

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Innocent Strategy *Season 1, Episode 9*

by:

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“Margie,” Paige called over the police radio. “Can I get a case number, then I’ll be clear and available if anything else comes in.”

Margie relayed the number within seconds. “Are you heading out now?”

“Affirmative,” Paige responded. “Jason Bennett, the complainant, is also the owner and he’s pretty upset someone stole his new skis. I’m sending you the serial number and other details. Can we get it listed in the national database right away?”

“I’ll take care of that if you’ll head over to the market and handle a shoplifter,” Margie bargained.

“Sure,” Paige stopped at the end of the Bennett’s drive before making a right onto the highway. “What do we know?”

“That’s about it,” Margie admitted. “The Manager, a Daniel Wardle, has the suspect secured in a room and is requesting the police. No additional information at this time.”

“Okay,” Paige sighed. “I’ll update you after I arrive.” Chances were pretty good that shoplifting complaints would increase during the holidays but Paige expected them to come from Walmart or Jensen’s Department store, not the local market. She pulled into the lot and parked next to the door. She was rummaging in the back for her notepad when a man in his late forties, early fifties approached her vehicle.

“Officer, thank you for coming so quickly,” he held out his hand.

Paige frowned, straightened and studied the man. Finally, she gave his hand a quick shake and secured her vehicle. “You called this in?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Daniel Wardle, store manager. Most people call me Dan. I have the thief secured in an office. I want her prosecuted. This is not the first time she’s stolen from me. I don’t care if it’s the holidays. Theft is theft.”

“Okay,” Paige followed the slightly overweight manager into the store, through a door and ultimately arrived in an office area. “Did you recover the items?”

Dan frowned. “Well, that’s a bit of a problem. Not exactly.”

“Did this person shoplift or not?” Paige demanded.

“Yes,” Wardle insisted. “It’s just... well, um... she won’t tell us anything and she doesn’t actually have the items on her.”

Paige sighed. This was beginning to sound like a wild goose chase. “Where is the person you have in custody? I’d like to speak with her myself.”

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Wardle motioned to a closed door as he stared defiantly at Paige. *Oh goodie, this should be fun.* Paige thought as she pushed open the door and entered the room. She had only taken one small step when she noticed the young girl. She paused to glance back at the annoyed manager before sliding the door completely shut.

Misty glanced up and spotted the policewoman. Her heart started beating faster and she swallowed hard. She just hoped Jack had gotten Seth away from the store before the mean man had caught her. Seth needed the milk. If Jack got Seth home, at least they would be okay...for a little while. Misty lowered her eyes to her lap. If she didn't say anything, maybe she wouldn't go to jail.

Paige moved forward and settled into one of office chairs. "Hi," she said softly. The girl was terrified enough as it was, she had to go slow here. "I'm Paige, can you tell me your name?"

Misty looked up, then dropped her gaze back to her lap. Should she tell them her name? If not, she'd be listed as Jane Doe, just like on TV. Then nobody would find her and Jack would be scared. "Misty," she whispered softly.

"Good, that's good Misty. You don't have to be afraid," Paige continued. "I'm just here to find out what happened. Is you mom or dad with you in the store?"

"No," Misty shook her head.

"You came here by yourself?" Paige pressed.

"Yes," Misty lied. She had to protect Jack and Seth.

"Okay," Paige settled further into her chair. This might take a while.

"So," she tried to sound casual. "The manager says you took something. Is that true?"

Misty didn't answer. She did steal, but she'd sent it with Jack. There was no way she was going to admit that.

"Okay, let's leave that for later." Paige wasn't sure how to get through to this girl. Getting to the point wasn't going to work, maybe just a little get to know you session was in order.

"How old are you, Misty?"

"Ten," she said softly.

"Ten," Paige considered. "So, that would mean you are in... fifth grade?"

Misty nodded.

"Wow," Paige smiled. "Pretty soon you're going to move to Junior High then. Are you excited?"

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Misty shrugged.

Okay then, that didn't work. Paige considered carefully. "Misty, if you came here by yourself do your parents know you are here?"

Misty shrugged.

"You know," Paige said. "I'm going to have to call one of them. Which one would be best?"

"For what?" Misty asked. She didn't have anything on her. Maybe they had a camera but it would show Jack leaving with the stuff, not her. She wasn't sure what they were going to do with her but she wasn't telling them anything.

"Well," Paige frowned. *Fair question, kid.* "That's a good point. Can you stay here for a minute while I talk to the manager?"

Misty nodded.

Paige stood and left the room.

"Well?" Dan asked. "Are you going to arrest her?"

"For what exactly?" Paige asked. "You said you didn't find anything on her. What exactly do you think she stole?"

"I don't know," Dan swallowed. "I saw her back in the milk and dairy section. She had a carton of milk when she walked away. Plus, I saw her with a box of granola bars."

"Okay," Paige frowned. "So, if she shoplifted, where are they?"

"I don't know, okay?" Dan said in frustration. "But Blaire tried to cover for her. She rang up a half gallon of milk and the bars and paid for them herself. She's going to be disciplined for that but she still refuses to cooperate. She claims she doesn't know the girl."

"Wait," Paige held up a hand. "Are you telling me you want this girl charged with shoplifting merchandise that someone else paid for?"

"Well, yes. But technically the girl did steal it. It's just that one of my cashiers felt sorry for her and paid the bill herself," Dan held firm. "And the girl still took the stuff. That's theft."

"Actually," Paige sighed. "It's a civil problem. And unfortunately for you... the cashier is the second party, not the store. I'm going to need to speak with this cashier. Immediately," Paige added when Dan just stood there.

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“Fine,” Wardle marched out the door. Moments later he returned with a woman in her late twenties.

“Do you have somewhere we can speak in private?” Paige asked Dan.

Dan looked around the room, clearly pointing out they were alone.

“I need a private conversation with...” Paige focused on the woman. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Blaire,” she said immediately. “Blaire Duffy.”

“I need a place I can speak with Ms. Duffy, alone,” Paige said again.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that,” Daniel objected. “The incident took place in my store and therefore I must be present.”

“Suit yourself,” Paige moved to the door. “Blaire, if you decide you want to discuss the situation involving you and Misty, give Margie a call at the station.”

“You can’t just leave!” Dan bellowed. “I want that girl charged.”

“I can,” Paige said calmly. “As far as I can ascertain, no crime has been committed. I highly suggest you free that little girl immediately before her parents call us and request charges be filed against you for kidnapping.” Paige stepped into the open area of the market and waited, knowing Dan would suddenly change his mind. He did.

“Deputy Carter,” Dan said contritely.

Paige smiled. “Yes?”

“I may have acted in haste. There is another office you could utilize to speak with Blaire if you feel it is absolutely necessary,” he added.

“Necessary?” Paige shrugged. “Nope, I believe I’m finished here. Have a nice day Mr. Wardle.”

“Wait,” he said immediately as he placed a hand on her arm. “I mean, well... I would really appreciate it if you would speak with Blaire. I think she might be able to shed some light on the situation,” Wardle corrected.

“Hum,” Paige hesitated. “Well, okay. I have time to talk to Blaire, if that’s what she wants.” She stepped back into the office area and waited for Dan Wardle to lead them down the hallway. “I’ll be out here, watching the other door to make sure the child doesn’t sneak out.”

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Paige closed the door and studied the woman in question. “As far as I’m concerned, this is a civil problem. The moment you paid for the merchandise... what happened to the milk and the granola bars, anyway?” Paige asked.

“I don’t know,” Blaire admitted. “I just saw the girl with the boys and figured they needed a little help. I think maybe the boys took the stuff but I can’t be sure.”

“Boys?” Paige pressed. “Misty said she was here alone.”

“I well...” she glanced at the closed door.

“Whatever you tell me inside this room will not be repeated to your boss,” Paige assured her.

“They’ve been in before. The first time I noticed her was a couple months back,” Blaire admitted. “Then, sporadically since then. That first day, she took a package of diapers. She’s taken odds and ends since then; some cereal, bananas, a package of hotdogs, stuff like that. I paid for the stuff each time I saw her. Nobody caught me before. I guess what I’m doing is against store policy or something but those kids looked like they really needed it. It’s not much for me but if a kid like that steals milk and diapers, not candy bars and goofy toys, you know she needs it, you know?”

Paige considered. “Have you ever seen them in here with a parent?”

“Never,” Blaire shook her head. “I tried to talk to the girl once, but she spooked. Took off running. It was awhile before she came back. I figured they’re neglected or abused or something but I couldn’t get close enough to find out. So, I just helped out a little. I should have that right. You know, to buy that food and stuff if I want. It’s my money, ain’t it?”

“It is,” Paige agreed. “And as far as I’m concerned you do. You are not in trouble with me or my office. As far as that goes, neither is Misty. Except she lied and I’d like to know why.”

“Her name is Misty?” Blaire asked. “Well, I guess next time I’ll know what to call her then. But, if she’s needy and comes back here, Mr. Wardle is not going to cut her any breaks.”

“I agree,” Paige opened the door. “Have a nice day Blaire Duffy.”

Dan stepped forward. “That’s it? That’s all? What are you going to do with the girl?”

“I’m going to see if I can give her a ride home,” Paige walked past the man and approached the door.

“What kind of message is that for a kid who steals? Go ahead, no problem. Someone else will just pay for it. Don’t worry about sneaking things out that don’t belong to you.” Dan ranted.

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Paige stopped and turned. “Mr. Wardle,” she paused and waited for him to acknowledge her. “You told me yourself that you did not recover any merchandise. What exactly did that girl steal?”

“That doesn’t matter,’ he insisted.

“In the eyes of the law, it matters significantly.”

