

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Desperate Love* *Season 2, Episode 6*

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*by:*

*Melanie P. Smith*

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[www.melaniepsmith.com](http://www.melaniepsmith.com)



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Paige hit save and watched as the tiny blue bar slowly made its way across her screen. The instant it disappeared, she sat back and let out a huge sigh of relief. She was finally... FINALLY, finished with paperwork. Boring, tedious paperwork... the bane of her existence. Yes, she was detail oriented. Yes, she preferred structure to clutter and she knew - more than once - she'd driven her colleagues crazy on a scene with her slow-paced, methodical searches. But, that was entirely different. That was about evidence - about the challenge of the hunt - that was the job. The paperwork? One could argue that was also the job, but Paige still hated it and knew she always would.

She stood, snatched up the stack of closed and inactive case files and headed to the backroom. "Yippee, filing," another tedious task she despised, but one that had to be done. She knew she could pawn the files off on Margie. The admin wouldn't argue... probably wouldn't even mind. But, she couldn't do it. She'd been the one to procrastinate, the one that had ignored the unpleasant until the stack on the edge of her desk was so large it looked like a bad game of Jenga. So, she had to be the one to pay the price. "Consequences," she muttered as she started down the long row of filing cabinets.

As she robotically shoved files into their proper slots, her mind wandered to the nightmare she'd had the night before. She hated the memories, hated waking up in a cold sweat not knowing where she was for several terrifying seconds, hated the way it made her feel the day after an episode. The cases she'd worked for the FBI were always difficult. It didn't really surprise her they sometimes haunted her when she least expected it. The memories had a way of tormenting her, mostly when she was stressed about something else.

At the moment, she was worried about Nathan Porter. Her longtime friend and mentor wasn't himself, hadn't been the last few times they'd spoken, and it worried her. For some reason, that worry had surfaced in a disturbing and twisted nightmare the night before. In her dream, Nathan had been captured by a killer she helped put behind bars several years ago. One that had lured his victims into an elaborate maze that was conveniently missing an exit, then he stood by and watched as they wandered around, desperate and frustrated for days. In real life, the victims ultimately died from dehydration. They had been trapped, wandering around a maze without food or water day after day, not understanding there was no hope, while a cruel and sadistic scientist monitored their problem-solving abilities. Five young men and women had succumbed before her team located his lab and stopped the madness. Seeing Nathan wander around that same maze, even in a dream, left Paige feeling uneasy and a little distraught. She'd call him tonight she decided. As soon as she got home. She'd call him and insist he talk to her. If she pushed hard enough, he might cave.

It was nearly forty minutes later when Paige headed back to the office area - what she fondly referred to as the Bullpen. Her steps were a little lighter, her mood a little brighter. The filing was done, her cases were caught up and she had a plan. By the time her head hit her pillow tonight, she'd know what was going on with the General. Then she'd decide how to help.

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She was only a few feet away from the inner door that separated the public office space from the private secure storage section when she heard voices, raised voices... and Margie was alone in the office. Paige quickened her pace, pushed through the doorway and stopped. Raised voices—yes - but the woman was sobbing uncontrollably and clearly on the verge of panic. Not a threat. Margie had everything under control as usual. Well, as much as possible when dealing with a frantic, hysterical citizen.

Paige made her way across the large expanse and settled casually against Margie's desk. *Appearance is everything.* If she came across as relaxed but in charge, she might be able to defuse the situation before it got too out of control. "Hi," Paige held out a hand. "I'm Deputy Carter, can I help you with something?"

"I need to see the Sheriff," the woman straightened her shoulders and stared defiantly into Paige's eyes, ignoring the outstretched hand.

"I'm afraid he's not available right now," Paige stood and studied the woman for several quiet seconds - clearly relaxed and casual wasn't working. "I'm here, I'm available. If you'll follow me into the Conference Room, you can tell me what has you so upset and I'll see what I can do to help you out."

"I already spoke to a deputy," the woman said in anger. "I don't have time for this. He's going to kill her," she practically screamed. "I don't have twenty-four hours. I don't care about protocol or probabilities. I don't care about any of it. My sister did not just decide, in the middle of the night, she wanted a new start. He has her!"

"Okay," Paige placed one hand on the woman's shoulder and gave her a supportive pat while accepting the paper Margie held out with the other. She glanced at the document briefly and realized it was the call information from the dispatch screen. Missing Persons incident reported at 0600. Okay, this might take a while. She needed to get them into the conference room before someone else wandered in looking for help.

Paige considered her options, she could try to coax the woman into the other room again but it hadn't worked the first time. Maybe she'd just head off in that direction and see if the woman followed. "You said you spoke with a deputy already. Do you know who you talked to?" She raised the document Margie had provided, thinking she'd find it herself, when the woman pulled out a business card and shoved it in Paige's face.

Paige took the card, glanced at the name and sincerely hoped the woman hadn't seen her eyes roll. It took effort, but she won the battle and prevented the sigh, now stuck in her throat, from escaping... barely. Mike Lovato was a good cop - when he wanted to be. That was the problem. If he didn't think the call was important or worthy of his time, his response was lackluster at best. On the flip side, if you were on a hot call, if you found yourself in some kind of danger... you couldn't have a better back.

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Paige entered the conference room and motioned toward one of the chairs, surprised when the tired, clearly worried and exhausted lady settled into one of the high-backed business chairs. She passed back the business card and handed the woman a legal pad and a pen.

The lady looked up in confusion but remained silent.

“I don’t want to waste time going over the same ground as the previous deputy,” Paige forced her voice to be soft and soothing, but direct. “So, I’m going to go back out there and contact Deputy Lovato. I’m going to get the basics from him while you take some time to write out the details for me. You said your sister is missing, I’m going to assume the initial deputy took down her information and the info on the man you think is responsible. However, I need more. Anything you can think of that will help us find the suspect. If you have an address, phone number, type of vehicle he drives, anything... jot it down. I’ll be right back.” She was light on the details but once she talked to Lo, she’d know the rest.

Paige made her way across the Bullpen and dropped into her comfortable desk chair, sighing heavily as she studied her phone. If Deputy Just-the-Facts had taken an extra five minutes to listen to a grieving family member, this situation could have been avoided completely. But, nooo, that was apparently too much to ask. Mike Lovato, AKA Lo to his colleagues, had made the entire situation worse by parroting the company line. *The Idiot*. Now she had to call him at home, probably wake him up, and drag the details out bit by bit. Because, Mike was not going to be happy about the call. He was going to be furious if she woke him up and asked about a missing person case he thought he’d already handled. Well, too bad. If he’d taken more time with the woman, been a little sympathetic, or at the very least spent ten minutes punching out his report before he checked off duty - she wouldn’t have to call him at home.

Paige dialed the number and waited, after several rings, it switched over to voicemail. She disconnected and hit redial, waited impatiently and again ended the call when she heard the recording. *One more time—with feeling*. She wasn’t a bit surprised at the angry voice on the other end of the line.

“What?” Lo demanded.

“Hello,” Paige said brightly. “I’m great, thank you so much for asking.”

“What do you want, Carter?”

“Information,” Paige sighed again.

“On?”

“You handled a missing persons call,” she began. “Abbi Copeland reported her sister and a nephew’s disappearance just before you went off shift.”

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“And?” he barked.

“Cut the crap, Mike,” Paige said annoyed. “Copeland is here looking for the Sheriff. I need to know the basics so I can smooth this over and see what, exactly, we have here.”

“Look,” Lo grumbled. “What you have is an adult woman that decided maybe she wanted a change of scenery. That’s the way it reads, anyway. The woman came home from work to discover her sister and the kid gone. Poofed. The sister...Talia I think, she has a long history of getting knocked around by the ex. She leaves the SOB, forgives him, moves back in and a few weeks later he’s beating on her again. Go figure. I checked up north, confirmed the pattern and figured she hooked back up with the shithead. My guess? The two of them secretly rabbited because she knew Copeland would try to stop her. Give it a few days, he’s a frequent flyer, I’m sure he’ll land in a cage... yet again. Maybe she’ll get lucky and he won’t make bail this time. Anyway, it’s been a pleasure and all that happy shit... but I need to catch at least a couple hours down before I’m back on to cover for Bridges. I’ll finish the report first thing and fill Walters in when I can. It can wait a few hours, Paige. We’re not going to do anything before the standard twenty-four, anyway. Now, if that’s all... it’s been real but don’t tag me again unless Armageddon has hit and zombies have gathered in the streets to feast on the local’s brains.”

“Gross, I seriously did not need that image in my head. But, I’m not sure,” Paige said hesitantly. She hated second-guessing a fellow officer, but her gut was telling her there was more to this and time was essential.

“You can’t be sure they’re zombies, or if the locals have brains?” Mike asked. “In that case, just assume they’re all human piss ants wreaking havoc in the streets and proceed with business as usual. I’ll stop by the office in a few hours.”

“She’s not going to accept the twenty-four,” Paige countered, ignoring his sarcasm. “You already explained it and she’s here demanding an audience with Walters. I’ve settled her down a bit but she’s got that look. She’s stubborn and if I try to placate her, I think it’s going to come back on both of us. Just tell me the basics and I’ll take it from here.”

Lovato sighed heavily, climbed from his bed and moved to his computer. “I’ll fire up the comp and shoot you an email. The report is rough but it should do for the basics.”

“Thanks,” Paige said sincerely. “I’ll do what I can and let you know. Check in when you’re back on.”

Lovato clicked off without saying goodbye.

