

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Shadow Rustler *Season 2, Episode 5*

by:

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“Uh, Paige?” Dax said in confusion.

“Yeah,” she answered absently as she pulled onto the highway and made her way to the outskirts of town.

“Where are we going?” Dax studied her closely. Something was wrong. “Our food is in the opposite direction.”

“I just need to make a quick stop first,” she glanced at Dax. “It won’t take long. I just need to... I don’t know. I just need to stop.”

“Okay,” Dax settled into his seat and waited for her to elaborate. She would... when she was ready.

Paige pulled off the side of the road and backed her vehicle into the cover of some large oaks. She had a clear shot of the Glenshaw home and property. Once she was situated, she pulled out a pair of binoculars and scanned the area. She grinned when she spotted Olivia riding her motorcycle.

“Who lives there?” Dax finally asked.

Paige handed him the binoculars. “See that girl? The one on the motorcycle?”

Dax scanned the property and paused. “Yeah.”

“That’s Olivia Glenshaw,” Paige took the binoculars when Dax held them out and slid them back into the case. “I met her awhile back. Her friend, boyfriend, I don’t know which... well, he was our first victim in that illegal fighting club.”

“Right,” Dax glanced back at the girl. “She’s the brave, reckless kid that broke the case for you. The one that snuck in alone and got the video that helped you guys bring the group down.”

“Right,” Paige frowned. “You know, I feel a little guilty now. She was so upset over Brian, she risked her life to help and I haven’t taken the time to check on him... or her since we closed the case. I should have stopped by, should have called Brian’s family to see if he’s improving.”

“Why are we here?”

Paige sighed. “Because the day she came into my office to present that video, I found out there was a connection to Jericho. She called him Uncle Jer. I didn’t think he had family in the area, so I asked about it. He said it was an honorary title. He and her dad, Ken – or Kenny – Glenshaw have been friends all their lives.” She sat, silently watching as a well-used SUV pulled down the drive and approached the home. The garage door slid open and the vehicle pulled slowly into place. As the door began to close, Paige turned back to Dax. “That was Ken.

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Since Olivia was a minor, Jericho called him that day. He headed straight to the office, to check on his kid. Anyway, I recognized him... from a photo. Remember when I first got here and you were driving me crazy with all the construction noise. I had to take the exam for POST and I couldn't study."

"Yeah," Dax frowned. "Sorry about that. I didn't realize."

Paige swiped her hand in dismissal. "Doesn't matter now. But, anyway, Jericho offered up his fishing cabin. It's up Ephraim Canyon... amazing place. Anyway, he has this photo, it's a blow up of him and Ken holding the two biggest fish I've ever seen. They're happy, grinning in triumph I guess, but I was drawn to it immediately. I don't think I've ever seen Jericho that happy, not since I've been back at least. Maybe when I was a kid, but I didn't really pay much attention to him. Anyway, Ken Glenshaw is important to Walters... closest thing he has to a brother if I had to guess."

That's when Dax finally understood. "And, he's on the list?"

"He is," Paige turned to look at him, conflict written all over her face. "I have to pursue it, you know cross it off, but my gut is already telling me it's a dead end. I'm almost positive Ken was not involved."

"But you have to know," Dax said flatly. "So, you'll do what you have to do and figure it out. Then, when you cross him off, Jericho will know as well."

"It feels wrong," Paige admitted as she shifted into drive and pulled back onto the highway.

"Because you know how much he means to Walters," Dax agreed. They two of them rode in silence all the way to the restaurant. Once Paige had pulled into a parking stall and shut down the engine, Dax reached for her hand. "You've been searching for you mom's killer for nearly a decade. You made some progress, Jericho made some as well. But neither one of you got anywhere... not really, until you joined forces. Don't take a step back. You have a list and the two of you need to work through those names... together. So, you'll go into work tomorrow and talk this through with your boss. If he's willing to join you, the two of you will go back out to the Glenshaw place and sit down with this Ken guy. You'll question him, in your way, and when you leave, he won't even know he was a suspect in anything. Because we both know, most of your suspects have no idea you are even looking into them."

"True," Paige considered. "But I don't see how I can question him without him knowing. And if he knows that's going to damage things... between him and Jericho. It's unavoidable."

"If Jericho feels like he can go, he'll go," Dax said. "If not, you'll take Gage. You're looking for an athletic ring. Clayton's the obvious choice, anyway. You said you haven't gone out to check on the girl. Go check on the girl. Ask how she's doing, is she back to normal, is she playing any high school sports? How are things with Brian? Have the two kids kept in

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touch? You remember high school,” Dax grinned. “I’d leave out the part about baseball though... slider. Maybe let Gage take over and talk about football. Then, you just ask him if he played anything... you know, when he was a kid. Oh, he did? Did he get one of those rings... that is such a cool tradition, blah, blah, blah...?”

Paige smiled at Dax. “Too bad you’re not a cop. You’d make a great partner.”

“I am your partner,” Dax yanked her across the car and smiled when she collided with his chest. “I’m just a different kind of partner.”

“Alright, Ace,” Paige pulled away. “I’m starving.” She climbed from the vehicle and waited a few feet away on the sidewalk for Dax to join her. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Dax took her hand and led her inside.

“Hey boss,” Paige stood in Jericho’s doorway. “You have a minute?”

“Sure,” Jericho closed the file he was studying and motioned for her to take a seat.

“It’s about Ken Glenshaw.”

Jericho frowned. “I know you have to look into him, because he’s on the list, but I’m afraid I can’t. I know Ken, he’s not our guy. Anything I do to prove that is going to damage our friendship, he won’t understand and I simply can’t...”

Paige held up a hand. “I get it. And I’m not asking you to. My gut says you’re right. But...”

“But you can’t simply go with your gut,” Jericho nodded. “I understand.”

“If it’s okay with you,” Paige straightened. “I thought I’d take Gage out with me. You know, just do a follow-up. Check in, see how Olivia is now that the fighting ring has been shut down. See if she’s still seeing Brian and how he’s doing. Then ease into high school activities... sports and other activities. Has Olivia taken anything up to keep her mind off Brian’s trouble? Did Ken play when he was a kid? Gage can help out there... talk about the football stuff and the ring.”

Jericho smiled, mostly in relief. He should have known Paige could handle this without making Ken feel like he’s a suspected killer. He should have trusted her, but the idea of questioning Kenny just had him tied up in knots.

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“I understand,” Paige finally said. “I saw the photo at your cabin. You guys are close and I promise we won’t do anything to put that in jeopardy.”

“I appreciate it,” Jericho told her. “I’ve been trying to recall the last time I saw that ring, but it’s no use. He hasn’t worn it in years. We’ve always kept in touch but when his family moved from Nephi to Manti and we ended up at different high schools, we rarely saw one another. I came here to visit a couple times, he came up north but it wasn’t the same. I remember seeing the damn thing, but I can’t recall when it was. Could have been one of those visits or it might have been after we reconnected and headed off to college together. As far as I’m concerned, if it was college... that puts Ken in the clear. I mean, the ring was lost just before the girls graduated.”

“Right,” Paige agreed.

“I guess it doesn’t matter because I can’t remember,” Jericho said resigned. “So you have to look into it. I just hope he still has the thing. Ken’s an architect. He doesn’t wear rings, says they get in the way of his work. In fact, it was an area of contention between Ken and Darcy for years. She finally realized it was about work and not because he wanted women to believe he was single and available.”

“Darcy is his wife, I gather.”

“Yeah,” Jericho smiled. “And she should have known Ken only has eyes for her. But I guess everyone needs to be reminded now and again.”

“I guess,” she studied her boss for several seconds. “So, do we have your blessing?”

“You have my permission,” Jericho corrected. “Like I said, I’m convinced but you need proof. Do what you have to do so he can be eliminated from that list. I won’t stand in your way.”