“Fine,” he seethed. “But I don’t want her back here. If she so much as steps foot in my parking lot, I will have her charged with trespassing. You make sure she knows that.”

Paige shook her head at the insufferable tyrant and entered the room where Misty still sat. “So,” she said casually. “I learned something from one of the cashiers. You lied to me.”

Misty’s head shot up and she looked in wide-eyed panic at Paige. What if she wasn’t able to go home? Jack might panic and do something stupid.

“Were they your brothers?” Paige asked softly. This girl was twitchy and terrified. Paige wanted to know why.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“And your parents? I told you I would need to contact them and I will,” Paige said as she settled into the chair once again.

“I don’t have a dad,” Misty mumbled. “And my mom is at work. You can’t talk to her until she gets home.”

“And when will that be?” Paige pressed.

Misty shrugged. “She gets home when we’re asleep. I don’t know.”

“Maybe I could call her at work and let her know you’re okay,” Paige offered.

“I don’t have a number. She says we can’t bother her there,” Misty added.

“What if you have an emergency?” Paige questioned.

“Then we call the police,” Misty shrugged.

Paige grinned, the kid had an answer for everything. She scowled when she heard the manager pacing outside. “How about I drive you home and we’ll talk more about it then.” She stood and waited. “It’s not a request. Let’s go,” she added when Misty remained frozen in her seat.

A loud screeching sound filled the room as Misty slowly pushed back her chair and stood. She didn’t want anyone to know where she lived. She was worried now. She’d messed up.

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Hopefully, Jack and Seth would be home and locked inside by now. This was all so hard. A tear slowly slid down her cheek as she started to cry.

Paige's heart melted at the young girl that was trying to act so tough. "It's okay, kid." She wrapped an arm around the girls' shoulders and realized just how tiny she really was. A sinking feeling settled in her gut and she was pretty sure Blaire was right. Some kind of abuse or neglect was at play here. She directed Misty out the door and far away from the crazy store manager. What a heartless monster. How could anyone look at this frightened kid and not want to help?

Once they were settled inside the patrol car, Paige turned to look at Misty. "If you're stealing food, I'd guess you're hungry. How about we stop and grab a burger and fries before I drop you off?"

"Really?" Misty asked, studying Paige for a trick.

"Really," Paige said as she pulled into the drive-up. "How many burgers? Two or three?"

"I have two brothers if that's what you're asking," Misty said cautiously.

Paige smiled. "This isn't an interrogation, Misty. I just need to know how much food to buy. No hidden agenda. No grown-up tricks going on here. Just a simple number, that's all I'm looking for."

"Three, including me."

"Three it is," Paige pulled forward and began speaking into the box.

Paige took the bags of food and passed them to Misty. "Okay, where to?"

"Umm," Misty hesitated. "Can you just drop me back at the grocery store?"

"Sorry," Paige shook her head. "The manager doesn't want you back there. He said if you return, he wants you charged with trespassing."

Misty's eyes grew wide. "Can he do that?"

"I'm afraid so," Paige glanced at the girl as she pulled from the drive-through and parked in the lot. "Misty, what you did was wrong."

Misty shifted uncomfortably. She knew it was wrong, but she was desperate.

"Do you know what consequences are?" Paige pressed.

"I guess," Misty mumbled.

"Explain it to me," Paige inquired.

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“I guess... if you do something bad, something bad happens to you,” Misty said as she glanced out the window.

“Sort of,” Paige smiled. “It means every action creates a Domino effect.”

“I don’t understand,” Misty admitted.

“Dominos?” Paige shook her head. “Okay, let me put it this way. Pretend a person is driving home and realizes she has a flat tire. She pulls over and tries to figure out what to do. As she stares into the trunk of the car, a passerby stops and helps. The woman is sent on her way, thankful for the help. She pulls into a parking lot and sees an elderly lady struggling to load her groceries into her car. She remembers how it felt to be helped when she needed it, so she stops and helps the lady. That lady gets home and sees a local teen shoveling the driveway for her neighbor. She immediately goes inside and gathers up a few Christmas cookies and a mug of hot chocolate. The boy, rejuvenated, decides to clear out a few more neighbors driveways. And the list continues to go on. Dominos!”

“So,” Misty considered. “When you do something good, the Dominos are good. And when you do something bad, the Dominos are bad?”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “Taking things that don’t belong to you is wrong. You’re not in trouble with me because one of the cashiers decided to pay for everything you have taken. But the Domino effect is that the manager doesn’t want you in his store again. Plus, the cashier got into trouble for helping.”

Misty’s head shot around and she stared at the cop. “But you said if you do something good, good things happen. Something good should happen to the cashier that helped me. She shouldn’t be in trouble. I don’t want anyone to be in trouble.”

Paige smiled. “Just because she got into trouble at work, doesn’t mean something good won’t happen outside of work. She might get a nice big surprise for her generosity. But you can’t steal things anymore. Do you understand?”

Misty swallowed the lump in her throat. She didn’t want to steal but she had to take care of Jack and Seth.

Paige studied the girl. She was in trouble and needed a friend, not a lecture. “Enough about that. Let’s get you home before those fries get cold. There’s nothing worse than cold fries and I bet your brothers are hungry, too.”

Misty looked out the window again. Paige was a cop but she’d done something nice when she bought them dinner. Maybe it would be okay to tell the cops where she lived. Maybe her mom was wrong about this, too. “Okay,” she brushed away another tear. “Go that way, I’ll tell you where to turn.”

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Paige pulled from the lot, made each turn as Misty directed and ultimately left the highway to travel down a long driveway. The first thing she noticed was a lack of vehicle tracks. The snow was almost melted, but it didn't appear a car had driven the dirt trail at all. *What day did it snow?* Paige tried to remember. She was positive it had been at least three days. Maybe Misty's mother took the bus. But the buses didn't run in the middle of the night. Something was not right here. She brought the vehicle to a stop in front of the run-down house. It looked more like a summer cabin than a family home. The wooden structure needed repairs for sure. The paint was peeling around the wood door frame, there was a wooden panel nailed haphazardly to one side, probably to seal seams that had opened up. The stairs leading to the front porch were old concrete that was sluffing off on the edges and the rock foundation had a few holes where sections of rocks had fallen out or crumbled under the pressure. As a whole, not unsafe but certainly not ideal.

Misty glanced at the police officer who was studying her house. She wondered what the lady was thinking but didn't dare ask. Instead, she pushed open the car door and struggled to carry the bags on her own. When the cop climbed from the car and took two of the bags, leaving her with one bag and the carton holding three chocolate shakes, Misty considered her options. She didn't want the lady inside her house, but the cop had already forced her way into Misty's life and she was afraid it was only the beginning.

Paige had just stepped onto the porch when the front door flew open and a small child of about five stood in the opening.

Misty panicked, then relaxed. "Jack, take these into the kitchen, okay?" She shoved the items she'd been holding into her brother's arms and turned to grab the bags from the policewoman. "I got this. Thanks for the ride."

Paige hesitated then handed Misty a business card. "I need your mom to call me." She silently studied the young girl. "I'm not going to drop this. You know that. Have your mom call me when she gets home." Then she turned and walked back to her car.

Misty rushed into the house and ran to the window. She watched as the police car disappeared down their long driveway. Once the car was gone, she joined Jack in the kitchen. "Where is Seth?"

"Sleeping. He wouldn't stop crying. I couldn't get him to stop," Jack admitted. "I'm sorry. He stepped in water. I wanted to get us home but his feet got wet. Then he sat in the snow and cried. His pants were completely soggy. He wouldn't stand up and I had to drag him all the way home. We were both so cold and wet. I took off the soggy clothes and wrapped him in a blanket. As soon as I finished, he crawled under the bed and cried until he was sleeping."

Misty put a hand on Jack's arm. "It's okay. You got him home. I'll go get him. We need to eat."

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“This is really all for us?” Jack asked as he pulled out a carton of fries.

“Yep,” Misty smiled. “I’ll get Seth and we’ll have a real dinner.”

Seth was sleeping under the bed with his legs poking out. Misty crouched and gently pulled on his feet until he was clear of the bed. Then she began to pull on a dry pair of sweats and added some socks. Seth rubbed his eyes, curled up and started to fall back to sleep. “Seth, you have to wake up. Do you want some fries?”

Seth rubbed his eyes again and pushed his lip out in a pout. “Fies?”

“And ice cream,” Misty said standing. “I promise you’ll like it. But you have to come downstairs.” She held out her hand.

“Okay,” the sleepy toddler slowly rose to his feet. Misty took advantage and pulled a warm sweatshirt over his head before he could protest. Then she took his hand and led him down to the kitchen.

Paige slowly strolled to her desk and dropped into her chair. She studied the contents of the bag and sighed. *Cold fries*. She hated cold fries. Paige dropped the carton into the garbage and unwrapped her burger. Her mind was stuck on Misty and her brother’s. They were so young. The little boy couldn’t be more than five. She wondered how old the other brother was. Did he fall between Misty and Jack or was he younger? He must be younger if Paige was stealing diapers a few months ago. What about their parents? Misty said she didn’t have a dad. Was that because he’d left them? Or had he ever been a part of their life at all? The kids were obviously close, but that didn’t necessarily mean they all had the same father. She had just finished her lunch when her boss stepped through the back door. Paige stood and followed him into his office.

“Oh, hey Paige.” Jericho removed his leather coat and hung it on a hook on the far wall. “What’s up? Margie said you had a shoplifter but I didn’t see anyone back in the cells. Did you cite and release?”

“No,” Paige settled into a chair. “It was a young girl. That’s what I needed to talk to you about.”

