

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Lethal Remedy *Season 2, Episode 3*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

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Paige settled in with her second cup of coffee. It was a perfect morning. The slight breeze was wreaking havoc with her files but it cooled the air just enough to make the morning pleasant. She settled back on the comfortable patio chair and closed her eyes as she tried to relax. For the first time in a long time, she had two whole days off. Two days to do whatever she wanted, two days to herself. Dax and Zeus left the previous afternoon, headed for Nephi to spend the weekend helping Ken with some project. Carmen decided to rent the Ledbetter house and this weekend she was settling in, trying to make the place a home. That would be a challenge, Carmen had big city taste and was now living in a small town.

She reached out, blindly searching for her mug when the doorbell chimed. Paige frowned as she made her way to the front door. Her surprised turned to curiosity when she saw her boss standing on her front porch in regular street clothes. She rarely saw the discernible man in anything but his uniform. “Sheriff.”

Jericho frowned as he stepped into Paige’s living room. Apparently, they still had a long way to go to get back on track. “I was wondering if you could spare a few minutes this morning.”

“Sure,” Paige waved him forward. “I was just working, well mostly relaxing... in the back.” She stepped through the French doors and settled back on the lounge chair.

Jericho glanced briefly at the files, then focused on Paige. “As your boss, I guess I’m expected to warn you about burnout and the need to take a break from the work now and again. But, I’m not going to because I’m not here as your boss.”

“Why are you here?”

“I think we need to talk and there never seems to be time,” Jericho settled into the chair across from her. “At the office I mean. I wanted to discuss Chaya’s case.”

“Um...” Paige hesitated. “I’m going to be honest, I have no idea what to call you. Sheriff seemed to annoy you but...”

“Let’s go with Jericho,” Walters sat forward. “I realize it’s going to take time... to get back where we were before. But let’s start there.”

“Can we?” Paige asked. “Get back there, I mean. I also wonder if we should. I mean it feels like that is moving backwards not forwards.”

“So, what do you suggest?”

“I don’t know,” Paige said in frustration. “I mean, I was wrong and I need you to know that. I was upset because I thought you just let a killer go free. That file proves otherwise and I hope you will forget all the horrible things I said about that and accept my apology.”

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“I already have, Paige.”

“But at the same time, you and mom betrayed my trust. You kept this huge secret and in my head I know I shouldn’t blame you. Mom was the one that insisted the relationship stay this big secret, but I just don’t understand why. I mean, as her daughter she should have told me. And now she’s not here. I can’t confront her about it. So, when I’m with you, I just refocus that anger toward you because you were part of that.”

“I was an unwilling part, but yes, I was part of it.”

“Do you know why?” Paige asked softly.

“No,” Jericho sighed. “And I know it won’t help, but her need to keep our relationship a secret hurt me, too... back then, just as much as it’s hurting you now. I wanted the world to know, but Chaya said she wasn’t ready. Maybe she was worried how it would impact you. Maybe it had something to do with your father. As I understand it, you were pretty close to your dad.”

“I was,” Paige agreed. “But he had been gone a long time by then. I accepted his death and I would have accepted mom’s need to move on. She was really happy here. For the first time since dad died, she was truly happy. I wish I had known why. Known you were partially responsible for that.”

The two of them sat in silence for several minutes, each lost in their own memories.

“I think that’s another reason I’m confused about where we go from here,” Paige broke the silence.

“How so?” Jericho asked.

“Because after I read that letter, I knew there was someone out there, a man here in town that mom loved with all her heart. Someone that, if things had been different, in all likelihood would have become my step-father. She loved you and I can see you loved her. It would have been the natural progression of things. Now, I can’t stop wondering why I really got the job. Did you hire me because I was the most qualified candidate, or did you hire me because I was the daughter of the woman you loved?”

“I hired you because you were the most qualified and because I loved your mother... and in spite of that as well.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It was difficult, at first,” Jericho admitted. “Seeing you every day, remembering Chaya each time you did something that was so like her. I knew it would be, but over time, our interaction became more about you and less about her.”

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“Dax said I got so upset with you because I thought of you as a father figure, sort of like I do Nathan Porter,” Paige confessed. “In a way, I guess he’s right. I thought of you as a mentor, but some of the feelings are the same... just like Nathan. Maybe that’s what has made this so difficult - the emotions. Now that I know you may have been my step-father, it seems a little strange to think of you that way.”

“Then don’t,” Jericho said immediately. “Back then, it would have been an honor to be your step-dad. I would have been good at it, I think. But that time has passed. Let’s not try to make this something it’s not. Let’s do like you said... move forward. I truly think the best way to do that is to let things develop naturally... as we solve your mother’s murder. I believe together, we actually have shot at doing just that.”

“I guess I can do that,” Paige picked up the file she’d been working on. “I realized something this morning.”

“What’s that?”

“You and I... we were working the same leads, just going about it in a different way,” Paige pointed out. “I investigated most of the same people you did. I just tracked them electronically. You have a file on Margaret Swenson, I have a file on Ms. Swenson as well. You tracked her down, physically, and asked her all the right questions before ruling her out. I tracked the money; gas purchases, restaurant tabs, hotel bills, stuff like that. I ruled her out my way, you ruled her out your way. I think it might be a good first step to combine files. I’ll tell you what I know, you tell me what you know.”

“I’m thinking that might be a good second step,” Jericho smiled.

“So what do you think we need to do first?”

“Take a good look around that abandoned factory,” Jericho said soberly.

“Have you been back there?” Paige asked. “I mean after you found her?”

“No,” Jericho frowned. “I always knew I would have to go, but I’ve been procrastinating. It’s not a place I want to revisit but I think we need to take the time to search it. Your mom was looking for something, a clue this Tracy girl left. We need to find that clue.”

“It’s been a long time,” Paige considered. “It may not even be there anymore. Maybe it never was. If I’m right, this has to do with Tracy Douglas and her untimely death. Mom referred to an incident... something that happened to Tracy a few weeks before she died. I tried to talk to Samara about it, but she shut down immediately.”

“Samara Vega?”

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“Yeah,” Paige affirmed as she shuffled through the file in search of the photo. The instant she found it, she set it on the table in front of the sheriff. “The three of them were close, in high school. Then Tracy died, and mom and Samara apparently went their separate ways. I tried to get details, but Samara clammed up. She was visibly upset when I showed her that photo and even more concerned I had made the connection. She tried to brush it off, but she knows something. A secret she’s too afraid to share.”

Jericho picked up the photo and studied the three girls. “I didn’t live here then,” he began. “When the three of them were in high school. If I had to guess, this picture was taken sometime around graduation. The irises have already bloomed and those look like lilies in the background. Yeah,” Jericho paused. “If I had to guess, I’d say late May or early June.”

“I hadn’t noticed that,” Paige said as she frantically searched for Tracy’s obituary. Seconds later she pulled it from a stack of papers triumphantly. “Says here, Tracy died on May twenty-fourth just before graduation.”

Jericho continued to study the photo of a young Chaya Carter... No, she wasn’t a Carter yet. That came later after she left Manti and met Dylan Carter. In this photo, she was Chaya Davis. So young and full of life... nothing but time ahead of her. “I think I should try talking to Samara.”

“Do you think she’ll give you more than she gave me?”

“It can’t hurt to try,” Jericho decided. “Give me an hour. Let me see what I can get from her, then the two of us will head out to that old factory and take a look around.” Just as he finished speaking, an uneasy feeling engulfed him. Jericho stood and moved to the railing. He focused on the nearby forest, waiting for the slightest movement. After several minutes, he turned. “Do you ever get the feeling you’re being watched out here? Then, suddenly the feeling disappears.”

Paige frowned, “All the time.” She stood to stand next to her boss. “Dax has darted, more than once, into the forest and spotted evidence someone was out there. Do you think we were being watched?”

“Maybe,” Jericho shrugged. “But if so, they’re gone.” He waited as Paige began shoving all their files into a large case. “You have a copy of my entire investigation. I think it might be a good idea if you copied everything you’ve gathered so far as well. That way we’ll have two complete files... a backup copy of everything. I don’t like this feeling I have in my gut that someone is waiting for the perfect moment to break in and steal everything you’ve got there.”

“Follow me,” Paige said lifting the large case. Once inside she moved to the room she’d set up as her office and slid back the hidden compartment where she kept all her clues. Once she slid the documents inside, she pulled out a small wooden box and flipped open the lid. “Mom

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had this hidden in the wall, with the photo, and that letter to you she hid in a sort of diary. It looks like a school ring, one an athlete would wear. Maybe give his girlfriend like that wrestler did with the girl we found up the canyon.”

Jericho took the ring and studied it. It was commonplace to engrave the owner’s initials inside the ring but this ring was smooth. Either the owner had worn it so much the engraving had worn down or there never were initials to begin with. “I don’t see anything that points to an owner. Any idea who it belonged to? Maybe a mention of a boyfriend in Chaya’s diary?”

“Nope,” Paige took the masculine item when Jericho held it out and returned it to the box. “The diary’s not from high school and it’s not a true diary. Just a record of things she had on her mind. Stuff that only made sense to her. The ring might not mean anything, but I have to believe mom hid it away for a reason. I keep going back to Tracy Douglas. She has to be the catalyst in all this. I just can’t figure out why.”

