

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Ancient Thievery *Season 2, Episode 2*

by:

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Paige stretched out on her comfortable lounge and took another sip of coffee. The sky had begun to develop that mystic hue that formed just before the sun rose over the mountain. There was still a hint of smoke in the air but at least the fire had been contained. The thunderstorm that sparked the flame in the backcountry had been brief, but the aftereffects could have been devastating. They got lucky this time. After nearly forty-eight hours of stress, anticipation and overtime, the fire was finally contained. The Fire Chief believed it would be completely out by the end of the day. On an upside... the smoke would make an already majestic display by Mother Nature, an even more vibrant and beautiful sunrise. It was just one of the many things she loved about living outside the city. Another was the quiet mornings that made her feel like she was the only person in the world at the moment. She knew she should get up, head inside and start her morning ritual before checking back on duty, but she needed a few more minutes of solitude and this last cup of coffee first.

The past two days had been long and stressful. By the time she stumbled into the house last night, she thought she'd sleep like a baby. Not so much. She was worried about Jericho. He hadn't been the same since she'd given him that letter. Initially, he refused to talk about it. Now, he was back to mysterious trips and unscheduled days off. At least this time she knew he was spending a few days at his fishing cabin. Should she stop in for the private chat she'd been needing? Maybe. Fate would make that decision for her today. If it was slow, she might head to Ephraim later this afternoon. If not...

She didn't finish that thought because her cell phone began to chime. She glanced at the screen and saw it was Dean. With a sigh, she prepared to answer... sure this call had just made the decision for her. "Hey, Dean."

"Paige," he said hesitantly. "I'm sorry to call before your shift but I was wondering if there was any chance you could check on early. I'm on a call and I think I need your help."

"Okay," Paige stood and made her way into the kitchen. "Is everything okay?"

"It's not an emergency or anything," Dean added quickly. "You don't have to dash out of the house or run code or anything. It's just... well, I need your opinion on something and I'm not really sure how to handle this. I'll wait until you get here and make sure they don't touch anything just in case you can find some clues or something."

"Now you have me intrigued," Paige admitted as she took her stairs two at a time. She dropped onto her bed and snatched up the notepad she always kept next to the alarm clock. "Give me the address." Dean rattled off his location. "Looks like you're close. Should take me fifteen minutes tops. See you when I get there." She disconnected, grateful she decided to shower before heading out to enjoy the morning. Now for the uniform, gun belt, boots... getting dressed alone would take five of the allotted fifteen she'd allowed herself. She moved to the mirror, ran a brush through her hair and quickly pulled it into a ponytail. That would have to do for today.

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Exactly fourteen minutes later she pulled into the driveway and parked her vehicle behind Dean's marked unit. Before she even climbed from the car, Dean was through the front door and approaching her in the drive.

"The house belongs to Pearl Ledbetter. She's an elderly lady, I believe she's in her late eighties," Dean began. "Anyway, last month she fell... broke her hip. The poor woman wasn't discovered for three whole hours. Her neighbor, and apparently best friend, found her. Mrs. Pembroke... that's the neighbor, her son is doing the repairs. Great guy and the local church donated a new stove."

"Dean," Paige said, trying to remain patient. "You lost me at Ledbetter. I'm glad the community has stepped in to help the woman, but why am I here?"

"Oh," Dean shrugged. "Sorry, it's been a rough couple days and I've had entirely too much coffee and not enough sleep. Let's head to the kitchen and I'll show you. The workers pulled the old stove away from the wall then called me immediately. I want you to get the full effect." He turned and took off toward the back of the house.

Paige frowned but followed. She stepped into the kitchen and moved around the old stove. A large section of wall had been left open to allow easy access to the gas line. Once the stove was pushed snug against the wall, it created a perfect seal. Good thing, Paige saw shredded paper - an indication a family of mice had probably taken up residence in the wall. She maneuvered around the ancient appliance and crouched to get a better look. Just inside the wall to the right of the opening was a large object wrapped in plastic. She reached around and grabbed the flashlight she always carried on her belt. The instant the light hit the object, she could see it was a large cash of money. She raised the light and spotted a second bag situated directly behind the first. The second stack accounted for the shredded paper. The tiny rodents had worked their way through the plastic on one corner and helped themselves. The nest was still there but to her relief, it was vacant.

Paige stood and took a couple steps backward. "Who found it?"

"I did," a middle-aged man standing behind Dean told her. "I'm Patrick Weller. I volunteer at the church when I can. We pulled out the old stove and I moved in to disconnect everything when I spotted the loot," he frowned. "It doesn't make any sense. Pearl has been struggling just to pay the bills for years. The preacher has even stepped in a couple times and paid the electric bill before the power company shut it off." He shook his head as he stared at the mysterious packages. "Pearl never married, she doesn't have any kids and she proudly told me she was twenty-eight when she bought this place. How'd that get in there?"

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“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Paige assured him. “Other than you, who touched the stove?”

“Uh... Derek, we were going to disconnect the old one while the rest of those guys brought in the new stove.”

“Okay, so only the two of you?” Paige pressed.

“Yeah,” Patrick nodded. “But the preacher was here the other day trying to get the thing working. He said it was no use, three of the burners were shot and it would cost more to fix than it would to replace it. He had a line on a new stove that was marked way down since it was last year’s model and decided that was the way to go.”

“Not that it matters,” Paige glanced around the kitchen. Someone was just a little over half way through a fresh coat of paint and there was a stack of updated linoleum in the far corner. “Why all the renovation? I thought the owner was old and recovering from a fall.”

“Mrs. Pembroke talked Pearl into renting out the home,” Patrick supplied. “The docs say she can’t live alone and they want her to relocate to the care center. But, Pearl is broke and can’t afford the monthly fee. Diane, that’s Mrs. Pembroke... well she thought if we updated a few things, we could get enough money in rent to pay for Pearl’s care. Diane just lives next door so she decided to take on the landlord duties.” He took another glance at the stash of money. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance Pearl could use the cash in that wall to help pay the care center bills?”

Paige knew the question would come eventually. “Probably not. Unfortunately, that money looks new to me. Which means it was probably taken from a bank.”

“You mean someone robbed a bank and stashed the money in Pearl’s wall?” Patrick asked in shock.

“It looks like that’s a very distinct possibility,” Paige moved forward. “Based on the amount of time it’s been in there, I doubt I can retrieve any evidence but I’d like to try.” She turned to Dean. “I need a tech out here immediately, Heidi would be my first choice if you can swing it. Let’s see if we can lift any fingerprints off the stove. It’s a long shot but whoever put the money in the wall had to move the stove to do it. We know we’ll find Patrick and Derek’s prints. Let’s see if we find any others.”

“And the money?” Dean asked.

“After Heidi gets photos and does what she can with the stove, we’ll pull out the bags and take them back to the office. The plastic could contain prints as well. Then I’ll take over and see what I can find by way of forensic evidence inside that hole. I’m going to be here for a few

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hours. Why don't you make arrangements for Heidi to respond, then head home? You look pretty beat."

"Thanks, Paige," Dean said, relieved. "I came to the same conclusion as you did. I think that money was obtained from a bank robbery. The bills look new and those on top are marked 1981. I hated to call, but I was sure you'd know what to do as far as contacting the feds and all."

"No problem," Paige assured him. "I was up anyway, might as well get an early start. Tell Heidi not to contact anyone. I want to handle this myself and I need a little time before word gets out. I'd like to do my best to bring Sean in, he'll be easier to work with."

"Great idea," Dean smiled. "Agent Wilkens gets along great with the boss which is always a plus." He frowned and considered. "Do you think I should call him? Jericho I mean, to let him know what we have here."

"Why don't you call Margie? She'll need to know what's going on in case someone calls and I think he's checking in with her while he's away. She can fill him in for us."

Four hours later, Paige had gone over the scene with a fine tooth comb. Heidi hadn't been able to pull anything off the stove but the fresh prints they knew would be Derek or Patrick's. The two bundles of cash had been carefully placed in large bags and transported to the station. It would take at least another day for Heidi to go over them thoroughly. Inside the wall, Paige had collected a couple strands of hair and there was a small blood stain on one of the two-by-fours. She'd have it analyzed but it was going to be impossible to know if the blood came from the robber or some construction worker that had built the house decades earlier.

She called Sean directly and asked him to run the serial numbers through the system. That way, if anyone had a flag on the money it would be traced back to the Salt Lake field office. It had taken some fancy negotiating but Sean finally talked his boss into assigning the case to him. He was due to arrive any minute. Paige was looking forward to working with her old friend again and Sean was looking forward to spending a little time with his sister and her baby.