Paige looked up and saw Margie was watching her. She pressed a hand to her chest and sighed. “He’s such a charmer.”

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“Sounds like another one of Mike’s clusters,” Margie grumbled. “I wonder if that boy will ever learn.”

“Yeah, it’s so hard to guide the wayward youth, but maybe he’ll grow out of it,” Paige grinned at Margie’s snort. The man had more than a decade on Paige, an entire career behind him, but he still insisted on making things more difficult than they needed to be. She started to stand but stopped when she heard the distinct chime of her computer telling her she had a new email. *That was quick.* Paige hit print and programmed two copies, turning to the machine to snatch up the first one the instant the printer spit it out. *Not bad,* she decided, giving it a quick scan. “Can you do me a favor? That’s Lovato’s rough draft. Can you run it for me? The missing girl, the kid, the suspect... get me anything you can find and bring it in when you have it. I’ll see what I can do to appease the sister... for now.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Margie promised as she stood and moved to the printer. She spotted Jericho’s vehicle out of the corner of her eye and considered, best to get him tucked away in his office before the hysterical and unsatisfied customer noticed his arrival. She could fill him in once he got settled.

“Thanks,” Paige said sincerely. “I’m going to close this, but come on in when you’re done.” She disappeared into the large room and silently closed the door behind her.

Abbi Copeland studied the female deputy intently, wondering if the woman could be trusted. “I’ve listed everything I know.”

“Good, Great,” Paige settled into the chair across from her.

“But before we go any further, I need to know if you are actually going to help me.”

Paige frowned, what did she mean by that?

“What I should say, what I should have asked, is if you are going to help me now? Are you taking my report seriously? Do you believe me when I say my sister was abducted? Or do you, like that other officer, believe she ran off in the middle of the night with her son?”

“I don’t know what happened to Talia or Deklan,” Paige said honestly. “I’ve spoken to Deputy Lovato, I’ve read his report.”

“And now you think she went back to him,” Abbi said soberly. “She didn’t. She wouldn’t.” Copeland turned to look out the window. “I guess I do need to speak to the sheriff, immediately.”

“Again,” Paige said calmly. “He’s not available. I’m willing to listen to you. I haven’t made up my mind, yet. Not completely. Tell me why you don’t think she went back to him. I

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mean, there's a pattern there. One Deputy Lovato took the time to investigate. She's done it before. Why didn't she do it again?"

"Deklan," Abbi said. "She's determined... to protect her son."

"I'm going to need more, explain it to me," Paige pressed. "Deklan is eight years old. Why now?"

"Because he's eight," Abbi shuddered. "And he decided he was old enough, strong enough, brave enough to stop his father from hurting his mother. Flint went nuts. The men were supposed to stick together. When Deklan stepped between them, Flint followed through anyway. He could have pulled the punch, but he had to teach Deklan a lesson. Men stick together or they get hurt. He broke Dek's nose, but that kid stood strong. Blood spurted over his little t-shirt, then continued to run down his face but Dek... well, he stood strong. He wouldn't budge, it broke Talia's heart and terrified her at the same time. Flint simply shoved his son aside and nearly beat Talia to death that night." Abbie wiped away tears that had begun to flow down her face. "She didn't go back to him, didn't get some wild idea to take off either. She had the protective order, a stupid piece of paper that he's already broken, but she had it. She was determined to stand her ground, give Dek a new life. A loving, carefree life where he could play with friends and just be a kid."

"I found the protective order," Paige affirmed. "But I didn't see any charges for violating it. Do you know the details about that?"

"It was yesterday," Abbie began.

"Here?" Paige asked for clarification.

"Yes," Abbi covered her face with her hands and rubbed. "She started to call 911, started to report it but he left. There was no point, he'd just say he was never there."

"That's not how protective orders work," Paige shook her head. "Did you see him? Were you there when he showed up?"

"Yes," Abbi admitted. "She rushed into my room and told me he was out there, parked on the curb watching. She panicked, of course. She didn't know what to do. I told her to call the police, have him arrested. We knew he'd find her, I mean... well, after all of her previous attempts to hide from him failed, she agreed to come stay with me. We knew he'd know. Knew we'd have to deal with him, but she was ready and so was I. We thought we were ready but now..."

"I'm going to file a report on the violation," Paige pulled out her notepad. "What time did this happen? Give me a description of Flint, how you knew it was him, if he was driving a vehicle, and the plate if you got it. What was he wearing? How long did he stay? I need all the

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details.” Once Abbi covered everything, Paige set her pad on the table. “Okay, now we are going to go through what happened last night... or this morning. When did you talk to Talia last? When did you see her? What was her mood? Did she seem upset or afraid?” She glanced up in surprise when Mike Lovato stepped into the room. He looked tired and maybe a little annoyed.

“Hello, Abbi,” he said cordially. “Do you mind if I speak with Deputy Carter for just a minute?”

Abbi swallowed hard but shook her head.

The two deputies stepped out of the room and closed the door.

“What are you doing here?” Paige asked. “I told you I’d take care of it and fill you in later. You needed some down time before you start Dean’s shift.”

“I was awake,” he shrugged. “And it started to needle me, a little. I mean I checked everything out but Copeland, well I admit she was starting to get to me this morning. The more she talked, the more she insisted it wasn’t a typical missing person and it wasn’t possible her sister just left, she got to me. But, I pushed it aside, gave her the standard twenty-four hours BS and tried to convince myself I had done the job. I was already wondering, you know? Like I said, she has a way and when I heard she came in...once I woke up and stopped being pissed at you... well, I was up.”

“I understand,” Paige admitted. “I mean, with the history and all... it just seems cut and dry, he showed up, she went back. We see it all the time. But my gut is telling me there’s more to this. He violated the PO yesterday. They almost called it in but he fled, so they dropped it.”

“But we’re not dropping it now,” Lo stated. It wasn’t a question.

“No,” Paige agreed. “We’re not. I’ve got that one. I’ll do the report and get it into the system.”

Lovato studied Paige for several seconds. “You’re still pissed. You think I messed this up and we lost time.”

“I think you’re doing a pretty good job of kicking yourself with that one on your own,” Paige shrugged. “I don’t need to do the same. Plus, I’m not sure you screwed up. You got her statement, called up north and talked to your buddies - guys that had dealt with the family in the past. You verified the info and made a judgement call. Just because Abbi is adamant her sister was abducted, doesn’t mean she’s right. I’m not convinced yet. I’ll leave the possibility open that Abbie is right and Flint has them, but Talia could have fled on her own. I mean, she tried to go into hiding before. Sure, she said she wanted a normal life for her kid but if Flint scared her enough yesterday...”

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“She could have made her plans and bolted,” Lovato nodded. “There are underground organizations. Could be she found someone that was willing to help and she wanted to keep her sister out of it... keep Abbi safe. It’s possible.”

“Let’s go grill the emotionally devastated and unstable sister,” Paige shoved open the door.

Lovato grinned and leaned in close so only Paige could hear when he whispered. “I left my thumbscrews at home. Maybe you have some I could borrow.”

Paige dropped back into her chair and waited for Lovato to join them.

“I know this is necessary,” Abbi said the instant they returned. “I know you still don’t believe me but every minute we sit here... well, that could be one minute too long. Talia is in trouble and I’m afraid this time he will kill her and disappear with Dek never to be seen again.”

“The questions are necessary,” Paige began.

“I don’t know how to make you understand,” Abbi interrupted. “You want to know about Talia’s state of mind last night because you think she waited until I went to work and then she fled. She didn’t. I know she didn’t.”

“How do you know?” Lovato asked. “We’re not asking because we don’t believe you. We’re asking because if you want us to investigate this incident, we need to know everything. We need to understand the situation completely. We need to have all the facts. You can’t hold anything back not if you want us to find your sister. Can you help us do that?”

“Okay,” Abbi gave in. “Okay.”

“Talia has a history of leaving Flint for a little while then returning,” Lovato began. “I’m not judging but I need to know why you are so sure she didn’t fall back into that habit. Even with the best of intentions, sometimes it’s easier to just fall back and go along.”

“I know a lot of battered women return on their own, for one reason or another, but Talia... well, she returned because she knew with every fiber of her being that if she didn’t go back with him, he would kill her. He told her he would. He taunted her with it, threatened their son, mocked her attempts to get away and punished her every time she tried.”

“Okay,” Paige soothed. “Sounds like your sister was living in fear and did what she believed she had to in order to survive.”

“Exactly,” Abbi agreed.

“So,” Lovato pressed. “What changed? I mean, if Flint showed up at your house and scared her, what would stop her from fleeing? It would be easy to disappear in the middle of the

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night, especially to protect Deklan and get a good head start before anyone knew she was even missing.”

“Uhggg,” Abbi dropped her head into her arms and tugged at her hair. “I don’t know what I have to do... what I have to say to make you understand she didn’t leave on her own.”

“Because,” Paige pressed.

“Because of so many reasons,” Abbi barked. “Because of what happened with Dek. My nephew was not willing to sit back and see his mother abused any longer. She knew that, I knew that, he made sure we both knew it. Before, well before she thought she could take whatever he did as long as Dek was safe. Flint never... never hurt his son until that night when he stood up to him. Talia believed she was protecting them both by surrendering each time he found her. Sure, he’d punish her but he left Dek alone. She tried. I wish you could understand that. She tried to get away, but he has contacts. I think he knows a cop or a PI that always finds her, no matter what she did, he found her. She does have a pattern, a history of leaving and returning but the returning wasn’t her idea. He forced her back, threatened her, terrified and terrorized her. It took a lot for her to agree to stay with me. We both worried Flint would come after me, to punish her. It would work. She’d never forgive herself if anything happened to me over this but she agreed. She finally agreed. The judge up north gave her a protective order and I think she actually started to believe the system could help her. Flint spent years chipping away at her confidence... in herself, her family, the system.” She turned angry eyes on the two deputies. “I’m starting to understand why.”