“Maybe Samara will enlighten us once I have a chance to corner her alone,” Jericho glanced at his watch. “Give me an hour. I’m going to confront her at home, lock that up tight and we’ll head to the factory as soon as I return. If you agree, bring your case file to the office on Monday and Margie can copy it for me. She’s discreet and can take care of it while the rest of us are handling calls.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to bring Margie in on this?” Paige asked. The woman was still angry and barely speaking to Paige these days.

“She’s already in,” Jericho moved toward the door. “On my end, she has been for years. Think about it. You can let me know on our way to the Tillman Factory. I’m not sure if you caught it, in my report, but when I found Chaya on the factory floor, she was gripping a cuff link. I have to assume it belonged to the killer. I’ve researched it, of course, but so far I can’t find a thread to tug - kind of like that ring. I have no doubt when we solve this thing it will all come together. Until then...”

“Until then,” Paige echoed. “We have a lot of evidence and not a single suspect. Are we kidding ourselves? Believing we can solve the mystery after all this time?”

“I don’t think so,” Jericho moved to the patio. “And I don’t think you believe that either.”

Jericho stepped to the front door and rang the bell. A series of emotions crossed Samara’s face as she stood just inside the door. “Good morning, Ms. Vega.”

“Sheriff,” Samara swallowed hard, worried about this visit.

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“I was wondering if I could come in and talk to you about an old case,” he said conversationally.

“Um...” Samara hesitated. “Well, I’m just getting ready to go to work. Can this wait?”

“I’m afraid it can’t,” Jericho took a step forward. “I’ve spoken to your supervisor, told him you might be just a couple minutes late. He agreed to stay a few minutes over if necessary.”

Samara frowned. She was out of excuses, there was a reason Sheriff Walter’s was so successful and why he was respected by the entire community. He never left anything to chance. “Okay, then.” She stepped inside and held the door so the lawman could enter. Once she had closed the door, she moved cautiously to the couch and sat down. “What is this about, Sheriff?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Jericho settled into a chair directly across from the terrified woman. She knew something, he was sure of it. “I came across an old photo this morning, one of you, Tracy Douglas and Chaya Carter.”

“Oh,” Samara’s hand shot to her mouth as she gasped. He knew, and he was investigating. Was he only looking into Chaya’s death or Tracy’s as well?

“I was hoping you could tell me about Tracy,” he settled into his chair.

“Um, well that was so long ago,” Samara swallowed. “What would you like to know?”

“Something specific,” Jericho pressed. “I’m afraid I need to ask you about the time just before her death. Chaya mentioned there was an incident. Something terrible that happened to Tracy. Maybe something she was distraught over, a reason that might explain her sudden depression and help me understand why a girl like that, a young woman that had her whole life ahead of her, would jump to her death.”

Samara studied her hands for several seconds. She was afraid, terrified the slightest answer might make her a third target. But she couldn’t lie to the sheriff. Maybe it was time to explain. She swallowed hard and glanced up, meeting the sheriff’s eyes. “We went to a party. All the seniors were supposed to be there. It was a celebration, sort of a pre-graduation event. We all wanted to blow off some steam, you know? Our parents were putting so much pressure on us to find a good college and get a good job. We just wanted to have a little fun, enjoy the summer before we had to start school again.”

“So the three of you went to this party together?” Jericho asked.

Samara nodded. “It was up the canyon, somewhere on top in a meadow. A bunch of the guys built a big bonfire, and we just hung out, drank a little too much and crashed. That was the plan all along, nobody thought it was a good idea to drive down the canyon after drinking like that.”

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“And what happened?”

“Tracy disappeared,” Samara admitted. “I didn’t notice at first, neither did Chaya. We were talking to a couple guys... the Baker twins. They were cool and I think Blake had a thing for Chaya. Jake was nice, but I didn’t get the feeling he was really into me. Anyway, we got caught up. The alcohol didn’t help. We just lost track of time. When some of the kids started to coordinate sleeping arrangements, we realized Tracy had been gone a long time. Chaya insisted we start looking for her. The four of us, the Baker boys helped, we split up and walked the entire area around the camp. We didn’t find her so we decided to head into the woods. There were a couple clumps of trees on either side of the meadow. I went with Jake, Chaya went with Blake. The guys insisted, said they didn’t want us girls wandering out there alone... not with so many guys drunk and all.

“Did you find Tracy?”

Samara swallowed hard again. “Chaya and Blake did.” A tear trickled down her cheek and she impatiently brushed it away. “Chaya stayed with her while Blake came to find me. She was a mess. Her shirt was ripped and her knees were bloodied. She was completely covered in dirt and grass. She had this look, like she wasn’t really there. I think she was in shock or something. Me and Chaya drove her back to my house. Chaya drove, she wasn’t drunk like I was. The guys followed us there but didn’t stop. They just wanted to make sure we got home okay. My parents were out of town that weekend so we had the house to ourselves. Chaya tried to get Tracy to call the police, but she said no. She said he had threatened her. She was really scared, which scared me. Tracy was always so bold, so fearless, but that night - she was terrified. She was still shaking and wouldn’t calm down. We begged her to tell us who he was, but she just shut down completely.”

“Can you be specific? I know it’s hard,” Jericho added. “But I need to know what happened to Tracy. Was she physical assaulted? Beat up by someone? Raped? What happened to your friend?”

“She was raped,” Samara said softly. “She was never the same after that. For the first week, after, she barely said two words. Then, she got angry. She decided to fight back. I begged her to let it go but she wouldn’t.”

“And you never learned who her attacker was?” Jericho pressed.

“No,” Samara shook her head immediately. “I think she might have told Chaya, or at least said enough that she figured it out. When Chaya moved back here, she was determined to make the man pay. I begged her to let it go. So much time had gone by and all I could think of was how terrified Tracy had been. Chaya didn’t know it, but the day she died, Tracy told me she was going to confront him. She was going to make sure he knew he hadn’t gotten away with it. Then she jumped off that cliff. Chaya insisted it wasn’t suicide... even back then, in high

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school, when it happened. She was even more adamant when she moved back years later. I told her that was the very reason we should let it go. If the guy had killed Tracy, going after him would be dangerous. I refused to help her and when she continued to push... I got angry. I wouldn't talk to Chaya and avoided her completely. She died, and I never had the chance to tell her how sorry I was. I don't know if helping her would have been the right thing to do, or if I would be dead now, too."

Jericho felt for the woman sitting before him but there were several things that needed to be cleared up. "Samara, I know this is difficult. I know it happened a long time ago, but I need you to think about that night."

"Okay," Samara swallowed hard.

"This was mid-to-late May," Jericho began. "You said you went to the top of the canyon, in a meadow. Is that right?"

"Oh, I understand," Samara nodded. "There was still snow way up on top. We didn't make it all the way to Skyline or anything. We just went to the top of where we could get. The road was still closed and further up there was still snow. But that year was warmer than usual and we thought it would be okay."

"But you guys camped out in the open?"

"Some of the kids did," Samara told him. "The guys kept the bonfire going and some of the kids just gathered around the fire, hoping it would keep them warm. We took a tent and warm sleeping bags. All three of us had been to girl's camp. We knew how cold it could get at night, even if the days were warm. So, we were prepared for the lower temperatures. Like I said, it was warmer than usual, but I think the party was that first week in May and the nights were still chilly."

"Okay," Jericho continued. That made more sense. "Now think about the kids, the guys tending the fire, the girls scattered around visiting. Were they all from Manti High?"

"No," Samara said confidently. "Some were from Gunnison. I didn't know them all but I think they were from Gunnison. I know for sure they didn't all go to Manti."

"Okay, good," Jericho praised. "You're doing great. Now think about Tracy. You said she went missing. Do you know how long she was gone?"

"I don't," Samara looked at her hands.

"Let's walk through it," Jericho suggested. "You three arrive and then what? Do you walk over to the fire together? Did you get separated? How did you and Chaya end up with the Baker twins?"

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“We got out of the car and started toward the fire,” Samara said slowly. “We were halfway across the meadow when Janice Peters marched over and blocked our path.”

“Janice Peters? Is that Janice Owen now?”

“Yes,” Samara nodded. “She was upset at Chaya and Tracy. Something about flirting with the football players at the last practice.”

“Okay,” Daniel Owen was a football player, sounded like typical high school jealousy. Jericho had heard somewhere they were an item in high school.

“Tracy finally had enough and she pushed Janice away,” Samara said slowly. Obviously remembering that night well. “Chaya shook her head at Janice, kind of like she was pathetic and sad. Janice stomped away and we walked in the opposite direction. We were wandering around, looking for Tracy when the Baker brothers approached us. They handed us a couple drinks and we joined them by the fire. Like I said, I don’t know how long we sat there before we noticed Tracy wasn’t there. I remember glancing around, at first... you know, right when we sat down. Tracy was talking to someone...”

“Think, Samara,” Jericho prodded. “Who was Tracy talking to?”

“It was a guy, a football player I think,” she sighed.

“Why do you think it was a football player?”

“I’m not sure,” Samara considered. “He was taller than Tracy, bigger, you know? His shoulders were big, but I didn’t know him. I think he might have played for Gunnison. Gone to Gunnison. Then a bunch of our guys, our football team, walked up and the group hung out for a while. The first guy, the one I didn’t know left I think. Yeah, I’m pretty sure he walked off and left Tracy with a bunch of guys from our team. That was the last time I saw her. Jake gave me another drink, it was strong... some kind of juicy thing and I lost track of time after that. We were just laughing and joking with the guys until it got late.”