“Okay,” Jericho settled into his chair. “Talk.”

“I was wondering if I could work a split shift,” Paige requested. “It’s pretty slow and Dean just came on duty. I’d like to head home and come back tonight, work the graveyard if that’s okay.”

“Why?” Jericho studied his deputy.

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“The kid,” Paige began. “Misty. My shoplifter. There’s something going on with her and her brothers. I’d like to camp out, watch the driveway.”

“By kid you mean...?”

“She said she’s ten,” Paige provided. “Her brother looks about five.”

Jericho frowned. “What did she take?”

“Milk and granola bars,” Paige said, frowning.

“How did you handle it?” Jericho asked, a kid stealing food didn’t seem normal.

“Well,” Paige sighed. “I bought her and her brothers burgers, fries and shakes then took her home.”

“And the theft?” Jericho wondered.

“The girl didn’t have anything on her and one of the cashiers paid for the items the manager claimed she took. I concluded it was at best a civil problem and Blaire, that’s the cashier, didn’t want to file a complaint,” Paige explained.

“And the manager?”

“Was pissed,” Paige admitted. “And insisted she’s not welcome at his store in the future. I told her to stay away. If I ever get to talk to her mother, I’ll explain the situation.”

“If?” Jericho frowned.

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “That’s why I want to work the split. Misty said her mom was at work and normally gets home after the kids are already asleep. I’d like to check it out. I’m worried about neglect... maybe even abuse.”

“But you left the kids there alone?” Jericho considered.

“I didn’t have a reason not to. They had coats and boots, sure Misty technically shoplifted but once the cashier paid the bill there was no reason to bring her in.”

“Where does the mother work?” Jericho asked. “Maybe you should head over and talk to her now.”

“That’s the thing,” Paige sighed. “Misty said she doesn’t know. Claims she doesn’t even have a number. Her mother told her to call the police if there was a problem. The kid’s ten and smart. She’s more than responsible enough to babysit for a few hours.”

“Then why the split shift?” Jericho asked. He agreed, something was off but he wanted to hear Paige’s take on the situation.

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Paige shrugged. “My gut is telling me something is not right with that family. I just want to hang out, wait for the kid’s mother to come home and talk to her myself.”

“I doubt you’re going to figure this out with one conversation, but go ahead,” Jericho approved. “Let me know what the mother says. And, tell her if she’s going to leave her kids home alone they need more of a contact than call the police.”

“Will do,” Paige stood. “I’m also going to do my best to get inside that house. If there’s no food, do I have your blessing to remove them? Even temporarily?”

“I trust you,” Jericho sat back. “You have my blessing. Do what’s right for the kids. The rest will work itself out.”

“Thanks,” Paige started for the door. “I’ll let you know what I find. See you tomorrow.”

Jericho nodded and watched as Paige walked from the room. He was finding it difficult to get her alone. He needed to have a conversation with her but the timing had to be right. Not while she was working a case. *Oh, well.* Jericho thought. He’d waited this long a few more days wouldn’t hurt.

It was nearly five in the morning and Misty’s mother still hadn’t shown. Paige was parked on the highway next to the driveway where she had a clear view. She’d already checked the bus schedule, the last run was hours ago. She’d wait a little longer, grab a couple hours sleep then head back and talk to Jericho. It was beginning to look like three little kids had been abandoned but Paige wasn’t ready to jump to conclusions just yet.

An hour later, Paige finally decided to head home. As she pulled into the driveway, she glanced next door. Dax still hadn’t made it back from Washington. *What was taking so long?* Nathan said the screening process would only take a couple days, but Dax had been gone for nearly a week now. She hoped nothing had gone wrong. Based on what the General had said, Dax should pass his security clearance... no problem. So, why was he still back east? She needed his input on the Misty situation. Okay, not really. But she missed their breakfast routine. She missed Dax.

She pushed through the door and headed upstairs. Misty, Jack and her feelings for Dax would have to wait. Right now, she needed sleep. She moved to the window to pull the blinds closed then hesitated. A chill ran down her spine and she focused on the tree line. Was someone watching her again? Paige frowned, moved to turn out the light and walked back to the window. She stood frozen for several minutes but the feeling was gone now. If someone had been there, he was gone. She lowered the blackout screen and climbed into bed. She’d check out the area when she got up, it would be light then and easier to find any clues that may have been left.

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Daniel slid further into the trees as anger surged through him. Paige Carter had been working all night and he was no closer to finding her files than he had been before. He'd had the perfect opportunity to gain access to her home and failed again. He was running out of time, Dax Hamilton wasn't going to be out of town forever. He was beginning to believe there was no hope, no way inside, no way to find out what she was constantly studying. He'd eliminated Chaya only to face the same tenacity from her daughter years later. But Paige hadn't been here when the initial incident happened. The catalyst that had put this all in motion. She didn't know anything about it. She couldn't. So if he could just avoid her from here on out, maybe he would be safe. One encounter with the stubborn, arrogant woman was enough. He'd just stay out of her way from here on out and he'd be fine. Daniel practically chanted that mantra all the way back to his car. *Everything will be okay, Everything will be okay...* he was still distracted as he slid behind the wheel and cautiously drove away.

Paige woke to snow. She stood in front of the window watching the large white flakes fall from the sky as she sipped her coffee. So much for searching the area for clues. Anything that was there, would now be gone and she'd never know if someone had been out there or not. It was going to drive her crazy, the not knowing. Her instincts told her she was right, someone was still watching her. But was that enough? Should she report her suspicions to Jericho or just stay alert? Nope, she was keeping this one to herself. Jericho's protectiveness had eased over the past few weeks and she didn't want him on full alert again. Anyway, he was clearly investigating something of his own. Something he was stressed about but not sharing with the team. She'd wait and talk to Dax when he got home. She had other things to worry about today... three young kids and a missing mother.

An hour later Paige was in her patrol car, headed for the office. She needed to talk to Jericho about Misty and her brothers.

"Paige?" Margie's voice came over the radio.

"Go ahead," Paige answered immediately.

"What's your twenty?" Margie asked.

"I'm just pulling out of my driveway, why?"

"Can you respond to the corner of Main and third? We have a car off the road, collided with the tree, which toppled and struck the Chevron sign. I'm told there are injuries. Fire's already enroute."

"On it," Paige said as she flipped on her emergency equipment and headed for the crash.

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“I hate her,” Jack said. He was curled up on the couch near tears.

“Who?” Misty asked as she stood over him and added another blanket to the throw blanket he was already using.

“Mom,” he said softly. “I hope she never comes back.”

“You don’t mean that,” Misty argued. “We need her.”

“We do not,” Jack insisted.

Misty sighed as she sat next to her brother. She didn’t want to cry, but tears started to fall. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Go to the store,” Jack urged. “Get him some medicine.”

“I can’t,” Misty shook her head. “The manager said if I go back, he’ll have me arrested.”

“Then I’ll go,” Jack suggested.

“You’re sick, too,” Misty argued. “And it’s too cold out there. You might get lost.”

“I won’t get lost,” Jack pouted. He pushed off the blankets and stood. “I’m going.”

“Jack,” Misty argued. “You can’t.”

“I’m going,” Jack said again. “I won’t get lost. We’ve been there a gazillion times.”

Misty smiled. “That’s not a word.”

“Is too,” Jack said as he stepped into his winter boots. “How do I know which medicine to get?” he frowned.

“We need baby Tylenol,” Misty told him. “Wait, let me get the empty bottle. You can take it with you.” She rushed out of the room as Jack pulled on his coat and gloves. Misty slid the bottle into Jack’s pocket then grabbed her scarf and wrapped it around his neck and ears. “Be careful and come straight home. I’m going to worry until you get here. And don’t be obvious. You need to pick up a couple things, then put them back down before you pick up the Tylenol. Then, pick up two at the same time and set one of them back down. Don’t leave right away. Walk around the store for a minute, then come straight home.”

Jack rolled his eyes at his sister. “I know!”

Misty gave her brother a hug and opened the door. “Be careful, okay?”

“Okay,” Jack said as he turned and walked outside.

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Jack slowly made his way down the driveway then across the road that was usually busy. Tonight, it was snow packed and slippery but he couldn't see any cars. He was proud of himself, he only fell once and was really glad he didn't get run over before he got up. Once he reached the other side, he walked to the funny tree that told him the right pathway to take. It was a shortcut they always used and would lead right to the market. The trail was covered in snow and Jack had a hard time knowing if he was still on the path or not. He had to stop every few steps and look around to make sure he was going in the right direction. The trees looked different with all their branches covered in snow. He was so cold and terrified he was lost and heading in the wrong direction when he saw the old barn. His heart soared. He was almost there. Jack immediately picked up his pace. He had to hurry, Seth was really sick and his sister was going to be worried if he took too long. Maybe he could follow his own tracks on the way home.

Jack made his way up the sidewalk, crossed the parking lot and entered the store. He didn't even look around, just began to walk up and down the aisles. He finally made it to the row with the medicine. But when he reached into his pocket to pull out the empty bottle, it was gone. That's when he began to panic. What was he going to do? He needed that bottle to know what medicine to get Seth and he'd lost it. Maybe it fell out on the road. He'd been so worried about getting run over, he hadn't checked to make sure he still had the bottle. Tears ran down his face as he stared at all the boxes. Maybe he could guess. He frantically searched the shelf, studying one box after another trying to remember what the bottle Misty gave him looked like. All of them looked different than the bottle, though. He would have to open them up and look inside to find the right one, it was his only option. Jack slowly reached for the shelf, his hand shook as he wrapped his tiny fingers around one of the boxes. He bit his bottom lip as he carefully tore open the top of the flap then jumped and let out a scream when a strong hand wrapped around his neck. Jack looked up to see an angry, mean looking man glaring at him.