Paige stood. “Thank you. I know this is difficult, but like I said before, I will eliminate him and then we can move on to the real suspects.”

“Paige,” Jericho sighed. “The fact that he’s on that list, makes him a real suspect. I’ve had to accept that. I’ll admit, it hasn’t been easy but don’t take him off just because you know it’s what I want... what I need.”

“Like I said,” Paige shrugged. “My gut says no and I always trust my gut but yeah, I have to know. Otherwise, he stays on until I do. Until we do. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

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Paige stepped from the vehicle and waited for Gage. The two deputies slowly made their way toward the front porch.

“I forgot,” Gage whispered. “How close Ken was with Jericho. This feels wrong somehow.”

“I know,” Paige paused before ringing the doorbell. “We go in, get what need and get out.”

“What if he doesn’t have it?”

Paige jerked her head around and glared at Gage. “You don’t think he kept it? Do you still have yours?”

“Somewhere,” Gage told her, then focused on the door when he heard footsteps. “But if you asked me for it, I doubt I could find it. Might take me awhile to go through storage and find my old stash. I’m just saying if he doesn’t produce it immediately... don’t jump to conclusions.”

Paige was about to respond when the front door flew open.

“Deputy Carter, is it?” Ken pushed open the screen door and held out a hand. He turned to Gage to shake his hand as well. “And Deputy Clayton, I’m not sure we’ve officially met.”

“Gage is fine,” he said as he gripped the man’s hand.

Ken smiled. “I have to admit, whenever I see you I think football, not cop. I suspect a lot of people in this town do the same. It’s an honor to meet you... in person that is. Come in, both of you.” He moved from the doorway and made his way toward a spacious living room. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No thank you,” Paige said taking a seat in a large, comfy looking chair. “We won’t take up much of your time.”

“Well,” Ken settled in across from her. “I have to admit, I am curious. It’s not every day I receive a visit from the police... Jericho notwithstanding. Somehow, that doesn’t seem to count.”

“I just wanted to stop in and check on Olivia,” Paige began immediately. “I mean she seems like a great kid and I was hoping, now that the guys responsible for her friend’s injury are behind bars... well, I thought I’d see if she’s doing alright.”

“That’s kind of you,” Ken relaxed. “She’s coping, I guess you could say. Brian’s making progress, but it’s slow. He recognizes her now, can even say a few words, but he has a long road ahead of him. Olivia is a little lost, I think. I remember my high school years, they were filled with reckless stunts I’m amazed we survived and hanging with the team. I wish Olivia would join in, but she’s not interested in any of that.”

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“What team?” Gage asked, seizing on the opportunity.

Ken smiled. “I was a baseball man myself. Loved the game, lived for it actually. But I threw out my arm my senior year. I may have played in college, otherwise... but I always knew I wouldn’t go pro. I guess some guys are born with it, the rest of us just play for the thrill.”

“What position did you play?” Paige asked.

“Second base,” Ken got a faraway look, like he was remembering the good times.

“I guess you got one of those rings, from Manti High?” Gage asked. “I remember the day I got mine. Coach made sure we all knew it was a tradition, one that went back to the beginning of time, I think.”

“Yeah,” Ken grinned. “Funny what’s important when you’re just a kid. I remember thinking that ring made it official somehow. Until you made it a year and got that simple but powerful symbol... you weren’t legit, I guess.”

“I still have mine,” Gage told him. He did, he just had no idea where it was. At the time it was the most important thing in the world to him. But, as he moved onto college, got another ring, a few trophies and then went pro, the high school symbol lost its shine somehow.

“Yeah,” Ken nodded. “Me too. I suspect every guy that ever got one cherishes it... in his own way.”

“Could I see it?” Paige asked sheepishly. “I remember the rings, from the time I was in high school. But someone told me they change the design every year. It would be interesting to see how much different yours was... compared to the one Gage got, I mean.”

Ken shrugged and stood. “Sure, give me just a minute.” Ken left the room and was gone longer than Paige had expected. Suddenly, he walked briskly through the room and entered what Paige assumed was the kitchen.

“Darcy,” Ken said anxiously. “Do you know what happened to my ring? The high school athletic ring that used to be in this black case.”

Paige glanced at Gage and saw he was looking at her. His face telegraphed the same question she had... *What now?*

“I’m sure it’s around here somewhere,” a female voice answered, clearly unconcerned.

“But I never take it out of this box. Do you think one of the kids found it... thought it would be cool to start wearing it?”

“No,” Darcy said immediately. “The kids know not to touch our personal stuff. I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. I’ll take a look later. Right now, I need to get this finished. I have

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to get it over to the church before noon. Scoot already. Put that box back where you found it. Well, go on.”

Ken stepped back into the room, worry and sadness showing in his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he began as he settled back into his seat. He set the ring box on the table in front of him. “I’m afraid I’ve misplaced that ring somehow.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Paige tried to sound light and unconcerned. “I mean, it would have been fun to see how much they changed things and all but... well, you seem pretty upset about this. I’m sorry I asked, now.”

“No,” Ken sighed. “I’m glad you did. Now I know it’s lost and I can start looking. I just have no idea how... well, that’s neither here nor there.”

Paige stood. “We’ll get out of your hair, Mr. Glenshaw. I just wanted to stop by, see about Olivia and make sure your family didn’t need anything. I mean, you were extremely helpful during that case and all of us, especially Jericho I think, appreciated your help.”

Ken smiled. “Tell the old man hello and he’s overdue for a beer.”

“We’ll do,” Gage shook the man’s hand, then followed Paige out the front door. Once they were back on the highway, headed back to the office he spoke. “He may not have his ring, but that man did not lose the thing twenty years ago.”

“No,” Paige agreed. “More like twenty minutes. Now I feel bad for asking.”

“But it doesn’t get him off the list?” Gage observed.

“Not yet, no.”

“Gage,” Margie’s voice came over the radio.

“Go ahead,” Paige said grabbing the mic before Gage could.

“Can the two of you head up the canyon? We have a complainant that is pretty upset.”

“Sure,” Paige said immediately. “What can you tell us?”

“He says someone stole some cattle,” Margie relayed. “His name is Martin Alder. He’s parked at the entrance to the Manti Community Campground and he’s not happy.”

“Copy that,” Paige frowned at her partner. “You know him?”

“Nope,” Gage shrugged. “Guess we will soon enough.”

They pulled into the campground and exited the car. They’d only gone a few steps when an angry looking man approached them.

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“It’s about time!”

“Martin Alder?” Paige asked.

“Well, isn’t that obvious?” the man demanded. “Do you see anyone else sanding here waiting for an officer to assist him?”

Paige narrowed her eyes at the man, Gage inwardly sighed. This should be fun. “What can we do for you, Mr. Alder?” Gage said, taking control of the situation.

“As I told your dispatcher,” Alder fumed. “I need to report a theft. As long as it took you to get here, it’s no wonder my cows are disappearing. Are all of you small town cops incompetent?”

Paige forced her face to appear neutral, inhaled a long, deep breath then addressed the man. “What makes you believe your cows were stolen? It’s rare, but we do have black bear up here... especially in the high country.”

“I demand to speak with your superior,” Alder growled. “Or a detective. Someone who possesses the ability to investigate a crime would be nice.”

“Sure,” Paige turned to leave. “Head on down to the police station and you can speak with the sheriff. He should be in the office today. I’m sure he’d be happy to listen to your complaint.” She returned to the vehicle to wait for Gage, knowing he’d try to smooth things over with the impossible man.

“I don’t know you,” Gage began. “I take it you’re not from around here.”

“Are you kidding me?” Alder answered. “If I have any say in it, I won’t be back. The Forest Service assured me this was the best place to graze my herd but this is the fourth animal I’ve lost this year. The area might be pristine grazing but the locals leave a lot to be desired.”