“Okay,” Jericho nodded. “Last question. Do you remember any of the guys from your team that was there when the guy from Gunnison left? Who was still talking to Tracy?”

Samara frowned, then her eyes grew wide. “It was one of them, wasn’t it?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I always thought it was an athlete,” Samara considered. “I can’t remember if Tracy said that or if Chaya did, but I always believed it was an athlete that attacked Tracy. Someone strong, strong enough to hold her down and strong enough to scare her into keeping quiet.”

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“Strong or influential?” Jericho asked.

“Maybe both,” Samara said slowly. “I remember Tim Akron was there. And Benny, uh... Benny Sutton. Benny always hung with Brad Timpson but I can’t say for sure about him. There were at least three others, I know there were at least six or seven of them. It was hard to see that far away and it was night time. It was just getting dark when we arrived and this was thirty minutes or so later.”

“What time did you arrive?”

“I’d say just before nine.”

“I think that’s all I need,” Jericho stood. “I really appreciate your cooperation on this. I know it must have been difficult and I’m sorry your friend had to go through that. If I have any further questions, can I stop by?”

“I guess that’s okay,” Samara also stood. “But I don’t think I can help any more than I already have. That’s all I remember. It was so long ago and Tracy didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Well,” Jericho reached the front door. “Like I said, thank you for your assistance I really do appreciate it. You have a good day.”

Jericho was still going over his conversation with Samara when he rang Paige’s doorbell. It took longer than expected for her to open the door. When she did, she was holding a phone to her ear.

Paige motioned for Jericho to come in. “Gage, discussion over. I’m heading to the clinic right now. Wait for me. You know if you leave, I’ll just track you down.” She paused and shook her head. “See you in five.”

“Why is Gage at the clinic?” Jericho asked immediately. “It’s his day off.”

“High school kid,” Paige slid her holster through her belt and buckled the latch as she talked. “Gage was conducting one of his spring clinics, kid went down. Apparently, the doctor thinks he had a heart attack. Gage is a little freaked. You know how careful he is with those kids and he feels responsible.”

“Let’s go,” Jericho headed for the door. “I’ll drive. We can go to the factory when we’re done if there’s still time.”

“And you can tell me how things went with Samara Vega,” Paige called out before climbing into the Sheriff’s vehicle.

Jericho climbed behind the wheel and pulled onto the highway. “I can give you the short version now.”

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“Even better.”

“Tracy Douglas was raped at a drunken teen party up the canyon in early May. Samara doesn’t know who the suspect was, Tracy wouldn’t say. But the guy scared her. Could have been an athlete of some kind, which makes sense if that ring has anything to do with the incident.”

“Right,” Paige considered. “Because that was an athletic ring, one the basketball players or the football guys earned at the end of their first year.”

“How did you know that?”

“I did graduate from Manti High, sheriff.”

“Right,” he pulled into the closest stall and headed for the main clinic doors.

Gage was sitting in a large chair that looked small compared to his huge frame. The guy was big but all muscle.

“Tell me what happened,” Jericho took the seat next to his man.

“I don’t know,” Gage began. “We were running a new play. It was tough because it was new so I told the kids to take ten. I wanted them to rest before we tried again. Joey talked back, said I was babying them and it was going to hurt their chances. You know, to get picked up by a good college. He wanted to run the play again. I told him we were taking a ten-minute break and he could either sit the bench now, or he could sit there the entire first game next week.”

“How’d he react?” Paige asked.

“Mouthed off a bit, but he sat,” Gage told them. “Next thing I know he’s on the ground clutching his chest. He was lucky, Marv was there and knew what to do until the medics arrived and brought him here. The doc says it was a heart attack brought on by exertion. He thinks this is my fault, that I pushed him too hard.”

“How would he know that?” Paige stood. “He wouldn’t, Gage. Ignore that doctor, I’m going to get answers.” She moved to the desk and demanded the woman call the doctor treating the high school kid.

“I’m sorry, but he’s busy at the moment,” the middle-aged woman said sternly.

Paige set her badge on the top of the counter. “I need to speak to the doctor treating the kid,” she repeated. “Now.”

The woman stood, letting out a loud “humph,” as she disappeared through the back door that led to the emergency room. Within minutes she returned with a man wearing a white coat and a stethoscope.

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“I’m a busy man, deputy,” he said as he approached. “I already explained the situation to the coach over there. The one Sheriff Walter’s is speaking to. I don’t have time for this.”

“Make time,” Paige said flatly. “What is the boy’s condition?”

“I’m afraid that’s confidential.”

“But you are certain he suffered a heart attack?”

“Yes,” the doctor said, a little too condescending for Paige’s liking. “That was easy to ascertain. As I told the coach, Joey Thatcher suffered a heart attack brought on by extreme exertion.”

“And what procedure did you run to determine that?” Paige demanded.

“What?” the doctor blinked, then blinked again. Clearly, he wasn’t used to explaining himself.

“What did you do to conclude it was caused by exertion?” Paige repeated. “Couldn’t have been a tox screen because you wouldn’t have the results back yet. I’m not a doctor, you said you are. What did you do to determine his medical condition was a result of football practice?”

“Deputy…”

“Carter,” Paige provided.

“Deputy Carter,” he sighed loudly. “I am the medical professional here. It’s obvious to me the boys were pushed beyond their limits and Joey suffered severely for that man’s overzealous need to win at any cost.”

“Where you there?”

“Was I where?”

“Where you at the practice?” Paige questioned. “Did you witness the boys being pushed? Did you see them exhausted… pushed beyond their limits?”

“Of course not,” he huffed. “You know very well I was here when that boy arrived.”

“When will the toxicology results come back?” Paige pressed.

“I’m not conducting a blood screening at this time,” the doctor straightened, clearly preparing for a challenge.

“That kid was transported by ambulance, escorted by an officer to this facility. This is now a police matter and we need a blood draw, immediately,” Paige ordered.

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“I won’t authorize that,” the doctor told her.

“Why?” Paige asked. “You got something to hide, doc?”

“Please leave this area,” he turned and took two steps toward the door.

“I’ll be back,” Paige warned before she too turned and headed for the exterior door. She paused and turned to Jericho. “Boss? I need your keys.”

Jericho approached. “What’s going on?”

“I saw Timothy Potter outside with that Jared kid,” Paige shrugged. “I’m going to interview them, ask them about the level of activity the team engaged in before this happened. Then, I’m going to take their statements to Judge Potter, use them as probable cause to get a warrant to draw blood from Joey. Then I’m coming back here with Heidi to retrieve the blood myself and send it to the lab of my choice for testing.”

“And you are going to do all of that because?”

“Because that doctor is hiding something and I’m going to find out what.” She snatched up his keys and walked out the door.

Judge Steven Potter read through the warrant application, pausing to read his grandson’s statement twice before he set it on the table and looked up at Paige. “Clever, I’ll give you that.”

“I’m sorry to bother you at home, sir,” Paige said respectfully. “But this couldn’t wait.”

“What are you after here?” Potter asked.

“I’m not sure,” Paige admitted. “But Gage was adamant he didn’t work them too hard and the other kids corroborate his story. I need to know if there is something dangerous the kids need to look out for.”

“As in drugs?”

“As in drugs,” Paige admitted. “But as you recall, this is the first year they’ve practiced out there in the spring. Normally this is their down time. Gage was the one that decided to hold this spring training session. He’s working the kids the way the pros do. That means they’re out on the field during a time when the field is being fertilized, I also know Todd uses some kind of insecticide to kill the bugs and the weeds. What if something like that was responsible? How many kids have to get hurt before we look into it?”

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“I’m giving you the warrant,” Potter signed the paperwork. “It’s a bit of a stretch but I’m giving it to you because we do need to know. And because I know, even though their parents would deny it, that those kids play around with steroids to bulk up for the scouts. Those energy drinks are nearly as dangerous if you ask me. That much caffeine can’t be good for a kid that age. Draw your blood but keep me posted. I know that’s probably not an appropriate request, but Tim’s on the team and I need to know what we’re dealing with.”

“You have my word,” Paige left the judges home and made her way back to the clinic. She was going to enjoy serving this one on the good doctor. She reached for the radio and called for Heidi. Their own technician, who was also a phlebotomist, would handle the draw. Paige wanted to keep things in-house. Well, except for the sample she planned to send to the Bureau.

It was nearly an hour later when Jericho and Paige climbed into his department vehicle and pulled away from the clinic. As Paige expected, the doctor was not happy about the warrant. He pushed back a little, but knew he didn’t have standing against a court order. Heidi drew two samples of blood. She was on her way to the lab to oversee the testing herself and to package the second sample as Paige had requested.

“I know you think that doctor is involved,” Jericho finally said. “But I talked to Nell and she thinks he’s got something against blood draws. Any draws, not just this kid. Said it seemed personal.”

“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “But it doesn’t matter. I needed the blood and he stood in my way. Now he’s on the list. Could be nothing, could be he’s hiding something. I’ll figure it out. I didn’t know him, did you?”