“Let’s say we believe you,” Paige said ignoring the insult. Abbi hadn’t answered the question, not to her satisfaction, but she’d get back to that. “Do you have any idea where he would take her?”

“Before we get to that,” Lovato said, considering. “There was no sign of forced entry into your home. How did he get to her? If we go with your version of events and assume Flint Kesten has your sister and their son, how did he get in?”

“I don’t know,” Abbi admitted. “I could try to make something up and hope it sounded plausible but I simply don’t know. He’s resourceful and he’s a criminal. He might know how to pick a lock. He might have a master of some kind. I honestly don’t know.”

“An honest answer is always better than a made up response,” Paige told her. They all looked up when Margie stepped into the room.

“I have the data you requested.”

“Thanks,” Paige stood and took the file folder Margie offered. Once she skimmed through it, she handed the file to Lovato.

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“What is that?” Abbi asked.

“Information,” Paige sat back. “Criminal history, registered vehicles, property records, that sort of thing.”

“On Flint?” Abbi asked.

“Yes,” Paige affirmed. “Now, let’s talk about yesterday. Walk us through your day from the instant Talia woke you to tell you Flint was parked outside.”

Abbi walked them through it. Paige and Mike stopped her, asked more questions and made her go through it three full times before they were confident they had what they needed.

“Okay,” Paige said with a friendly smile. “I think we’re clear. Now, we need you to head back home and stay there if you can.”

“But...” Abbi began.

“We need you to be home in case Talia is able to get away and call,” Lovato said softly. “We need you to be home, but do not open the door if he shows up. Call the police immediately.”

“You think he might,” Abbi’s eyes grew wide in obvious terror. “You think he’s going to come after me?”

“I don’t,” Lovato said. “Because that would be stupid.”

“Really stupid,” Paige agreed. “We just want you to take precautions. Like you said, Talia would be devastated if anything happened to you. We just want to make sure nothing does.”

“Oh,” Abbi said relieved. “Okay, that makes sense I guess. Um, well do I have to stay there alone?”

“Do you have someone that could stay with you?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Abbi considered. “There’s this guy I’ve been dating for a few months now. Ben... Ben Garrison. I was thinking maybe I could have him come over and stay with me. So I don’t have to be alone.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Lovato said. “Go ahead and give him a call, see if he can meet you at home.”

Abbi stood and moved to the other side of the room, had a hushed conversation for several minutes, then returned. “He’s going to meet me there. He’s closer, so he’ll probably be there when I arrive. I’m going to trust you but just know if this was all some elaborate ruse, a way to make me think you’re working the case, to stall so you can wait twenty-four hours before doing

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anything, I won't go away quietly. I'll scream from the rooftops, to anyone that will listen, how you failed my sister."

"Understood," Paige said before Lovato could erupt on their witness. "Go home, we'll call you as soon as we know anything."

"You said your sister had a car," Lovato remembered.

"Oh, yeah," Abbi nodded. "It's still in the garage."

"Are you willing to let us take it? Go over it? See if we can find any evidence inside?" Lovato continued. "We'll get a warrant, but if you're willing to sign a release and let us tow it in right now, that could save time."

"I guess that's okay," Abbi said slowly. "Yes. It's for Talia, so yes. Come and get it as soon as you want. I'll sign the paperwork. You might not need a warrant, I don't know. The car is actually in my name and I'll sign off on anything you want. He wouldn't let her have transportation of any kind so I bought the car for Talia. Technically... I guess it's mine."

"We'll be in touch," Paige said again and watched as the woman slowly made her way out the front door. She glanced up in surprise when she realized Jericho had exited his office and was now standing in front of her and Mike.

"I thought you were off," he addressed Lovato.

"Was," Lo said casually. "Now I'm on."

"Margie said there was a situation," Jericho turned to Paige. "Something about a case Mike handled before he checked off. Was it necessary to call him back in? I should have been notified." He turned back to Lovato. "I need you to cover for Dean. We're short, down two men and I don't have the resources to fill the shift if you need to adjust."

"I'm good," Mike assured him. "I've got Dean's hours covered. And, Paige didn't call me back. I realized the situation needed more attention. My case, my attention."

"Alright then," Jericho motioned them back into the conference room. "Let's sit down and you can fill me in." Once they had, Jericho considered. "So, you believe her? The sister. You think the ex-husband found a way to abduct his wife and kid in the middle of the night?"

"We don't know," Paige shrugged. "She's a compelling complainant. We all know the pattern isn't unique. You never know what you'll encounter when you respond on a DV and your best efforts to help might just get your cold-cocked by a frying pan. Women return to their abusers all the time. It's not an easy cycle to break."

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Jericho nodded, remembering his own days pushing a patrol car and getting into trouble. “So, why aren’t we going with Mike’s initial reaction? Why not list her as a missing person, wait until morning and then start looking if she hasn’t surfaced?”

“We could,” Paige told him. “But I don’t think we should.”

“I agree with Paige,” Mike told him. “It didn’t sit right, not with me. Not from the start. I looked, there’s no evidence of a break-in. There are a few things thrown around that makes it look like Talia and Deklan packed in a hurry. Maybe they did... under duress.”

“Maybe,” Jericho studied his two deputies. He wasn’t going to interfere if they thought this was something they should follow up on. “I’ll clear it for the two of you to focus on this today. Margie and I can handle anything that comes in. If I need you, I’ll let you know.”

“What about Gage?” Paige asked.

“He’s off,” Jericho reminded her. “Football banquet, extravaganza... whatever.”

“Oh,” Paige tried to remember the details. “Down in Moab wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Jericho agreed as he stood. “One day. I’m giving you one day, then we go with the obvious, classify the case as a missing person and handle things the way we normally would. Margie will get the BOLO out and I’ll have her input mother and son on NCIC. You two go find something, anything, so I don’t have to deal with the compelling sister later on.”

“Yes, sir,” both deputies said at once.

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Paige stood in the driveway, watching as Talia’s vehicle was loaded onto the truck, secured and ready for transport back to the office. She waited at the edge of the curb, wondering what Flint Kesten saw when he parked here and watched the tiny house for hours. It had been hours, they knew that now. Reanna Akeman from two doors down and across the street confirmed it. She’d noticed the vehicle as she ushered her kids into the car the previous morning, around 0700 on their way to swimming lessons. When she returned at nearly ten, it was still there. She thought it was suspicious, got the plate and was about to call the police when he sped away and disappeared. She was happy to provide the plate number to the Sheriff’s Office and hoped they found the suspicious character soon. Paige had run the plate, it was stolen out of Provo off a 2010 Honda Civic, white in color. Another dead-end. But the Wit helped add weight to the Protective Order Violation. Plus, the stolen plate would add one more charge if they ever caught the elusive prick.

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She frowned and took two steps toward the house when she was stopped by a soft, hesitant voice behind her.

“Ma’am,” Charlene Swann said as she made her way up the drive.

“Can I help you?” Paige asked hesitantly.

“I...” Charlene swallowed hard and cleared her throat.

She was an intriguing woman, Paige thought. She had a well-toned, athletic build but her features were... well, a bit homey. She wore very little makeup and her long butterscotch hair was tied back in a tight tail. It had vibrant streaks of bronze running through it, Paige wondered if that was natural or came from a bottle. Either way, it added character. Her clothes were once again... homey. Nondescript t-shirt, baggy cargo’s, white high-top running shoes. Paige would guess she was in her mid to late thirties and was extremely shy.

“I was talking to Reanna a minute ago and she told me about the man,” Charlene began. “The one she saw yesterday. I think I saw him here last night. Well, early this morning would be more accurate.”

“What’s your name?” Paige asked.

“Oh, sorry. I’m Charlene Swann and I live one street over,” she pointed. “I, well I work late. I’m the assistant manager so I normally close at about eleven but last night we had a few snags. I didn’t shut down until nearly one. Beaker was beside himself - that’s my dog. Anyway, Beaker is pretty good at the house training thing but if I wait too long, he has accidents. I was worried, but he held it together until I finally showed. I’d guess it was maybe one twenty or one thirty by the time I changed, got his leash attached and headed out. Beak was frantic, wanted his play time, you know? So, at first, my attention was focused on him. When we rounded the corner up there,” she pointed up the road. “I saw the vehicle parked in front of Abbi’s place. I didn’t think anything of it, you know. I mean, yeah it was a strange car and it spooked me a little, but I had Beaker and he’s a big dog - an English Mastiff. I knew my baby would protect me but it was strange. Strange enough I paid attention and got a good look at the man sitting behind the wheel, even took a picture of the back of the vehicle. It was dark, so the image isn’t great but here...” she shoved her phone at Paige.

*Naughty, naughty boy*, Paige thought as she studied the photo. The image wasn’t great, but it was clear enough to make out the vehicle, and the surroundings... specifically Abbi’s residence. Charlene had also snapped a shot of Flint hanging out the window, glancing behind him to make sure the street was clear before he sped away. It was indisputable evidence to prove the protective order violation. “Could I get your name and contact information?”

“I guess,” Charlene agreed. “Is he dangerous?”

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“He’s dangerous to the people that live here,” Paige clarified. “And he’s not supposed to be here. Those pictures would go a long way in proving he violated a judge’s order not to be here.”

