

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Kindred Discord *Season 2, Episode 7*

by:

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Retired General Nathan Porter stood silently at the front of the room. The weather was shifting, literally and figuratively. Fall was in the air and... A fall was imminent. He briefly wondered if it would be his... an epic fall from grace at the end of a distinguished career. His gaze briefly stopped on each and every man and woman in the room. Colleagues he had handpicked for this job. Soldiers, strategists and politicians he had once considered friends. Every member of the committee was someone Nathan had once believed honorable. And still, one of them was a traitor. A danger to their country. A callous fanatic willing to terminate anyone who got in their way. For money? Prestige? A religious ideology that had been twisted and perverted into something evil and sadistic? He didn't know.

The stakes were high, which was the reason he'd gathered this group in the first place. Knowing a member of his elite team had been compromised, made him sick deep inside. So ill, he hadn't slept in days. He rarely ate. And, his calls to Paige had reached such a point of casual nonchalance he might as well skip them altogether. About the only man he knew he could trust at the moment was Dax Hamilton. The former Army Ranger was as loyal, honorable and patriotic as they come. And, he was a couple thousand miles away. Nathan didn't even trust his electronic devices these days. He wished he could talk to the military vet, but it was too dangerous. He was on his own until he flushed out the mole. He just hoped he could find the defector before anyone else died.

Tyler Lloyd was a good man. A patriot. A selfless, retired marine and an even better CIA strategist. And, that dedication to truth and his country had gotten him killed. Nathan wondered if Tyler had sacrificed himself on purpose or if his enemy had just outwitted him. That was something he would never know, but as far as he was concerned Tyler was a national hero who had given his life in the line of duty.

Lloyd had called him yesterday and insisted they needed to meet before their morning committee meeting to discuss something important. Something that would impact the group and had to be handled right away. Nathan had scheduled the appointment for zero-seven hundred hours, believing that would give them plenty of time before the nine o'clock meeting to discuss the new development. Then, he'd headed out to address the Senate Arms Committee.

Tyler had been waiting down the hallway when Nathan exited the room. He pulled him into a secluded office and provided a flash drive with all the information he had gathered. Information that proved one of Nathan's team members was working for the enemy. Unfortunately, Tyler hadn't discovered the identity of the conspirator. The most damning clue was the last piece of evidence, something Tyler had discovered just that morning. Highly sensitive Intel had been compromised. Details of a covert mission that was unknown to anyone outside of this committee were now in the hands of the enemy... specifics that could only be shared by a member of this team. The evidence was indisputable. Nathan was currently in the presence of a traitor. A traitor that had murdered Tyler Lloyd, believing the man's death would keep their secret hidden. Nathan was grateful Tyler had passed along the data, but he also

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realized the implications. Either his phone was bugged, Tyler was being monitored... or both. Which meant all electronic devices were suspect and currently off the table.

He needed Carman, but could she be trusted? It was her boyfriend that had been murdered. Someone she loved and cared about that had started this whole ball rolling. There was a slim chance she was involved, but Nathan didn't think so. If he could just get a message to her, she'd be able to start running the names and backgrounds of every person on the team. But, how to get a message to Manti, Utah without using a phone, email or any other digital device? Technology was great... until it wasn't. He had to find a way to contact Carman and Hamilton... Posthaste. Nathan forced his expression to remain neutral as he somberly addressed his committee.

Ahmed Al-Hashim lowered the binoculars and considered. He'd been in the area for two days now and was no closer to accomplishing his mission. Hamilton never seemed to be alone. He started the engine on the compact rental and pulled away. The street was always littered with pedestrians. If he remained in the area too long, he would appear suspicious and someone would undoubtedly contact the authorities. That was one thing he could not risk. He'd return to the small rental and wait. An opportunity would present itself... eventually.

He pulled down the long drive that led to the unpretentious shelter he had stumbled onto his first day in town. His thoughts shifted and returned to his homeland. America was so different from the world he grew up in - the land he had shared with his wife and precious son. The place where his entire world had been shattered. Where his family had been stolen away too soon. There was nothing left for him there. Nothing to live for. Nothing but this mission. He climbed from the vehicle and inhaled slowly. The air was so clean here and the mountains... Ahmed loved the mountains and the beautiful green trees. Most of all... he reveled in the fact there was no sand. No, he would never return to Iraq. Regardless of what happened here, he could never go back to the land of his people. He made his way to his temporary home and wondered what the future would bring for him, for Hamilton, for the others. Only time would tell.

Paige dropped the file she'd been studying onto the small table and sighed in frustration. She settled back, leaning into the chair and ran a hand through her hair. They were getting nowhere with this.