“No,” Jericho took a right turn. “I asked Nell about that as well. Apparently, he’s new. Only been in town two weeks. Nobody knows him that well, but the feeling around the clinic is positive. He seems competent enough.”

Jericho left the main road and entered a long driveway. The road had once been smooth, paved in asphalt and probably well-traveled. Now, it was mostly dirt with about a million potholes and chunks of black, sluffed off asphalt scattered about. Jericho was dodging and swerving the best he could but every few seconds he hit a large obstacle and the tires bounced over the damaged section or fell into a large hole.

Paige was grateful when he finally came to a stop in front of the ancient building. She forced herself to take a deep breath, emotions were starting to surface that she needed to avoid. She glanced at her boss and realized he was having an even harder time. That was understandable, he was the one that found the woman he loved inside this structure, shot and left

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dead in a puddle of her own blood. Paige pushed that image out of her mind and shoved open the door. “If you want to hang out here, I can go in alone. Take a look around and see if I can find anything obvious.”

Jericho sighed, pulled the handle and slowly slid from the car. “We do this together.”

“I know this is hard,” Paige pushed. “You could hang out in the parking lot, stand guard or something.”

Jericho grinned at that. “We’re not burglarizing the place. Let’s get this over with.”

The building was well built and would have been a hub of activity in its day. Paige glanced around, wondering what she was looking for. Several forklifts had been parked haphazardly to the side of the large room they were currently standing in. The place was dirty and smelled like dust. Paige figured at one time it had been a professional looking business but years of neglect had taken a toll on the massive structure. The walls were falling off the framing in several places, probably due to vandalism. Old shelves had been toppled and were lying in pieces on the floor. “Any idea where we should start?”

“Let’s head to the far end of the building and work our way backwards.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Paige followed the sheriff down a long hallway and into what appeared to be an office area. They search the section thoroughly then moved to the next room and did the same. After nearly two hours, the duo decided to call it a night.

“Why don’t you pick me up at eight tomorrow morning and we’ll get an early start.” Paige began before nearly colliding with Jericho’s back. She side-stepped and studied the ground. The object of her boss’ current focus. Within seconds, she realized this was the spot. She was standing over the place her mother had died. There was still a large rust colored stain on the concrete but the area surrounding the stain was clear of any debris. It struck Paige immediately, *nobody has been here since mom died*. She took a minute to walk around, focused on the work, forcing her mind to ignore the emotions. After several minutes, she decided there was nothing here, no evidence left forgotten, waiting for the daughter to find the one clue that would bring closure after all this time. She shook her head and moved to stand beside Jericho. Thinking she’d find something that everyone else had missed was stupid and arrogant.

Jericho couldn’t move, he couldn’t look away. Memories flooded his mind and he froze in place. This was the reason he hadn’t come back here. He knew the instant he did, he’d be drawn to this spot, he’d see that night all over again, envision Chaya’s tiny body crumpled among the dirt and blood... so much blood. He barely noticed when Paige slid her arm through his and guided him toward the door. It was only when he exited the building, when the cool night air hit his pale face, that he started to recover. That’s when it hit him, something he hadn’t thought of before. “How did he know she was here?”

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“What?” Paige turned, Jericho looked a little better now. The color was finally returning and he didn’t look like a ghost.

“How did the killer know Chaya was here?”

Paige frowned. She had gotten the impression her mother’s trip to this factory was spontaneous. A last ditch effort to provide closure for her friend. Chaya Carter wanted to move forward, to stop keeping secrets from the man she loved and to do that, she had to try to fulfill Tracy’s last request. Chaya had to drive out and look for whatever her friend had left in the abandoned building. “Maybe he was watching her, like he’s watching me.”

“I guess that’s possible,” Jericho surveyed the area. “Or, it could have been a crime of opportunity. Chaya’s little red sports car was distinctive. If he lived in the area, one of those houses up there, he may have spotted her here and wondered over to investigate.”

Paige shook her head. “I’m not buying it. This was premeditated, at least bringing the gun to the factory was planned. He could have spotted her, grabbed his gun thinking he could scare her... the way he scared Tracy at first. Brought the gun to heighten the threat. But at some point, he decided to use the weapon to murder an innocent, helpless woman. I won’t apply some kind of panic defense to his actions. Once we charge him, I have no doubt his lawyer will do that for him.”

“I agree,” Jericho climbed into the car. “And I wasn’t making excuses. I just took a look around and it hit me. The call Chaya made to my house was spontaneous. I could tell.”

“Wait,” Paige closed the door and turned to face Jericho. “What call?”

“It’s how I knew she was here,” Jericho admitted. “How I found her so quickly. Although by the time I got here, she had been dead for several hours.”

“Mom called to tell you where she had gone?”

“She called and said she was sorry for keeping secrets,” Jericho said softly, the last call from Chaya echoed in his mind. “She said there was just one last thing she needed to do, then it was over. She’d put the past behind her and we could move forward. It was almost an afterthought, just before she clicked off. She said she thought it was safe but if anything happened to her, she was at the old Tillman Factory. I didn’t get the call until hours later. She knew I wouldn’t. I believe she did that on purpose. She left the message on my home machine, knowing I had to work that night and couldn’t interfere. The instant I heard it, I jumped in my car and rushed to your house. Her car wasn’t in the drive and I knew, something horrible had happened at the factory. My heart dropped the instant I pulled into that lot and spotted her car.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Paige recognized the guilt. “Mom called you at home on purpose. She didn’t want you to interrupt her mission.”

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“I think we should look into each of those houses,” Jericho tried to change the subject, once again studying the horizon. The parking lot was located in a sort of valley surrounded by rolling hills. Each hill contained a home. “I know the people who own them now, but we need to look back. See who owned each house the night your mother died. My gut is telling me this might be important.”

“Okay,” Paige pulled out her seatbelt. “I make it a rule to always follow my gut.”

Jericho pulled into Paige’s driveway and waited for her to climb from the vehicle and enter her house before he backed onto the highway. It was going to be a long, difficult night but he was determined to get through it without alcohol. He’d been down that road before... he would not return. Anyway, he’d already learned nothing could dull the pain.

Paige stepped through the front door and sighed. Time to call Nathan. She pulled out her cell phone and hit send. It only took two rings to hear his voice.

“It’s late,” Nathan answered. “Is everything alright?”

Paige proceeded to explain the situation, asked for a favor running the second sample of blood and filled him in on the night’s activities.

“I’m worried this mission of yours is dangerous and will only end in heartbreak,” Nathan said sympathetically. “I guess at least you have that sheriff working beside you. That eases my worry some, especially with Dax out of town again. Just promise me you will be careful.”

“So you trust Jericho now?” Paige asked. “What changed?”

“I didn’t know your mother,” Nathan said in answer. “But Dylan was a very good friend. I can only imagine the pain your sheriff endured when the woman he loved was murdered that way, in his town, while he was on duty. The death of someone you care about is a great motivator. That became obvious when your father died. He’ll protect you. There’s no doubt in my mind Jericho Walters will do the right thing. That alone has changed my mind about the man.”

Paige frowned. “So, is that why we’re close? Because of dad?”

“We’re close,” Nathan told her. “Because I love you, kid. We met because of Dylan. Be careful. I don’t like the situation out there and it’s worse because I’m stuck here in Washington. Just watch your back. If you’re getting closer to the truth, the man harassing you might start to get desperate.”

“I wish you would stop worrying so much,” Paige dropped onto her bed. “I’m being careful and there are enough people watching out for me a paid assassin couldn’t get through.”

“Not funny,” Nathan scowled.

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“You sound busy and I’m beat,” Paige said in answer. “I’ll call you tomorrow, make sure the lab received the sample and they’re willing to take a look. I’m betting some kind of steroid, make sure they test it for everything. Something is off about this case, I can feel it.”

“Talk to you tomorrow, kid.”

Paige was just about to climb into bed when a thought struck her. She picked up her phone and dialed Walters.

“Did you forget something?”

“I need to do something, first thing. Can we make it ten instead of eight?” Paige asked.

“Why?” Jericho asked immediately. “Unless it’s too personal.”

“I need to pay a friend a visit... a friend of Gage,” Paige told him. “I think Gallager can help him get past this. You know, team spirit and all that.”

“I’ll be there at ten,” Jericho agreed before he clicked off.

Paige was tired, dirty and frustrated. She’d spent the entire day scouring the abandoned factory for clues but hadn’t found a single one. They still had at least another day, maybe two, worth of searching but she was beginning to get discouraged. What if they never found that mysterious clue Tracy had left? Did they actually need it? Maybe tracking homeowners would help... and maybe not. She decided to run a hot bath and soak a while before bed.

Daniel stepped into the dark, musty building and flashed his light around the vacant space. What had the sheriff and Paige Carter been looking for out here? It was bad enough Chaya’s daughter was looking into her mother’s murder. Had she talked her boss into helping? His heart began to race and panic threatened to immobilize him. He moved forward, made his way down the long hallway and stopped over the spot the nosy woman had died. He knew he should feel guilty about her death. He should probably feel guilty about killing Tracy, too. But he didn’t. He hadn’t done it for fun or out of curiosity. He’d done it out of necessity and he would never

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regret that. But with two police officers looking into the matter he had to be sure. Needed to know there was nothing to find, no evidence that would track back to him.