“Oh,” Charlene brightened. “Maybe I helped catch a criminal then?”

“You absolutely did,” Paige agreed as she forwarded the pictures to her email account.

“He came back,” Charlene told her. “I took Beaker up to the park. It’s a long walk, but he gets so cooped up in the house all day while I’m working. I took him up, let him run a bit then headed home. I saw the car again, not parked this time. He was just, maybe casing the house or something. He drove by at least three times... down this street. At least three, maybe more... I didn’t wait to see. When I saw him, I just wanted to get home, but I know he passed me three times before I rounded the corner. I admit I was walking a little faster than usual, you know? I guess he scared me a little. Then I told myself I was being stupid and he probably had a perfectly logical reason for being there. Now... well, with you guys here I’m not so sure.”

“Do you know what time that was?” Paige asked. “When you headed back home?”

“Oh, it was a while,” Charlene admitted. “I was at the park for at least an hour, maybe more. Nobody was there and Beaker was having so much fun I just couldn’t disappoint him.”

“How about the time you got back home?” Paige pressed. “Do you know when that was?”

“I’d say around three,” Charlene said cautiously. “I know I shouldn’t be walking around in the middle of the night like that but I work afternoons. By the time I get up, have breakfast and take care of a few things, it’s time to head into work. Like I said, I work late, I’m normally out by eleven... midnight at the latest, normally. It’s important to me that I take a couple hours with Beaker. Plus, he’s so big, I can’t imagine anyone would bother me. This is Manti, you know. I’ve never worried about it before.”

“But you worried about it last night?” Paige asked.

“A little, yeah,” Charlene admitted. “I mean I had Beaker, but the guy was a little scary. Maybe it was the time, you know a stranger in the middle of the night and all, but he scared me. Then, I got home, locked the doors and settled in. I told myself I’d been watching too many scary movies and my imagination was getting the better of me. When I finally turned in, I made sure Beaker settled in next to me. When I got up this morning, I shrugged it off. Until now. Until Reanna said you were looking for the guy. Now I’m a little scared again.”

“I don’t think he’s a threat to you,” Paige tried to assure her. “But if you see him again, call us immediately. I’d lecture you about the late night jaunts but I can see I’d be wasting my breath. Keep the dog close, always carry your phone and pay attention to everyone around you. If you haven’t already, I’d recommend a self-defense course. They have a regular schedule at the county gym.”

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“Okay,” Charlene glanced up when Lovato stepped through the front door.

“I’m done here,” he called to Paige.

“Can I go?” Charlene asked. “I need to head to work soon.”

“Sure,” Paige dismissed her and moved to join her colleague. “Anything?”

“Let’s head to the Farmhouse,” Lo suggested. “I need coffee, desperately.”

Paige smiled. “I’ll meet you there.” She watched as he dropped a couple evidence bags in his trunk, climbed behind the wheel and sped away. She took another quick glance around before she jumped into her own car and followed.

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Paige stepped into Dirk’s Farmhouse and surveyed the area. She spotted Lovato in the back, away from the rest of the customers. Must have asked for privacy. She slid into the chair across from him and waited as he took a long sip of his coffee. “Did you find anything?”

Lovato started to answer but paused when the waitress slid a steaming breakfast plate in front of him and refilled his coffee mug.

“Coffee?” Gail asked pleasantly.

“Love some,” Paige answered. She eyed Mike’s breakfast. “How’d you get that? It’s after eleven.”

“We made it up special,” Gail answered. “Don’t tell anyone but if you want... I can get. We take care of our warriors in blue.”

Paige smiled. “Thanks, but no. I think I’d like an order of your Fish and Chips.”

“Be right back,” Gail assured her.

Paige turned back to face Lovato. Before she could ask again, Mike spoke.

“Maybe,” he told her, frustration evident in his voice. “There is no sign of forced entry. I guess the guy might have some B&E skills but his sheet doesn’t show that particular vice.”

“Maybe he’s good,” Paige considered. “Maybe he just hasn’t been caught for that particular vice.”

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“Maybe,” Lo cut off a huge chunk of pancake and shoveled it into his mouth. The stack was swimming in syrup, so much it made Paige’s teeth hurt just looking at it. “I checked the doors, windows, garage, nothing. If she didn’t answer the door for him, he’s got skills.”

“Okay,” Paige said slowly. “It’s possible the guy was making so much noise Talia opened the door to shut him up.”

“Possible,” Lo agreed. “But I don’t think so. She had that PO and it’s a nice neighborhood. She had to know that. If her douchebag-ex was causing a scene, she had to know one of the neighbors would call it in. She’d be saved. Why open the door? Why risk another violent attack?”

“I agree,” Paige took a sip of her coffee. “So he broke in... somehow. For now, it doesn’t matter how. We go with it and assume he gained entry somehow. Did it look like he forced them or like they packed up and went willingly?”

“That’s the thing,” Lo shrugged. “I mean, they packed and it could be argued they left willingly.”

“But?”

“But there are small things,” Lo sighed. “Might be nothing, might be something. The thing is, we could justify it either way.”

Paige frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” Lo sat back and stretched out his legs. “On the surface, it looks like she packed and fled. Jumped up in the middle of the night, packed a few clothes and bolted. But then there’s the car, how’d she get away? Why would she leave it? Maybe she grabbed a bus out of town, but why? Why take a bus or a train when she had that car sitting right there?”

“Good point,” Paige pondered.

“Then there’s the kid’s room,” Lovato continued. “The kid is eight. On the surface, again... looks like he packed in a hurry and took off with his mom. But he left his GameBoy. Right there on the bed, practically screaming at you when you walked in. *Look at me! Here I am.* It felt like a message, like the kid was trying to tell his aunt something. What kid that age, with dozens of games, all packed away in a handy compact case, takes off without his favorite entertainment... why leave it behind?”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “Dekland could be sending a message. I left my favorite things behind. Does that mean he thinks they’re coming back, or he wants her to know he didn’t leave willingly?”

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“I think the latter,” Mike said softly. “Then there’s the mother’s room. She snags up some clothes and a couple pairs of shoes but nothing else. She leaves a framed picture of her family... mother, father, Abbi... sitting there on the nightstand. Then there’s the jewelry box. I asked Abbi about it. It’s this fragile wooden box, hand-carved with all these decorative things all over it. Abbi said their grandmother gave it to Talia just before she passed away. It’s Talia’s most valued heirloom and she just walks out and leaves it behind? Wouldn’t she take the picture and the box if she was fleeing? If she found some underground organization that could make her disappear for good, wouldn’t she want at least a picture of the family she left behind? The jewelry box, something tangible she could hold to get her through the lonely nights on her own?”

“Yes,” Paige agreed. “She would.” She leaned back as Gail set a plate in front of her and walked silently away. Paige smiled at the large side dish of ranch dressing, one she hadn’t asked for, but one that Gail knew Paige would need. She drowned a fry in the creamy sauce and popped it into her mouth. Once she swallowed, she continued. “I think both of them were trying to leave Abbi... and us... clues. Just subtle messages to let us know they didn’t leave on their own. They left the things that were the most important to them behind so Abbi wouldn’t stop pushing and if we looked closer than the surface we’d understand.”

Lo smiled. “That’s so cute. I mean, after all this time it’s good to see you still believe in unicorns and fairies.”

Paige scowled. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” Lovato said soberly. “The woman lost faith in the system a long time ago. The message was for Abbi. I’d guess Talia knew her sister wouldn’t stop pushing. We never entered her mind. Talia had lost faith in the system, she didn’t leave those clues for us... she left them for her sister.”

“You’re probably right,” Paige nodded. “It worked. Abbi hasn’t let us take the easy route. Wouldn’t accept the company line or let us settle for the surface appearance. She’s pushed, yelled and screamed, and threatened to do more if we didn’t take her seriously.”

“I should have seen it earlier,” he admitted. “Should have listened to my gut. I had this niggling in the back of my mind but then I looked into the history, saw the surface and figured what’s twenty-four hours? I issued the ATL, but we all know someone that doesn’t want to be found can slip under the radar even with a thousand cops attempting to locate her. I can say I did the job, but I didn’t... do the job. Not really.”

“You did do the job,” Paige disagreed. “You followed up, tagged a friend and had him fill in the details. The history fit, clouded things a little. The more we’ve been able to gather, it mostly came from the knock on doors. You couldn’t canvass the area at six in the morning. Wouldn’t have caught the Akemann woman if you had. We also would have missed another wit I need to tell you about.” Paige proceeded to tell him about Charlene and her big dog, Beaker.

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“I have the photos to add to my case. He can’t squeeze out of the violation and it puts him in the area during the time Talia and Deklan disappeared.”

“You done with that?” Mike motioned to Paige’s lunch. “I want to head back to the office and run a few things.”

Paige stood and dropped some bills onto the table, enough to cover the meal and a generous tip. “Let’s go.”

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When Lovato stepped into the Bullpen, he spotted Paige at her desk. She was kicked back, feet propped on the desk, eyes closed. He moved to his own desk to finish his call. Quickly made another then moved to settle into her visitor’s chair and wait.

“I can hear you staring?” she advised without opening her eyes.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Lovato said sarcastically. “I mean, we just have a small pesky matter of a missing woman and her son to deal with.”

Paige opened her eyes, dropped her feet to the ground and focused on the deputy. “I wasn’t sleeping,” she said flatly. “I was thinking. Going through the situation in my mind, considering angles, you know... investigating.”

Before Mike could answer, Margie approached them. “I found something the two of you might be interested in.”