"Come with me young man," Daniel Wardle said as he pulled the kid towards the back. The kid started to cry, *like that was going to matter*. What was wrong with parents these days? Did nobody teach their kids right from wrong anymore?

Blaire spotted the boy the instant he stepped into the store. She'd watched as best she could but when Mrs. Donaldson stepped up with a large basket full of items, she'd lost track of him. Moments later she watched in horror as her manager marched the frightened, tearful child into the back office.

"Here's your receipt," she handed Mrs. Donaldson the long strip of paper. "Be careful out there."

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Donaldson said tucking the receipt into her large purse. "What do you think that young boy did? You look worried, is everything okay?"

Innocent Strategy

“I don’t know,” Blaire admitted. “His sister was in yesterday. She took some milk and Mr. Wardle called the police. I’m worried he was trying to steal something tonight and my boss must have caught him.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Donaldson frowned. “Milk huh? That’s unusual for a child.”

“Yeah,” Blaire frowned and glanced toward the back office.

“How did the encounter with his sister go?” Donaldson asked. “I mean, did the cop arrest her?”

“No,” Blaire smiled. “Deputy Carter was wonderful with her.”

“Well...” Donaldson trailed off. “Maybe you should call him.”

“Oh,” Blaire considered. “It was a her and that’s a wonderful idea. Thank you,” Blaire pulled out her phone and dialed the number Paige had given her.

“Carter,” Paige said as she climbed into her car to try to get warm. Her toes were so cold she couldn’t feel them any longer. She absently watched Frank hook onto another vehicle as she listened to the woman on the phone.

Jericho pulled up behind Paige. She’d been on duty far too long. He stepped from his vehicle and watched as Frank slowly pulled a car from the ditch, then approached the driver side of the patrol car. Paige was on the phone so he tapped lightly on the window to let her know he was there.

Paige jumped at the tap on the window then immediately rolled it down. “Thank you for calling me Blaire, I’ll be right there.” She disconnected and glanced at her boss. “Hey.”

“You look beat,” Jericho observed. “I brought you a sandwich but why don’t you let me handle this and you head home. I’ve called in the reserves, Susie’s taken over dispatching and Havilland’s on duty. We’ll manage.”

“I’ll let you take this but I can’t go home,” Paige grabbed the sack of food. “Thanks for this, I’m starved.”

“What do you mean you can’t go home?” Jericho challenged. “I’m quite certain I was the one elected sheriff in this county. As long as I get the big office, I call the shots.”

“Blaire from the market just called,” Paige said as she took a huge bite of the sandwich. She swallowed then gulped down some of her water. “Misty’s brother is at the market. The manager took him into the back room. That can’t be good. I’m worried he shoplifted.”

Innocent Strategy

“Family trait?” Jericho frowned.

“No,” Paige shook her head. “I don’t think so. The kids only five. Misty must have sent him because she couldn’t go herself. She’s just a scared kid and the manager was very clear he’d scream trespassing if he saw her on the property. I didn’t get a chance to update you, the blizzard had me hopping all day. Mom never showed last night. I stayed until six. The kids must have been desperate to risk another theft so soon. Maybe something to do with the storm. I’m actually surprised Wardle hasn’t called it in already.”

Just then Jericho’s phone buzzed. “Walters. Uh-huh. Transfer me to the number, I’ll take care of this myself.”

Paige frowned. “I can handle this, Frank’s almost finished here if you need to leave.”

Jericho held up a finger. “Sheriff Walters here.”

Paige watched for several seconds as Jericho listened to the man on the other end of the call. She wondered what could have happened now. The night had been long and difficult already. The last thing they needed was some kind of emergency.

“We’re on our way, but as you might have noticed the roads are a mess and we are dealing with an actual emergency at the moment. We’ll get there when we get there. Yes, I will be dealing with this myself.”

“If you need to go, I’ll finish up here then head over to the market.” Paige climbed from the car and stood next to her boss.

“Actually that was Daniel Wardle,” Jericho said softly.

Paige frowned, she knew that tone. Jericho was angry. “What did he do?”

“He has your boy and wants him locked up for shoplifting immediately,” Jericho began. “He called the office. Susie said he went off on her, yelling about my incompetent deputy, our lack of protocol when handling shoplifters, society’s inability to teach their children right from wrong and a lot of nonsensical blubber that Susie ignored. Then he insisted she send an officer right away because he apparently doesn’t have time to wait and it had to be someone other than you. So, you ready to go?”

Paige shook her head. “That man is a tyrant. Does he know he’s dealing with Misty’s brother?”

“I don’t think so,” Jericho sighed. “I’ll deal with Wardle. You try to find out why in the world a five-year-old kid would walk through a blizzard to shoplift tonight. If we can’t track down their mother, we’ll have to take action. They can’t be alone in this weather.”

Innocent Strategy

“I agree. It had to be an emergency,” Paige was sure of it. “Otherwise, Misty would never have let him out of the house.”

“Let’s go find out,” Jericho glanced at Frank. “Who owns the car?”

“A young girl, she’s only eighteen. Lost control and landed in the ditch. Her dad came and picked her up already,” Paige smiled. “I think he was more rattled than she was and that’s saying something. The girl was a mess. Frank gave them the info and they’ll check in with him when this blizzard is over.”

“Great,” Jericho motioned to Frank, who pulled away. “Let’s go then.” He walked back to his vehicle and started the engine. Jericho waited for Paige to pull out then he followed her to the market. The two of them stopped just inside the store and waited.

“Deputy Carter,” Blaire said, obviously relieved. “They’re back there. In the office. The little boy, he was so terrified and Mr. Wardle was so mean. I tried to go back and check on him, but Mr. Wardle ordered me to get back to work. I’m the only cashier on duty tonight. We’re pretty slow, on account of the snow and all, but we’ve had a few customers here and there.”

“I’ll handle it,” Paige assured the woman. “Let’s go,” she said to Jericho. “I know the way.” She motioned to a closed door.

Daniel jumped to his feet the instant he saw the large, intimidating man. Maybe he’d made a mistake. The guy didn’t look like someone he should mess with. He’d heard of Jericho Walters, but hadn’t ever met him. In his line of work, he typically dealt with the street officers, not their boss. His frown deepened when Deputy Paige Carter stepped through the door. “I specifically asked for someone other than her.”

“Actually,” Jericho said coolly. “I’m glad you mentioned that. When you call my office, you get whatever officer we decide to send. End of story. This is not some kind of pick your deputy program. And, if you ever harass one of my employees the way you did tonight, you will not like my response. And make no mistake, you will get a personal response from me.”

“I um...” Dan stuttered. “I’m sorry, but Deputy Carter refused to deal with the last shoplifter simply because it was a child. I didn’t want the same problem again tonight. It’s unprofessional.”

“Did your cashier pay for the merchandise or didn’t she?” Jericho asked pointedly.

“Oh, well... technically, yes.” Daniel admitted.

“Then my deputy handled the situation exactly the way it needed to be handle. Where is the child?” Walters demanded.

“Um...” Wardle frowned. “The girl?”

Innocent Strategy

“Is the child you have in custody another girl?” Paige asked.

“No,” Wardle frowned. This was not going the way he had hoped. “It’s a boy and he’s in that room over there.”

Paige moved past the two men and entered the room. Jack was sitting in the same chair Misty had occupied. It broke Paige’s heart. The tiny child looked so terrified but there was something more. He looked defeated and tears were streaming down his face. When he looked up their eyes locked and Paige knew the boy recognized her. “Hello, Jack.”

Jack swallowed. He didn’t know what to do. Seth needed medicine and Misty was going to be worried. He wondered if he was going to jail.

“We need to talk,” Paige said as she sat next to the boy.

“Okay,” he said softly.

Paige had a moment of déjà vu. This reminded her of the talk she’d had with Misty. She better step softly or he’d clam up just like his sister had. “Can you tell me what you were trying to take tonight?”

“I didn’t take anything,” Jack said defiantly.

“That’s not what the manager said,” Paige told him.

“I just opened it, I didn’t take it,” Jack insisted.

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “What was it? What did you open?”

“Medicine,” Jack said softly.

Paige frowned. “What kind of medicine? Is somebody sick?”

Jack swallowed. He didn’t know what to do but somehow he needed to get home before Misty came looking and he was worried about Seth. He had to get home. Maybe this police lady could help. “My brother, Seth. He’s really sick and I was supposed to get him some medicine but I lost the bottle so I opened the box to see if it looked like what I remembered.”

“Can you tell me what’s wrong with Seth?” Paige asked, worried now.

“He’s really sick,” Jack said. “He’s really, really hot and he has a bad cough. He makes a funny sound when he breathes.”

“You’re right, it sounds like Seth is really sick,” Paige agreed. “What if I drive you home and see if I can help.”

Innocent Strategy

“Umm,” Jack bit his bottom lip. “I don’t know. Misty said I had to hurry but she might get mad if I take you home.”

“Well,” Paige shrugged. “I just thought if Seth was sick, I should take a look. You know, make sure he’s okay and doesn’t need a doctor.”

“I think…” Jack paused. “I think he might need a doctor. He’s really sick.”

Paige stood. “Let’s go home, Jack. Let’s go see if Seth needs my help. I think Misty might be worried too. She’d want me to drive you home don’t you think?”

“Okay,” Jack stood. “Am I going to jail?”

“No,” Paige assured him. “I won’t let anyone take you to jail. I promise.”

Jericho watched as Paige and a small boy stepped from the room. The kid looked scrawny and a little malnourished. There was definitely something going on with that family. “Are we done here?”