“Does that normally work?” Gage asked.

“What?” Alder demanded.

“Insulting the very people who are trying to help you.”

“You call this helping?” he demanded. “That woman would be better suited as a cashier at Walmart. Black bear? Seriously?”

“That woman,” Gage gritted his teeth in anger. “Is the best investigator you are going to find... in these parts sure, but probably in the entire country. So, I suggest you bank the attitude and start answering my questions.”

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“Right,” Alder shook his head. “I was lucky enough to run into a premier investigator in the middle of small town Utah. She has what? A year on the job.”

“Deputy Carter has been with us for over a year,” Gage corrected. “Before that, she was a top investigator for the FBI, stationed at Quantico. And, unfortunately for you... she’s now off your case. So, you are stuck with me... a guy who doesn’t have a lot of investigative experience but will do the best he can to locate your livestock.”

Alder frowned, focused on the woman leaning casually against the police car and wondered if he’d just made a terrible mistake. “Why’d she leave? The Feds? If she was such a hotshot investigator, what’s she doing working out here?”

“That’s personal and not something I’m at liberty to discuss,” Gage pulled out a notepad and a pen. “Can you give me your full name, address and contact number?”

“She got fired then?” Alder accused. “I knew it. She’s doing penance because she got into some kind of trouble. Slept her way to the top, no doubt, and got in over her head so she bailed.”

“I changed my mind,” Gage closed his notebook. “I agree with Paige. You asked for a supervisor. Drop by the office and speak with the sheriff. I’ll be sure to let him know you’re coming.”

Gage marched to his car, flung open the door and climbed behind the wheel. Within seconds he had the engine roaring and the vehicle shifted into reverse.

Paige glanced at their complainant - who looked stunned and unsure what to do next - glanced back at Gage and realized she’d better get in the car or he was going to leave her. *What had the man said to push Gage over the edge?* They were halfway down the canyon before she asked. Gage didn’t answer.

The two officers rode in silence. The instant Gage stepped through the backdoor, he headed straight for Jericho’s office, slamming the door behind him.

“I take it your detail didn’t go well,” Margie sighed. “Martin Alder has already called. He’ll be in later to speak with Sheriff Walters and make a complaint.

“The man’s obnoxious and insulting but I have no idea what he said to Gage to set him off. I lost my temper and left my partner to handle things on his own... guess that was a mistake.” She moved to her desk and dropped into her chair. Nothing seemed to be going right this morning.

“And that other thing?” Margie asked. “You get that cleared up?”

“Nope,” Paige flipped on her computer and wondered what she was supposed to do now.

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“You will,” Margie said confidently. “Just give it a little time.”

It was two hours later when Martin Alder finally strolled through the door. He stopped, talked to Margie for a few seconds, then took a seat outside Jericho’s office. Gage had long since left... Jericho’s office and the building. He appeared to have calmed down by the time he’d finished with their boss, but he didn’t say a word on his way out. Paige still wondered what the guy had said to set her friend off, but he’d tell her when he was ready.

Jericho stepped into the open foyer area, motioned the man inside and closed the door behind them. Twenty minutes later, Jericho opened his door and motioned for Paige to join them. Paige moved to the office and cautiously sat in the chair next to the door. Martin Alder was seated at the opposite end of the room.

“Mr. Alder has something he would like to say to you,” Jericho started the conversation.

“As I told your boss,” Alder began. “I used to graze my herd up north... in the Uintah’s. Last year, I lost every calf but one. I believe the Yellowstone wolves have migrated south but the feds disagree. Between that and the increased number of black bear... well, cattle is an easy target.”

“I’m sure that is difficult,” Paige observed.

“It was,” Alder nodded. “It was the reason I decided to move south. It’s a long drive and I get down here as frequently as I can but I mistakenly assumed it would be safe.”

Paige frowned, Manti and the LaSal’s were safe.

“Anyway,” Alder continued. “I owe you an apology. When I discovered two additional calf’s missing I was furious. I had already lost two others... calves again, last month. Then it took longer than I anticipated for the two of you to show. I was frustrated, pretty distraught about the cows... especially the bull. He was going to save my operation. Rather than convert him to a steer, I planned to use him to replenish my stock.”

“And now he’s gone?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” Alder agreed. “I understand why you immediately concluded he was taken by a bear or something, but I still disagree.”

“Why?” Paige asked. “I mean, I asked you that before but you ignored the question.”

“Be honest,” Alder glanced at Jericho. “I didn’t just ignore the question, I insulted you and I’m sorry for that. I’m ashamed to say, I took my frustration with the previous cops - the ones up

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north - out on you. They were less than helpful and basically told me if I wasn't willing to assume the risk of grazing in the area, I should find a new location. I get it... they can't control the wildlife but they could have at least been civil about."

"I agree," Paige smiled.

"And you're thinking, based on our initial interaction, they were justified."

"I didn't say that," Paige said flatly.

"But you thought it," Alder pressed. "And if I'd treated them the way I treated you... I'm guessing you'd be right. But I didn't. You can believe that or not, it's up to you."

"What I think really doesn't matter," Paige decided. "What I'm trying to figure out is if we have a crime... or nature taking its course."

Alder pulled out a large tablet. "Let me show you why I believe my calves were stolen, not killed by wild animals."

"Yay," Paige said then sobered at the look Jericho gave her.

Alder tapped the screen a few times then placed the tablet on Jericho's desk so all three of them could see it. The first image was a map of the area. There was an electronic pin placed near the campsite.

"What is that?" Paige asked, pointing to it.

"That is the place I offloaded the herd... initially." He swiped the screen and brought up an animated map. The pins started moving. "I placed tracking devices on a few of the animals. I did it for a couple reasons. Mostly because I'm not familiar with this area. I figured until I got my feel for the place, it would help me locate the cows when I made it down to check on them."

"Makes sense," Paige studied the readout. The herd made their way higher into the mountain area, but mainly stayed in the lower meadows. Probably because they were also new to the area.

"Now watch this pin," Martin pointed to a black pin.

Paige watched the animation again and frowned. The black pin appeared with the rest of the cows when Alder offloaded them from the truck. For several days, it followed the same path the other cows traveled. Then, suddenly, it disappeared.

"Where is it?" Paige looked up and asked.

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“That’s my question,” Martin said soberly. “If it was killed, black bear, cougar, whatever... the pin would still show. The collar would show us the exact location of the carcass. The pin shouldn’t have disappeared completely. Unless someone stole my bull.”

Paige had to admit, the man had a point. “I’d like to return to the canyons,” she glanced up at Jericho. “I want to see the place...” she pointed to the tablet. “May I?”

“Sure,” Martin pushed the device closer to Paige.

Paige studied the screen and slowly used the progress bar across the bottom until she located the bull’s last location. “That’s where I need to go.”

“Will that program identify coordinates?” Jericho asked.

“Yeah,” Martin took his tablet back and hit a menu off to the left side. With a couple clicks, details appeared in the sidebar.

Paige grabbed a notepad and jotted down the numbers. She jumped to her feet and turned to Martin. “I know we got off to a rocky start and I guess I understand, but Gage and I... we aren’t the bad guys. If you had given us a chance, if you’d explained this up at the campsite when I asked... we would have saved a lot of time. I hope you’ll think about that. We’re used to dealing with difficult people, it just didn’t have to be that way.”

“I understand that,” Martin accepted the scolding. “Do you need me to return to the area with you?”

“No,” Jericho stood. “Paige and I will handle it. We’ll be in touch.”

Martin understood he had just been dismissed. He stood and started for the door then stopped. “I really appreciate your help on this and again, I apologize for my behavior earlier today. Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.”