As he walked from room to room, he let himself remember. He had wanted Tracy Douglas the instant he saw her. She was beautiful, strong willed and so independent. Nothing like the girls his mom insisted he date, the young women that would grow up to be proper ladies. No, Tracy would never have the approval of his mother, but he had to have her anyway. He'd gotten his chance that night at the party. It should have been perfect, all of them drinking and having a good time. She should have felt honored he wanted her. Instead, she said no. How dare a girl like that say no? To him? Well, he'd shown her, hadn't he? He took what he wanted but afterwards, he realized she might be a problem.

He'd threatened her with the first thing that had come to mind, her father's job. She would never risk him getting fired... or at least that's what he believed at the time. But nearly a week later, she'd taunted him. Threatened him... him. He couldn't allow it, couldn't let her get away with thinking she had the upper hand. That's why he agreed to meet her, but he picked the place. He'd insisted on it. She may have been strong-willed, but she was naïve. It was so easy to maneuver her next to the cliff and give her a little shove. That should have been the end of all this. He thought it had been until that night. The night Chaya Carter drove out to this factory. He spotted her car immediately, grabbed the gun and came down to see what she was doing. He knew she was looking into Tracy's death, knew she didn't believe her friend committed suicide but he'd been sure there was no proof. That nobody would listen if she cried foul.

Now he wasn't sure. Chaya Carter claimed to have evidence, something that would prove he killed Tracy. She had mocked him, threatened him and in his anger and frustration, he had shot her. He knew she was dead, almost immediately but that hadn't been enough. In his rage, he had emptied his entire magazine into her lifeless body. He kept shooting until the slide locked back and he couldn't fire anymore. Nobody was supposed to find her out there. She should have wasted away, been devoured by wildlife, remained a missing person forever. But she had been located that night, and he hadn't had time to cover his tracks. He just hoped there wasn't any tracks to cover. Not with the nosy woman's pesky daughter sniffing around. Especially since she brought in the sheriff. He spent nearly an hour searching the place before deciding it was safe. There was nothing in this building to find.

Paige stepped into the building and approached Margie's desk. "Did Jericho tell you I was bringing these in?"

"He did," Margie looked up, then casually slid open a desk drawer. "Just slide them in there and I'll take care of it."

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“Thanks,” Paige turned and spotted Gage. Her friend was still not himself. She approached his desk and took a seat in his single visitor’s chair. “I heard you’re thinking about canceling spring training.”

“You should have stayed out of this, Paige,” Gage glanced at her then looked out the window. “Mark didn’t need to get involved.”

“Sounded to me like he wanted to get involved even before the incident,” she countered. “How come you didn’t bring him in to begin with?”

“Sissy didn’t want him to go back,” Gage shifted and focused on Paige. “They moved here to get away from the life. She didn’t want him back in so soon.”

“But coaching is a lot different from playing,” Paige argued. “She has to know that.”

“I guess she does,” Gage gave in. “And Mark is going to help with the training. In fact, he’s going to take over as head coach. I’m stepping back, I’ll assist as I can but the job keeps me pretty busy.”

Paige frowned. “Is that what you really want? I know you love helping those kids.”

“It’s what I want,” Gage stood.

“Hey,” Paige also stood. “Don’t do that. I’m only trying to help. I only want what’s best for you.”

“I know,” Gage sighed. “And no, we’re not canceling spring training. We have practice tomorrow afternoon. I’m told it’s the talk of the town. It’s the first time Mark Gallagher and Gage Clayton have played together in years.”

“But you’re going to let Mark take lead?”

“I think it’s best,” Gage said and shrugged. “We’ll make a good team and this way I can focus more on defense and he can work on offense.”

“Maybe I’ll come by,” Paige headed for her desk. “See if you really are as good as everyone says you are.”

“Yeah,” Gage grinned. “Like you don’t already know.”

Paige was sitting on the bleachers the following day, enjoying the workout when another kid collapsed. She was off the bench and on the field within seconds. Keith Cotton was having

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a hard time breathing. She had just finished ordering a medic when Marv, the team doctor dropped to her side and began working on Keith. Paige moved out of his way and headed for the parking lot to wait for the ambulance.

“What happened?” Gage demanded. “I was on the other side of the field and didn’t realize there was a problem.”

“Oh,” Paige said sarcastically. “So, Keith collapsing on the field wasn’t your fault?”

“Not the time, Paige,” Gage grumbled.

“I told you something was wrong here,” Paige continued. “That kid was not extending himself. He was just standing there, waiting for Mark to call the next play when he went down. You watch for the transport, I need to make a call.”

Paige moved away from her friend and dialed Nathan Porter.

“I just got the results,” Porter said in answer. “Literally seconds ago.”

“Another kid went down, just seconds ago,” Paige said in answer. “What did they find?”

“There were chemicals in the kid’s system,” Nathan said scanning the report. “They believe he was on some kind of steroid, performance-enhancing mixture. The tech that dropped it off said they’d never seen this particular drug before and the heightened levels of amphetamines combined with the human-growth-hormone probably caused the heart attack. They are going to try to isolate each component and break it down, figure out the formula which will apparently help them track the manufacturer.”

“Thanks, Nathan,” Paige sighed. “These kids have talent, why would they inject something into their system that might cause permanent damage and ruin their chance of a lucrative career?”

“Because they want that lucrative career,” Nathan provided. “And the competition is stiff. I’ll let you know when I have more and in the meantime, I’ll email over these results.”

Gage stepped up next to Paige. “Did you find anything?”

“Yeah,” Paige turned to look at her friend. “Those boys are using steroids. Something new, apparently. Some kind of performance-enhancing mixture that is making them sick.”

Gage frowned. “I need to talk to Mark about this. I didn’t even suspect doping. We need to figure out a plan to stop it before someone dies.” He turned and walked away.

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“I thought you were going to handle things out there,” an angry voice said through the phone. “I just learned the FBI’s lab has a sample of my product and they are analyzing it to determine the manufacturer.”

“I told you before,” Doctor Warner sighed. “I don’t work for you. I did what I could to stop the investigation out here, but the cop got a warrant. It was out of my hands.”

“How did the information end up in the hands of the Feds?” he demanded. “That is the last thing I needed right now. My backers are getting nervous and several more players have had... unfortunate reactions.”

“I told you to decrease the amphetamine,” Warner warned. “You didn’t listen. I’ve done all I can do for you. I have a good job, a new start and I will not risk that just so you can get rich doping kids.”

“You wouldn’t want those nice people out there in Utah to learn how you paid off med school would you?”

“I’ve kept up my end of the deal,” Warner backed down. “There’s no reason for you to back out of the deal now.”

“Find out why the feds are involved and see what you can do to prevent this.”

“I’ll see what I can find out, but as far as contacts at the Bureau, that’s your area of expertise. I don’t know a sole at that level and you know it,” Warner reminded the annoying, greedy businessman on the other end of the line.

“I’m already working on that,” the man said. “But I need to know who ordered it. So far, my people can’t get answers. Until I know why it was requested, I won’t know how to stop it.”

Warner stepped from the private office and made his way to the emergency room. He had patients to see. He stopped abruptly when he spotted Deputy Carter. She was behind this mess, he was sure of it. And if he could just keep a lid on things for another week, the statute of limitations would expire on that little matter of fraud he engaged in years ago. Once he was in the clear on that, he could come clean about the drugs.

“Doctor,” Paige said coolly.

“Hello, Deputy Carter.”

“I guess you know by now that another kid has collapsed.”

Warner frowned. He hadn’t known. “Has he been seen?” If he could get to the kid soon enough, there might be hope. If he hadn’t had a full-blown attack, the effects of the steroid might not be permanent.

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“I think they are waiting for you,” Paige narrowed her eyes at the doctor. He was acting rather suspicious today... same as the last time she met him.

“Then I better get to it,” Warner moved past her. “My patient needs me.”

“Just thought you should now,” Paige called after him. “Joey had drugs in his system. But you would know that if you’d agreed to the tox screen like I asked. I’m guessing Keith in there has the same drug in his. Are you going to make me get another warrant?”

“I suggest you speak to his parents,” Warner said before pushing his way through the door.

Paige pulled out her phone and dialed Judge Potter. Once she explained the situation to him, she agreed to wait before taking any action until he called back. Apparently, the good judge was friends with Keith’s father... golfing buddies or something. She paced the waiting area, impatiently waiting for word to come back.

Rather than a call from the Judge, Paige came face to face with Kevin and Susan Cotton.

“Steven explained the situation,” Kevin said before Paige had a chance to speak. “I agree, we need to know if he’s been taking steroids. I don’t want to believe it but lately, he’s been acting a little strange. We blew it off, thought he was just stressed over tryouts. If he bought drugs from someone, I need to know. And believe me, he’ll tell you where he got them.”

“Thank you,” Paige put a hand on Susan’s arm. The woman was obviously near tears. “I was there when it happened. Keith was in pain and obviously in distress but I don’t think it was a heart attack. Marv got there immediately and the transport was quick. The doctor is with him now. I’m not a medical professional, but I honestly don’t think he had a heart attack like Joey.”

“Thank you for that,” Susan whispered. “I’m just so worried. Do you think they’ll let us go back?”

“Let me check,” Paige moved forward and spoke to Nell for several seconds before waving a hand at the Cottons. The instant they were in front of the counter, Nell led them into the back to be with their son. She was surprised when Jericho settled into the chair next to her.