“Problem?” Jericho asked.

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“No,” Paige turned to face her boss. They had been working outside, on her back porch, all morning and she needed a break. “It just feels like... well, like we’re making progress but getting nowhere.” She reached out, grabbed her soda, and gulped.

Jericho set the document he’d been reading aside and studied Paige. He still struggled to know what to call her... friend? Colleague? She was so much more than that. She was the daughter of the woman he had loved and if things had been different, she’d be his daughter. But, she wasn’t and that was another topic that was getting him nowhere. “I think we’re making progress. I crossed the last of the old suspects off the list. I know, once we discovered the ring they were pretty much eliminated anyway. But, now it’s official.”

“And yet...”

“Okay,” Jericho conceded. “And yet, the killer is still out there and we haven’t identified him. I get it. But we are making progress. Gage narrowed the list substantially. He discovered the numbers and he’s the one that realized each ring had a tiny ball on the left side that coincided with the sport they played. We thought that was just a decorative circle. Now, we don’t have to look into swimmers, baseball guys or basketball stars. The search is limited to the football players. Thanks to Gage, the list has been narrowed substantially.”

“I know I’m being impatient,” Paige pushed forward. “But I’ve been here almost two years now. I just thought...”

“You thought you’d come home and show up all of us inept locals in a matter of weeks,” Jericho provided.

“No,” Paige disagreed. “Well, maybe... sort of. But I didn’t know you back then.”

“I get it,” Jericho shrugged. “But, now you know I never stopped working this case. It’s not a simple homicide. I’m convinced Chaya was murdered because of a cold case. A previous murder that occurred decades earlier. It complicates things.”

“And that case was never really investigated because they ruled Tracy’s death a suicide,” Paige grumbled. “I understand the situation, I just hate it.” She was interrupted from expanding on that thought by the buzzing of her front doorbell.

“You expecting company?” Jericho asked.

“No,” Paige stood. “Give me a minute.” She made her way back into her house and paused to check out the window before sliding the door open. Paige studied the man that looked a few years older than herself. A man that seemed vaguely familiar, but not enough that she thought she knew him.

“Paige Carter,” the man said with a huge smile.

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“Can I help you?” she asked.

“You don’t remember me,” he realized. “I should have expected that.”

Paige waited. She knew if she left enough silence, the man would explain himself. It only took a few seconds.

“I have to admit, I’m a little hurt,” the man began. “But, I guess I should have expected it. I mean, you were just a kid the last time I saw you. Well, technically... so was I.”

Paige continued to wait.

“I’m your cousin, Paige. Wyatt,” he took a step forward. “Wyatt Darrow.”

Paige frowned as she studied the stranger more closely. There was a family resemblance. She jumped a little when Jericho placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Everything okay here?” Jericho asked as he sized up the man standing on the front porch. There was something about the guy Jericho didn’t trust. He was acting casual... a little too casual.

“Um,” Paige swallowed. Was this really Aunt Sadie’s son? “Yeah,” she decided. It was Wyatt. The last time she’d seen him, she was only nine and he was thirteen but she was good with faces and the man standing before her, was her only cousin. Her only family. “Jericho, this is my cousin, Wyatt Darrow. Wyatt, this is Sheriff Walters.”

Wyatt took a step back in surprise. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you had company. I can come back... when you’re not busy.”

Jericho frowned. He was saying all the right things, but this guy was acting suspicious. He didn’t trust him, didn’t like him, but he should give Paige her privacy. She was smart, if the guy was a con or a crook... his deputy would figure it out. In the meantime, he’d give her the space she needed to catch up with this... distant relative. “I think we’re done for the day.”

“Right,” Paige shifted to look at her boss. “I should...”

Jericho nodded. “Take your time, catch up with your cousin. I’ll clean up out back and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Paige wasn’t sure she was grateful for the sheriff’s retreat but she knew it was necessary. She’d accept it and see what Wyatt wanted. There had to be a reason he was here.

“So,” Wyatt relaxed as the lawman turned and disappeared from view. “How’s Chaya? I haven’t heard from that aunt of mine in years. I was hoping I could catch up with her while I was here in town.”

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Jericho stopped and waited. Something was definitely off. Surely any relative would know of Chaya's death. Was this a clever conman that just looked like Paige's cousin? What was he after? Even if he was legit, clearly they weren't close. He needed more information and he knew just where to get it.

"I guess you didn't hear," Paige answered. "Mom passed away years ago. I'm afraid you won't be able to catch up with her again... ever."