Once their visitor was gone, Jericho turned to Paige. “We’ll head out but first, how did it go with Ken this morning?”

“It went fine,” Paige said evasively.

“So,” Jericho frowned. “He couldn’t produce his ring, then?”

“Not yet,” Paige sighed. “But I think it went missing recently. He seemed truly surprised when he went to retrieve it and the ring was gone.”

“We can figure that out later,” Jericho moved around his desk. “Right now we have a cow to find.”

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“I hate to say it,” Paige followed him out. “But I think he might be right. It appears as if someone took that cow and moved it completely outside the area. Are you driving or am I?”

“I am,” Jericho led her to the parking lot and climbed into his vehicle.

Jericho slowed his vehicle as they neared the area where the calf was last recorded. “We have to get back in there, at least a couple hundred yards off the road.”

“Am I going to get yelled at if I follow that trail?” Jericho asked.

“Why would I yell?”

“I’m just thinking if someone did steal his calves, they had to drive a truck or trailer back there. I thought you might want to check for tire tracks before I drove over any evidence.”

Paige frowned. She should have thought of that. She needed to concentrate. Her mind was on Ken and where his ring could be but right now she needed to concentrate on cows. “Yeah, let me out.” She reached into the backseat and snatched up her bag before jumping from the vehicle. As she made her way up the small path she immediately spotted the tire tracks. It only took a few minutes to document what she needed.

Jericho waited for Paige to jump back into the vehicle and yank the door closed before speaking. “What did you find?”

“Tire tracks,” Paige was focused on the area as she explained. “Only one set. It was a truck, normal size and they weren’t pulling a trailer. I suppose, since they only took calves they didn’t need one right away. Easier that way. Get in, snatch the younger, smaller animals, get out. Then they could have a trailer down the road somewhere or the truck could have a shell. The cows would be hidden and a single truck wouldn’t stand out up here.”

Jericho made his way over the small trail that led further into the back, wilderness area. He glanced at his GPS unit and came to a stop. “This is as close as I want to get. I’m thinking they probably stopped here as well. I don’t see any tracks running across that long grass.”

“Right,” Paige shoved out of the vehicle and began wandering the hidden meadow. The one thing a theft didn’t explain was the tracking device. Even if they loaded the cow into the back of a truck, the device should have continued to track down the main highway and right out of town. Paige made her way back to Jericho. “Hey, do you have cell service?”

Jericho pulled out his phone and studied the display. “It’s spotty, but yeah.”

“Can you call Martin Alder?”

“For?”

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“I need to know if his cows are branded. I can see the older cows have that squiggly line thing with a bar across it. I assume that’s his brand but he never said if the younger calves were marked as well.”

“Right,” Jericho moved to his car, snatched up his notes then dialed the number.

Paige left him to that while she continued to move around the area. She paused, glanced around the meadow then shifted her gaze to the wooded area behind her. She frowned, ran a frustrated hand through her hair and disappeared into the trees. Living in Quantico didn’t give her a lot of insight into the world of ranching. She knew next to nothing about cattle. One thing she was learning... they trampled everywhere and pooped where they lived. It wasn’t conducive to finding evidence. She loved a good burger but was quickly discovering... she wasn’t all that fond of the animal it came from.

Paige made her way further into the shadows and found herself at the edge of a tiny stream. Again, the cows had destroyed the natural beauty. The bank of the spring was a muddy mess. In addition to the trampled bank and compressed foliage, the place was littered with cow pies. The water was dirty... well, filthy really. Paige instinctively pressed her hand over her nose and moved forward. Seriously, did the cows really drink from that gross murky water? The closer she got to the stream, the slimier the mud became. When her footing slipped and she barely held herself up with a nearby tree, she gave up.

Paige turned and spotted Jericho watching her with an amused smile. She scowled as she made her way to his side.

“I’m guessing you haven’t spent much time around cows,” the minute she reached him, he began to walk, making his way further into the thick trees.

“Well,” Paige followed. “There’s not a lot of farms in the Quantico area. What are we doing?”

“We’re making our way above the cattle’s rest area. They’ve been occupying this section for a while now. Which means, they’ve slept here, drank from the stream and grazed as much as they are going to. It’s the reason they are out there... in the open right now.”

“So they’ve destroyed their water source and moved on to find the next stream to destroy?” Paige asked.

“They will still drink from the stream,” Jericho disagreed, stepping over a fallen log.

Paige followed closely behind him. They made their way several feet above where the cows had settled in. Up here, the water was clear. The bank was damp but not such a muddy mess and where it was a little muddy, it wasn’t slimy. Paige stepped closer to the stream and frowned. About ten feet above them, there was something in the water. It was obscured by a

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large log, but the piece of wood didn't look like it had fallen into the water on its own. "What is that?"

Jericho moved in next to her and studied the area she was pointing at. "Let's go see."

"What?" Paige jerked around and glared at her boss. "You want me to wade through the water... or are you going to do it?"

Jericho grinned. "And here I thought you were my meticulous investigator. You're really afraid of a little water? What happened to gathering evidence at any price? I was sure that was you I saw jump off a cliff into a raging river not all that long ago."

"Right," Paige smiled. "So now it's your turn. You wade across the stream and check it out. If there's something there, I'll join you."

Jericho glanced at Paige, looked up the stream and realized the water narrowed a little up above. He made his way to the edge of the bank and easily stepped across. Then, he headed back down a few feet and crouched near the strange obstruction. Without saying a word, Jericho straightened, glanced around and spotted just what he needed. He disappeared behind the trees and returned with a sturdy branch. Seconds later he was crouched again and pulling something from the water.

"What is it?" Paige asked.

"If I had to guess, I'd say you're missing tracking device," Jericho straightened.

"Don't touch it," Paige ordered as she made her way to her boss. The instant she reached him, she pulled an evidence bag from her pack, held it open and waited for Jericho to drop it inside. Once the device was secured, she handed the bag to Jericho and began searching the area for clues. "The cows haven't been up here, maybe I can find something that will help lead us to the thief or thieves."

"There had to be at least two," Jericho decided.

"Why?"

"Because one guy may have been able to separate the young bull from the herd. It would have been difficult, but possible. And, depending on how he did it, maybe even load it into the back of the truck by himself. But, I don't see how one guy could cut that device off a rambunctious bull like that. Not even in the confined space of the truck. It's sturdy and the clasp is complicated on purpose so it won't fall off. It would take two people to remove it."

"Okay," Paige considered. "So, at least two guys. There should be footprints. We might get fingerprints off the metal on that device but it's been submerged, most likely the reason it

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stopped working. The internal components would have shorted out the minute it got water inside.”

“I agree,” Jericho studied the ground around them.

“What did Martin say about the brand?”

“He said they have them,” Jericho said absently. “Alder said he never leaves an animal on public land unless he’s branded it first.”

“Okay,” Paige glanced around, not seeing anything obvious. “That helps. If we find them, we can identify them. Finally, good news.”

“I don’t think we’re going to find anything else out here,” Jericho decided. “Let’s head back to the office.”

Paige frowned but ultimately agreed.

Margie stopped Jericho on his way to his office. “Mrs. Glenshaw called,” she held out a small piece of paper.

“What did Darcy have to say?” Jericho asked, accepting the note from Margie.

“She said she needs to talk to you about something important,” Margie glanced at Paige. “I think it was her visit to Ken this morning. Anyway, she only had a short opening today. Since you were otherwise occupied, she scheduled a meeting for tomorrow morning... ten o’clock.”

“I’ll be here,” Jericho said casually. “Thanks, Margie.” He disappeared into his office.

“Why do you think it’s about my visit this morning?” Paige asked.

“She said something about a complication,” Margie shrugged. “Something she needed Jer’s assistance with. And she complained about your visit. Said she wished she knew about it in advance because it upset Kenny.”