“We are,” Paige affirmed.

“So, you are arresting this one, right?” Wardle demanded. “I caught him red-handed. You are arresting him for the theft?”

“Mr. Wardle,” Jericho studied the man. “Have a good evening.”

“What does that mean?” Dan asked.

Paige held Jack’s hand as she left the office, Jericho followed them out the door. Once they stepped outside, into the blustery wind and snow filled air, Paige rushed Jack to her vehicle and settled him inside. Then she turned to her boss. “I’m taking him home. He said his little brother is sick. I’m worried. From his description, it could be serious.”

“I’ll follow you,” Jericho told her. “If we’re right and the mother has disappeared you’re going to need my help.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “But be prepared, Misty is going to try to hide the truth and keep us out of the home.”

The two vehicles slowly made their way up the driveway. Jack hadn’t said a word all the way back. Paige knew he was worried and didn’t want to let his sister down. She could appreciate their fear, but it was time to get to the bottom of this. She parked her car and turned to study Jack. “You ready?”

“She’s going to be mad,” he practically whispered. “She trusted me.”

Innocent Strategy

“I don’t think so,” Paige said as she watched the front door fly open and Misty run across the front yard to the parked vehicle.

“Misty,” Paige said as she exited the car. “Jack told me Seth is sick. I need to see him, can we go inside and get your brother the help he needs?”

Misty was crying as she pulled Jack from the car and gave him a huge hug.

“Are you mad?” Jack asked softly.

Misty shook her head then looked at Paige. “Seth needs a doctor.” She started to cry harder. “I don’t know what to do and I thought... I was so worried about Jack. I should have made him stay home.”

“Let’s take a look at Seth and then we can discuss Jack,” Paige motioned for the house.

“Is he in trouble?” Misty asked. “It was my fault. I made him do it.”

“No you didn’t,” Jack protested.

Paige smiled and glanced at her boss, who had stepped up behind her. “I need to see Seth, okay?”

Misty took a deep breath, glanced at the front door then nodded. She slowly made her way up the stairs and across the patio then pushed open the door. The group stepped inside.

The first thing Paige noticed was how cold it was. “Misty, how long has it been since you had heat?”

“I don’t know,” Misty answered. “The electricity went out a few months ago.”

Jericho frowned as he glanced around. The girl had lit a candle to give the space some light, but it was clear they had been alone for some time. He moved to the kitchen and tried the water. Nothing. How had these kids survived for so long, in the winter like this?

“Where is Seth?” Paige asked before her boss blew a gasket. By the look on his face, he was close.

“Upstairs, in the loft,” Misty ascended the stairs, Paige followed.

They stepped into an open loft area that contained three small beds. Again, Misty had lit a candle, but the little boy was seriously sick. “Sheriff?” Paige called.

“Yes,” Jericho answered as his head appeared just above the floor. One look at the room and he pulled out his phone. “I’ll take care of it.”

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Within minutes an ambulance was parked in front of the house and EMT's were loading the tiny child onto a stretcher.

"I'll head to the hospital with the baby, you take care of those two. Bring them to Gunnison with you. I'll have Family Services meet us at Gunnison Valley and we'll figure it out there. See you soon," Jericho said as he left the house.

Paige stepped into the living room and spotted Jack on the couch. The kid was crying again. She slowly sat next to him and pulled him into her arms. That's when she realized he too had a fever. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick, Jack?"

Jack sniffled. "Is Seth going to die?"

"No," Paige assured him. "He's going to be okay but he's really sick and will have to stay in the hospital for a little while."

Misty cautiously sat next to Paige. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't gotten caught, Jack wouldn't have had to bring Seth home and they wouldn't have gotten wet in the cold. That's why they're both sick. Seth is worse than Jack but it's all my fault."

"Are you guys ready to tell me where your mom is?" Paige asked.

"We don't know," Misty answered as she stared at her hands. "She left and didn't come back."

"Has she done this before?" Paige asked.

"Sometimes," Jack answered. "I hate her. This is all her fault."

"You don't hate her," Misty objected. "It's my fault."

"It's not your fault, Misty," Paige told her. "Now, what do you mean by sometimes?"

"Mom sometimes leaves us alone for a few days. But she's never been gone this long. I'm worried something happened to her," Misty admitted. "I tried, but the power went out, then the water and we ran out of food. I didn't know what to do."

"Did she really go to work?" Paige asked.

"Sometimes," Misty said softly. "But I think she went to a party the night she left."

"Okay," Paige was having a hard time holding in the anger. How could a mother leave to go party and never come home? How could she not worry about the well-being of her three children? The woman was clearly unfit. "Let's head to the hospital then. I know you guys want to see your brother and I want a doctor to look at Jack."

Innocent Strategy

“You promise Seth’s okay?” Jack asked.

“I promise,” Paige told him and held out her hand. Jack took it and Misty stood.

“Let me lock up,” she rushed into the kitchen and grabbed a set of keys then followed Paige, blowing out the candle before she stepped out the door and locked it behind her. The house was pitch dark and eerily quiet. As they pulled away, Misty wondered if they would ever see their home again. She was smart enough to know that now the cops knew their mom was missing, they wouldn’t let them live there alone any longer.

Emily Donaldson hung up the phone, knowing she’d done the right thing. Her best friend’s daughter had been so depressed for nearly a year now. The news she’d just shared might save an entire family. And if this worked out the way she hoped, those kids would be much better off. She’d known immediately who the child was at the grocery store. She’d seen all three of the kids sneaking around for weeks. In fact, two weeks ago she’d nearly called Family Services herself. But she didn’t like to meddle and she hadn’t been sure she was right. The two boys had snuck over to the Farnsworth farm and returned with a bucket of water. Emily had been curious enough to make her way to the front window and peer inside.

Unfortunately, it was pretty dark and she couldn’t make anything out clearly. The house looked clean enough, but she hadn’t seen lights inside the place for over a month. Again, not enough to report but curious just the same. When she’d realized that tiny child was one of the kids she’d been suspicious of, she’d rushed home and called her friend. Maybe it was time to put things in motion. She just hoped she hadn’t waited too long. Guilt had gotten the better of her as she watched the baby being carried to an ambulance and the second deputy escort the other two kids to her patrol car. That’s when she realized it might be too late. But Jan would know what to do. Jan would know how to help her poor friend. Jan would handle everything, Emily was sure of it.

Paige stepped into the private room and settled into a chair. “Seth’s condition is serious but we caught it in time. He has a severe case of pneumonia but shouldn’t have any permanent damage. The poor kid’s lungs are full of liquid. Jack’s been admitted as well for his fever, they’re watching for signs of pneumonia as well. When I explained the situation to the nurse, she talked the doctor into admitting Misty as well. All three of them are scrawny and malnourished. They need a few days of constant liquid and food to get them back to normal.”

Jericho studied his deputy. “This wasn’t your fault.”

Innocent Strategy

“I guess I know that,” Paige sighed and settled further into the chair. “I didn’t have a reason to remove them, just my gut. That’s why I watched the house all night. I really did plan to discuss it with you first thing but the storm got in the way.”

“Misty thinks the boys are sick because of their trek back from the store, but the doc says it was already developing before yesterday,” Jericho provided. “Those kids were on a pathway to danger and didn’t know it. I have Susie working on the mother. Once we have a name, we can try to track her down and deal with her criminally. In the meantime, Family Services is on their way. Jan, the Director said she thinks she has a place to house them at least temporarily but she would like to wait until tomorrow morning to make contact.”

“Then why is she headed out tonight?” Paige asked.

“She wants to see the kids, make that first initial contact and make sure we didn’t scare them to death when we drug them out of their home and threw them into a police car and hauled them in.” Jericho smiled.

“Yeah,” Paige smiled back. “That’s exactly how it all happened. How’d she know?”

“Jan’s alright,” Jericho added. “Don’t get me wrong. She just came here from Seattle a few years back, returned to her roots I guess you could say. Apparently, they did things a little different in the big city. She’s still sensitive to that time in her life and I don’t argue. I think it’s good for the kids to get to know her right off the bat.”

“Duly noted,” Paige stood. “I need coffee, you want some?”

“I’m told there’s a decent pot in the employee lounge,” Jericho offered. “Throw in a little cream and one sugar. The lounge is to your left then three doors down on your right.”

Paige slipped out the door and disappeared. Jericho wondered if now was the time to tell her about his relationship with Chaya. He couldn’t procrastinate forever, but somehow he didn’t think a hospital waiting room while they were dealing with three young, frightened kids was the time to delve into such a sensitive topic. Once again, the conversation would have to wait.

Jan stepped to the front door and rang the bell. The dog began to bark, she could hear shuffling, then footsteps and finally the door swung open. “Good morning, Matt.”

“Ms. Bolton,” Matt pushed open the screen door and motioned for the woman to enter. “Did we have an appointment?”

“No,” Jan said casually as she looked around for Matt’s wife, Penny. “I wanted to let you know the paperwork is complete.”

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“Oh,” Matt frowned. “Couldn’t you have called? I mean, with the weather and all I would think that would have been better. It’s still pretty bad out there this morning.”

“If that was all I had to talk to you about, I would have simply called.” Jan paused in front of the couch. “Is Penny home?”

“She is,” Matt glanced towards a closed door. “Does she need to join us?”

“That would be great,” Jan said as she settled onto the couch.

“Um, okay.” Matt moved down the hallway then disappeared through a door.

Penny was sitting in front of the window, the same as she was every other morning since they had lost their baby. Matt moved forward and knelt beside her. “Baby, Jan Bolton is here. She said she needs to talk to us about something.” He reached up and placed a hand on her left cheek, hoping the contact would get her attention. He knew his wife was depressed. She was devastated. But it had been nearly a year and she seemed to be getting worse, not better. He didn’t know how to pull her out of this funk she’d fallen into.