The front door swung open and Agent Sean Wilkens made his way past Margie with a smile and dropped into the visitor's chair Paige had positioned next to her desk.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said as he casually settled into the chair.

"Not really," Paige smiled. "It's my office."

"Right," Sean shrugged. "So, tell me what you've got."

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Paige pulled out an evidence bag with a section of the two-by-four secured inside and handed it to Sean.

“You took a piece of her house?”

“I took a piece of an old board,” Paige corrected. “Don’t worry. I replaced it already. The guys doing the updates said it would be easy to install the new board where the old one used to be.”

“Give me the receipt,” Sean held out his hand. “I’ll turn it in for reimbursement.”

“It’s not necessary,” Paige disagreed. “It cost less than ten dollars.”

“And if you don’t, some overzealous defense attorney will use it against us to try to make this investigation personal somehow,” Sean insisted.

“Okay,” Paige pulled out the receipt. “You’re right.”

“What was that?” Sean grinned. “I’m not sure I heard you correctly. It sounded like you said I’m right, but I know I must have heard it wrong. No way Paige Carter would concede to being wrong, especially not that quickly.”

“Yeah, laugh it up... mark your calendar, put a star on your forehead... whatever. Just don’t expect it to happen again anytime soon.”

“Duly noted,” Sean studied the evidence bag. “What am I doing with this?”

“It has blood on it,” Paige advised. “Could be the robbers, could be a construction worker, and could be somebody else entirely. I just thought we should see if your lab could test it and tell us who it belongs to.”

“I’ll ship it off tonight,” Sean dropped the bag into a leather briefcase and pulled out a file. “Here’s what I found.” He set the large envelope on her desk. “You’ll want to go over it yourself but here’s the short version. Two guys go into a bank.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.”

“The jokes on us,” Sean frowned. “They got away clean, bank out of Kentucky thirty-five years ago. I watched the video, it’s old and grainy but obvious the job was pulled by two males. I’d guess in their twenties by the way they walk and act during the hit. They were in and out in a matter of minutes. Didn’t bother with the tills, forced the manager into the vault, each man snagged a pre-wrapped bundle of cash and walked away with 1.2 million... hundreds to be exact.”

“That sounds about right,” Paige confirmed. “Heidi’s still going over the packaging but we can take a look if you want. Mice got some of it, made a luxury nest out of the shredded paper

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but other than that, it looked like they hit the bank and dumped the cash. What I can't figure is why they never returned."

"Could be a million reasons," Sean surmised. "They could have got caught on another job, could have killed each other off, could have decided it was too hot in the states and headed for some tropical island. I'm hoping the first dip they took, they got attacked by a shark and disappeared without a trace."

"There are too many could be's... and you know I'm more of a factual, evidentiary kind of gal," Paige stood. "Let's go back and see what Heidi has for us."

Paige was still smiling when she pulled into her drive. She missed Sean Wilkens and was glad they still got to work together every once in a while. She was just stepping through her front door when she smelled the delicious aroma of beef on a hot grill. Barbecue time. Paige unhooked her duty belt and draped it over the couch, then she unbuttoned her uniform shirt just enough to slip it over her head and dropped that on a kitchen chair. She was out the back door and headed for her neighbor's back porch in record time.

"Hey," Dax glanced up and saw Paige approaching.

"Hey yourself," she smiled. "Don't suppose you have enough for one more?"

"Of course," Dax assured her.

"We... and by that I mean he... hoped you'd get off in time to join us," Zeus said with a grin. "It was all in the plan."

"I'm glad I didn't disappoint," Paige climbed the back stairs and settled into a lounge chair. "I'm starving!"

They were just finishing up dinner when a car pulled into Paige's driveway.

"You expecting company?" Dax asked.

"No," Paige stood to get a better look at the driver. The instant the woman climbed from the vehicle, Paige was darting across the yard.

"Looks safe," Zeus decided.

Dax frowned. "Yeah, it is."

"So who's the hot brunette?" Zeus asked.

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“Carmen Fennelly,” Dax answered. “But I’m not sure sending her out here was a good idea.”

“Who sent her?” Zeus pressed.

“Porter,” Dax glanced at his friend. “Carmen got herself into a little trouble. I’m sure Nathan sent her out to visit an old friend to get her out of DC for a while. They’re trying to track down the bad guy but, unfortunately, he’s being more elusive than anticipated. But Paige has enough trouble, she doesn’t need more of it following a friend out from the big city.”

“I’m sure he knows what he’s doing,” Zeus suggested. “I mean, you said Nathan Porter was extremely protective of Paige. He wouldn’t do anything that would put her in danger.”

“Sure he would,” Dax disagreed. “If he thought I could handle it.”

“You sure?”

“No, I’m annoyed,” Dax admitted. “The guy that’s after Carmen already killed a cop. I doubt he’d hesitate to kill another one.”

“Clearly, I’m missing a lot of details,” Zeus said as the two women returned to the porch.

“This is Carmen,” Paige introduced. “And she’s amazing but a little crazy. This is Dax and Zeus.”

“I know Dax,” Carmen said as she turned to study Zeus. “Name fits.”

Zeus grinned. “You have no idea, sweetheart.”

Paige rolled her eyes but smiled. Humble was not even in Zeus’s vocabulary. “Carmen is going to stay with me for a bit. She’s had a long day so I’m going to show her to her room, get her settled and everything. Thanks again for dinner,” she was about to leave when Dax stopped her.

“Wait,” he said, descending the stairs to stand in front of her. He pulled her against him and gave her one of his mind-blowing kisses. “Goodnight. How about breakfast? I’ll buy, you take care of the coffee?”

“Sounds good,” Paige said, still a little breathless. She ignored the smirk on Carmen’s face as she made her way back to her own place.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” Carmen said the instant the back door slammed shut.

“And you didn’t come all the way to Utah for a vacation,” Paige countered.

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“Why don’t you show me to that room,” Carmen changed the subject. She had strict orders from Nathan not to involve Paige in this mess. She was going to do all she could to comply.

“Thought so,” Paige said knowingly as she made her way to the stairs. “I’m sure you’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

Paige stepped into the office and was halfway across the room before she realized Sean was already there, sipping coffee and waiting for her to arrive.

“Apparently, the locals keep different hours than us professionals,” Sean grinned.

“Yeah,” Paige dropped into her chair. “Us amateurs need an extra hour or so to get motivated.”

“What’s the plan for the day?”

“I want to head over to the care center and see if I can talk to Pearl,” Paige told him. “I know she’s old and she could be senile but sometimes the elderly recall details with amazing clarity if you ask them about something that happened years ago. It’s just the here and now they have trouble with.”

“I agree,” Sean stood. “I also want to see her house, the hole the bags were stashed in and I’d like to walk the area a little. See if the thieves left any other clues.”

“Like?”

“I don’t know, stashed something in an old barn or something,” Sean said, frustrated. “I spent hours last night going over every inch of that file. The original agents were thorough. I’m afraid if there was something to find, they would have found it.”

“I did the same,” Paige admitted. “Oh, Carman is in town.”

Sean frowned. “Really? Why? That girl’s city slicker through and through.”

“I don’t know,” Paige admitted. “She’s hiding something but she’ll spill her secrets soon enough. In the meantime, I agree with you. The guys were thorough. I didn’t find anything that could help us in their original file. But we have evidence they didn’t have. We have the money, but we also have Pearl. Which is why I want to talk to her. It seems unlikely a couple strangers snatched over a million in Kentucky, made their way to Manti, Utah and shoved that much cash into a hole they just happened to discover in a stranger’s kitchen. There has to be a link. We just need to find it. The robbers could be relatives or an old family friend that stopped in for a surprise visit.

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“Let’s go,” Sean stood. “We can hit the house first, then stop by the center.”

“No,” Paige followed. “I want to go to the center first. I called, she should be finished with breakfast and the receptionist said it’s best to visit as early as possible.”

“Care center it is,” Sean pushed through the front door. “You riding with me?”

“Sure,” Paige agreed as she slid into the passenger’s seat.

Pearl Ledbetter was a no-nonsense kind of woman. Her mind was sharp as a tack, it was her body that was deteriorating. She’d heard about the money and was expecting the police to come calling.

“I’ve been thinking,” she told them. “Preacher Wilson told me what little he knew. Said the men believe the money is old. Someone must have stashed it there without me knowing about it. I mean, if I’d been aware... well, even I couldn’t resist testing a little out. Would have beat eating peanut butter and jelly for two months straight,” she smiled.