“I’m told you handled that well,” he said as he shifted, then settled. “Like a real professional. Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

Paige grinned. “What brings you here?”

“I was looking for you,” he admitted. “Went by the high school and Marv told me what happened. I assume Gage is around here somewhere.”

“No,” Paige shook her head. “I told him I’d handle it. He’s with Gallagher, trying to come up with a strategy to make sure none of the other kids experiment with that poison.”

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“After two medical situations on the field, I suspect they’ll think long and hard before diving in,” Jericho told her.

“I hope so,” Paige turned. “Why were you looking for me?”

“Have you been back to the factory?” he asked. “Did you go back out there alone?”

“No, why?”

“Because someone has been there... after we left.”

“How do you know?” Paige was sure there wasn’t an alarm on the building.

“The dust on the floor has been disturbed,” Jericho told her. “Whoever went out there must have realized they left prints because they left scuff marks, not prints. We can’t track them. Can’t even tell the size.”

“And you thought I’d do that?” Paige asked, offended. She had no reason to hide her tracks that way.

“No,” Jericho told her. “That’s why I came looking for you. I think we are making someone mighty jumpy.”

“Can we use that somehow?” Paige considered. “Maybe put a hidden camera in the factory and see if anyone goes back.”

“We could try, but I doubt they are going to return,” Jericho decided. “I walked through the building, seems they made their way through the entire place. If they were after something, they either found it or gave up.”

“Or he knew we had been there and wanted to know why.”

“Could be,” Jericho shifted in the uncomfortable chair again. “Margie left that file in your desk drawer and I’ve locked the copies up with my originals.”

“What did she do with the ring?” Paige asked.

“We booked both the ring and the cuff link into evidence,” Jericho advised. “I thought it was the best place to secure them just in case. Margie cataloged them and they’re out of sight but safe.”

“Good,” Paige stood. “I need to see if there’s an update, call Gage and then I’m headed home. When do you want to head back out? Finish the search at the factory?” Paige stopped abruptly and frowned. “Why did you go out there? Alone?”

Jericho stood. “I need to. Needed to see if I could get some kind of closure.”

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“Did it work?”

“Not really,” Jericho sighed. “I saw the tracks and shifted back into cop mode. I’ll get there, eventually. It’s just going to take time.”

“I agree,” Paige shrugged. “And catching the SOB responsible might expedite the timeline.”

“It might,” Jericho said before he walked out the door.

It was Monday, a full week since Keith had his episode. His parents were still trying to get a name from him. So far, he wasn’t talking. He was willing to take whatever punishment he had earned, but he wouldn’t be a rat. His words. Paige knew even if she charged him with possession, it wouldn’t stick. The drug was new and steroids were technically legal. She would just have to be patient and hope Kevin and Susan got through to him.

In the meantime, Gage and Mark had called an emergency meeting with the parents and the players. They implemented a new rule. Anyone who wanted to participate in the spring training program would have to agree to random drug testing. The players immediately agreed, realizing it was a rare opportunity to be coached by two retired pros. The parents voluntarily signed a waiver giving permission for the testing wanting to give their kid the best chance at success. Since then, they hadn’t had a single incident.

Paige pulled into her driveway and shut down her vehicle. She hadn’t had a day off since the last time she searched the factory with Jericho. Things were always busy in the summer and the past week was no exception. As she made her way to the front porch, thinking how nice a day off sounded, she spotted Dax. He was standing near the steps and she could see his frown from a mile away.

“What?”

“You need to call this in.”

Paige glanced at the door and bit her tongue in anger as she dialed Jericho. “I think we spooked him.”

“What happened?”

“Someone broke in,” Paige admitted. “And this time, he didn’t try to hide it. I’m going to take a look around and see if there’s a need to call in Heidi.”

“I’m on my way.”

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“You don’t...” Paige didn’t finish that sentence because Jericho had already disconnected.

“What do you mean you have him spooked?” Dax demanded. “And why do you always insist on poking the bear while I’m out of town?”

“I haven’t poked any bears,” Paige stepped through the door and frowned. Her house was a mess. Clearly, her intruder was looking for something. Most likely the files. Too bad they were still at the office, tucked away inside Paige’s locked desk. Just dumb luck, actually. She planned to bring them back home days ago. Every night she got a lengthy call and headed straight home, too tired to drive back to the office and retrieve them.

Paige stepped over slashed cushions and broken lamps and swore. The stuff wasn’t worth much, but it was hers and it was going to be expensive to replace.

“Anything missing?” Jericho asked as he glanced around the room. This looked like anger... frustration. Their mysterious stalker was upset about something. Jericho was pretty sure he knew what. “What did you do with the files?”

“They’re still at the office,” Paige said over her shoulder as she made her way to the office. “I kept meaning to bring them back home, but it’s been busy.”

“Good,” Jericho said relieved. “We have copies but I’d rather he not know what we know. Gives us an edge.”

“I agree,” Paige shoved a bookcase out of the way as she made her way to the desk. She grabbed the legs from the upside-down desk chair and set it in the right position before dropping in with a sigh. “I’m thinking someone is pissed.”

“I’m thinking that’s an understatement,” Dax leaned against the doorjamb. “What have you two been doing while I was away?”

“Investigating,” Paige and Jericho said at once.

“Well,” Dax considered. “I’d say you’re getting close.”

“We’ve been searching the Tillman Factory for clues,” Paige told him.

“Looking for whatever Tracy left for your mom,” Dax nodded. “Makes sense. You think he saw you? Maybe he’s worried what you found.”

“I think he knows,” Jericho picked up a wooden chair and settled in. “We know he’s been there, looked around some. We planned to head back tomorrow. It’s the first day we’ve had off in a week.”

“Want help?” Dax asked.

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Jericho considered. "Sure, but that might make you a target as well."

"After living next to Paige, chasing ghosts from the shadows for months, I guarantee I'm already a target. Let's see if we can end this once and for all. If there's a clue, we'll find it." He took another long look around the room. "You want to crash at my place? Zeus stayed with Ken so it's just me."

"Yes," Jericho answered. "She does. I'll be by in the morning to pick you up. Do what you can to lock up here and I'll send Gage and Heidi over in the morning to see what they can find."

Paige frowned. "With all that rage, there could be DNA."

"And it will still be there in the morning," Jericho stood. "Now, I'm heading home. Lock up, that's an order. I don't want you messing with my crime scene." He turned to look at Dax. "I'll be at your house at nine."

"Yeah, I know," Dax said when Jericho left. "Sucks to take orders but he's right. Let's get some sleep. We have a factory to search."

Paige reluctantly followed Dax out the door. Once they reached the kitchen, he turned and pulled her against him. "I've missed you," after a long, passionate kiss he took a step back. "You go up and pack a few things, I'll scrounge up a few two-by-fours to secure the door."

Paige watched as Dax disappeared out the back door. She wanted to be mad at both Dax and her boss but deep down she knew they were right. She just hated taking orders from anyone, especially her sexy, dominating neighbor. With a sigh, she turned and headed up the stairs to pack. Letting her stubborn streak show wouldn't do any good if there was nobody in the room to see it.

Paige was on the dirty, grimy floor reaching for a metal object when her phone rang. She reached into her pocket, started to straighten and knocked her head on the side of a forklift. She was cursing under her breath as she answered the call.

"Bad timing?" Nathan asked.

"No," Paige rubbed the side of her head. "What's up?"

"The lab tech got back to me," Nathan sobered. "They know what the drug is and who is making it. Apparently, a kid died two days ago in Colorado. Denver. Autopsy showed he had the same concoction in his system."

Lethal Remedy

“Is he well-known? And how did he get the drugs to Manti? I mean Denver, sure. That’s a big city but Manti is small, it’s a risk.” Instead of providing answers, this call just posed more questions.

“The manufacturer’s a chemist,” Nathan provided. “Boyd Eastman. Used to live in San Diego. Got fired from his last job about nine months ago. We figure he’s been working on the formula for over a year. He’s pushing it to athletes as some wonder drug. Promises it will beef them up in time for the fall when the scouts are out recruiting.”

“Makes sense,” Paige still didn’t understand how he got his product to Manti.

“There’s one more thing,” Nathan continued. “That doctor, Warner. He used to live in San Diego. Left the job just over a year ago. Disappeared completely. I mean he was totally off the grid until he surfaced in your little town out there in Utah. I’d say it might be worth a conversation.”

“I agree,” Paige frowned. She knew there was something off about that guy. “Any problems? By that, I mean with his license or rumors of anything fishy before he disappeared?”

“Not that we can find,” Nathan admitted. “Strange really, seems everyone loved him at the hospital. Claimed he was a standup guy and a great doctor.”

“There had to be something,” Paige disagreed. “Bigwig out of California doesn’t just up and disappear then end up in Utah. I’ll get to the bottom of it. Thanks for your help.”

“Happy to help,” Nathan said honestly. “And DEA was grateful for the tip. Now, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Paige sighed. “We’re just out here searching the factory again and I might as well tell you, because somehow you always seem to find out on your own, I had another break-in.”

Nathan frowned. “How bad?”

“I think I’ve angered someone,” Paige admitted. “The house was a mess, but he didn’t get what he was looking for.”

“The files?” Nathan guessed. “I’m told Dax is back. I think you should stay with him for a few days.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “Now you sound like Jericho.”