“Darling,” Lovato grinned. “I’m always interested in anything you have to offer.”

Margie grinned, Paige nearly groaned.

Margie focused on Paige. “He can be a charmer when he wants to be.”

“What did you find?” Paige wondered.

Margie set a stack of papers in front of the two deputies. “I found the vehicle.”

“You?” Paige straightened in amazement. “How? Are you sure?”

“Ninety-nine point nine percent sure,” Margie said confidently. “It seems Flint Kesten borrowed the car from his good friend Bobby Masters.”

“Who is Bobby Masters?” Lovato asked, moving so he could see the documentation Margie had provided.

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“Bobby Masters is a fellow criminal. That big section there, that’s his rap sheet. Masters and Kesten got arrested a couple years back... together.”

“For what?” Paige asked, flipping pages to find the details.

“Assault,” Margie provided. “I requested the report and it just arrived before the two of you. Flint got off with sixty days and a few hours community service. Masters wasn’t so lucky. When the cops arrived, he tried to flee. Got the added bonus of a DUI and when they impounded the car, the same one Flint is driving now, they found stolen property in the trunk along with burglary tools under the driver’s seat. He spent nearly two years at the point of the mountain and got out on probation five months ago.”

“We need to contact his Parole Officer,” Paige said absently.

“I already did,” Margie advised. “Officer Bannock decided it was past time he conducted a little spot check and search on his parolee’s residence. He’ll make contact with you, Mike, once he’s finished.”

“That means Kesten has a connection to a B&E man,” Lovato realized. “Does Bannock know if Master’s was out of town early this morning?”

Margie frowned. “I didn’t ask.”

“I’ll call him,” Mike stood, snatching up the page that contained the officer’s contact info. “Give me a minute.”

Paige looked at Margie. “Good work, but then you always do good work. I take it Lo’s flirting doesn’t bother you? It could be considered sexual harassment in the workplace in some circles.”

Before Margie answered, Lovato dropped back into Paige’s comfortable visitor’s chair. “It’s not harassment if it’s welcome. Plus, I attended that mandatory class when I came on. The instructor said you could apply a little test. You know, to see if it’s harassment or not. I just had to ask myself if I only call Margie Darling or if I also use that same term of endearment on my male counterparts. Since I told Dean he’s a darling man just the other day... I’m good.”

“And I’m flattered,” Margie added as she turned to leave. “Not insulted so let’s just leave things the way they are for now.”

Paige turned to face Lovato. “You didn’t really call Dean a darling man did you?”

“I absolutely did,” Lo grinned. “He may have wanted to come through the phone and choke the life out of me, but since we were miles apart and he’s taking a few days off... I figure I’m safe. For now, anyway.”

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Paige shook her head in disbelief.

“Bannock said Master’s still has an ankle monitor,” Lovato got back to business. “Said he never left the valley. He’s in the clear, on the abduction angle anyway. He may have stolen the plate, or known it was stolen. Bannock said he’ll use it if he needs to and let us know when he’s done.”

“It’s good information,” Paige said, staring out the front window. “But it doesn’t get us any closer to finding Talia and Deklan.”

Lovato sighed and glanced down at the packet Margie had compiled. “I think the first step is sifting through all this. We have to read it, see if there’s something we can use in there. You want half?”

Paige nodded and accepted the stack of papers Mike handed her. Mike stood, then hesitated. “Hey, Margie?”

“Yes, Mike,” she said absently.

“Is the conference room clear for the next couple days?”

Margie pulled up the calendar. “Yes.”

“Sign it out to me. I want to use it on this case,” he glanced at Paige. “Okay with you? We can spread this all out and discuss anything that pops out as we read.”

“Good idea,” she stood and gathered up her files before she followed him into the large room.

“I have the locals, up in West Valley, keeping an eye on Kesten’s place. If he shows, we’ll know. And we’ll know if he’s alone or if he has company.”

“I don’t think he left town,” Paige insisted. “Not yet.”

“I think he did,” Mike argued. “There’s nothing to keep him here. He has to know Abbi reported her sister missing right away.”

“And he’s familiar with the system,” Paige told him. “He’d know there’s a twenty-four-hour delay. As far as he knows, we’re not even looking at this right now. We won’t be looking at it until tomorrow sometime.”

“Okay,” Mike considered. “I’ll give you that. It gives us an advantage but I don’t think it follows that he’d stay close to town.”

“He has to,” Paige disagreed. “He kidnapped two people. He abducted his wife, a woman that has a protective order issued against him. If he’s found with her, he’s screwed. He knows

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that. Plus, he took his son, the son that stood up to him, the son that took a punch from him and still stood his ground. He knows he can't control them, not yet. One word and he's toast. Add to it, he's driving around in a vehicle that has stolen plates. Good chance he's going to get stopped by Highway. If he tried for a road trip... a long road trip, there's a good chance he'd be stopped along the way – speeding, failing to signal, not making a complete stop at an intersection, then the cop runs the plate and..." she snapped her fingers. "He's spending the night in a cell and the car's impounded because he's driving around with stolen plates."

"Or, he just changed them back after he snatched them up," Lovato countered. "No reason not to at this point."

"Maybe," Paige considered. "Maybe, but I still think he needs time. If he can get the two of them on his side. If he can get them back under his control, it improves his chance of getting away with it. He just needs to get them back home where they belong. Stupid bimbo thinks she can run... and with his kid? Well, he's going to show her a thing or two. But he's got that order. If he gets stopped, for one thing, the smallest infraction and she cries foul, he's off to a cell. He can't risk that. He has to hunker down, teach her a lesson, teach the kid who's boss. Then he can take his little family back up north and settle back into his cozy life. With him in charge... the way it's supposed to be."

"Okay," Lovato relented. "So where are they?"

"That's a question," Paige told him. "It's the one we need to answer before it's too late. Because if Abbi's right, Flint Kesten's careful little plan is not going to work. Which means Talia and the kid may be in serious trouble."

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It was a quarter after five when Jericho stepped into the room. "You two headed out soon?"

"Huh?" Paige glanced up, looked at the clock then focused on her boss. "We need more time."

Jericho moved in and settled into one of the chairs. "Convince me. This one," he pointed a thumb at Lovato, "has been on nearly eighteen hours."

"Actually," Mike objected. "I went home and grabbed a couple hours sleep before Paige tagged me and my shift was only eight... last night as well as today, so I'm good. Eight on, two off and another eight on. I can handle a couple more."

"Again," Jericho said soberly. "Convince me."

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Paige ran through all the reasons she believed they were still in the area. Then she explained what they were doing to locate the hole, the place Flint had taken his family to hide out until he felt the coast was clear to bolt.

“I agree,” Jericho said after several silent seconds. “It’s too risky to just bolt back up north. In fact, I’d be surprised if he plans to return there at all. The judge that issued the order is too close. All Talia has to do is get word to the authorities and Flint’s locked up again. Talia and the kid would be out of his reach and they’d have plenty of time to disappear for good. He won’t risk that, not yet. Maybe not ever.”

“You think he’s on the run,” Lovato studied his boss.

“I think he might be,” Walters corrected. “Paige could be right. He may have found a place to hole up until he thinks things have cooled down and he has his family under control. Then, he buys a new identity, sets up house in a new area with his fancy new name, a new job and a new life. He could control the mother by threatening the kid, control the kid by threatening mom.”

“I agree,” Paige sat back. “Partially. I think that’s exactly how he will control them. I think that’s probably the plan... just poof. Start a new life and let Talia know if she doesn’t go along she’ll lose everything. He might even threaten Abbi. She’s close to her sister and might do anything to protect her sister and her son. But first, he has to scare them enough, torment them enough, to go along. One word and the plan goes out the window. Flint knows Deklan is getting older, he has to make sure the kid won’t blow his cover if they are stopped by the police. Hell, Deklan could whisper something to a waitress while they wait for breakfast if he wanted to. He needs time. He’s still here, we just have to find him,” Paige finished in frustration.

“He might already have the new identity,” Jericho warned. “He may be relaxing in a luxury suite at the Yardley. Rather than convincing by force, he could just book a spa session, woo her into submission rather than reverting back to force.”

Paige slid a folder across the desk. “Does that look like a man that would pamper his wife? The guy hasn’t had a real job for years where did he get the money to book that spa session? How is he paying for the suite? I’m tracking his cards, there’s no activity... at all. He’s not at the Yardley or any other classy hotel or Inn for that matter. He’s somewhere isolated, somewhere he can pound on his wife and the neighbors won’t call the cops. Somewhere he can keep the kid under control and in fear. I just need to figure out where.”

“We need to figure out where,” Lovato corrected. “My case, my responsibility.”

“Alright,” Jericho stood. “I’m headed home, but if you get a hit call me. I want to know immediately if you find him. I want to know if you find that mother and her son.”

Mike Lovato watched his boss leave the room then ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “He could be right.”

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“About which part?” Paige asked.

“We’ve been asking about rentals, rooms, even purchases by Flint Kesten,” he supplied. “What if he already has his new fake identity and he’s already living under that name? What if he rented a place under some made up, fictitious name? We’ll never find him.”

“I’ve thought of that,” Paige admitted. “But I don’t think he’d do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because if he uses his new identity here, it’s blown. If we start asking questions, passing around photos of him, of Talia or Deklan... his new fancy life is over. This is a small town, someone is going to remember him.” Paige was pretty sure she was right about that. “Plus, I don’t think he could resist showing Talia just how powerful and in control he is. If he uses another name, it’s like saying she won. ‘This is my name, my wife, my son. I’m in control and nobody’s going to tell me I can’t go near them.’ That order hadn’t been in place all that long before he violated it. If some stupid, meddling judge thinks he can tell Flint Kesten what to do, he’s wrong. Nobody is going to stand in the way of him and his woman. Nobody is going to keep him away from his own son.”