“Oh,” Paige sighed. “I didn’t mean to upset him. Maybe she has information about the ring. Maybe she’s the one that took it. That would be nice, it would help me cross Ken off the list.”

“You should cross him off, anyway,” Margie grumbled. “We all know he’s not responsible.”

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“We all believe he’s not responsible,” Paige corrected. “I’d like to say we know, which is why he’s still on the list.” She glanced at Gage’s work area and wondered what her friend was doing.

“Jericho sent him home,” Margie provided.

“Is he okay?”

“Apparently, his grandfather had a heart attack,” Margie said softly. “He found out this morning, which is probably why he wasn’t very patient with our obstinate Mr. Alder.”

“Will he be okay? His grandfather, I mean,” Paige clarified.

“I think so,” Margie said hopefully.

“I’ll call him later,” Paige decided. “I need to run over to the high school and talk to Mark about that vehicle burg from yesterday. I don’t think I’ll be back.”

“You solved it?” Margie asked.

“Yeah,” Paige frowned. “A kid by the name of Luke Henderson.”

“If you’re talking to Mark, he must be on the team,” Margie decided, referring to the high school football team.

“He is,” Paige grabbed her file. “I’ve looked into him and he’s never been in trouble before. I think it might have something to do with the team... maybe some kind of initiation or something. I’ll talk to Mark first, enlist his help and get to the bottom of this before I head home tonight. You think you’ll be okay here?”

“I’ll be fine,” Margie brushed that off. “I’m going to talk to Jericho, I think he needs to give Gage another day off.”

“Not necessary,” Jericho stepped from his office. “I told Gage to take at least two days. He’ll let me know if he needs more. Now, Paige,” he turned to address his deputy. “I’ve tracked down several auctions in the area. You’re with me tomorrow. We’re hitting the road first thing. Margie, you’re in charge. I’m calling in Havilland to cover any calls that come in while we’re gone.”

“What time?” Paige asked.

“Meet me here at nine,” he told her.

“But...” Margie began.

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“I called Darcy,” he advised. “Changed my appointment to eight. She said that works better, anyway. I’ll take care of whatever she needs and we’ll hit the road as soon as she’s on her way.”

“You think it will take a full hour?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” Jericho answered before returning to his office.

Paige frowned, then shrugged. “Okay then, I’ll be at the high school if you need anything.”

“Good luck,” Margie called out as Paige exited the building.

Paige pulled into her drive and climbed from her car. She smiled when she saw Dax sitting on her front porch waiting patiently. *How long had he been there?* She wondered.

“Hey babe,” Dax stood. “You look tired. Good thing I took care of dinner.”

“My hero,” Paige grinned as he pulled her in and gave her a gentle welcoming kiss.

“Long day,” he observed.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Caught a new case, one I’m struggling with. My knowledge of cows... well, let’s just say what I understand about those animals could fit in my little pinky.”

“Cows?” Dax asked.

“Yeah,” she settled into one of the patio chairs. “A guy has his herd up the canyon but it looks like someone stole a couple of the young cows. One was a young bull that he needs for breeding. If I can’t get it back, it’s going to be a real blow. Plus, Gage’s grandfather had a heart attack. I called him just before I got home, Gage says it was serious, but he should be fine. Just a long recovery, I guess. I did solve the vehicle burglary from yesterday though.”

“Was it a kid, like you thought?”

“Yeah,” Paige shook her head and settled further into her chair. “Luke’s the new kid and the guys conned him into pulling that stunt as an initiation to the team sort of thing. Once I realized he was on the team, I guessed as much. Mark is going to handle it and the team will be doing a fund raiser of some kind to pay for the damages. The victims agreed not to press charges, so it all ended well... I suppose.”

“It did end well,” Dax stood. “Let’s head inside and I’ll get you dinner and you can tell me about the cows... and the ring.”

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“Oh, yeah,” Paige sighed. “Ken Glenshaw’s ring is missing. I haven’t resolved that, yet. I’m hoping his wife has it but we won’t know until the morning.”

“Why morning?”

“Darcy, Ken’s wife, has a meeting with Jericho in the morning,” she stepped inside and dropped her gun belt onto the couch.

Once dinner was on the table, Dax asked about the cows. Paige filled him in on the day’s events.

“You should head up to Nephi,” he suggested.

“Why?”

“Because Jaimie told me she’s taking Ken and Donna to the rodeo this weekend,” Dax told her. He was still having a hard time picturing his army buddy, his wife and his mother at a rodeo but Jaimie had insisted. “Seems like a great place to find a few cows.”

“But that bull is too small to ride,” Paige objected.

“True,” Dax conceded. “And I doubt you will find the cow you are looking for up there.”

“So why go?”

“Because you can talk to the stock hands, see where they get their animals, find out if anyone is new to the circuit,” Dax said sitting back in his chair.

“Sounds like you do know a bit about cows,” she observed.

“Not much, but enough.” Dax agreed. “If you’re game we could head up, stay with Ken and Jaimie this weekend and join them at the local rodeo. We might get answers, but we will certainly get leads.”

“With Gage taking a few days off, I’m going to have to check with Jericho,” Paige decided. “I think Havi is scheduled to work and if so, between him and Dean they should be able to handle the call load. I do need to check though before I can make plans.”

“You said you’re touring the area auction sites tomorrow. That’s another good idea. Go hang out with Jericho, get a feel for things,” Dax stood and began clearing the table. “He should know what to ask to get answers. You can take notes and we can use what you learn in Nephi. Get his blessing and I’ll call Ken tomorrow night.”

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Paige stepped into the office and glanced around. Margie wasn't at her desk and Jericho's door was still closed. Maybe Darcy was still visiting, or he could be meeting with his secretary about something. She took several steps toward her desk but was stopped when Jericho flung open his door and called for her to join him.

"I don't know if you've met Darcy Glenshaw," Jericho began, motioning to the petite woman sitting in one of his visitor's chairs.

"No," Paige stepped forward and held out her hand in greeting.

"Darcy has a request." Jericho prompted.

"Okay," Paige settled into one of the other chairs.

"Well," Darcy began. "I know you didn't mean any harm but well... you upset Kenny yesterday."

"When he couldn't find the ring?" Paige acknowledged. "I'm sorry about that. We were just there to follow-up... I mean, regarding Olivia. She was such a great help on that case and I know she's been upset about Brian. I just wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else I could do to help."

"I appreciate that," Darcy said softly. "That truly was kind and thoughtful of you. But you see, I took Kenny's ring. Now he's upset. I came here today to see if maybe Jericho could meet him for lunch, take his mind off things, you know... get him thinking about fishing, planning a summer trip to the cabin, or something. But I was hoping, if he does come in... that you wouldn't mention the ring again. He doesn't know I took it, I want to surprise him for our anniversary."

"How many years?" Paige asked, relieved they could legitimately take Kenny off the list.

"Twenty-nine this year," Darcy said proudly. "I know it's not a milestone or anything but Kenny's always so good to me, I wanted to do something special for him. I found this place - up north - that could take his ring and clean it up real nice, then they put it in this kind of glass display thing. I know he's going to love it. He was good when he was young, probably could have gone all the way if he hadn't thrown out his arm. Anyway, it's a good memory."

"I promise," Paige glanced at Jericho. "I won't say a word."

"Thank you," Darcy stood. "I won't keep you. Jericho said you had a busy day ahead of you. I'll let you get to it. I really do appreciate your help on this."

"I really am sorry I brought it up," Paige said sincerely. She stood and watched as the woman exited the building. "He's off the list, but I feel even worse now. If it wasn't for me,

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that man never would have realized the ring was gone. She could have arranged her surprise and he wouldn't be upset and worried because something he cares about is gone."