“I’m with you on that,” Paige agreed. “We’ve determined the money was stolen in the early eighties out of Kentucky. Do you recall having a visitor sometime after May in eighty-two?”

“Eighty-two?” Pearl was clearly trying to remember the time. “Can you call in that nice nurse? Tell her to check my charts and see what year I broke my left leg.”

Sean stood and left the room.

“How did you break your leg, Pearl?” Paige asked.

“Oh, it was silly really,” Pearl sighed. “I was out in the old orchard picking cherries... that would have been sometime in June. I planned to make a half dozen pies and donate them to the church fundraiser the following week. The ladder was a little old, but I thought it was sturdy. Anyway, the leg on one side cracked just enough to make it wobble and I took a tumble, fell right through that large branch and landed funny on my left leg. The break was pretty severe, at least that’s what I was told. I was in my fifties at the time and sweet Doctor Talbot said my bones had already started to become brittle. He patched it up and was adamant I start taking one of those calcium vitamins every morning. Still take them to this day.”

Sean stepped back in the room. “You broke your left tibia in late June 1982.” He exchanged a look with Paige before settling back into the chair.

“Pearl was just telling me about her broken leg,” Paige advised. “With that kind of break, how did you manage on your own?”

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“Oh, it was difficult,” Pearl frowned. “I struggled some for a day or two before my sister’s boy, Crosby showed up to help. All the good it done, that boy stuck for exactly four days before he went off and disappeared. Now that you mention it, I don’t think Sally ever did hear from him again before she passed. Heart attack got her when she was only fifty-seven. It was such a shame, too young for something like that if you ask me.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Paige said sincerely.

“What can you tell us about Crosby?” Sean asked.

“That boy never did have a lick of sense, that one,” Pearl began. “He was always finding trouble somehow. Took after his daddy that way. It surprised me when he showed up on my doorstep but I was grateful for the help. Until he took off just like his daddy a few days later,” Pearl paused. “Oh?” she said in surprise. “You think Crosby had something to do with that money?”

“What do you think?” Paige asked.

“Could be,” Pearl admitted. “Like I said, he had a way... that boy could sniff out trouble a hundred miles away. I was fit to be tied when he up and disappeared. Sally was devastated, Crosby was her only boy and she could never see just how much he was like his father. Made excuses even had her daughter, Payton, clean that boys messes up after the fact. Payton, now that girl is an angel. Successful lawyer in Denver these days. Too busy to live life if you ask me but at least she has time to mail out those fancy Christmas cards every year.”

“And you said Cosby just disappeared?” Sean said, trying to get the woman back on track.

“Right,” Pearl became quiet and got a far-away look on her face. “Said he was going out for a walk and never came back.”

“And have you or Payton heard from him since?” Paige asked.

“Not a word,” Pearl said confidently. “Payton is sure he got himself dead somehow. I know Sally insisted he was just in another country trying to find himself or some such nonsense. I would never wish that boy harm, but I thought it was more likely he got himself thrown in prison somewhere. Could be here, could be Mexico and that’s why we never heard another word.”

“When we leave here,” Paige patted Pearl’s hand, not knowing exactly how to respond to her last statement. “We’re heading out to your place. Do you mind if we take a look around? I mean, a more thorough look? If you want we can get a warrant, or you could just sign a release for us right now.”

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“Oh,” Pearl shook her head. “There’s no need for a warrant. You take a look, do what you need to do. I have nothing to hide... I mean, you already found my only secret. And that one was so well kept even I didn’t know about it.”

Sean pulled out the standard form. Pearl called for a nurse to help and within minutes Paige and Sean were heading out the door with a license to search every nook and cranny of the old Ledbetter place. Once again, it was going to be a long day.

While Paige and Sean made their way to the Ledbetter property, Dax took a break from staining his front porch to make a phone call.

“I know why you’re calling and I won’t change my mind,” Nathan Porter said in answer.

“She has a right to know,” Dax argued.

“Knowing will put her in danger.”

“Not knowing will put her in more danger,” Dax pressed.

“I’ve made my decision and Carman better stick with it,” Nathan said firmly. “She knows what will happen if she disobeys my directive.”

Dax took a minute to inhale air through his nose and back out. He had to keep his cool or this conversation would end in disaster. “Carman will obey your order. Not because you threatened her with reassignment back to the dungeon, but because she respects you. It’s going to kill her, but she’ll keep the secret because you told her to.”

“And you?”

“I also respect you, but I respectfully disagree,” Dax provided. “And if you won’t change your mind and let Carman explain things, I’ll do it for her.”

“You also work for me, soldier.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, and right,” Dax consented. “I do work for you, but I’m no longer a soldier and I will not blindly follow anyone ever again... damn the consequences.”

Nathan remained silent for several seconds while he tried to come up with a solution they could all live with. He was bluffing, it had nearly taken an act of God to get Dax Hamilton on his team. He would not lose him over this. “I’d like to hear your side of the argument,” he decided.

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“That one’s easy,” Dax relaxed a little. He’d won that battle, but they were still at war. “Paige is already dealing with a threat of her own. She’s going to need to be even more alert to help Carmen deal with her own threat. The man is a terrorist and he’s after the woman squatting in the guest room. Paige has a right to know, to make plans, and ensure security for both of them. We both know what happened last time that man took a cop by surprise. Is that what you want for Paige? You want the guy to approach her on the street while she’s on a call, or worse set up an ambush with a routine call? She needs to know everything and deep down you know I’m right.”

“I want to protect her,” Nathan said softly.

“I’ll help you do that,” Dax agreed. “But not this way. Keeping her in the dark is not protecting her, it’s endangering her.”

Nathan sighed. “I sent that girl to Utah to hide out where it’s safe. You know the instant Paige knows Carman is in danger, she’s going to jump right in the middle of it.”

“Maybe that’s the perfect place for her to be,” Dax offered. “I mean, so far your guys have come up with nothing. Maybe Paige will see a different angle, something we’ve overlooked. She’s the best. I suggest we use that to our advantage instead of risking her life with good intentions.”

“Alright,” Porter gave in. “Tell her, you and Carman bring her up to speed. You better be right about this Hamilton. If anything happens to that girl, I’m holding you personally responsible.” He disconnected the line.

Dax hung up shaking his head. Apparently, it had completely escaped the good general that he was the guy who sent a ticking bomb to their little community. Nothing would happen to Paige, he’d make sure of it. Now, he had a spunky Cuban-American to bring up to speed.

Paige and Sean had been walking around the Ledbetter property for nearly two hours when she spotted what looked like an old mine. “Hey,” she called.

“What’s up?”

“Does that look like an old mine?” Paige pointed toward a structure on the side of the hill about a hundred yards away. “It’s boarded up, but clearly accessible.”

“There’s nothing over there but trees and large scary bushes,” Sean scanned the area just to be sure.

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“Right there,” Paige pointed again.

“Yeah,” Sean frowned. “I heard you the first time. There’s nothing there. You’re seeing things, must be the heat.”

“You’re blind,” Paige disagreed. “Must be old age.”

Sean was grinning as he moved in next to his sassy friend. His eyebrows shot up in surprise the instant he spotted the structure. “Wow, how did you see that? Good find.”

Paige shrugged and took a few steps in the opposite direction. The structure disappeared. “You think anyone knows it’s there?”

“Beats me,” Sean shrugged. “One thing’s for sure, it’s not easy to find. Let’s check it out. You know, it’s possible the kid was out here looking for a better hiding place and spotted that structure. It’d be a perfect place to stash the money until it wasn’t so hot. It’s also possible he fell to his death in there and never left.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Paige warned. “It would explain his disappearance but there were two men involved in the initial crime and he had all the money for some reason. It’s just as likely guy number two followed Cosby out here and knocked off his partner because he wanted the loot for himself... a double cross maybe?”

“True,” Sean agreed. “But where’s the body?”

Paige slipped through a large opening in the boarded up entry to what appeared to be an old mining operation. From the size of the shaft, it must have been large and likely productive. Sean followed and the two of them used their flashlights to maneuver their way around the dark cavern.

“Wait,” Sean reached out a hand to stop Paige’s progression. “Can you hear that?”

“Sounds like water,” Paige observed. She began to flash her light around the manmade cave until she found a small tunnel that shot off in the opposite direction of the main section. “In the mood for a little detour?”

“Absolutely,” Sean said, clearly excited.

Paige approached the smaller opening and shone her flashlight on the ground. “Are you seeing what I see?”

“Drag marks.”