“Okay,” Lovato sighed. “I think I agree with you. It’s all speculation and we could both be dead wrong, but it’s what we have so let’s work this through to the end. I’ve gotten through all the hotels and motels in the area. I’m about to start on that new list of cabin rentals. If he’s looking for privacy and seclusion, we have that in spades. All he has to do is find a place up in the LaSal’s and he’s set.”

“I’m working through trailer rentals,” Paige advised. “Easy to rent a motorhome or a small trailer, snatch those two up and head for the hills.”

“It would have to be a motorhome,” Lovato said absently. “Or he ditched the vehicle and I don’t think he’d do that. He needs it for later.”

“Good point,” Paige agreed. She snatched up her phone and made another call.

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Two hours later, they were both still hunkered down in the conference room, working the case. Lovato disconnected his latest call and moved into the bullpen to snatch his newest list off the fax machine. He wandered back, grumbling about antiquated equipment. “I seriously can’t believe anyone still uses a fax. I mean seriously, it’s so much faster to just send an email with a simple attachment.

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“Uh-huh,” Paige said into her phone as she gave Lovato an understanding nod. “I can get a warrant. No. Listen, I’m not asking for private information. I just need to know if a man by the name of Flint Kesten rented any of your vehicles in the past week.”

“Yes!” Lovato exclaimed. “I’ve got the prick, stop hassling with the uncooperative flunky. I found him.”

“Are you sure?” Paige asked, excited.

“One Flint Kesten of Salt Lake City, Utah rented a rustic cabin a few miles up Sixmile, near the creek, for the entire month with the option to renew if needed. He declared three occupants; himself, his lovely wife and one child. No additional amenities necessary.”

Paige smiled as she addressed the woman on the other end of the line. “Ma’am, we were able to obtain the information by another means. The Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office will not forget the manner in which you conducted yourself during this call and will act appropriately in the future. Do have a nice evening.” She disconnected and stood.

“Where are you going?”

“We need a map of the area,” Paige said over her shoulder. “Oh, and if Jericho asks, you have no idea what that woman is talking about. I have a feeling the obnoxious snob just might file a complaint.”

“What call?” Lovato said with a grin. Paige returned with a large map and the two of them began to study it closely. “I guess I better call the boss.”

“Yeah,” Paige agreed. “I guess.” She walked back to her laptop and used the mouse to zoom into the area even closer. The image wasn’t perfect, but she was pretty sure she had just located the cabin in question. She took a screenshot, saved it and returned to the overhead map.

It was less than ten minutes later when Jericho Walters stepped into the room. He quietly studied the map, orienting himself to the exact location. He remembered there was an old logging road that ran almost directly behind the small structure. The man might park right next to the cabin, thinking he’d gotten away with his scheme. But if Flint Kesten had half a brain, he’d parked on the logging road to ensure escape if cornered. Jericho planned to corner him and as a special bonus, he’d disable the vehicle just for fun.

“I assume you know that area well,” Lovato surmised. “I don’t think I’ve ever been up there myself.”

“Me either,” Paige admitted.

“I know it,” Jericho said, still studying the map. “We’ll wait for Havilland then I’ll tell you what I know.”

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“You called in Havi?” Lovato asked. “We could use him, I just thought... well, I didn’t think you were convinced... when I talked to you on the phone.”

Jericho smiled. “I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t convinced.”

“True,” Lovato relaxed. “Havilland’s the best marksman I know. We could use him on the door, just in case.”

“I agree,” Jericho said absently. “I want Havilland to set up here.”

Havilland stepped into the room dressed in black. Black jeans, black long sleeved t-shirt, black boots. “Just in time, I see.”

Jericho slid a quick glance to his deputy then returned his attention to the map. “I want you here.” He repeated. “The front door is here,” he pointed to the cabin. “There’s a logging road back here. You can’t see it on this map, the trees are obscuring it but it’s there. A little rough, more in the vehicle he’s driving but passable.”

“Right,” Havilland concentrated on the area for several seconds before it hit him. He knew that cabin. “There’s also a small cave over here. If they make it out of the house, they could head through here...” he pointed to another area obscured with trees. “The cave is about here.” He pointed to a spot just before the trees connected with a steep slope.

“Right,” Jericho nodded. “I forgot about that. Haven’t been out there since I was a boy. To be honest, I wondered if they’d boarded it up. But I don’t think he’ll know about that. He’s from up north. If he knows the locals, sure but there’s no indication he has any contacts down here.”

“We could call in Forest just in case,” Havilland said referring to the Forest Service Rep that worked the area. “It’s nearly time for him to check on, anyway.”

“Call him,” Jericho decided. They’d be better off including the fed, especially if anything went wrong out there.

“I got it,” Lovato told them as he pulled out his phone and made the call. Moments later he returned to the group. “He’ll meet us at the mouth of the canyon in twenty minutes.”

“Okay,” Jericho leaned against the large table. “This is how we’re going to handle this.” He proceeded to lay out the plan, pointing out positions and giving assignments. Once he was done, he studied each of his deputies, one after the other. “Any questions?”

“I don’t have a question, just a concern,” Paige told him. “If Deklan is determined to protect his mother, I’m not sure we’ll be able to get him away from the cabin without her. I know it would be ideal to get him out and away but unless forcefully removed, I’m not sure he’ll cooperate.”

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“I agree,” Lovato said immediately. “Abbi said he stood up to his dad, refused to let him hurt Talia and his father broke his nose for the effort. He’s getting old enough he wants to help, not run. If you encounter the kid, I’d say just snatch him up and carrying him to safety. Don’t waste time trying to negotiate with him.”

“That’s fine,” Jericho said after considering for several seconds. “As long as you don’t jeopardize your own safety to do it. Flint could use his son as bait to get a clear shot. From what we’ve learned, it’s not out of the realm so watch your back and consider all the hazards before you do anything. Let’s head to the canyon and hook up with Forest. We need to read him into the plan.”

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Paige slowly made her way into the cover of trees. Her heart was beating fast as she settled into place. She clicked on her mic and whispered into the radio. “I’m in position. I have a clear view of the back door. There are two windows, both unopened and appear to be secure. No sign of movement inside or outside.”

Havilland came over the air next. “Car 21, in position.”

“Car 23, same traffic,” Lovato relayed.

Paige knew Havilland was stationed at the front of the cabin with a sniper rifle aimed at the front door. She had the back on the east, Lovato was in back on the west. The Sheriff was stationed up front with a bullhorn and would be shouting out orders for the occupants to exit with their hands in the air. They were just waiting for Forest to signal he was in place further away, hidden among the trees, blocking the entrance to the old mining cave.

“FS one,” Forest’s voice came over the radio. “I’m in place and good to go.”

“Copy,” Jericho acknowledged. “I want to get a good look, see if there’s any movement inside before I start giving the commands. Just hold tight and wait for my signal.”

The back door slid open and a small boy carefully made his way down the stairs. Flint Keslan stood in the doorway, watching... judging was more like it if you asked Paige. She pressed her mic, carefully, and whispered into the mouthpiece. “Deklan just exited the back door. Target is standing just inside the open doorway, watching the boys every move. I can’t see his hands, they’re blocked by the screen door. Standby and I’ll advise.” Paige held her breath and waited. She could hear Jericho cursing in her head and smiled for an instant before pushing the humor away as she focused on the child. Deklan continued across the large expanse of the backyard area, headed straight for the trees.

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“Be advised, I’ve relocated to the east of my original location,” Lovato’s voice came over the radio. “I’m making my way to what looks like a washing area. There’s a water faucet surrounded by a round section that’s been filled with gravel. The boy may be headed to get water or wash up. I’ll intercept once I know he’s in the clear.”

The group waited silently for word the kid was secure. Several agonizing seconds ticked by, then several more. Finally, Lovato’s voice broke through the silence. “Child secure but I need to get him out of here.”

“I can cover the back,” Paige offered. “I have a clear visual of the entire back section of the cabin.”

“Lovato,” Jericho’s voice boomed over the radio. “Get the kid to the car, Margie’s waiting. I’m not going to issue commands until you’re back in position.”

“Copy,” Lovato said as he held the child close to his chest. The kid was not cooperating and he was going to be a handful for Margie. “Kid,” Lovato hissed through his teeth. “I told you to calm down. If you fight me, this is going to take longer. The longer it takes, the longer it will take us to get your mother free.”

“He’s going to hurt her,” Deklan said through his silent tears. “You have to save her. He’s going to kill her.”

“I told you,” Lovato said as he reached the car. “I need you to stay in the car with this nice lady. I’m going back to get your mom. Margie will explain everything. I need you to climb into the car, kid. Trust me, we’re here to help you.” He set the kid on the ground but kept a firm grip on the kid’s hand as he opened the door. Margie was already in the backseat and gave Deklan a welcoming smile.

“Climb on in here,” she said softly. “Let us help you. Go on now,” she said to Lovato. “You get back out there and save this boys mom. A young boy needs his mother. You go save her for him, okay?”

“Suspect has closed the back door and is no longer visible from my position,” Paige advised.

Lovato closed the back door the instant the kid climbed inside. Hopefully, Margie could handle the little tyke until this was over. He made his way cautiously back to his original location and notified his boss he was ready to proceed.