“Just another reason I trust that man,” Nathan decided. “But you didn’t agree and I’m not hanging up until I get a commitment.”

“I haven’t had an invitation,” Paige countered.

Lethal Remedy

“Okay,” Nathan said slowly. “But if you do, you promise me you will accept.”

“I don’t want you calling Dax and ordering him to invite me to be his guest.”

“He doesn’t have to,” Dax said behind her. “You’re already invited.”

“There you go,” Nathan said triumphantly. “And I’m glad you brought him in on this.”

“Okay,” Paige relented. “I’ll stay for a few days. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Nathan told her. “Now I have to go but call me tonight, I’m worried about you.”

“I know,” Paige said, resigned. “And I’ll call when I get home.”

Once she hung up, Dax took her hand. “I think I found something but I need your help.”

“What?”

Dax led her to a back room that looked like it had once been some kind of locker room or storage area. “I’ll pull this bank of shelves out as far as I can. You see if you can pull that bag out from behind there.”

Paige crouched down and studied the area Dax indicated. She glanced up when she heard a noise. Jericho stepped into the room.

“Did you find something?”

“Maybe,” Paige wasn’t sure.

“I’ll help Dax,” Jericho said moving to stand beside the younger man. “You pry that out of there and we’ll see what we have.”

The three of them worked for several minutes, Dax and Jericho pulling the unit out as far as they could while Paige tugged at the pack. It looked like a backpack but it was wedged in between the wall and the shelves. Finally, Paige gave the strap a hard tug and the pack came free. She tumbled backwards and landed on her behind but the bag was free.

“It looks like something a girl might use,” Jericho said, studying the outer design.

“I agree,” Paige grinned. “It also looks old... ancient, like something a girl might use back when oh... you were in high school.”

Jericho shook his head and smiled. “Let’s head back to your place and see if we found Tracy’s hidden treasure.”

“Why not do it here?” Dax asked.

Lethal Remedy

“Because we know he’s been here and we know he could be armed. I prefer to do this in private, where we can make sure nobody is watching,” Jericho turned to leave, the others followed.

As Jericho pulled out of the parking lot, Paige filled him in on her conversation with Nathan. “I’m going to need to question him. Today if possible.”

“You in a hurry?” Jericho asked Dax.

“I have some time,” Dax answered.

“Mind if we head to the station instead?”

“Not at all.”

The three of them stepped into the station and made their way to the conference room. Paige carefully unzipped the backpack and dumped the contents onto the large conference table. There was a young girl’s skirt, a gold men’s necklace and a notebook. Paige lifted flipped open the cover and began to skim the pages. “This is definitely Tracy Douglas’ notebook. Look, this appears to be a writing assignment and she’s written her name and 4th period at the top of the page.”

“Do you think that skirt...” Jericho began.

“It’s possible,” Paige answered.

Dax frowned, completely confused.

“There’s no photo,” Paige said deflated. “Mom’s letter said she was looking for a photo. All that for nothing.” She looked up at Jericho, defeat showing in her eyes.

“Look through the book,” Dax suggested. “Maybe she hid it in there.”

“There’s nothing. Wait!” she said immediately as she turned another page in the book. “This looks like a letter to my mom.”

“Read it out loud,” Jericho insisted.

C-

If you found this pack that means the Troll has done something awful. I told you to look for a photo because I planned to snap a shot of him before I head up the trail. Proof that I was with him, I guess. Maybe that’s stupid but I’m afraid. He’s late I guess. I’ll take the camera with me, just in case I get the chance later.

Lethal Remedy

I wasn't sure I should meet him out there. I'm scared, but I have to confront him and he won't meet anywhere but out by the cliffs. By now, I'm sure you know who it was. If not, when you look in my backpack and see the ugly gold chain, you'll figure it out. I'm sorry. I know I handled this all wrong, but he threatened my father. You know how sick mom is, I couldn't risk it.

If anything happens to me, take this to the police. The skirt was the one I was wearing that night. It has... well, you know. The necklace I ripped off when I was fighting him. It also had that stupid ring on it, the one he brags about, but it must have gotten lost in the woods. Ms. Busybody claimed he was going to engrave it with something romantic but I saw it and he didn't. Tell Samara none of this was her fault... or yours. I had no idea what he was going to do. He just said he wanted to talk to me about something in private. I was stupid, I know that now. I followed him into the woods willingly. That's where my part in this ended. Make them believe you. If something happens at the cliffs, don't let them say I just fell. He did this. I know I said I'm scared already, but I'm totally freaked out. Maybe I shouldn't go, but I have to.

Tell the cops it all happened so fast, I couldn't even scream before he covered my mouth with his hand. He was pushing so hard, that's how I got the fat lip. Once he had me pinned to the ground, he tied that ugly scarf around my mouth so all I could do was silently cry...

Anyway, I love you guys, whatever happens was fate, I guess. Never look back, you and Samara fly for me. Sweet dreams and reach for the stars.

-T

“That’s why mom said that all the time. She got it from Tracy.” Paige used the palm of her hand to wipe away the tears that had fallen. This was the reason her mother had been killed. Because a stupid jock forced himself onto a young girl, then killed her to keep her silent. Such a senseless chain of events. Whoever this troll was, she was going to find him. She was going to destroy him the way he had destroyed Tracy, her mom... and her.

“I’ll package that up and send it to the lab,” Jericho stood. “We have that blood sample from your house. If we’re lucky, the lab will get a match. At least we’ll know for sure we’re dealing with the same man.”

Paige had forgotten that. “I’ll take care of it.”

“No,” Jericho shook his head. “You have a doctor to question and I think I just heard Gage come in. I want him to go with you.”

Dax watched Paige exit the room. He was worried about her. This whole thing was taking a toll.

Lethal Remedy

“She’ll be fine,” Jericho said as he gathered the evidence and secured it in a large plastic bag.

“Will you?” Dax asked casually. “I know it was hard to go back out there, to the factory. What you did, it wasn’t easy and not many men could do it.”

“I’m sure you have,” Jericho tried to brush off the compliment.

“I’m not most men,” Dax shifted. “I’ve done things most men never dreamed of. Doesn’t mean it was easy and it doesn’t mean I liked it.”

Jericho looked up. “No, it wasn’t easy but it was necessary.”

“Like I said,” Dax came full circle. “Are you okay?”

“I will be when we track this pervert down and lock him up for the rest of his miserable life.”

“I get that,” Dax stood to follow Jericho out of the room. “But just know I’ve been there, not the same but... the same, if you get my meaning.”

“I get it and I appreciate the gesture.”

The two deputies stepped into the clinic and walked to the desk.

“Not again,” Nell sighed.

“We just need to speak to Doctor Warner.”

Frank Warner stepped from the secure area and approached the officers. “I assume this is about that steroid case.”

“You assume correct,” Paige said flatly. “Is there somewhere we can speak in private? She was in no mood for this and hoped the good physician didn’t try to give them the run-around.

“Let’s take this to my office,” Frank told them. Once they had settled into the cozy room, Frank pulled out his phone, scrolled through his photos and handed the phone to Paige. “I believe this is the man you are looking for.”

Paige looked at the picture, noticed the date then focused on Warner. “You took this yesterday?”

Lethal Remedy

“I did,” Warner admitted. “I can give you the name of the man who developed the drug in the first place but I can’t be sure this is the man dealing to children. I believe it is. I believe, if you question him, you will find he has been living in San Diego and recently relocated. I do not know that man, can’t tell you his name. That picture is the best I can do.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning,” Paige suggested. “You knew, when we brought Joey in, that he was using some kind of steroid. That’s why you refused to do the blood screening.”

“I suspected,” Warner sighed. “I got into a little trouble a few years back. A few months after I graduated from med school. Well, a fellow graduate came to a few of us with this amazing deal. I should have known it was too good to be true, but at the time I was desperate, drowning in debt and it seemed like a perfect solution.”

“Was it illegal,” Paige wondered.

“I suspect it was,” Warner nodded. “Which is why I got out and kept the details a secret. I’ve been biding my time, waiting for the statute of limitations to run out. I haven’t dared asked if what I did was unethical or illegal.”

“Why tell us now?” Gage asked.

“Because if it was a criminal act, time has run out,” Warner provided. “He can’t ruin my life anymore. I don’t have to live in fear of losing my license.”

Paige considered. Everywhere this man worked, the staff and the patients loved him. If the statute had run out, did she really need to know what he’d done? She’d leave that for later. “So this man, someone you knew from San Diego was blackmailing you?”

“Yes,” Warner admitted. “He somehow found out what we’d done and he approached me at the hospital. I rebuffed him. He pressed, when I still said no, he threatened me with my past. I ended up quitting my job abruptly. I had hoped he would find someone else to assist with his little enterprise. He didn’t. I spent a few months at my grandparents’ old cabin. It needed work and repair anyway so it was time well spent. But I missed my work. I searched the internet, found a clinic in a small town where I thought nobody would look for me and I applied for the job.”

“But he found you,” Paige surmised.

“He did,” Warner lowered his head. “Once again, he came out. He threatened me, said he’d go public with my past and I’d lose my job. He threatened to take it to the medical board, get my license suspended. I knew I had nowhere to go, so I caved.”

“Okay,” Paige frowned. “First, who is this guy? I need a name.”