She swung the light slowly around the area they were standing. There was a clear path where something large had been dragged several feet then disappeared down the smaller tunnel. They were currently standing in a large open cave area. The entrance tunnel had been long and

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narrow but ultimately opened up into this elaborate cave. From this section, you could continue in the same general direction as the original tunnel, or take a fork to the left. Both tunnels led deeper into the center of the mountain. The smaller tunnel seemed to skirt the base of the mountain and apparently connected with some kind of water source. “What do we do?”

“What do you mean?” Sean asked.

“I mean, something was dragged here,” Paige said impatiently. “It could be evidence.”

“Or it could have been a horny teenage boy bringing his girlfriend to a secluded spot to scare her and then make out in privacy.”

“You’re such a guy,” she rolled her eyes. “There is no indication any local teens hang out in here for fun.”

“How would you know?”

Paige once again used her flashlight to circle the area. “Where are the empty beer cans? The graffiti? The red plastic cups?”

“Okay,” Sean shrugged. “You have me there.” His gaze returned to the drag marks. “Just in case, take a few shots with your camera. I’ll shine the light for you. Then we continue on that way and see what we find. If it turns out this is a crime scene, we’ll come back and do a more thorough search. We’ll just be careful where we step and watch for anything out of place along the way.”

Paige didn’t like it, but Sean was right. They didn’t even know if it was a crime scene. First, they needed to follow the drag marks and see what they found at the end. Once the marks were documented as well as could be under the circumstances, the two friends carefully made their way into the small tunnel. They both hugged the wall and were careful not to step on any of the disturbed dirt. It was soft here, not the same hard surface they’d encountered in the entrance tunnel or the black, mostly rock surface of the large cave area. The tunnel curved, then wound back the other way and ultimately opened up again.

Paige stepped out of the narrow channel and moved to the right. She slowly waved her flashlight across the expanse, stopping on what was clearly a human skeleton. Sean stepped in beside her and sighed.

“Definitely a crime scene,” he let out another sigh. “You think it’s Cosby?”

“Probably,” Paige took a step forward. “And murder.”

“Right,” Sean agreed. “I’m guessing he didn’t drag his own lifeless body into the corner like that.”

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“Not likely,” Paige moved closer. “If he came in here on his own, he would have simply walked out on his own. It’s just bones, but I can’t see any breaks, no sign of injury... other than the part about being dead that is.”

Sean smiled. “There is that. Guess we better call it in.”

“No service in here,” Paige held up her phone. “We’ll have to head back out, secure the area and call in Heidi. I guess I’m going to have to interrupt the Sheriff’s fishing trip after all.”

Once again, Paige got home late. It was starting to be a pattern. One she needed to break. Jericho had been unavailable all day. He finally checked in just as they were finishing up at the scene in the tunnel. He assured Paige he’d be back in the office bright and early tomorrow morning.

Paige stepped through her front door and jumped at the sight of the trio relaxing in front of her big screen TV. “Guess when I said to make yourself at home, you took that to heart.”

Dax stood and moved to greet Paige. “Rough day?”

“We found a body in a cave,” she whispered. “And on top of the death, for some reason, the entire county is blaming me. Apparently, nobody’s been murdered in Sanpete for decades and then I show up and bodies are dropping like flies.”

“So it was a recent incident?”

“No,” Paige yanked off her duty belt. “That’s the thing. If it’s who I think it is, the guy was killed over fifty years ago. How is that my fault? I wasn’t even born yet.”

“How can I help?” Carmen asked from the couch... where she sat, practically in Zeus’ lap.

Paige considered. “Well...”

“Just tell me, I’ll jump in,” Carmen insisted. “It’s the least I can do. Especially since we need to talk about something important.”

Paige studied her friend. “I need to track someone. His name is Cosby but I don’t know anything more. I believe that’s our victim... and our suspect.”

Carmen frowned.

“One of the bank robbers ended up dead?” Dax provided.

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“Right,” Paige smiled at Dax. He always got where she was going with very little clarification. “His mother’s name is Sally and she’s Pearl Ledbetter’s sister. So, I’d guess Ledbetter is Sally’s maiden name but she had a husband, don’t know his name or even where he landed.”

Carmen was jotting down notes. “I’ll see what I can find and leave it on the table so you’ll have it first thing.”

“Let me dump this stuff upstairs and then you can hit me with... whatever you guys are stressing over,” she turned and made her way up to her bedroom. That had been a lucky break. She knew Carmen said she was on vacation, but Paige didn’t believe it for one second. If Carmen Fennelly had earned a vacation, she’d be sipping margaritas on a beach somewhere enjoying the heat, the men and the surf. Might as well use her if the woman was offering. By morning, Paige would know everything there was to know about Pearl Ledbetter’s troubled nephew.

Once she dumped the work gear, she decided to change. Within minutes she was clad in jeans and a loose t-shirt. She glanced at her bare feet, shrugged and returned to the living room, dropping into the chair next to Dax. “Okay, spill it.”

Carmen glanced at Dax, who reached out and took Paige’s hand.

“Carmen is in a little trouble, because of her job, and Nathan thought it would be best if she hid out here for a bit. Just until they find the guy that’s after her,” Dax began.

“Way to dump this on a person, gentle like,” Carmen scowled. “I appreciate the effort Dax, but seriously? Maybe you could just let me handle it.”

“Start at the beginning,” Paige watched as the two of them exchanged glances, clearly working to come up with a way to explain the situation. “First, the guy. Do you know who he is?”

“Yes and no,” Carmen sighed. “Look, this guy... well he sought me out. Started pushing his way in, you know?”

Paige smiled. “Fatal mistake.”

Carmen blinked and swallowed hard. “Turns out, it was fatal for Brian.”

“What?” Paige asked, confused. “Brian was killed in the line.”

“We believe it’s all connected,” Dax provided.

“He’s dead because of me,” Carmen said. Her voice hitched and Paige realized just how upset her friend was.

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“I looked into Brian’s death, for you. I talked to his lieutenant,” Paige disagreed. “Brian was ambushed on a call, he was working an extra shift on the road and was ambushed when he arrived.”

“Because of me,” Carmen repeated. “Because of his connection to me. He was lured out on a routine call and ambushed because he knew me. A message for me.”

“I need to know everything,” Paige decided. “Because that doesn’t make sense.”

“A couple days before Brian was killed, this guy contacted me out of the blue,” Carmen began. “He started talking about... well things,” she glanced at the two guys in the room. “You know, the things I’d done in a previous life. The hacking stuff.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “I get it.”

“He said he knew me but I can’t remember ever meeting him, not even online. At first, he was acting all suave like he thought I’d be up for a little side job,” Carmen explained. “When I told him that was a long time ago and I wasn’t interested, he got nasty. He said he had proof I was a criminal and that if I didn’t cooperate and tell him everything he wanted to know, give him information when he asked, he’d take his evidence to my boss.”

“And you told him where to shove his threat,” Paige said flatly.

“Basically,” Carmen confirmed. “I also asked him how he thought I got the job. I mean, I’m working for the feds because I got into trouble on that one...thing.” She glanced at Zeus then refocused on Paige.

Paige laughed. “Yeah, that one thing... the one that looked really good on a resume when interviewing with the FBI.”

“Anyway,” Carmen shifted, uncomfortable with the turn in conversation. That hacking job was a long time ago but seemed to be the job that would haunt her to the grave. “I gave him a piece of my mind and wasn’t very subtle in my rant. He got nasty right back, so I hung up on him. I thought that would be the end of it, but two days later Brian was ambushed on a call.”

“Where’s the connection?” Paige still wasn’t convinced. “I still don’t see it.”

“The number the guy called from was in Chicago,” Carmen provided. “It’s the reason I answered in the first place. I thought maybe Brian was calling from a new number.”

“And?” Paige pressed.

“And he left something at the scene, a calling card I guess to make sure I knew he was the one that killed Brian.”

“What kind of calling card?” Paige asked.

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“There were a couple things,” Dax picked up. “One had to do with the job Carmen doesn’t want to talk about. The other was a little strange. It took us a while to figure it out. He left the right pointer finger from a man that was killed a month earlier. A guy that had been dealing in small arms in the area.”

“What does the finger of an arms dealer have to do with Carmen?” Paige was thinking, turning the information around in her mind and still coming up short. Something was missing.

“The arms guy was funneling guns. Some to local gangs, some to outsiders, most to suspected terrorists,” Carmen said softly. “We were working the case, tracking the guns, which led us to Chicago. And to me... and Brian.”