"Don't worry about that," Jericho stepped to his door. "We have an auction to attend and I'll call Ken, meet him for lunch tomorrow and make something up. He'll be fine."

"Dax wants me to go up north, to Nephi this weekend, to the rodeo," she clarified. "He said his friends are attending and he thinks it would be a good place to look around, ask some of the regulars if they've noticed anyone new, stuff like that. If we haven't solved the case before that, anyway."

"I forgot that was this weekend," Jericho considered. "Havilland and Dean can handle things. I'll give you a few names, people to talk to. Tell them I sent you and what we have. They can be trusted and if they know we're dealing with cattle rustlers, they'll help keep an eye out for anything suspicious."

They visited four auction houses, one actual auction and drove up the canyon so Paige could take a picture of one of Alder's branded cows. By the time she got home it was late, she was exhausted and they didn't have anything even remotely interesting to follow up on. She made her way to the bedroom, changed out of her work clothes and walked next door. Zeus, Carmen and Dax were relaxing on the back porch.

"We're on for this weekend," Paige said in greeting. "Jericho said we should head out tomorrow, early afternoon if possible. I know you said Ken and Jaimie could put us up but I guess the traffic is crazy. The rodeo apparently starts on Friday so if we head out a day early, we might miss the crowd."

Dax pulled out a beer and held it up in question.

"I'd love one," she snatched the beer from his hand and settled onto the lounge chair between his legs. "Better," she moaned as she took her first sip.

"We can watch the house," Carmen offered. "I don't have anything better to do," she grumbled.

"Nathan still keeping you on the sidelines, I guess?" Paige asked.

"Yeah," Carmen shrugged. "I guess I should be grateful. I mean, I'm still getting paid but it feels wrong, to get paid for doing nothing."

The group visited, complained and solved the world's problems for several hours before they split up and headed for bed.

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Paige walked with Dax toward the temporary cage, trying to appear casual and non-threatening. *Impossible for Dax*, Paige thought as she smiled and moved to stand on the bottom rail of the pen. It was Saturday morning and they were meeting one of Jericho's contacts. The instant she approached him, identified herself as one of Walter's deputies and explained the situation, the man had become agitated. He was sure the thief, or an associate, was in the area. Paige had thought it too good to be true at first, but the more Tate Gamble talked, the more she believed him.

So, here they were, standing in the middle of a dusty makeshift containment area, waiting for Tate to show and introduce them around.

Dax put an arm on Paige's shoulder. "He's here."

Paige didn't move, she was sure one of the young cows in the pen had Alder's brand.

"What is it?" Dax asked.

Paige pulled out her phone and showed Dax the design. "That cow, the reddish one over there with three white feet... it has that mark."

Dax moved to the side, slowly studying each cow carefully. Anyone watching would think he was just picking out the stock he planned to bid on. Once he was sure Paige was correct, he returned to her side. They explained the situation to Tate, who rushed inside a building and returned with a man wearing an official looking nametag.

"This is Kyle Broadhead," Tate introduced. "He's in charge here. It's his job to verify ownership on all animals being auctioned off today. Can you please show him that picture and... Well, discretely of course..." he dropped his voice to a whisper. "Can you show him your badge?"

Paige pulled her badge from her pocket then returned it when she got a subtle nod from Kyle. She pulled up the photo of Alder's cow, with a clear picture of his brand and handed the phone over to the auction official.

"Let me take a look myself," Kyle requested. "I'd like to say I discovered an animal with a brand we were on the lookout for due to Jericho making the request."

"I understand," Paige shrugged and waited for the man to find the cow she had spotted almost immediately. When he did, she relaxed a little. Now, they just needed to locate the person who had entered her in the auction for sale.

"Come with me, please," Kyle requested as he headed for a travel trailer they obviously used as a portable office.

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The small group stepped into a tiny section partitioned off for privacy and waited for Kyle to tell them what came next.

“I need to inform the organizer of this event,” he sighed. “Dusty is not going to be happy about this.”

“Who is Dusty?” Paige asked.

“Dusty Hawkins,” Tate answered. “He’s the guy that organizes the entire rodeo. He’s a straight shooter. Knowing someone stole another man’s livelihood and tried to profit from it at his rodeo... well that’s just gonna piss Dusty off something fierce.”

“Do we need to call the police?” Paige asked. “I don’t want to make waves out here and I don’t want Jericho to have to step in and smooth things over.”

“Dusty’s one of our local cops,” Tate explained. “He’ll handle this. Don’t you worry.”

Kyle hung up the phone and frowned. “Dusty said wait here, he’s on his way over.”

They went through it all again when the local lawman arrived. He was younger than Paige had expected. He wore a cowboy hat, cowboy boots and a thin western style shirt that hugged his broad chest and large arms. If Paige didn’t have a thing for Dax... a man that was standing right beside her... she might try to get to know the guy a little better.

“Pull the heifer from the auction and I want to see the paperwork on the seller. Anything they listed will be pulled and scrutinized by me.”

“And us,” Paige added.

The corner of Dusty’s mouth twitched but that was his only reaction.

“Before we go,” Paige said quickly as the man had already turned and was headed for the door. “Can you tell me what they list as their address... on those forms? My victim is still missing a bull... one that is important to him. A young calf born earlier this year.”

“Let’s make sure he’s not here, then we can see about a warrant for their property,” Dusty said before he disappeared out the door.

While the group worked to gather up all the animals Ramon Farms had entered, Paige made a phone call.

“Do you have news?” Marty said in answer.

“I’m not sure,” Paige said evasively. “I’m wondering if you have any photos of your animals. Especially the bull that’s missing. It seemed like he was the most important to you.”

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“Sure,” Marty said casually. “Should I drop them off at your office?”

“That would be great,” Paige decided. This was going to take a while, anyway. “Are you still in town?”

“Yeah,” he was shuffling something in the background. “I decided to hang out a couple days, you know, in case you needed anything else from me. I should have thought to bring this binder the day I stopped in to meet with the Sheriff. Anyway, I’ll bring my documents in... who should I ask for?”

“Just get them to Margie,” Paige jumped out of the way when a cow escaped and headed her way.

Tate, Kyle and Dax all laughed.

“I’ll give her a call, let her know you’re coming and give her instruction on what to do with the file. I appreciate it,” Paige started to hang up.

“You know something,” Marty accused. “I can hear it in your voice.”

“I think I may have found one of your cows,” she admitted. “It’s not confirmed yet, but I have the officials here looking into it. That paperwork will really help speed things along here. I’ll let you know one way or the other... as soon as we know. I promise,” Paige added.

“Okay,” Marty headed for the door of his hotel. “I can live with that. Margie will have these in five minutes. I’m headed out now.”

“One of us will call as soon as we know,” Paige repeated before hanging up. She immediately dialed Margie.

“Hey,” Paige called out. “Uh, Tate. Is there somewhere my secretary can send something out here? I had the owner, my victim, bring in his file on the missing cows. She says he has photos, DNA from the local vet and a vaccination chart with detailed descriptions of each of his cows. It sounds like the man kept excellent records, details that might help if we need a warrant.”

“I doubt you’ll need one, but Dusty is going to want to see the docs. Follow me,” Tate walked briskly to the trailer. “Have her fax everything to this number.” He pointed to a label on the front of the machine that contained a phone number. Within minutes, they had more information than they could possibly need to make a positive ID.

“Now we just need to find Mr. Ramon Fletcher,” Paige said as she handed the documents to Dusty. He glanced through them, smiled and made his way to a large set of bleachers.

“Mr. Fletcher,” he said coolly. “I’m wondering if you could explain these to me.”

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Fletcher glanced at Dusty, shifted his gaze to Paige in annoyance then focused again on Dusty. “What is it?”