Lethal Remedy

“Boyd Eastman,” Warner provided. “He was a chemist I guess. He says we went to college together but I don’t remember him.”

“Okay,” Gage wrote down the name. “And when you say you caved, what exactly does that mean?”

“I don’t believe I did anything illegal,” Warner said abruptly. “He said he had people to sell his stuff. Said someone would move out here to be close to me. I just had to stall. Make sure nobody connected any... incidents to the steroid.”

“Which is why you refused to draw blood,” Paige realized.

“And why you insisted it was my fault,” Gage said angrily.

“I’m sorry about that,” Warner said contritely. “It has been my experience small town coaches do push their players too hard. They think because they don’t live in the big cities they have to push harder to get their players noticed. Win more games, get in the spotlight. I just assumed.”

“I guess you’re not a fan,” Paige grinned.

“Of football?” Warner asked. “No.”

“Which is why you didn’t know Gage here was a pro linebacker,” Paige provided. “He knows how much to push and when to back off. He doesn’t need to seek the spotlight. One word and any one of those kids will have the shot of a lifetime.”

“I’m sorry,” Warner looked at Gage. “I guess you are built for it but I had no idea. I do apologize, sincerely.”

“What makes you think that guy is selling?” Gage changed the subject.

“I’ve been watching,” Warner provided. “When Keith came in, I was close. I’m not sure how the rules work... you know the criminal stuff, so I counted out a date. One I knew was well beyond the time frame. I told myself once that date had passed, I was in the clear. I still had another week when we talked about Keith. Once I was sure, once I knew I was safe, I started to look into the drugs myself. I’m not okay with some thug selling drugs to kids just to get rich.”

“And you saw this guy...?” Paige held out the phone.

“I saw him talking to the kids, but I think I recognize him,” Warner told them. “He looks familiar. That’s why I think he came from San Diego. Maybe got treated in the ER or something.”

“Can I email this to myself?” Paige asked.

Lethal Remedy

“Sure,” Warner agreed. “Really, whatever I can do to help you out on this, just say the word.”

“I think you have helped,” Paige stood. “I’m not going to bust you on the previous stuff. If you say it’s over, I’ll accept that for now. Just know, I’m watching you.”

“Uh...” Warner hesitated, should he tell them the rest? Might get him some points if he did.

“Yes,” Gage stopped.

“Eastman has contacts in the FBI,” Warner told them. “He called me, after you sent that sample to their lab. I assume that was you. He wasn’t happy. Said his contacts were having a hard time getting to the bottom of it. He wanted to know who they were sent to and who authorized it. Damage control, I guess. Anyway, I don’t know who he knows in the Bureau, but he has contacts. I uh... well, I just thought you should know.”

“Are you saying they’re dirty or just that they give him a heads up?” Paige asked.

“I think they just give him a heads up,” Warner corrected. “I don’t think they are dirty or do anything illegal or anything. Just provide information, let him know if trouble is coming.”

“I’ll pass that on to the right person,” Paige studied the doctor. She was torn. He had obstructed her investigation, but he seemed okay. “Don’t get in my way again and we won’t have any trouble.”

“I get it,” Warner had expected this. The threats, the ego and all the rest. He’d have to suck up to the police in this town or he’d be harassed on a daily basis.

“I’m not sure you do,” Paige studied him. “What I’m saying is I’m giving you a pass on this one. I looked into you. San Diego, the hospital... they couldn’t say enough about you. All good. The staff here, they already respect you. As long as that continues, we won’t have a problem. But don’t stand in my way again. I won’t look the other way twice.”

Warner studied her, surprised. She wasn’t going to make life difficult for him. Maybe small towns were different from the big city. He actually might end up liking it here. If not, he could always move on. “What about Eastman? What do I do if he calls again?”

“He won’t,” Paige paused in the doorway. “The feds already picked him up. We’ll work on the local guy and once we get him, this should all be behind us. Thanks again for the cooperation. I think Gage and I will swing by the high school and see if we can see a slimy looking guy lurking around.”

Warner smiled as the cops left the room. He really did hope this was all behind them for good.

Lethal Remedy

Paige followed Gage into the back parking lot of the high school. The instant he stepped from the car, three students approached him.

“Hey, coach.”

Paige stood back, this was her partner’s world, not hers. She liked how he brightened when the students looked up to him. He was a natural at this. Sure, he was a good cop but coaching on the side... that was Gage’s real talent. Hopefully, Mark would be able to talk him into staying. She’d talked to the former tight-end a few days ago. Mark had been offered the head coach position when school started back up in the fall. He said Sissy was even on board but he only wanted the job if he could continue to work with Clayton. Paige could see why. She was about to step forward, pull out her phone and start asking if the kids had ever seen the man in the photo but Gage beat her to it. Once the photo came through on her email, she immediately forwarded it to Gage and Nathan. Between all of them, they should have the man’s identity before the end of the day.

“Yeah,” Jared nodded. “He’s been hanging around a lot. We think he’s creepy. Usually stops by just before lunch and then he’s always in the parking lot after school.”

“Have you ever talked to him?” Gage asked.

“Naw,” Jared shook his head. “Like I said, he’s an old guy. Kind of creepy the way he hangs out here all the time.”

Paige pulled a card from her pocket. “If you see him, while you’re hanging out here today... can you give me a call?”

“Sure,” Jared took the card then froze. “Is he the one? The guy that sold that crap to the players?”

“We think he might be,” Gage nodded. “And we don’t know anything about him. Don’t confront him or anything. He could be dangerous.”

“I’ll call,” Jared said frowning. “Joey may never play again and he was our best runner. I’ll call when he shows. He always shows.”

“Thanks,” Gage gave his shoulder a pat as he walked away.

“Now what?” Paige asked.

Gage headed for the bleachers and took a seat. “Now you tell me what’s going on. Who broke into your house and why didn’t you call me?”

Lethal Remedy

Paige sighed as she settled in next to her partner. She should have filled him in before, but he'd been preoccupied with the whole drug thing, she didn't want to bother him.

"Do you have the ring?" Gage asked.

"It's in evidence, why?"

"I'd like to see it," he told her. "They're basically the same, but each year they're a little different. I could at least tell you what year it was issued. The guys get them after their first year on the team but everyone that finishes out the year gets the same one. I have a book, a listing of what the rings looked like all the way back to when they started. Might not matter, but we'd know for sure."

"It might help," Paige decided. "When we get back to the station, we'll get it out of the back and look it up." She glanced up and saw Jared pointing toward the parking lot. "I think our guy may have just arrived."

The two of them headed for the parking lot. They had just walked around a line of parked cars when they spotted the man in the photo. Unfortunately, he also spotted them. He ran, the two deputies chased. Paige was closing in, trying to decide the best way to stop the guy once she was close enough when two hundred pounds of muscle flew past her and tackled the scrawny punk.

Paige grinned at the cheering she heard from the high school students. Gage was going to be even more of a legend by the time this day was through. Once Gage had their guy cuffed and back on his feet, Paige patted the dirtbag down.

"Well, well," she said shaking her head. "What do we have here?"

"That's an illegal search," the guy objected.

"Haven't searched you yet, Einstein." Paige pulled a large baggie out of his jacket pocket. "Looks like coke to me. And at a school no less, sounds like an enhancement to me." She gave his shoulder a little shove. "Get going, to the cars. You're under arrest."

"For what?"

"Possession with intent to begin with," Gage gripped his arm and led him to the car. "This is my school and you're not welcome here."

"I want a lawyer," the guy screamed.

"Great," Paige said casually. "Maybe you can get Boyd Eastman to hire you one."

"That's what this is about?" the dealer considered. "I want a deal. I'll tell you everything just get me a deal on the coke."

Lethal Remedy

“I’ll talk to the DA,” Paige evaded. She knew Tolman wouldn’t deal. He hated drug dealers and hated the ones that preyed on kids even more. She’d let him talk, get the details on Eastman then turn the weasel over to the Tolman and let him explain why he was headed to a cell.

The following day, Paige woke, confused. She took a look around and remembered she was staying with Dax. But he was gone. The noise outside had her hopping from the bed to glance out the window. A huge smile spread across her face when she saw what had awakened her. Dax had at least five boxes, each containing a dozen donuts spread out on her front porch. Her driveway was full and pretty much everyone she knew had arrived to help put her house back in order. She jumped from the bed, pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and was finger combing her hair into a ponytail as she darted across her neighbor’s front lawn.

“I can’t believe you guys,” Paige said happily. “I hope Jericho didn’t give a direct order.”

“Nope,” Jericho emerged from behind a large truck. “This is strictly a volunteer operation.”

“Who’s minding the store?” As far as she could tell the entire department was on her front lawn.

“Laurel Bluffs is covering,” Gage handed her a cup of coffee. “Department emergency, one of our members was in need.”

“You guys didn’t have to...”

“We wanted to,” Margie appeared from nowhere. “So, shut up and tell us where to start.”

Paige grinned. “I’m not sure that’s possible.”

“You know what I meant,” Margie scolded.

Something inside Paige settled. It seemed since the moment she’d arrived at that old factory with Jericho, her life had been a little upside-down. Seeing her friends, laughing, joking and working to help her put her home back together tilted everything back into place again. She still had work to do. She’d never let the murder go. But right now, she was going to enjoy good coffee, good donuts and amazing friends.