“Did you bring Brian in on that?” Paige asked.

“No,” Carmen said immediately. “We kept our jobs separate. Both of us dealt with confidential stuff and most of our conversation occurred on the phone. I guess when you do this... as long as we’ve been doing it... you get a little paranoid.”

“It’s not paranoia if they really are watching you,” Paige grinned. She sobered. “I’m still not buying it. The connection’s too weak, what am I missing?”

Carmen frowned. “Isn’t that enough? I mean somehow he found out about that job I did and thinks he has an in. Thinks he can get inside information, so he tries to blackmail me. When that didn’t work, he murdered my boyfriend and made sure I know he was the one that did it.”

“Sure,” Paige shrugged. “I get all that and still, I think it’s a stretch.”

“How did he know about the job if he wasn’t researching me?” Carmen countered. “He was looking for a weak link and hit on me. When I refused, he murdered someone important to me to get my attention.”

“What are you thinking?” Dax asked, this was exactly the reason he wanted to bring Paige in. Sure, he needed her to know there could be danger, but she also had a sharp mind and her way of reasoning things was completely different from anyone else he’d ever met.

“I’m thinking anyone could discover that crap about Carmen and Senator Fryberg,” Paige sat back and considered.

“Fryberg?” Zeus asked. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

Paige smiled. “Chuck Fryberg was a blithering buffoon who believed walking over the ‘little people’ now and again was his right... as he was such an important Senator and all. Unfortunately, he walked on the wrong person and she hacked into his personal computer. A few days later, a certain tabloid printed a rather scathing article along with multiple compromising and embarrassing photos of the good senator engaged in some rather

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questionable... intimate behavior. That same week, the local cops received a tip that the distinguished gentleman – not - had an illegal porn stash on his hard drive, custom wrapped with a small sample of the goods. He resigned, but the entire incident was a huge spectacle and left him ruined. His political career was anyway.”

“Right,” Zeus drawled. “I remember that now. You were responsible?” He looked at Carmen in admiration.

“No,” she frowned. “He was responsible. It’s the only time I ever pulled a job for personal reasons and it came back to bite me. In fact, it’s still coming back because a madman is stalking me because of it.”

“But I don’t get it,” Zeus pondered. “He said he’d rat you out. But that incident was so public why would he have to?”

“Because the FBI kept their knowledge of the hacker a secret,” Paige answered. “As far as anyone knows, the identity of the leaker is still unknown.”

“But they know?” Zeus realized.

“They know,” Carmen sighed. “They always knew. I made a mistake. That’s what happens when you get emotionally involved. I made a mistake and they caught me. A job should just be a job, no emotional baggage.”

“And that mistake got Carmen the best job she ever had,” Paige grinned. “And provided a means for her to meet her best friend in the whole world.”

“Okay,” Carmen agreed. “It wasn’t a total disaster.”

“I know you guys have gone over this a ton,” Zeus finally said. “And there’s stuff I don’t know, but I’m inclined to side with Paige on this one. Knowing about a public incident doesn’t mean the guy targeted you specifically.”

“Then how do you explain it?” Carmen asked.

“I think it happened in reverse,” Paige decided. “I never met Brian, not in person, but I spoke to him. You talked to me all the time about him. I think he was a good cop, a good detective. The gun running was occurring in Chicago. Their activity led you guys there. Brian no longer did undercover work, but he still had a lot of contacts.”

“He did,” Carmen agreed.

“Remember about six months before he was killed, you told me some guy hooked up with him out of the blue to give him details about a murder. Details that helped solve the case. Brian

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had contacts on the street, in the gutter. If someone was running guns out of his city, chances are good he'd hear about it," Paige provided.

"They checked his case files," Carmen disagreed. "We've gone over this. His supervisor checked all his files, all his notes, call logs, everything. He wasn't working a gun case."

"Not that you know of," Paige pushed.

"I don't understand," Carmen told her.

"I mean you are thinking like a fed," Paige grinned. "Brian was a street cop, a good one. Sure, he had connections. He had guys that would feed him information for a price. Like the murder. He followed up on that murder tip, made sure it was legit before he passed it on to the case agent. I have loads of stuff I'm working at any given moment and some of it would never pop if you were looking into my files. That's how a local cop works. You've got tunnel vision. You're thinking about the way it works in Quantico, at the Bureau. You have to think like a local."

"You think Brian stumbled onto something," Dax considered. "Something he decided to look into himself before he went to his admin and started yelling terrorism. You think he hit on our case and whatever he discovered got him killed."

"I do," Paige was going to go with her gut. Her gut was telling her that was the more likely scenario. "I think someone came to him with info... one of his CI's. I think he decided to check it out before he took it up the chain. And, I think it got him killed. I also suspect that's where the suspect got Carmen's name in the first place. Carmen's number would be all over Brian's phone. A simple cloning device would give the dirtbag access to Brian's contacts, emails, text messages. No actual contact was even necessary."

"So Brian stumbles onto something and starts digging," Dax nodded. "He's discovered somehow and the bad guys start digging into him. They hit on Carmen and decide to take a risk. Hackers are known for working in the gray, they think it's worth a shot. A snitch on the inside would be gold. They call, it's a no go and a couple days later Brian is dead. Could be a message, but it could be he landed in a viper pit and got himself dead without anyone knowing. Akmed then decides to use the situation to his advantage and tries to scare you... and, at the same time, lead your colleagues in the wrong direction. It worked. We've been spinning our wheels trying to find a connection all this time. A connection that doesn't exist."

"Akmed?" Paige asked.

"Yeah," Carmen nodded. "And before you ask, yes... he's a known terrorist. At least he's been known to associate with terrorists. He's in the country illegally and he's in hiding. We don't know how to find him but he's been tormenting me for months."

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“Tormenting how?” Paige asked.

“Leaving gifts, and I use that term lightly, in front of my apartment door,” she glanced at Dax. When he nodded she continued. “I’ve sensed someone following me to work but haven’t actually seen anyone. The final straw was when he sent a bouquet of explosive flowers to the office.”

“Explosive flowers?” Paige asked.

“Personalized flowers made out of explosive material,” Carmen answered. “The entire building had to be evacuated so the bomb squad could dispose of the horrible thing.”

“And that’s when Nathan sent you here?” Paige surmised. “What did he do to make sure the guy didn’t follow?”

Carmen smiled, she knew her general well. “I’m supposedly lounging on a beach in Bali.”

“If I’m right, and this guy tracked you down through Brian, he’s going to know you didn’t fly to Bali.”

“I flew to Atlanta,” Carmen explained. “My ticket said I was laid over for three hours before I boarded a commercial jet to Bali. I actually left the commercial section of the airport, got on a train... can you believe it? I’ve never been to Atlanta before but you actually get on a train, the airport is so huge. I made my way to the private, luxury jet area and hitched a ride secretly with one of Nathan’s friends. He dropped me in Salt Lake and I was greeted by an agent with that junker out there. Seems they were just about to auction the thing off before Porter convinced them to loan it to me. Once I return it, they’ll sell it to the highest bidder.”

“But he will still know you didn’t board the flight to Bali,” Paige surmised.

“No,” Carmen objected. “I forgot that part. Another woman boarded the flight in Atlanta under my name and returned under a different name. We’re in the clear.”

“Who knows you’re here?”

“You, my overachieving ex-agent, local cop hero,” Carmen told her. “Your hot neighbor and Nathan. That’s it... well, Zeus. We were afraid of a leak in the agency so as far as anyone knows... I’m vacationing in Bali.”

“Good,” Paige relaxed. “That’s good. I doubt there will be any trouble here but we’ll all stay alert.” She turned to study Dax. “Reading between the lines, Nathan planned to keep this a secret... from me.”

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“He worries about you,” Carmen answered. “He’s afraid once you know, you’ll push your way in... end up right in the middle and the last thing we wanted was another dead cop... especially when that cop would be you.”

“Thanks for changing his mind,” she told Dax softly.

“Anytime,” he grinned. “It was the right thing to do.”

“You in trouble over it?”

“Naw,” Dax smiled. “He threatened Carmen with the dungeon, but dark places don’t scare me. In fact, it’s where I do my best work.”

Paige laughed but under the humor, she knew Dax was telling the truth. Which meant it was time to have another heart to heart with Nathan Porter. It was seriously past time things changed.

“You look tired,” Carmen stood. “I’m sorry we dumped all this on you after such a rough day.”

“I’m thinking you could use a little TLC,” Zeus also stood and took Carmen’s hand. “Darling, why don’t you walk me home and let’s give Dax a chance to pamper the little lady a bit.”