“Ownership papers,” Dusty advised. “Pictures, vet records, all the things you don’t have but said there’s a reason. I agree, there is a reason. The reason is... you’re a thief.”

Fletcher jumped to his feet and moved forward to crowd Dusty’s space. “You might be in charge here, but nobody accuses me of stealing.”

“Oh, I’ll do one better,” Dusty shifted, pulled a set of handcuffs from the waist of his jeans and snapped them on their suspect before he registered movement.

“If that victim of yours has a way to come up and retrieve his property, you might want to call him. Otherwise, I’ll have to take them in and it’s going to cost him. I’d prefer to just turn them over to their rightful owner tonight.”

“I agree,” Paige smiled. “Any chance I can sit in? I have a few questions for that man and the theft is my case.”

“Make the call,” Dusty shoved Fletcher into the backseat of a patrol car. “Take him to the office, set him up in the back room. I need to interview him before I decide what to do with him.”

“Yes, sir,” the patrolman said before pulling away.

“Not just a deputy then,” Paige observed.

“No,” Dusty wiped his hands on his jeans. “I guess I didn’t properly introduce myself. Paige Carter, I’m Dusty Hawkins, Juab County Sheriff.”

Paige studied the man for several seconds. “I’m curious.”

“Women always are,” Dusty grinned.

Paige ignored the response. “Why didn’t Jericho tell me to look you up when I got here? I mean, you’re the sheriff and you organize the rodeo. I’d think you would be the first man he’d suggest I see while I’m here.”

Dusty frowned. “Walters isn’t a fan, I guess you could say.”

Paige shrugged and walked away. “I can see why.”

Dusty’s frown deepened. The cop was hot and if it wasn’t for the hard looking man standing guard over the woman, he might make a move. But, there was a guy standing guard and he had work to do. Anyway, Jericho would not be happy if he had a little fun with one his

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cops. No, it was better this way. But he couldn't help the disappointment that filled him when Paige Carter walked away and disappeared around the corner.

"Marty," Paige said the instant Alder answered the phone. "How soon can you get to Nephi and do you have a way to transport your cows?"

"You found them?" he asked, afraid to believe it was possible.

"We did," Paige affirmed. "I'm not sure about the bull but when I left, they had found the three heifers. They're still looking for the bull. The Sheriff would like to turn them over to you rather than impound them. If he does that, you're going to have to pay the fee."

"No," Marty said immediately. "I'll head out now. It shouldn't take more than an hour."

"Okay," Paige said, relieved. "Head to the sheriff's office once you hit town. I'll meet you there."

Paige pulled into the parking lot and glanced around. The building wasn't exactly inviting and it sat out in the middle of what looked like a large field. They had planted a couple trees next to the front of the building but they were young and didn't provide much by way of curb appeal. And she thought her office was bad. She smiled and made her way to the front door. Once inside, she showed her badge and ID to the guard and was escorted to an office area in the back. The instant she stepped inside, she spotted the good sheriff. Once again, she wondered why Jericho didn't like this man. She'd gotten that loud and clear when she called him to give him an update. Oh, well. It was obvious neither man was going to reveal the details and it was probably none of her business anyway.

"Deputy," Dusty grinned as he watched her approach.

"Sheriff," Paige frowned. "My victim is on his way out. It will take around an hour to get here from Manti. Tate has the cattle secured in a small corral that's separated from the other livestock. He said the time delay wouldn't be a problem."

"And he has a trailer?" Dusty pressed.

"He said yes," Paige leaned against a desk wondering when they'd get to the interview. "Have you heard anything from the rodeo grounds? I'm just wondering if they found the bull. He's the most valuable animal of the four."

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“Tate called a few minutes ago. They found him. They didn’t enter him in the auction, probably thought he was too hot this time around. They were housing him with the other stock but didn’t have any plans to sell him... at least not here.”

“They?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Dusty moved toward a door. “He had two men helping him and one woman. My people have taken all of them into custody. They say this guy’s the leader... makes sense, I guess. His name’s the one on the business license.”

Paige followed the cowboy into a small room and closed the door behind her. There was a small table, one chair next to the wall that was currently occupied by Ramon Fletcher and two chairs positioned on the opposite side of the table nearest the door.

“So,” Dusty pulled out a chair and settled in. “Ramon Fletcher.”

Fletcher grunted but didn’t look up.

“My name is Deputy Carter,” Paige began. “Have you been given your rights?”

Dusty scowled. “My people did that already.” He shifted his chair, a sign he was taking control of the interview. “You said you understand those rights, Ramon. Is that correct? You understand you can remain silent, have a lawyer and all the rest?”

Paige frowned. That was not the proper way to give Miranda.

“I’ve been read my stupid rights twice now,” Ramon barked. “You gonna read them again like I’m some idiot that doesn’t understand English. I don’t want no stinking lawyer. I didn’t do nothing and you can’t prove I did.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Dusty decided. “Tell me where you got those cows.”

“I already told that other guy,” Ramon objected. “The one at the rodeo. Ask him. He has the paperwork.”

“You mean this paperwork?” Dusty pulled a sheet of paper from a file and slid it across the desk.

“Yeah,” Ramon said confidently. “So you see, I’m the rightful owner. Now let me go.”

“Oh, Ramon,” Dusty said sympathetically. “If it were only that easy. I’m sure that’s what you would like but I’m afraid that piece of paper right there, while incriminating... doesn’t prove anything.”

“I told you,” Ramon said a little louder. “I own those cows. Now, let me go man or I’ll sue you for false arrest.”

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“Sorry, man,” Dusty mocked. “No can do. First, because you are not under arrest... yet. And also because I haven’t gotten the answers I need from you.”

Ramon’s eyes narrowed in anger.

Paige sat silently. She’d realized, almost immediately, she’d stepped on the Sheriff’s toes. And if she did it again, he might just kick her out of the interview. She wanted to be here, so she’d bite her tongue and let him do things his way... no matter how much she disagreed with his tactics.

“Deputy Carter here,” Dusty pointed to Paige. “She has a man that claims those cows are his. He even provided her with the documents to prove the brand on those cows you are trying to sell... well, that’s his registered brand. I’m wondering if you can explain that to me.”

Ramon studied the table for several seconds. “Sure,” he finally said. “That’s who I bought the cows from.”

“Oh,” Dusty brightened. “That’s great. All I need is a copy of the bill of sale and we can be finished here.”

“I didn’t bring it with me,” Ramon objected. “Who carries the entire office on the road when they are selling cattle?”

“Oh,” Dusty sat back. “A bill of sale, pretty much anyone that wants to auction off a cow these days. But I’ll bite, where is the paperwork located?”

Ramon didn’t answer. The room remained completely silent for over a minute. Finally, Paige couldn’t take it any longer. She reached into her own file and pulled out the photos of all four cows, slapping them down on the table in front of Ramon.

“You took these,” Paige pointed to each one. “All four of them from the mountains in my home town. I’m a deputy, but I work in Manti. You remember Manti, right? It’s where you found these calves. It’s where you drove into the secluded area of a meadow, near a small stream and grabbed each of these animals. It’s where you and a friend loaded them into the back of a truck and transported them up here to wait for the rodeo where you could offload them for a few bucks. You took this one,” Paige shoved one of the photos forward. “And this one,” she pushed another one toward him. “I’m guessing you only took two because that’s all you could fit in the back of your truck. Then a couple weeks later you returned, and loaded up these other two,” Paige shoved the last two photos toward him.

“You can’t prove that,” Ramon said. “I mean, you can’t because it’s not true. I bought those cows. I own them and I have a right to sell them.”

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“But that’s the problem Roman,” Paige sat back and lied. “You see when the two of you removed that tracker, the one that was placed on the bull, well... you left a clear set of prints. Once Sheriff Hawkins here books you, all I have to do is request a copy of the prints and... Bam,” she slammed the palm of her hand on the table. “All the evidence I need to lock you away for good.”