“What?” Penny finally turned and focused on her husband. “What did you say?”

“Jan Bolton,” Matt stood and held out a hand. “She’s here and she said she needs to talk to us. The paperwork has been approved. Maybe she has a child that needs us.”

“What if I can’t do it?” Penny asked, panic evident in her tone.

“I know you can,” Matt took her hand and led her from the room. “Let’s hear her out. See what she has to say, then we can decide okay?”

Penny nodded.

Once the couple was settled across from Jan, she began. “Like I told Matt, your paperwork has been approved. I know you said you were thinking of two children but I’m wondering if you would consider fostering three.”

“You have three children that need a home?” Matt asked. That seemed like a lot for first time foster parents.

“I do,” Jan affirmed. “I met them last night. They are all in the hospital.”

“Oh, dear,” Penny gasped and began shaking her head. She couldn’t take in a sick child. She couldn’t get her hopes up and then have them die again.

“They are healthy, or they will be I should say,” Jan corrected. “The youngest, he’s eighteen months old. Seth has pneumonia. His older brother and sister are both malnourished

Innocent Strategy

and Jack, he's five, has a severe cold... that's all. The doctors just wanted to admit them overnight. Mostly due to the malnutrition."

"And their parents?" Matt asked.

"Well, that's a bit of a mystery," Jan admitted. "We believe they've been abandoned in their own home. The police are working on that as we speak. I was hoping you might join me. I'm heading back to the hospital this morning. Maybe if you met them, you might be willing to at least take them in on a temporary basis. They truly are adorable."

Matt studied his wife. "I don't know, three seems like a lot to handle. We don't know what we're doing. This is all so new to us."

"I know," Jan nodded. "And if you simply can't do it, I understand. But I was hoping you would at least try. Just come to the hospital, meet them. I haven't told them they will be relocating to a temporary home yet. They won't even know what this is about. Give it a go and if you don't think you can handle it, well then..." Jan sighed. "Then I'll see what else I can do."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to meet them, Matt," Penny swallowed hard. If they weren't sick, maybe they could do this. Maybe they could try. Being a foster parent didn't have to be permanent. If it was too much, they could tell Ms. Bolton they couldn't handle all three. She thought of her lost baby and wondered how any mother could abandon three children of her own.

"Are you sure," Matt asked his wife. He wanted to try but was she up for it?

Penny nodded, then stood. "Can we go now, before I have time to freak out and change my mind?"

Jan also stood. "Of course. Why don't you meet me at Gunnison Valley Hospital? I'll be waiting at the main entrance.

"We'll just be a minute, then we'll meet you there." Matt walked Jan to the door, anxious to meet the kids that could be his new family... at least for a while.

It was two days later, Paige was sitting at her kitchen table enjoying her morning coffee when a familiar knock sounded on her back door. She jumped up and welcomed Dax with a smile. "You're back?"

Dax pulled Paige in for a hug then released her. "You look tired."

Paige sighed. "I have so much to tell you."

Innocent Strategy

“Well, let’s get started.” He held up a bag of donuts and gave them a little shake. “I’ll share if you have coffee.”

Paige grinned and poured black liquid into her neighbor’s favorite mug. “How was Washington?”

“Same,” Dax set the bag on the table and accepted the mug Paige offered before settling in. “Reminded me why I hate it there.” He took a slow sip and sighed in contentment. “It’s good to be home.”

“Good to have you back,” Paige settled in across from him. “So, background all finished, interviews done, are you official?”

“I am,” Dax nodded. “This isn’t going to be a problem, is it? I mean, when I’m working on something and can’t give you the details?”

“Not at all,” she said immediately. “It will change things, maybe be a little awkward as we get used to it but not a problem. I had to adjust with Nathan, we’ll do the same.”

“Good,” Dax visibly relaxed. “Speaking of Nathan, he and Sophie couldn’t stop talking about how great it was to spend Thanksgiving with you. I think they might be back for Christmas.”

“Is something going on with him, Nathan I mean?” Paige asked. “I don’t want to know anything top secret, but he’s been acting a little weird lately.”

“No,” Dax sighed. “Just work, I think. Maybe it’s made him appreciate what he has a little more.”

“Oh,” Paige frowned. “He’s working on one of those missions. I hate those, he gets so... introspective. But if that means he’ll visit more often, I’ll take it. I really do miss them. That’s about all I miss, and Carmen of course, but I’m starting to love it here in Manti.”

“Speaking of Manti, tell me what’s been going on here,” Dax pressed.

Paige explained what happened with the kids and told him about the feeling she was being watched and Jericho’s mysterious disappearances. “In fact, once we brought in Family Services, Walters took off. He’s been gone for two days now. What do you think he’s doing?”

Dax couldn’t answer that question so he dodged. “Sheriff stuff I guess, but tell me about the kids. What’s going to happen to them? Did you guys track down their mother? That woman should have serious consequences after what she did. No heat, no water, no food... in this weather? I have a few suggestions if you need them.”

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Paige laughed. "I'm sure you do. No, we haven't found her yet. I left a card with a note telling her to call me but still nothing. I'm not surprised, she left those kids alone for months."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," Dax told her. "But what happens when you find her? Will she get them back?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Paige shook her head. "Misty and Jack are staying with foster parents. A young couple, Matt and Penny Anderson. Seth is scheduled to be discharged today or tomorrow. I thought I'd head out and check on them tomorrow morning. Misty was only held overnight. I stopped by the Anderson home the following day and talked to Misty. She was apprehensive about the move but she's a trouper. I think she'll adjust okay. And if Misty is okay, the boys will be fine."

"Sounds like you might be attached," Dax observed.

"It's impossible not to get attached," Paige grinned. "Misty is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to her brothers. And little Jack... well he's a little firecracker. I'm sure Seth is just the same. He's only eighteen months old, so he's still learning. The Anderson's are going to have their hands full."

"It's nice they are willing to take in all three," Dax straightened his legs and crossed one ankle over the other. "With all they've been through, it will be easier if they are together."

"I agree, and apparently so does Jan Bolton. She's the Director of Family Services," Paige explained. "I was surprised she took on this case herself. Normally there's a case worker that handles the fieldwork. But Jan met the kids and immediately formed a bond with them. They're lucky to have her advocating on their behalf. I just met her, but I'm impressed."

"Sounds like you have that under control, what about the voyeur? Anything other than that one morning?" Dax asked.

Paige shook her head. "Nope, I don't know why but as far as I can tell he hasn't been back. We did have that snow storm and it's been cold since. Which means the snow hasn't melted. Maybe he's worried about prints."

"Maybe," Dax agreed. "And on the other front? Any progress on the manhunt for the mysterious Mr. J?"

"Not much," Paige admitted. "I've spoken to Judge Potter and I'm pretty sure he can be eliminated. I also tracked down Keith Judd's travel schedule and he was in Africa when my mother died. Other than that, it's a work in progress. Joey seems to be avoiding me, but I also think I can eliminate him. His mother was in the hospital in Gunnison and I believe he was staying there full-time during the week mom was killed."

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“Well,” Dax considered. “Sounds like you’re making progress.”

“Slow progress,” Paige pouted. “But yeah, I guess.”

“And speaking of progress, I need to head home. I have work,” Dax stood.

“If I make it home on time, do you want to get together for dinner?” Paige asked as she too pushed to her feet.

“Love to,” Dax told her just before he pulled her against his chest and kissed her senseless.

Paige stood breathless as Dax casually walked out her door and sauntered back home. She was beginning to think that man kept her frustrated and confused on purpose. She sighed, then headed upstairs to dress for work.

Misty stepped hesitantly from her room and snuck down the hall to Jack’s bedroom. He would be sharing with Seth when their brother got out of the hospital today. She tip-toed to the bed and settled in close.

“Morning,” Jack said softly as he sat up and looked around.

“Jack?” Misty said softly.

“What?” Jack frowned.

“What do you think happened to mom?”

“I don’t care, I like it here,” he said defiantly. “I hope she never comes back.”

“Do you really mean that?” Misty asked. She was confused. She loved her mom, but she was also mad at her for leaving. She didn’t blame Jack for wishing she’d stay away. It was nice here. The Anderson’s had been kind and friendly from the start. They’d only been here three days, though. Maybe it wouldn’t last. Maybe their mom would come home and make them return to the cold cabin with no food.

“I think I do,” Jack admitted. “Mom left. We were hungry and cold and she didn’t care. I’m mad at her and I don’t know if I want to see her.”

“I know,” Misty hugged her brother then stood. “I think Seth comes home today. I hope so. He’s going to love it here.”

“What if we can’t stay?” Jack asked. Then he jumped up from his bed. “I saved us some food. You know for when we have to leave. We won’t have to be hungry again. I’m saving stuff for later.”

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Misty frowned, should she be saving food? Just in case? Things were so hard right now. She just didn't know what to do. She just knew it was her job to take care of her brothers, no matter what happened.

Paige was at her desk, going through files when the door opened and a woman stepped inside. She was wearing all black, from head to toe. When she took off her black coat, jet black hair fell over her shoulders and Paige could see she had several tattoos and multiple piercings. Paige thought she looked a little old for the Goth look but to each their own.

The woman spoke briefly to Margie, who motioned to Paige and frowned. Paige continued to watch as the woman approached her desk then plopped unceremoniously into her visitor's chair. Within seconds, the woman threw a business card onto Paige's desk. Paige glanced down then back to the woman and waited.

"I take it you have my kids," the woman finally said. "Just tell me where to pick them up so I can get out of here."