Jericho raised the bullhorn to his mouth, took a deep breath and began negotiations. “Flint Keslan, this is the Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office. The cabin is surrounded. I need you to come out immediately. Exit through the front door, hands in the air and don’t make any sudden movements. We need to talk to you about a situation.”

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“Suspect is in the living room,” Havilland called out. “It looks like he has the mother tied to a chair and he is becoming violent. I don’t have a clear shot at this time.”

“Flint Keslan,” Jericho’s voice echoed ominously throughout the entire area. “I know you have Tiana in there with you. We have the boy and are prepared to do what’s necessary to ensure the woman is safe. Step away from Tiana Keslan immediately or I cannot ensure your safety.”

Flint stopped, glanced around and focused on the window. He could shut the curtains but that wouldn’t stop a bullet. He was surrounded, how had they found him? “What did you do?” he demanded of his wife. “What did you do?” he screamed in frustration.

“Nothing,” she sobbed. “Nothing. Please Flint, just let me go. Let me walk out the front door. I’ll see if it’s a trap. I’ll test it for you.”

“Shut up!” he yelled and backhanded her across the face.

“Suspect is still in the living room,” Havilland advised. “I’m going to try to move, see if I can get a clear shot. He just struck the woman in the face with his hand.”

“Hold positions,” Jericho demanded. “Flint Keslan, there’s nowhere for you to go. If you strike your wife one more time, I can’t ensure your safety. I need you to move away from the chair. Do it now.” He shifted the bullhorn so he could speak into his microphone. “Paige, make the call.”

Paige dialed the cellphone number she’d retrieved from the court records and hoped it was still functioning. She let out a relieved breath when she heard ringing inside the house.

“Flint,” Jericho called when he too heard the phone ringing. “We need to talk to you. Step away from Tiana and answer the phone. I need you to answer the phone.”

Flint pulled out his knife and bent over his wife. “You answer it,” he said as he cut the rope binding one of her hands to the chair. “Be careful, be very careful what you say, Tiana.”

“Hello?” Tiana choked out.

“Tiana?” Paige asked.

“Yes,” she said meekly, not sure what she was supposed to say or do.

“Tell them I rented this place and they’re trespassing. Tell them to get off my land. Tell them!”

“Flint says you are trespassing and he wants you to leave,” Tiana choked out.

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“That’s not going to happen,” Paige assured her. “We are here to save you. Don’t worry about Deklan, he’s safe. We intercepted him on his way to the water.”

“Okay,” Tiana said.

“What did they say? What?” Flint demanded.

“She said they have Deklan,” Tiana told him.

“Tell Flint I need to talk to him,” Paige suggested. If she could get him on the phone, maybe she could keep him occupied enough he wouldn’t injure Tiana again. “Tell him I ordered you to hand him the phone.”

“She said I have to give you the phone,” Tiana said to Flint. “What do I do?”

“Give me that,” he snatched the phone out of her hand. “I want my kid back in this house, now. You have one minute... that’s sixty seconds starting now, to get me my son.”

“I’m sorry but we can’t do that,” Paige told him, shifting to get a better look at the back of the house. “We aren’t allowed to send a child into danger and I think we can all agree this situation is dangerous. We just need to talk to you, that’s all. All you have to do is step out onto the front porch and this can be over. I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding. My boss, he just needs to talk to you... that’s all. Just talk. Can you step onto the front porch and talk to Sheriff Walters?”

“Don’t use that tone with me,” Flint yelled into the phone. “I’m not an idiot. The instant I step onto the porch you’re going to shoot me in the head. I know how you work, shoot me in the head then plant a gun and say it was my fault. Why don’t you come in here and talk? I’ll be sure to give you a big welcome. Just you, I don’t want your boss in here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Flint,” Paige said flatly. “I’m wondering if you can tell me if Tiana is injured.”

“Not as bad as she’s going to be if you don’t get my son,” Flint warned.

“The suspect is armed,” Margie said through the radio. “Loaded handgun, no further.” Margie looked at Deklan. The boy was trying to be brave, but he was obviously upset and worried about his mother. “Thank you for telling me that. It’s going to help us get your mom back, okay?”

“Okay,” Deklan swallowed and stared out the window.

Tiana shifted her body to block Flint’s view and slowly began to work at the rope securing her right hand. He’d cut her left hand free so she could talk on the phone. If the cops kept him busy, maybe she could get her other hand free and have a fighting chance when he came at her

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again. She was going to get away from him for good. For Deklan, she would survive this somehow, she had to. She'd testify against him, tell the world how he'd snuck into the house and kidnapped her. How he'd beat her, tied her to the chair and threatened her. She'd do whatever she had to do to make sure he spent the rest of his worthless life in prison. If she couldn't do that, she'd find a way to hide. She'd go somewhere he'd never find her or Deklan and she'd hide.

Flint dropped the phone back into his wife's lap. "I'm done talking to the women. Tell her I'm done."

Tiana picked up the phone and placed it to her ear. "He said he's not going to talk to you anymore."

"That's not what I said," he kicked the chair with so much force it nearly toppled over.

"Paige," Haviland said softly. "He's moved the chair slightly which brought the victim nearly into range. See if you can get her to slide the chair another two, maybe three feet in the same direction. If you do, the next time he approaches her, I'll have a clear view of the target."

"Tiana," Paige said wondering how she was supposed to do that. No matter what she said, the woman would know they were arranging a shot if Flint ended up getting dead. "We can't see you very well. My guys up front, they want to know you're okay. If you get a chance, can you move the chair just a little in the same direction it went when Flint just kicked it?"

"What?" Tiana asked. She was supposed to move the stupid chair? How?

"If you get a chance, just move the chair a couple inches," Paige repeated hoping with every fiber of her being they didn't shoot the idiot the instant she did what Paige asked.

"What is she saying?" Flint demanded.

"She wanted to know if I'm okay," Tiana lied. "She said they saw you kick the chair and they wanted to know if I'm injured."

Flint glared at his wife for several seconds before he grabbed the chair she was sitting in and moved it several feet away. She was now sitting directly in front of the window. "They want to see what's going on in here, let them look."

"Havi," Paige said softly. "How's the view now?"

"Five by five," he said with humor in his voice. "He just repositioned her directly in front of the large window. Whatever you said pissed him off. His tantrum is our advantage."

Paige relaxed. If he moved the chair that far, Tiana couldn't blame her... or herself if Havi ended up taking a shot.

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“Flint Kesten,” Jericho called through the bullhorn. “There’s no way out of this. Put down your weapon, exit the front door hands in the air, and surrender. We don’t want anyone to get hurt. Come out with your hands up and we can talk.”

“Get up,” Flint told Tiana.

“What about,” she held up the phone.

“Forget that,” he demanded as he grabbed the phone and threw it to the ground. “Stand up.”

“You have to untie me,” Tiana said hesitantly. “I can’t stand up with my legs tied to a chair.”

Flint moved forward and crouched on the floor, cutting the rope that tied her legs to the sturdy chair. He grabbed her free hand and yanked her toward the door. The chair tumbled to the side nearly pulling them both over with it. Flint slapped her across the face. “You idiot,” he grumbled as he reached over and cut the rope. The chair fell to the floor with a clatter. He shoved her toward the door. “If this is a trap, I want you in front of me. If they shoot, they’ll shoot you.” He laughed, a high-pitched, sadistic laugh.

Tiana swallowed hard, moved to the door and gently began to open it.

“Wait,” Flint ordered, raising his hand to stop the door. “We wait and see what happens for a minute.”

“I think they are coming out the front,” Paige said into the radio. “The voices sound weak but I think he’s making her exit first, to see what we do.”

“Subject is at the door,” Havilland relayed. “I’ve got eyes on.”

“Okay,” Flint gave Tiana a shove. “Open it all the way then step onto the porch.”

Tiana pulled open the door then immediately raised her hands into the air. She took a small, tentative step forward and stopped. She could feel Flint’s warm body pressed against her back.

“Move it,” he said softly. “Not too fast.” He was positioned behind his wife, his hand hidden behind her back, resting on the butt of the gun he had tucked underneath his waistband in the front of his jeans. If they thought they could ambush him, they were in for a surprise.

Tiana took another tentative step forward then stopped abruptly when Flint wrapped his hand around her hair and yanked.

“That’s far enough,” he kept his left hand wrapped around her hair as he ran his right palm over the gun in anticipation.

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“Hands where we can see them,” Jericho called out. “Now! Flint, get your hands in the air.”

Havilland focused on the subject and waited. This could go about a million different ways and he needed to be prepared. He studied the man’s eyes and knew the instant he made his decision. Everything happened in the blink of an eye. Flint spun his wife around to face him and pulled a pistol from underneath his shirt. Havilland could hear yelling, could see the fear on the woman’s face, the determination and anger on the man’s. Flint started to raise the weapon, to aim it at his wife, and Havilland fired. The loud boom of the rifle echoed through the still mountain air. The bullet cut through the air and found its mark. Flint went down and dropped his own weapon as he hit the old, stained, wooden porch.

Tiana screamed, realized she was free and ran.

“Hold your positions,” Jericho ordered before he reached out and wrapped his big arm around the terrified, fleeing woman. She gasped, then fell to the ground in a heap and began to shake. He needed help and he needed it now.

“Paige, Lovato I need you up front. Make your way around the house and secure the prisoner. He’s down but his condition is unknown. Proceed with caution.” He shifted forward to shield Tiana from the scene still playing out on the front porch of the cabin. He watched as his two deputies approached the front of the building from the right and cautiously moved forward. Once they reached the body, it was obvious the man was dead.