“Call her a little lady again and I’m pretty sure your recovery is going to be set back about three weeks,” Dax also stood.

Carmen laughed and pulled Zeus toward the door. “Don’t wait up,” she called on her way out.

“You don’t have to stay,” Paige told Dax. “But if you have the time, I’d like to show you just how grateful I am for intervening with Nathan.”

“I’ve got time,” Dax pulled her into his arms. “But no thanks is necessary. Like I said, it was the right thing to do.”

“You sure you’re not in trouble over it?”

“I’m sure,” Dax leaned in and gave her the most gentle kiss she’d ever had. “He threatened to fire me, I said okay, he changed his mind.”

“I’d question that with anyone else, but somehow I think that’s probably exactly how it all went down,” Paige grinned. “I’m glad he’s found someone who frustrates him just as much as I do. It’s good for him now and again... not getting his way, I mean.”

“I agree,” Dax took her hand and led her up the stairs.

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The following morning, Paige was sitting at her desk going through the information Carmen had left her when Jericho entered the building, disappeared into his office for several minutes then appeared again in the open doorway.

“Paige,” he called. “I need a moment.”

Paige jumped to her feet and was across the expanse that separated them in record time. She stepped through his door and started for a chair when he stopped her.

“Close the door, please.”

Paige paused, turned and gently pushed the heavy door closed until she heard the soft click of the latch. She moved to the visitor’s chair, confused and a little worried.

“I know I haven’t been myself since we had our last talk,” Jericho began. “The information you gave me, the handwritten note from your mother... well, let’s just say it knocked me back some. I needed my space, a little breathing room to adjust, to take it all in and decide where to go from here. I appreciate your patience, I now that couldn’t have been easy.”

Paige just sat there, not knowing how to respond to that.

Jericho gave a humorless laugh. “Must be a Carter family tradition.”

“What is?” Paige asked, confused.

“The silence, it’s deafening. Your mother used to do that to me,” he sobered. “When I was in the doghouse. She’d let me flop around a bit before she put me out of my misery. Guess you inherited that particular trait. I can take it, I suppose I deserve the hot seat. You don’t have to let me off easy.”

“That wasn’t my intent,” Paige frowned. “I was just... I don’t know, I guess waiting, taking it all in, listening to what you had to say.”

“I have a lot to say,” Jericho admitted. “Some will have to wait for a better time. I think we should try to have regular update meetings, a regular meeting where we go over things and update each other on any progress we’ve made. I haven’t made any by the way. I’ve ruled a couple things out but haven’t learned anything that could help.”

“Oh,” Paige realized the mysterious trips were somehow connected to her mother’s murder. “I was wondering, mom talked a lot about Tracy in that letter and alluded to something bad happening to Tracy. Do you know what she meant?”

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“Not entirely,” Jericho admitted. “Tracy, Samara and Chaya were inseparable in high school. Something bad happened to Tracy their senior year, something Chaya wouldn’t even tell me. Right after graduation, Tracy died.”

“How?”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Jericho smiled. “Speaking of which…”

“I assume you just switched gears and you’re referring to the case. I’m tugging a few lines on that and will fill you in later this afternoon,” she provided.

“Okay, good enough.” He thought about Tracy Douglas. What he knew about the girl was next to nothing. “Tracy was killed when she fell, or was pushed, over a cliff up the canyon. Most of the town has accepted it as an accident, or suicide. A few are positive there was foul play. Chaya was a hundred percent in the foul play circle.”

“She said she was going to the factory to retrieve a photo Tracy had left,” Paige recalled. “Something that was supposed to provide answers. Do you know if anyone ever found it?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Jericho sighed. “And after all this time, it’d be a miracle if we could.”

“I agree.”

“Well,” Jericho stood. “That’s all. I just wanted to say thank you for being open with me about the letter and I’m sorry I withdrew immediately afterward. Mostly, I wanted to thank you for your patience.”

“You’re welcome but that’s not necessary,” Paige assured him. “I’ll let you know what I learn about the million dollar murder. A friend of mine was able to find a substantial bit of information on our mysterious Crosby Miranti. I’m still going through it, but once I know more, I’ll fill you in.”

She took a minute to make sure her boss was up to speed on the current case and then returned to her desk to ponder what she’d learned. So, Tracy had to be the third person in the photo she found, the one that spooked Samara that day at the flower shop. Hadn’t Samara mentioned Tracy? What did it all mean? At the moment, Paige had too many mysteries running through her brain. She’d never solve this case if she let her mother’s murder and Carmen’s terrorist push their way to the forefront. And with that reminder, she returned to the office and filled Jericho in on her house guest, the possible threat and the need to keep it all a secret. She was a little surprised when Jericho agreed and told her he’d find a way to keep his men’s eyes open for suspicious activity without mentioning Carmen, the FBI, or national security.

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“Margie won’t even know,” he assured her. “I think it’s best if we kept this just between us. Last thing I need is General Nathan Porter breathing down my neck because I endangered his girl.”

“I’m my own girl, but I think that’s the best call... at least for now,” Paige grinned. “And anyway, you just might give as good as you get.”

Jericho was still laughing when she left the room.

Paige was tired, dirty and grumpy. Sean had called within minutes of finishing up with Jericho and asked her to meet him back at the old abandoned mine. They’d spent the entire morning and half of the afternoon combing every inch of that place without finding a single clue.

“Now what?” Sean asked.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m done here,” Paige wiped the sweat from her face and sighed. “There’s simply nothing here. I don’t think I’ve crawled around in the dirt that much since I was three.”

“I agree,” Sean pulled a bandana from his pocket and wiped his own face. “You said Carmen found something?”

“Actually, I said Carmen left me a packet this morning,” Paige corrected. “So far, I haven’t found much to tug. Crosby’s mom, Sally, married Ford Miranti when she was fairly young. It’s cutting it close, and I could be wrong, but I think it was one of those shotgun weddings.”

“What was that?” Sean teased. “Did I hear you say you could be wrong? Twice in the same week?”

“Ford stuck for a couple years then bailed,” she continued... ignoring the jibe. “You’ll need to look at his sheet for yourself, but basically he was in and out of jail for the next twenty years. About six years after his kid disappears, Ford lands in prison for good. Convenience store robbery gone bad. His partner shot the clerk who ended up dying. Miranti got life and is still rotting in a cell. My guess, he’ll die there.”

“Sally Miranti?”

“Just like Pearl said,” Paige started to walk toward Pearl’s house and her car. “Sally died from a massive heart attack. She had a modest life, left everything to her daughter... Payton.”

“Right,” Sean fell in next to her. “The snooty lawyer with three last names?”

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“Worse,” Paige grinned. “She’s a hyphen... Miranti-Chadwick. I always want to add the third to the end of that for some reason.”

Sean laughed. “Okay, so the family’s in the clear.”

“For now,” Paige agreed. “I still have the dirt on Crosby to go through. Pearl said he was a trouble magnet and judging by the depth of the stack Carmen left, she was right. I’m going to head back to the office and sift through it all... see if anything jumps out as a possible lead. You still headed up to Salt Lake?”

“Yeah,” Sean ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Our bone expert insisted on a one-on-one. She thinks she found something important. I think she’s being her typical drama queen but the SAC ordered me in. I’ll be back tonight, how about we plan on hooking up in the morning? It will give me time to deal with the bone doctor and you time to finish up with Carmen’s report.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Paige stopped for fast food on her way back to the office, sure it was going to be another long night.

Several hours later, Paige was still sitting at her desk, skimming through information on Crosby, his family and several acquaintances. She nearly fell out of her chair when Jericho barked “Go home,” before disappearing out the door. She glanced up, considered and decided to ignore him. Didn’t sound like an order... more like a request. She’d put in another hour here, head home and quiz Carmen about a few of the documents. She’d have to start the morning out at the care center notifying Pearl they’d found her nephew in the old mine. Something she didn’t look forward to but it had to be done. She had wasted nearly an hour today, driving out to the center, only to learn Pearl was having a bad day and the doctor wouldn’t allow any visitors that might upset her. He offered to break the news himself, but Paige needed to know if Crosby had met with anyone, or maybe had a visitor just prior to his disappearance. In all likelihood, Pearl wouldn’t remember something that happened so many years ago, but she had to try.

She flipped the page and once again saw the names David Beckett and Heath Hackshaw. Both men had extensive records dating prior to the robbery and after Crosby’s death. However, once Miranti disappeared, the two men didn’t appear to cross paths again. At least not in a criminal arrest sense. She’d have Carmen follow up on that as well. See if the two men ever lived in the same area at the same time. Both were currently in prison. Hackshaw for a home invasion in Tennessee, Beckett for numerous drug charges.