"Where you can pick them up?" Paige echoed. "You might want to lose the attitude... like now."

"You left me a card, said to come see you. I assume that means you have my kids. I'm here to get them," the woman said again. "Can we hurry this up, I have somewhere I need to be."

"I left that card nearly a week ago," Paige told her. "So this is going to take a while. You can start with your name."

The woman frowned and squirmed a little. "Becca Watson," she finally said.

"And your kid's names are..." Paige asked.

"Misty, Jack and Seth," Becca said impatiently. "But you already knew that. So let's just cut to the chase."

"The chase Ms. Watson is that you abandoned your children in the dead of winter. I'd like to know why?" Paige settled back in her chair to watch the woman squirm.

"I didn't abandon my kids," Becca said, clearly each word was carefully thought out. "I don't know what they told you but I had work. Misty's old enough to take care of the others now and then. I got the card a couple days ago, but I work nights. I figured you'd be sleeping, so I waited for my day off to come by."

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“So,” Paige seethed. “Let me make sure I understand. You came home from work in the middle of the night and your kids were gone. But you found my card and decided, hey I’m tired I think I’ll get some shuteye before I head back to work tomorrow. I have no idea where my kids are, but no problem. I’ll just deal with it on my day off?”

“That’s not what I said,” Becca practically yelled.

Jericho stepped from his office and walked towards the two women. Paige was surprised to see him. She thought he was still out of town and briefly wondered if he was sick or something.

“Sheriff Walters,” he said as he settled into a chair next to Becca.

“Sheriff,” Paige acknowledged. “This is Becca Watson, she is Misty, Jack and Seth’s mother. She claims she got my card days ago, but waited until her day off to come by and see about the kids.”

“That is not what I said,” Becca argued.

“Okay,” Jericho said watching her carefully. “Why don’t you explain to me what you did say and we can go from there.”

“Look,” Becca said, turning to address the sheriff. “I work nights. Misty watches the kids while I’m gone. She’s old enough and she’s a mature kid. So, when I got the card I didn’t anticipate trouble. That’s why I waited to come in ‘til now. It’s my day off and I wanted to get this all cleared up.”

“And by all cleared up you mean....?” Jericho asked.

“That card,” Becca pointed impatiently to Paige’s desk. “You told me to come here. I don’t know what I gotta clear up but here I am.”

“Where are your kids, Ms. Watson?” Jericho asked.

“What?” Becca darted a look towards Paige then back to Jericho. “Don’t you have them?”

“I’m curious, when you got home from work two...three days ago and the kids weren’t home, where did you think they were? I’m sure you didn’t report them missing, this is my shop and I’d have heard about it if you did. So, you went to bed and got up the next morning to find no kids. Then you just moseyed on back to work without a second thought? And you did that for two additional nights without the slightest concern for where your kids actually were? At what point did you decide to stop in on your day off to inquire about your children?” Jericho pressed. “Or are you inquiring about your children? It’s hard to tell.”

“If you don’t have my kids, then there’s no reason for me to be here,” Becca moved to stand.

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“We do have your kids,” Paige said flatly.

Becca returned to her seat. “I’d like to pick up my kids and get out of here. As I stated, I have somewhere I need to be.”

“Where do you work, Ms. Watson?” Paige asked.

“What?” Becca widened her eyes then forced herself to relax. “I work at... I’m between jobs at the moment.”

“So when you say you waited for your day off to stop by, you really meant...?” Paige pressed.

“I want a lawyer,” Becca folded her arms and glared at Paige then Jericho in defiance.

“That’s fine,” Jericho stood. “Judge Potter is in a trial the rest of the day. I’ll contact the DA. I’m sure he’ll be by in the next day or so to discuss your arraignment.”

Paige stood and handcuffed the woman before she realized what was happening.

“What?” Becca sputtered. “What are the charges? You filthy pig, I want to know the charges.”

Paige watched Jericho step back into his office and close the door. She proceeded to the back and deposited the mother of the year candidate into a cell.

“I have a right to know the charges,” Becca screamed.

“Child endangerment, Child Neglect, Abandonment, False info to the police, should I go on?” Paige paused. “Naw, Tolman will go over them in detail when he gets here.” She casually walked back into the office area, closing the heavy door behind her so they didn’t have to hear the freakish screams coming from the hysterical woman.

Paige had just settled back into her chair when Jericho’s stepped into his doorway and motioned for her to join him in his office.

“James said he’s going to let her sit for a day or two,” Jericho advised. “He’ll need a fact sheet as soon as you can get it to him but Jan Bolton is going before Judge Elaine Parker in the morning with a petition to remove the children at least temporarily, and place them with the Andersons. The hearing to determine if that woman is fit will come later. In the meantime, I want charges filed against her. James will be handling this case himself. He agrees with our immediate arrest, and is just as outraged as we are over this. He’s going to ask she be remanded as a flight risk so before the end of the day I want her transferred to the jail.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Paige promised.

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“I told Margie to call Gage,” Jericho disagreed. “He’ll take care of it. I need to talk to you about something.”

Paige frowned. “Okay.”

“It’s come to my attention that you have been actively searching for the man your mother may have been seeing at the time of her death.”

“Oh,” Paige straightened. Was she in trouble? “I...well, yes.”

“I want to talk to you about that,” Jericho settled back and watched. “Do you have time, this might take awhile.”

“I’m fine,” Paige answered. “There’s nothing pressing at the moment.”

“Well,” Jericho began. “Before I get into the details, I’m curious. If your mother was seeing someone at the time of her death, why is that important now?”

Paige hesitated. She hadn’t ever actually asked herself that question. The letter was a clue her mother had left the night she died. Paige hadn’t question it, just immediately began following the clue. But why? That was hard to explain. “I assume you are aware by now that I have been looking into my mother’s murder.”

“Yes,” Jericho agreed.

Paige was a little surprised by that. He’d never said anything and he wasn’t revealing how he felt about that now. “I guess the easy answer is that he might know something. The report was crap. I don’t know this Detective Tibble but he was inept at best, corrupt at worst. I’m actually wondering why you allowed it. Why didn’t you oversee the case yourself? How could you let someone like that investigate my mother’s murder?”

“It wasn’t my call,” Jericho said sadly.

“I don’t understand,” Paige frowned. “You were the sheriff at the time. Who else could have made that call?”

“The District Attorney at the time, Dean Cosgrove,” Jericho shrugged. “He found out your mother and I were friends. He claimed it was a conflict of interested and convinced the mayor having me involved would jeopardize the case. Mayor Ralph Cole backed him up, probably because they frequently golfed together. I never saw the investigation until it was over and then it was too late to step in. I trusted the system. I even agreed having me in the middle would muddy the waters. I didn’t know Tibble, he’d been brought in by Cosgrove from Price. He never worked for me, in fact I never met the guy. He was an investigator for the prosecution. He showed up and took the case on immediately. It all happened pretty fast. The day after Chaya’s body was found, Tibble was on the case. He claimed he was some hot shot detective up

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there. I have my doubts about that, but it was a political appointment by the Mayor and the DA. I had no say, it wasn't my department."

"I guess I don't understand why you allowed it. I just can't see you backing down. That's not the man I've come to know," Paige pressed.

"Paige," Jericho sat forward. "There's something you may not know. Something that was protected and not listed as part of the report. I am the one that found your mother's body."

"I didn't know," Paige considered that. It must have been hard to find the murdered body of a close friend. "I'm sorry for that. Sorry you had to see that."

"Don't be," Jericho sat back. "Not many people know and I hope you will keep it that way. It was protected in case I had to testify against the killer. And it was another reason Cosgrove insisted I could not be the one to investigate the homicide."

Paige considered for a minute. "I guess I still don't understand. I've worked with you for several months now. You don't back down from anyone. Why didn't you fight it? Why didn't you insist on at least following the investigation to make sure they actually worked the case?"

"I was too emotionally involved," Jericho admitted. "I found your mother's body. That fragile, petite, beautiful woman shot, multiple times and left for dead in an abandoned warehouse." Jericho closed his eyes at the pain the memory still brought him. He'd loved that woman more than life itself. The discovery had nearly killed him. Those first few days were a little foggy to him, even now. Once he pulled himself together, it was done. Tibble was lead detective and no amount of arguing with Cole or Cosgrove would change it.

"I know you guys were close," Paige said softly. "I remember seeing you at the house. Mom said you were a good man, but you just terrified me."

Jericho smiled. "You were a little wild. A teenage girl in a small town. I thought maybe it would straighten you up. Scare you into doing the right thing."

"It worked," Paige grinned as she remembered the days before her mother's death. "Most of the time."

"It was me, Paige," Jericho said softly.

Paige blinked, confused. "What was?"

"I'm the man you've been looking for," Jericho shrugged. "I was the man dating your mother. It was more than that, I was madly in love with her. That's also something I hope you won't share. But I think you have a right to know and I'm afraid I don't have any special insight that will help find the killer. Believe me, if I did, he'd be in prison already."

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Paige stood, barely able to control her emotions. She was angry, hurt, confused. “You? I had pretty much ruled you out. I mean you were the sheriff. If you loved mom, I was sure you would have been relentless in your search. Inexorable in your need for justice. If it had been you, the crime would have been solved years ago, right. So I dismissed it, ignored it, talked myself out of even looking at you.” She turned to glare at her boss. “I will never be able to respect you again. I will never trust you, never believe you. You are a liar and a fraud. I need this job so I will be professional, when I have to deal with you, but I will never, ever believe in you again. You’re worse than a fraud. You’re a failure. You have no business being our sheriff. You... I have to go. I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

Paige rushed out the door, grabbed her bag and darted to her car. She needed air, she needed space, she needed... what? At the moment she didn’t know. She just had to get home.

