateful... and a little sad. Grateful the war between the Sutton's and the Newton's was over... for now. Grateful they'd finally solved all the mysteries surrounding the trouble. Hannah was responsible for most of it, but the kids had jumped in and done the rest.

David Newton admitted he was the one that fed the Sutton horses bad hay along with a little help from his brother, Keith. Toby and Harlan Newton confessed to slashing the tires. All four boys were let off with a warning and a commitment to perform thirty hours of community service. Jericho got to decide what that service would be and he planned to make the group work together. Hopefully, it would prevent any problems in the future. This generation may never get along, but with any luck... the next one would at least find a way to be civil.

The one loose end she couldn't tie up was Noah Russell's death. Everything about that case was a mystery. She didn't have anything to follow up on. No indication of what had happened, no tire tracks or skid marks, no broken lights or paint fragments, nothing. The ME said there were signs on the body that the kid had crawled some distance after his injuries were sustained, but from where? And how had he ended up on the shoulder of the road in the middle of the night? Unless someone came forward, the case would remain unsolved... forever. Paige frowned. Hannah Russell would never get closure. A grieving mother was going to spend the rest of her life in prison. Her son's mysterious death had set a series of events in motion that had impacted dozens of lives. It felt wrong that case would never be resolved. A clear miscarriage of justice. The file would remain open but inactive. She had a feeling that status would never change.

Paige jumped at the knock on her door. She knew it wasn't Dax, he always came through the back. So who in the world had stopped by to visit this late in the evening? She snatched up her gun and slowly flipped the deadbolt, sliding the door open a few inches. She smiled when she saw her boss and swung the door open wide. Jericho was now focused on her weapon.

"I guess I'd better be careful about what I say," he said grinning. "Can I come in, we need to talk."

Paige took a step backward and waited for Jericho to enter before slowly sliding the door closed and returning to the couch. Jericho took a seat across from her.

"Margie told me you plan to quit," he said, taking the direct approach. "I'm here to ask you to reconsider."

"Why?"

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“Because I knew when I hired you our department needed someone like you. I still believe that, in spite of everything that’s happened since.”

“I’ve been trying to get you alone,” Paige admitted. “I wanted to apologize weeks ago, but you’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been honoring your wishes,” Jericho corrected. “I guess I should have considered the possibility you may have changed your mind, but I took what you said at face value.”

“I’m sorry for what I said,” Paige said seriously. “I was angry. And you were holding back on me. I think...” she paused, to consider her next words carefully. “I think we both held back. I should have trusted you but you should have trusted me, too. I’ve been looking through that file, the one you had Margie give me. There’s a lot of information, a lot that wasn’t in the original report.”

Jericho nodded. “I told you I was the one to find Chaya.”

“Right,” Paige took a deep breath. “About that. Well, I know it must have been difficult. More so because you thought she wanted everything to remain a secret.”

“She did want that,” Jericho corrected. “She insisted on it. I know she had her reasons, some I didn’t understand but I had to honor my promise. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Here’s the part where I share something with you,” Paige stood and walked to the back room where she kept the letter. The one addressed to the mysterious J. She returned to the living room and held it out to Jericho. “I read it. I’m sorry, I know it was personal, but I did. Now, I’m turning it over to its rightful owner. I hope that helps in some way and if you’re willing, I think it might benefit both of us if we started to work together. To figure this all out, I mean. You’re disappearing at odd times and I’m trying to catch up but we’re working the same case.”

Jericho’s hands shook as he read the last thoughts of the woman he loved. Oh, how he wished she’d given this to him before she went out to meet her killer. There were so many things he would have done differently had he only known. For starters, the world would know she was his. He looked up at Paige - another woman he had come to care for. This time in a fatherly way. He took a deep breath and forced a smile. “I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.” He paused, considered then asked. “Does that mean you’ll stay?”

“I’ll stay,” she decided. “And maybe, sometime... we could talk about mom. We could learn to share her, our memories and celebrate her life. Out in the open, where it should be.”

Jericho stood. “I think I’d like that, too.”

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Paige watched as Jericho Walters slowly made his way to his car. Something inside shifted and for once, she knew she'd done the right thing. It had been a long time since she'd felt this certainty and... Peace. December of last year to be exact.