Paige stood, gathered up her notes and made her way to the door. It was time to call it a night. All things considered, she’d had a productive day. They had finished searching the mine, and she had two prime suspects in her robbery/murder case. Time to head home, have a glass of wine and spend a few hours with a good friend.

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Paige looked up when Sean stepped into the office. “You look tired... and grumpy.”

“That’s because I am tired and grumpy,” Sean dropped into her chair.

“Any luck on the trip up north?”

“Some,” he admitted. “But it was a long way to drive for very little information.”

Paige waited.

Sean dropped a set of photos on the desk. “The ME has ruled it a homicide. The bone expert has determined our guy was killed by a blow to the head with a blunt object.”

“We already knew that,” Paige frowned. “The caved in skull is what I like to call... a clue.”

Sean smiled. “That’s not the part I learned. Patience never was one of your virtues,” Sean paused. “Our expert has determined our guy was hit in the back of the head with some kind of hammer or odd shaped rock. He goes down, that blow alone would have killed him, but our guy’s not taking any chances. So, once Crosby is sprawled on the ground, dead. The killer takes a couple more swings, striking him in the right temple with the same object. He’s then drug by his legs down that tunnel and dumped in the corner.”

“How could they possibly know he was drug by his legs?”

“Something about a dislocated knee,” Sean swiped his hand through the air. “I didn’t need to know how. She’s the expert.”

Paige laughed. “And you call me impatient. You never could sit still long enough to understand the details.”

“Well,” Sean continued. “Now all we have to do is find something smaller than a hammer with a square end that a guy could swing a couple times and kill his buddy. That thing about no honor among thieves...” Sean paused. “Guess that’s true when it comes to over a million in cash.”

“In my opinion, it’s true with much less.” Paige settled into her chair and considered. “There were a lot of tools out at the mine. We pretty much ignored them because they belonged and we figured the usual, butt of a pistol when he didn’t get the answers he needed. I guess we need to head back, see if any of the pokey things match up with this...” she held out a close up of Crosby’s skull. Well, at least they were assuming it was Crosby. “We’ve been working under the assumption that’s Crosby’s dead body. What if Crosby’s the killer?”

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“Doesn’t track,” Sean disagreed. “He’s the only missing, disappeared, person reported in the area during that time.”

“But they weren’t from this area,” Paige argued. “For the record, it doesn’t track for me either. But we can’t rule out the possibility. Unless your team has already identified the remains.”

“Not conclusively,” Sean admitted. “Everything matches up with records at the time but we’re still trying to get a judge to sign off on a warrant for his medical history.”

“The sister won’t grant permission?”

“One word.... lawyer,” Sean said shaking his head.

“Right,” Paige didn’t need more. “So, let’s head back to the mine. I also want to stop in at the care center and see Pearl. The docs wouldn’t let me in yesterday.”

“Why?”

“It’s a longshot, but I want to see if she remembers any visitors... that Crosby might have had out here just before he went missing.”

“Won’t hold up,” Sean warned. “We can ask, but any attorney worth his weight will get it tossed. She’s an old, sick, decrepit woman.”

“Redundant much?” Paige pushed away from her desk. “Don’t forget your photos,” she said as she walked away.

Once again, Paige found herself making her way through the narrow tunnel that led to the ancient mine. The two friends walked in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Once they stepped into the large open area, Paige flipped on the spotlight style flashlight she’d snagged from the back storage room at the office. She cautiously moved forward and stood in the spot where the drag marks began.

“Okay,” she turned to face Sean. “The partner wants the money back, Crosby’s resisting. Crosby turns to walk away and whack... he’s hit in the back of the head. The partner used so much force, he’s killed instantly but he wants to be sure. Whack, whack... two more strikes.”

“His head would have been caved in at that point, no question the guy’s dead,” Sean added. “So, did he bring the weapon with him? Or was it something he had on his belt or in his pocket and he used it in the spur of the moment?”

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Paige frowned. "I was thinking it could be one of the tools over there but that wouldn't work. Unless..."

"Unless it was premeditated," Sean concluded. "They walk in, the killer snags a tool off the old cart over there and waits for his chance. They argue like you said, Crosby turns to leave and bam... he's dead."

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Paige decided. "I mean, if he walked over during the argument, Crosby's going to notice and he would never turn his back on the creep. If he used one of those tools, which is a big if at this point."

"Let's start looking," Sean decided. "The end has to be smaller than a hammer and square, not round like your typical, garden variety domestic hammer."

"Redundancy again," Paige observed. "Hum, never noticed that about you... before, I mean. When we worked together." She slipped on a pair of gloves and moved to join Sean. He was standing in front of a utility cart of some kind, his flashlight was shining directly into the bin section of the cart.

"There have to be at least fifty tools in there."

"Probably," he agreed. "But it's not like the guys going to bash his friend's brains out, drag him into the back to avoid discovery and then come back here and bury the weapon in the bottom of the cart. If it's here, he just tossed it on top on his way out."

"Makes sense," Paige added the beam of her light to the small area. She was about to give up when something caught her eye.

"Let's check the other room," Sean suggested. "Where the body was found. He could have left it in there."

"Wait," Paige said urgently. "There's something in here."

Sean grabbed an empty bucket sitting next to the cart and began pulling out picks and chisels. It only took a minute to see what Paige was after. There was what looked like a hammer but smaller wedged between several pickaxes and smaller circular chisels. "What if we just dumped it? Tipped the cart over and let the tools fall onto the ground. It would be easier to pick through them that way."

"Okay," Paige agreed. She couldn't think of another way to get to the tool she wanted without removing the others one at a time. The two of them moved to the back side of the cart and together, with a significant amount of effort, finally tipped the cart on its side. Metal tools clattered to the ground. The sound of metal hitting metal echoed throughout the room, the

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sounds almost unbearable. Paige covered her ears and waited for the noise to subside. “Great idea, Einstein.”

Sean shrugged. “Worked didn’t it?”

Paige crouched down, searching for the tool she’d been unable to dig from the collection. Within seconds, she found it. As she stood, she set the object in the palm of her hand and held it out to Sean. “One possible murder weapon coming up. What is this thing anyway? It’s strange that there’s only one in the entire group.”

“Matches, though,” Sean decided. “Let’s bag it and get it to the lab. If that’s what he used, it should have blood and hair mixed in with all that rust.”

Paige glanced back at the mess they’d made. “What do we do with that?”

“Nothing,” Sean decided. “We still have the opening secured so nobody can get inside. Until we say different, it’s an active crime scene. Let’s leave them in case we need to come back.”

Paige considered. Sean was right. The Feds had provided a sturdy barricade with a padlock to secure the area. Unless you had a key, there was no getting into this space. “I guess it should be okay.”

Paige pulled into her driveway and was greeted by her neighbor. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“Nothing special,” Dax took her hand and guided her toward his place. “I just thought you might be hungry, so I got dinner.”

“You got dinner?”

“Yeah,” Dax grinned. “Your favorite... Dirks BBQ.”

“I can’t say no to Dirk’s,” Paige agreed. They stepped into an empty house. “Where’s the dynamic duo?”

Dax frowned. “They’re on a date, apparently.”

Paige grinned. “You don’t approve?”

“I just hope Carmen understands what she’s getting into,” Dax told her. “Zee, he’s the love ‘em and leave ‘em kind of guy. I like Carmen, I don’t want her to get hurt.”

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“You might like Carmen, but you don’t know her that well if you’re worried.”

“Meaning?” Dax asked.

“Meaning,” Paige settled into a chair at the table. The food smelled amazing. “The closest Carmen has come to having a serious relationship in all the time I’ve known her was with Brian. And that only worked because she was in Virginia and he lived in Chicago. It lasted because of the distance.”

“So you don’t think she’s serious?”

“I think she’s an adult and if she wants to have a little fun while she’s in town, and Zee is willing, what’s the harm?”

“She seems pretty broken up about Brian,” Dax pushed. “You sure they weren’t serious?”

“Oh, they were as serious as Carmen would allow.” Paige studied Dax, wondering what had him so upset. “Brian talked about moving to Virginia, applying with the Bureau. Carmen always talked him out of it. Our eccentric computer geek was comfortable with their arrangement. She liked having a guy, but not having him... if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Dax settled across from her. “I won’t worry about it if you say she’s fine. I just think underneath all those bright pink streaks in her sassy hair and crazy jewelry lies a truly good person. I don’t want to see Zee mess with that.”