“I want a deal,” Ramon demanded. “I want to talk to the prosecutor. He’ll cut me a break for information. I’m done here, get me the prosecutor.”

“Are you saying you did steal those cows but you have a bigger fish?” Dusty asked. “One that you think the prosecutor might be interested in? I don’t get the DA until I know exactly what you’re saying here.”

“Yeah,” Ramon shifted. “Take off these cuffs and get the DA. I want a deal.”

“Yeah, what?” Paige asked.

“Lady, are you stupid or something?” Ramon said sarcastically. “Yeah, I stole all three of those cows and the bull, brought them here to Nephi, and tried to sell them at the auction.”

“Where did you take them from?” Paige pressed.

“Like you said,” Ramon said impatiently. “I drove up Manti Canyon, found the herd in a meadow near the bottom. Then I watched. The first two were easy. We just pulled off the side of the road and threw them in. The bull was harder. He took off, ran into the thick trees, toward that small stream. I cornered him and Pete helped rope him up. We noticed the tracker on his neck and I had to get rid of it so I got the thing off... took nearly twenty minutes. Then I got rid of it.”

“How?” Paige asked.

“I was going to throw it in the stream but I realized the water was still running, from the snow melting after winter. So, I grabbed a large branch that had fallen from a tree and wedged it into the bank. Once I was sure it wouldn’t go anywhere, I shoved the tracker under the water and took off.”

Paige glanced at Dusty and realized he was watching her... waiting for her to finish. She needed to do one last thing. “Okay, so I just want to be clear on what you requested. You are not asking for you attorney, you just want to talk to the local District Attorney so you can offer up something you know in hopes he will offer you a plea?”

“That’s right,” Ramon turned to Dusty. “Is this lady stupid? I mean, can’t she understand English?”

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“I really don’t think she’s the stupid one,” he stood and headed for the door. “We’ll be back when I have an answer from the prosecutor. You just hang tight for now.”

Paige followed him out. “Now, I just need to know if you are filing charges or if I am.”

“Well done in there deputy,” Dusty said, ignoring her. “I’ll call Steve and he can work things out with Tolman. He made a left to head to his office but pivoted when he spotted his detective. “Miles,” he reached out a hand to shake the detectives in greeting. “I got this, I thought you were taking the night off.”

“I was,” he glanced at Paige then back to his boss. “But Doug said you brought someone in, so I thought I better head in.

“I would have called, but I knew you were busy,” Dusty said to explain to his man why the Sheriff was interrogating a suspect, not his detective. “You get the next one. Now go home, pamper Sheila a little and I don’t want to see you until Monday morning.”

Paige watched as Miles visibly relaxed, then smiled. “Thanks, boss. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“You can pay me back later,” Dusty joked. “With hard work and many, many arrests. Tell Sheila I said hello.”

The detective made his way down a long hallway and disappeared out a back door.

Dusty placed a hand on Paige’s back and escorted her to the front of the building. “Now, in answer to your question, I don’t know. He attempted to sell stolen property in my city and stole the property in yours. The lawyers can hash it out. Any chance you might stick around, grab a bite and see where it leads?”

Paige glanced up and spotted Dax’s truck headed their way. “Not a snowflakes chance in hell, I’m afraid.” She started to turn but was surprised when Dusty grabbed her arm, turned her around and planted a kiss right on her mouth.

Dax jumped from his truck and was across the sidewalk before either cop realized he was there. He wrapped an arm around Paige’s waist when she pushed away from the local sheriff, stumbled backward and nearly fell to the ground.

Paige was pissed. How dare the man make that kind of move... especially in front of Dax? He knew she was here with someone, knew she was involved...but that was the point, she immediately realized. The guy was cocky and arrogant and needed to be put in his place. She extricated herself from Dax’s hold and took a step forward intending to do just that. But, she wasn’t quick enough. Dax had balled his right hand into a fist and landed a punch to the Sheriff’s face. He followed it up with a left hook to the gut. Paige jumped between the two men

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and forcefully shoved Dax toward the car. She knew she couldn't control him unless he let her, lucky for her... he was letting her. "Get in the car and let me handle this."

Dax scowled but turned and climbed behind the wheel. He didn't take his eyes off the two lawmen as he waited to see what Paige's next move would be.

"I could arrest him for assault on a police officer," Dusty said, holding a handkerchief to his bloodied nose.

"I suppose you could," Paige agreed. "But then I could press charges for sexual assault and that is something a sheriff doesn't need on his record... especially in a couple years when election time comes around."

"If you ever decide to dump the temperamental monkey over there, give me a call." Dusty turned and slowly made his way back into the building.

Paige sighed, turned and slowly made her way to the truck. The minute they were back on the road, Paige called Marty and told him she needed him to meet her at the rodeo grounds instead of the police station. He agreed and said he was about five minutes out. Dax changed course without saying a word. He waited in the truck while Paige dealt with her victim. Waited while two experienced cow hands stepped in to help Marty Alder trailer his missing cows. Waited while Paige pulled out several business cards and handed them to Tate, one of the cow hands and Marty. It took less than thirty minutes to get the cows into the trailer, the paperwork completed and the man back on the highway.

Paige said goodbye to the men, thanked them for their help then climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door. Dax moved to start the truck but she reached out and covered his hand. "I understand why you did what you did back there, but why are you angry with me?"

Dax didn't know how to answer that question. He considered shrugging it off but decided to be honest instead. "I guess because I think you wanted it. Deep down inside you've been curious about the man, intrigued by the man since the moment you laid eyes on him. If that's what you want, I'm not going to stand in your way. I mean he's a cop, you're a cop. I suppose you'd have a lot in common. He's a prick and a player but I don't own you so if that's what you're looking for... I can get Ken to drive me home and you can bring the truck back when you're ready."

"You would do that?" Paige said in disbelief. "You would head home and let me hop into bed with a stranger... then drive on home in your truck?"

"I already told you..."

"Not what I'm asking," Paige turned to face him. "I mean that little to you? So little you would just back off... give up and go home, just like that?"

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“No,” Dax sighed. “You mean that much to me.”

Paige stared at him in shock, not really understanding what this all meant.

“I’m not going to fight for you,” Dax shrugged. “Not if he’s the one you want.”

Paige smiled. “I beg to differ,” she moved across the seat, reached across Dax and slid the lever back as far as it would go. Then she climbed into his lap and took his face between the palms of her hands. “I was there and I’m pretty sure you broke his nose.”

Dax didn’t respond.

“I don’t want him, you idiot,” she added when he still didn’t respond. “I want you.”

“I was there, too,” Dax told her. “I saw the way you looked at him.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong,” Paige began, tightening her grip when Dax moved to look away. “Not completely. Dusty Hawkins is hot, until he opens his mouth... that is. If you truly believe I would throw you over for him... well, I guess I have a lot of work to do. We could get started tonight... if you’re willing to book a hotel rather than head back to the Woolsten’s. Call Ken and tell him we made other plans.” She leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

Dax hesitated and told himself to resist the pull of her. Memories tried to push in, a little voice in the back of his mind told him not to trust so easily, reminded him how many times Piper had cheated when he wasn’t around to stop her, warned him how much he cared about Paige and how much her betrayal would destroy him. Then he pushed it all aside and deepened the kiss.

Paige relaxed and moved off his lap. “Am I booking a hotel?”

Dax just nodded.

“Good,” Paige smiled. “Then tomorrow, maybe we can stop on the way home and find you a cowboy hat. If you had a hat... a sexy white cowboy hat with a turquoise band like the real cowboys rather than the baseball cap you always wear... well, I might not be tempted to look at another man for the rest of my life.”

Dax tried not to smile as he pulled onto the roadway, but failed.