Paige pulled into her driveway, shut down her car and glanced toward her neighbor’s house just in time to see Dax step onto the front porch. It was in that moment clarity hit... Dax had known. She was sure of it. She watched as he slowly descended his stairs. With each step he took, the knot in her stomach grew. She couldn’t deal with this right now. She had to get away. Dax had reached the edge of his property when Paige threw the car in reverse and stomped on the gas. The vehicle squealed, then slid on the loose gravel when she slammed on the brakes. Within seconds she was off, barreling down the highway, running... the way she ran that morning after graduation. She had to get away from this town... away from Jericho Walters... away from Dax.

Jericho sat silently behind his desk, mulling over what Paige had said. She was right, in some ways he was a fraud. Mostly, he was a failure. He knew that. All these years chasing ghosts and he still hadn’t figured out what Chaya was up to. He still couldn’t find the meaning behind her death. A killer walked free. A decade of work and he had more questions than answers. Chaya had hinted, asked veiled questions, but ultimately kept her secret close to the belt. He thought about all the times they’d discussed it. She admitted she was hiding something but wouldn’t let him help, even after he’d practically begged her to talk to him. Chaya had refused to let him in. That was the thing that haunted him the most. Why? Was she trying to protect him or was it more personal? He often wondered if she simply hadn’t trusted him. No wonder her daughter didn’t either. But he’d earned the daughter’s feelings. He couldn’t blame Paige for her anger, he certainly didn’t deserve her trust. Not after all these months of not telling her the truth.

Chaya was a different story. He never did understand her insistence on secrecy. Not the secrets she kept from him, not with their relationship. Was it even about him? Or was it still about her husband? The capable soldier who had died and left her all alone? Jericho couldn’t

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answer that question. He just knew he had failed her and because he failed, he lost her. Then he failed her all over again when he fell apart after her death.

“You okay?” Marie asked as she stepped into the room.

“Yeah, sure,” Jericho gave his normal non-answer.

“Now tell me the truth,” Margie demanded. “I know she hurt you. I can see it in your eyes. And you have that look again. The one that always scared me. The one I haven’t seen in years. You will not retreat into yourself again. Not this time. Paige might be mad, but she’s alive. You can get through to her. You will. And in time, she’ll understand.”

“How could I possibly expect her to understand something I haven’t figured out for myself?” He reached into the bottom drawer and pulled out his file. “I need you to copy this, give the copy to Paige when you see her, then put the original back in the desk.” He stood and pulled on his coat. “I’ll come back later and get it.”

“Where are you going?” Margie asked, worried.

“Away,” he moved toward the door then stopped. “Don’t call this time. I need some time alone. I need to figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“What does the mean?” Margie called after him.

“Paige pointed out my failure as a sheriff and expressed her unfiltered opinion that I’m not qualified for the job. I need to decide if she’s right. Please, copy the file and make sure Paige gets it right away. I’m putting Gage in charge while I’m gone. If you have an emergency, call Pat.” He was out the door before a stunned Margie could reply.

Paige wasn’t sure why she was here. She sat at the top of the hill, watching the kids play with Matt Anderson. It looked like a good fit. She hoped so. The kids continued sledding and laughing as Matt moved to the driveway and lifted a Christmas tree from the back of the truck. He disappeared into the house, only to return and join them on the hill again. After over an hour of playing and laughing, the four of them headed inside. Paige imagined hot chocolate by the fire and a night of decorating.

At least they would have a decent Christmas this year. It was impossible to tell what the future held for them. With any luck, parental rights would be taken away from Becca and the kids could find a permanent place with a family that loved them. Maybe even the Anderson’s. With a sigh, Paige turned and headed towards her vehicle.

She was deep in thought as she approached the area where she’d parked and jumped about a mile in the air when she saw the dark figure standing next to the driver’s side door. She took a

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second look as her heart tried to settle and recognized the woman immediately. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“No,” Margie said solemnly. “We need to talk.”

“I’m not really in the mood,” Paige made a motion with her hand, hoping Margie would take the hint and move out of the way.

“Too bad,” Margie didn’t budge.

“Margie,” Paige sobered. “I’m serious, not now.”

“Look at me Paige,” Margie demanded. “Do you think I’m not?”

Paige took a second to study Margie. The woman was dead serious, something had happened and Margie was upset.

“Okay,” she relented. “Get in the truck, its cold out here.”

Paige released the lock and climbed inside.

Margie settled into the passenger’s seat. “Jericho is gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Paige asked, wishing she didn’t care, but she did.

“I don’t know,” Margie admitted. “He wouldn’t say. You hurt him. I haven’t seen him like this since your mother died.”

“Good,” Paige said then felt guilty.

“Not good,” Margie disagreed. “He’s a good man and he’s been through more than any one person should in this life. I like you, Paige but you’re wrong. And because of you, a man that I admire and respect more than anyone I’ve ever met is suffering. He’s alone and a little lost. If there is one thing Jericho Walters has never been it’s a failure. But ironically that’s the one demon he can’t face, his belief that he is. And the only person in the world that could help him realize he’s wrong... just told him he’s right.”

“Margie,” Paige didn’t like the feeling of guilt that overcame her. She wasn’t the bad guy here. Jericho had lied, he had failed her mother, and he had failed her. “Jericho has left before. He’ll be back. He always comes back.”

“We’ll see,” Margie grabbed the handle and pushed open the door. “I’m not so sure this time. It’s different. Before he was...well,” Margie dropped the file on Paige’s seat. “Read that and you’ll know. Not this time. This time he might never return. This time, he has nothing to come back to. And if he lets himself fall too far into that chasm of despair, none of us will be able to bring him back... this time.”

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Paige watched as Margie shut the door and walked away, not even glancing back. Had she just ruined her friendship with a woman she admired? Was it really her fault Jericho left? But he'd be back. He always came back. Right? Paige put the car in gear and headed for her boss's residence. Maybe she could catch him before he left. But if so, what was there to say? That she'd been wrong? He wouldn't believe that because she didn't believe it herself.

The house was completely dark. She drove by three more times before she gave up. Jericho was gone. She left the area and headed for home. He'd return, he had to. But Margie had been so sure, so upset. She'd never seen Margie like that before and it worried her. She pulled into her driveway and grabbed the file, wondering what it could possibly be. Once she was inside, she headed for the kitchen and dropped the heavy folder on the table. Whatever Margie had left her, it was significant. After pouring herself a glass of wine, she settled in.

Paige flipped open the top folder and froze in shock. She read through the top page, then read through it again. She had only gotten through three pages when there was a knock on her door. She jumped up and ran to it, throwing it open to see Dax standing in a blizzard with a questioning look on his face.

"I think I've forgiven you," Paige said as she motioned for him to come in.

"Okay," Dax shrugged out of his coat and waited. "For what?"

"You knew," Paige accused. "You knew it was Jericho and you never said a word."

"Oh," Dax frowned. "That."

"Yeah that," Paige frowned.

"He told me about your mom and how much he loved her but he said it in confidence and I promised not to tell anyone. That includes you," Dax settled into a chair. "You look upset, what's going on?"

Paige told him about her confrontation with Jericho, his leaving and Margie's visit. Then she pointed to the file.

"How'd she know you were out there?" Dax wondered.

Paige furrowed her brows. "I don't know. I didn't ask, she just lit into me about Jericho then gave me the file and left."

"So what's the file?" Dax asked.

"It's about my mother," Paige admitted. "I was so cruel to him. The things I said," she shook her head in disgust. "I'm not like that."

Dax laughed.

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“What?”

He stood and took her hand, leading her into the living room. Once he was settled onto the couch he pulled Paige down next to him. “You are exactly like that... with Nathan.”

That’s when it hit her, she was upset with Jericho because he was like a father figure to her. Learning he’d allowed her mother’s case to be mishandled had felt personal because their relationship was personal... like her and Nathan. “I’m worried,” she admitted. “Margie thinks he’s gone for good. She said something about the way he was after mom died. She said he doesn’t have anything to come home to this time.”

“He’ll come back,” Dax assured her.

“How do you know that?” she pressed. “I really was awful. And I called him a failure. Apparently, all this time he’s felt like a failure because he hasn’t caught mom’s killer and I threw that in his face. But look at the file! The stuff in there, it’s good. He documented everything. The stuff I wanted from the original report, Jericho has it. The forensic stuff, the details. Do you have any idea how difficult that must have been for him to document every minute detail of the woman he loved and I threw it in his face?”

Dax wrapped his arms around Paige and held her close. He did know. He’d had to relay the details after the death of more than one of his men. Guys he loved, guys he was responsible for, men with families just like Chaya Carter. He knew what Jericho had gone through for justice and he admired the man even more for it. “I know, because if he doesn’t return, we’re going to find him and we’ll drag him back kicking and screaming if we have to.”

“Thanks for that,” Paige shifted and pressed her lips to his.

“Better,” Dax kissed her forehead. “Now, let’s see if there’s a decent movie on cable. It’s a blizzard out there and I’m not quite ready to head home.”

Paige settled in and let Dax pick the entertainment. They’d just started to watch some action flick when Paige turned to study her neighbor. “You could stay.”

Dax studied her for a minute. “What?”

“Stay with me... tonight,” Paige said softly. “It’s a blizzard and there’s no reason to fight through it. I want you to stay.”

“Are you sure?” Dax asked, not sure himself.

“Positive,” Paige leaned in again and brushed a light kiss across his lips. She immediately knew she’d made the right decision... at least for tonight. Tonight, she needed him. Tonight she didn’t want to be alone.