“You got this?” Paige asked, looking down at the lifeless body of Flint Kesten.

“I got it,” Lovato assured her. “Go help the boss. Looks like he could use a little assistance.”

Paige approached Walters and saw Havilland moving toward them from the rear. “I got this,” she pointed to Tiana. “I’ll take her to the car.”

“Good idea,” Havi said when he reached the group. He held out his rifle to Jericho. “I assume you need this.”

Jericho ran a hand through his hair and sighed before accepting the weapon his deputy offered. “I guess I do. Let me secure it in the car. I’ll call Tolman so we can get this over with. We’ll need the ME out here as well.” He watched as Paige guided the frightened, but lucky, woman out of the immediate area and knew between his deputy and his admin, she couldn’t be in better hands. “Good job, kid.” He said turning back to Havilland. “I had hoped we could avoid that, but good job. You saved that woman’s life. Remember that... you were forced to take a life to save a life.” He walked away, prepared to get down to business and process the scene. It was definitely going to be a very long night.

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Paige stepped into the office and spotted Gage. "I thought you were out of town."

"I was," Gage stood. "Heard you had a little excitement while I was away."

"A bit," Paige dropped into her chair, exhausted. "And I guess I'm glad you weren't there. I mean, the last thing we needed was one of your signature tackles. He had a gun, Gage. If you had gone in, the way you do, he might have turned it on you. I thought of that when it was all over. I thought how much I missed you and I thought... well, at least he wasn't here to get dead. That's something."

"I missed you, too," Gage said as he dropped into her visitor's chair. "It's been awhile since we worked together. And, I guess I'll forgive you... this time. But only because you look like the rug that granny beat with a rolling pin."

"I don't even know what that means," Paige sighed. "Why are you here? In the office I mean. You should be home sleeping off a good party buzz."

"I needed to see you," Gage told her. "You and Jericho."

"Aren't you on in the morning?"

"I am," Gage agreed. "But you never know what kind of calls we're going to get and when we'll both have a break long enough to stop by the office. Anyway, I've been listening to the call and knew you and the sheriff were on the way in."

"Havi had to shoot him," Paige warned him. "Jer might be busy with the DA for a while."

Gage shrugged and stood when Jericho stepped through the door.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. Paige smiled.

"I know you're busy but I could use a few minutes of your time," Gage said quickly.

"In my office," Jericho motioned for Gage to join him.

"You too," Gage insisted turning to Paige.

Once they were settled, Gage placed a disk on Jericho's desk.

"What's that?" Walter's asked.

"You know I went to the annual Knights Templar extravaganza," Gage began.

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“I do,” Jericho nodded. “Which is why I was surprised when I walked through the door and spotted you at the office.”

“I left early,” Gage told them. “Not really my thing. Anyway, once I got there, I realized it was the perfect opportunity to gather intel... on your project.”

“On the investigation into Chaya’s murder?” Jericho frowned.

“Yes,” Gage nodded. “It hit me almost immediately. I’d barely stepped through the door when Millie Keeton cornered me and demanded to know why I wasn’t wearing my ring.”

“Oh,” Paige said in understanding.

“Yeah,” Gage smiled at her. “I haven’t attended many of the events because well, I was busy. And, to be honest it’s just not my thing.”

“You said that already,” Jericho pressed. “Did you find something?”

“I took pictures,” Gage told him. “They aren’t great, I was using my cell phone but I think they are good enough.”

“I don’t understand,” Jericho pressed.

“Everyone was taking pictures,” Gage told them. “All night long, I don’t think I’ve had my picture taken that many times in my life... not even as a pro. Anyway, it gave me an idea. I was thinking about the ring and the list I compiled and decided I’d start taking pictures, subtly. I got snapshots of everyone that was wearing their ring. Most did. There were a few like me that didn’t bother, but it was a big deal... apparently.”

“We have names we can check off that list you narrowed down for us... before,” Paige realized. “How many?”

“A lot,” Gage motioned to the disk. “I took a shot of each member, then a close-up of the ring. They didn’t know. I just played like I wanted the two just in case one didn’t turn out. I also learned something I didn’t know. It’s going to help if the person who lost theirs had it replaced.”

“What?” Paige asked, excited now. “What did you learn?”

Stan Donaldson stepped into Jericho’s doorway and rapped on the wood molding. “James said you needed me here.” He glanced at Paige, then instantly looked away. It always made him so uncomfortable being around her.

“Right,” Jericho stood. “Let me get you started. I’ll join you in a few minutes, this shouldn’t take long.” He escorted the prosecutor back into the office area and into the conference room. Havilland was already waiting in one of the chairs. The union attorney, Eric Graham, sat next to him taking notes. “Stan needs some basic information from you while I

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finish something up. Don't get into the details until I return." He returned to his office and leaned against his desk. "Gage, continue and try to hurry. I'm sure Graham is doing his best to limit Havilland's responses but I don't want to leave them alone with Stan for too long."

"I found out the rings are numbered," Gage informed them. "I didn't even know that myself. Each ring has a number etched into the design. If you enhance those pictures, you should be able to identify the number on each one."

"How does that help us?" Paige asked. "Does the school have a record of who received what?"

"No," Gage shook his head. "It's up to the coach. I learned of the numbers the day I left for Moab. Otherwise, I would have passed the information on sooner. Mark and I had just finished up with practice when Principal Swanson stopped us on our way out... he was mainly looking for Mark. Swanson was frantic to get the final numbers - the final count on rings for this school year so he could place an order before the deadline. When he left, Mark casually asked me to pencil him in. Said we needed to get together soon and decide who gets what number. That was the first I'd heard of it. I honestly didn't even notice the rings had numbers. I don't even know what number I got. Anyway, I decided to test it out at the event over the past couple days. Sure enough, they all have a number on them. I called the manufacturer yesterday and asked about a replacement, you know played like I lost mine and I wanted to order a new one. I can order a ring, but not an exact replica. I spoke to the manager. She explained the policy and the reason for it. I have to say it actually makes sense. They can reproduce the ring but not the number. If I order a new ring, I have to get at the back of the line you could say."

"Meaning?" Jericho asked impatiently, he needed to get back in and deal with Havilland and the prosecutor.

"Meaning if thirty rings were issued the year I received mine and I lost my ring," Gage explained. "I could order a new ring, one that had the same design as the year I got it, but the number on the ring would have to be thirty-one or higher. They can't reproduce a number... ever. She used me as an example. If I lost my ring, because I went pro, it would be worth more than say... your friend Ken Glenshaw who didn't play after high school. If they reproduced it, the ring would lose some of the value. To avoid any issues, they have a strict policy not to reproduce any numbers. That way, the original stays original... it remains one of a kind."

"Makes sense," Jericho decided. "So, we just need to get the ring out and see what number is on it. Then we figure out how many rings were issued that year and go through your photos to see if anyone ordered a replacement."

"That's what I was thinking," Gage told them. "We won't catch everyone on the list. Some didn't attend and others, like me, didn't wear a ring. But... it's a new lead and I wanted to let you know right away. I realize we aren't going to work on this tonight but it's a new lead."

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“It’s a good one,” Paige grinned. “I can start working on it in the morning. Jericho is going to be busy saving Havi from fire, brimstone, and bankruptcy but I’ll get started right away. Even if we don’t find our man, we should be able to eliminate a few more on the list.”

“I’ll be sure to let Havilland know how sorry you are that he’s in this mess,” Jericho stood and moved to the door. “Go home. Get some sleep. You look like the walking dead.”

Paige stood, turned, then whipped back around and pulled Gage into a huge hug. “Thank you!”

“I know the two of you wanted to work on this... well, together, I guess. But I was there and the idea came to me, so I just ran with it,” Gage said. “It was easy enough and if it helps, I’m glad I played a part.”

“You have,” she smiled at him. “You heading out?”

“Yeah,” Gage motioned for her to lead the way. “I’ll walk you to your car, make sure you don’t fall flat on your face before you climb behind the wheel. You sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I’m fine,” Paige assured him. “It’s just been a long day and I didn’t sleep much last night. Tonight is going to be better, I’m sure of it.”

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Paige climbed from her vehicle and spotted Dax heading her way. He must have been waiting for her. “Hey,” she called as he approached.

“Hey, yourself,” he stopped, brushed back a strand of hair and frowned. “Long day?”

“Long and stressful, but ultimately the good guys won,” she told him as she unlocked her front door. “Is something up?”

“Carmen’s at my place,” he pushed open her door and followed her inside. “Said something spooked her and she needed company.”

“What spooked her?” Paige asked, worried.

“Not really sure but I’m working on it,” he assured her. He watched as she slipped out of her boots and dropped her gun belt onto the sofa. “Probably nothing but I thought maybe you and I could have a sleepover. I could bunk here with you...” he said as he backed her against the wall and leaned in for a kiss. “Zee and Carmen can have my place,” he gave her a cocky, wicked grin as he leaned in for a second, deeper kiss.

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“I might be able to manage that,” she agreed. “Do I need to go over, say hi and all that...or can it wait until morning? I’m so beat, I’m not sure I can make it up the stairs and into bed as it is.”

“I can help with that,” Dax told her as he scooped her into his arms and carried her up the stairs.

“My hero,” she whispered as she rested her head against his shoulder. She was already half asleep when Dax stepped into her room. She settled onto the edge of the bed and realized with everything that happened, she didn’t have a chance to call Nathan. Now, it was too late. Just another thing that would have to wait until morning. She dropped onto the pillow and was out cold in seconds.