“And the same goes for Zeus,” Paige countered. “He’s a great guy, a little on the chauvinistic side but I think that’s mostly for show. He gets a lot of mileage out of the shock value. I also think Zeus hasn’t met the right woman yet.” She frowned. “And now I’m just as worried my friend is going to break your friend’s heart as you were in reverse.”

Dax grinned at the convoluted explanation he understood perfectly. “Then let’s both stop worrying and let them figure it out for themselves. Like you said, they’re both adults. Eat, while it’s hot. You had another long day.”

Paige and Dax were just finishing up with the dishes when Paige’s phone rang. She looked at the display, Sean, and answered on the second ring. “What’s up?”

“Our lab found blood and hair on the hammer,” he jumped right in. “Apparently, it’s a rock hammer. Miners and geologists use it to split rock to determine the composition of the fossils under the surface.”

Paige grinned. This was something that would fascinate Sean and bore her to tears. “So we found our murder weapon?”

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“We did,” Sean said confidently. “The blood is the same type you sent from the two-by-four in the wall. They’ll still have to run the DNA, see if it’s a match but it’s looking like Crosby snagged himself on a nail or something when he stashed the loot.”

“Did they find anything we can use to identify the killer?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” Sean said, clearly gloating. “We have a print.”

“Seriously?”

“Belongs to one Heath Hackshaw.”

“I knew it!” Paige exclaimed. “It was between Hackshaw and David Beckett but my gut was telling me Hackshaw. His crimes were always more violent. When do we go? To Tennessee?”

“I’ve made arrangement for a transport tomorrow, ten o’clock if you can be ready.”

“Where?”

“Ephraim Airport,” Sean advised.

“I’ll be there,” Paige assured him. “We staying overnight in Tennessee or coming back tomorrow night?” Paige smiled when Dax wrapped his arms around her waist, a purely male thing to do at the moment... scratch that, it was a clear sign of possession and either gender was capable of doing it.

“We’ll play it by ear,” Sean decided. “If we need to, the Bureau will pick up the cost. I’m hoping when he’s confronted with the evidence, he’ll just confess and make things easy.”

“You’re dreaming Wilkens, the man’s a hardened criminal. He’s not going to tell much but we might get enough to figure it out ourselves,” Paige grinned. “We can discuss it on the way, I need to call Jericho and let him know what’s up. Tolman’s going to want in, work something out with the AG on the charges.”

“Be sure to tell that guy of yours any overnight rendezvous will include separate rooms.”

“Okay,” Paige smiled. “I guess that will work if you’re sure the Bureau can’t afford two rooms we can share for one night.”

“Paige,” Sean warned. “He’s standing right there isn’t he?”

“Yep,” she laughed.

“Tell him the truth, I like my teeth.”

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“See you in the morning,” she clicked off and turned to deal with that ‘guy of hers’. She wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about that.

Heath Hackshaw was uncooperative and defiant. Sean explained the evidence they had against him in the bank robbery and pushed his buttons about the lost money. It worked, the man was pissed and dumb enough to talk... initially.

“All this time it was right there, in the old ladies wall and you walked away empty handed,” Sean laughed. “How does that make you feel? A low-level street thief outmaneuvered you, left you with nothing while he took it all. I bet he’s living the high life on a tropical island somewhere laughing it up as he remembers the fool that helped him get rich.”

Hackshaw sneered. “Crosby Miranti’s the fool.”

“Yeah? How so?” Paige asked. She looked around the room. “Don’t see him locked up in this hellhole.”

“The guy’s a petty thief,” Hackshaw snapped. “You think that idiot planned the hit?”

“He walked away with the cash didn’t he?” Sean pushed.

“You can’t prove I had anything to do with that bank job,” Hackshaw grinned. “But if I did, the only reason that kid ended up with the dough was dumb luck and police harassment.”

“I don’t follow,” Paige told him.

“Stupid cop was off-duty,” Hackshaw barked. “Don’t you guys ever just hang, leave the job at the office and enjoy a beer or something?”

“I enjoy a beer now and then,” she looked at Sean. “Don’t you?”

“All the time,” he said casually.

“Not this guy,” Hackshaw continued. “Always hounding, always just around the corner looking for a reason to throw me in a cage.”

“You got arrested,” Paige realized.

“Had a couple outstanding warrants,” Hackshaw grumbled. “Petty crap that any decent cop would let go. Not Deputy Mike Stratford. No, he couldn’t let anything drop. Hauled me in for a week before my attorney could get me out.”

“And by that time, Crosby was long gone,” Sean provided. “He took the money and ran.”

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“Not so long,” Hackshaw grinned. “Not so gone, either. The kid thought I didn’t know.”

“But you did know about his Aunt in Utah,” Paige prompted. “You figured he’d go out, lie low and disappear.”

“I’m sure that was the plan,” Hackshaw said confidently. Nobody would ever find that kid’s remains.

“So you had to kill him,” Sean dropped the hammer.

Hackshaw’s eyes grew wide, but he didn’t speak.

“You lured him out to the old mining operation and bashed his head in,” Sean continued. “Yeah, we found the body already and it’s covered in evidence. Evidence that points directly at you.”

“I want my lawyer,” Hackshaw mumbled. Then he wisely kept his arrogant, condescending mouth shut.

It was nearly ten o’clock that evening. Paige watched out the window as the small plane descended, then finally touched down on the runway at the Manti-Ephraim Airport. To say it was a long day would be an understatement. Hackshaw hadn’t said another word. The local AG got involved and charges were filed in federal court for the bank robbery. Tolman was insisting he wanted the murder case to be handled locally. It was all over her pay grade, so Paige decided to let the attorney’s fight it out.

She was still thinking about the irony of the situation as she descended the stairs and headed for her car. Crosby double-crossed his partner, watched him get arrested, then split and never looked back. Well, until Hackshaw showed up and killed him of course. The two thieves got nothing for their trouble. Well, nothing good. One ended up dead, the other spent the past fifty years completely broke, in and out of prison. Over a million in cash so close... yet so far. Then there was Pearl. All that money right there, waiting to solve all her problems, just out of reach for over fifty years as she struggled month after month to pay the bills.

The only good thing to come of the whole mess was the reward. Money Pearl Ledbetter would receive in a few weeks if all went according to plan. Paige was glad, it would help pay the fee at the care center. Plus, Diane and the guys would have a little extra time to get the house updated and rented. She couldn’t wait to tell them the good news. The Feds had already started the paperwork, thanks to Sean. Pearl Ledbetter would soon be the lucky recipient of fifty thousand dollars. The reward had originally started out as two percent of the total take, but

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twenty years after the theft, it was bumped up to five percent, then forgotten. Not a bad return on the small investment of an outdated stove.

Another good thing, Hackshaw was going away for good. Paige doubted he'd ever see freedom again. Tolman was sure he could prove pre-meditation and he intended to throw the book at the murdering thief. She was sure there was a story there. The local DA seemed awfully upset about a crime that occurred before he was born. She didn't mind, the man was a menace and deserved to die in an eight-foot cell.

She was just approaching her car when a man stepped from the vehicle parked next to her. She paused, shifted her purse for easy access to her weapon, then relaxed. "Should I be worried?"

"Not at all," Nathan Porter stepped forward. "Come give an old man a hug. I hear you caught the bad guy."

"Well," Paige smiled as she hugged the closest thing she had to a father. "It wasn't that hard, he was already caught."

"That's my favorite kind," Nathan smiled. "Harder to run that way."

"Why are you here, Nathan?"

"I think you're right," he said softly. "About Brian." He glanced around but decided even if someone was trying to listen, the noise from the airport would drown out their conversation. "Nothing we've been able to confirm outright yet. But a friend, a colleague of Brian's in the area, he found a guy... one of Brian's contacts on the street. We're working on it."

"And you're here to talk to Dax about all this?"

"I'm here to talk to all of you," Nathan corrected. "I was wrong to exclude you. Officially, I'm here to visit with an old friend and see how she's doing. It's been too long, Paige. I missed you. And maybe while I'm at it, unofficially, I can get a little insight on a touchy situation."

"How long?" Paige asked. "I don't mind, I love having a house guest but how long?"

"Could be months," Nathan admitted. "Even if we get this one guy... this operation is big. Their organization is careful and meticulous. We can't take any chances. Plus, I figure I have one team member out here, it's not that big of a deal to have two."

Paige smiled. If Carmen was going to be here for several months, she just might talk to Diane Pembroke about renting a house.