"Oh, man," Wyatt brushed his hand over his face. "Dad never said anything. Do you think he knew? Of course he knew. I'm so sorry, Paige. I'm sorry for the loss and I'm sorry I brought it up. Dad and I... well, we're not exactly seeing eye-to-eye these days. He's the reason we didn't keep in touch. Man, just...wow. I am so sorry."

"It's okay," Paige stepped on the front porch and made sure the front door latched behind her. This might be her cousin, but she didn't trust him. Not yet. There was a reason Wyatt Darrow was in town, a reason he'd looked her up... and she was determined to figure out why. She settled into a chair and watched as Wyatt lowered himself into a second chair across from her.

"When mom died," Wyatt began. "Well, dad was lost for a long time. We moved... constantly. He'd get a job, then things would get tight and we'd pack up and move again. That was basically my life until I graduated from high school and refused to go with him. I settled in Nashville for a while... chased my dream until I realized I was never going to hit the big time and landed a job at the Smoky Mountain Speedway. A couple years ago, I landed a job with Reyo Transports. I'm a professional driver... pilot car, and I love it." He launched into a story about his most recent escapade as a driver.

Dax swung open the back door, expecting to see Paige. Instead, he was greeted by the stony face of the local sheriff. "Jericho."

"Have a minute?" Jericho asked immediately.

"Sure," Dax took a step back and waited as Jericho entered the room.

"I was working next door with Paige, on Chaya's case," Jericho said as he settled into a kitchen chair. "We were interrupted by a stranger. Well, I've never met him. Said he's Paige's cousin, Wyatt Darrow."

Dax frowned. "Paige never mentioned a cousin to me."

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“And Chaya never mentioned one to me either,” Jericho provided. “Since I know Chaya was an only child, he has to be related through her father. Dylan died when Paige was just a kid. Chaya moved around a bit then settled here. I’d know if a relative from Carter’s family had stayed in touch. They didn’t.”

“Do you think it’s a con?” Dax asked.

“I don’t think so,” Jer decided. “It looked like Paige recognized him... at least she thought she did. It’s possible this guy isn’t related and he’s working some kind of con. But, if he knows where she lives, he has to know she’s a cop. That would be bold... not out of the question, but unlikely I think.”

“But you still don’t trust him?” Dax decided.

“I don’t,” Jericho admitted. “There’s just something about him. He didn’t even know Chaya was gone. Asked if she was still here in town so they could get together.”

“That’s a bit odd,” Dax agreed. “But if he’s related through her father, maybe his parents didn’t want to keep in touch after her dad died. Could explain why he didn’t know about the death.”

“Maybe,” Jericho said soberly.

“But you want me to keep an eye on him just in case?”

“I do,” Jericho agreed. “There’s just something about him. Something I don’t trust. He might be a legitimate relative but that doesn’t mean he’s an innocent one.”

“I’ll watch him,” Dax agreed.

“I was also wondering if you could have Carmen run a check,” Jericho asked. “I could have Margie do it, but I don’t want anyone else knowing of my suspicions just yet.”

“And things are still a little on edge between my favorite deputy and your favorite admin,” Dax grinned. “I understand. I’ll talk to Carmen, but I can’t guarantee Paige won’t know about it. Those two are tight.”

“I know,” Jericho stood. “I’ll get out of your hair. Let me know if you find anything I should know.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Dax followed him to the door and watched as the local top cop made his way to his vehicle. He’d run a search on Wyatt Darrow. Jericho Walter’s didn’t need to ask for that particular favor. And he was pretty sure, given their friendship, Carmen would jump at the chance to make sure her friend was safe with the new guy.

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Paige pulled into her driveway, happy to be home. She'd been bombarded with nuisance calls all day when the call came in from Tolman. That situation had catapulted her last shred of patience into oblivion. Charles Corvene, Real estate mogul and multi-billionaire, was also a part-time seasonal resident of Manti and he was furious. Local DA and close pal of the victim, James Tolman, decided his friend's dilemma was now Paige's problem. If only she'd left the office ten minutes early like she'd intended, then Dean would be the one looking for a spoiled man-child's newest toy. Sure, a Lamborghini Roadster should stick out like a neon sign... if the thief planned to drive it. Paige was sure that was not the case. Whoever took the expensive car wanted it for a reason.

Either they'd be shipping it overseas to sell on the black market or it would be stripped down for parts. She knew next to nothing about expensive cars and wasn't interested in learning. Unfortunately, Corvene was also a generous donor to the current Mayor's political campaign and she didn't have a choice. But first, she needed a hot bath, comfortable clothing and something hot and filling for dinner. Then, she'd see what she could find out about the Lamborghini market. Dean would have been so much better at this. He loved cars, raced them, ate slept and drank anything auto related. Dean was the obvious choice... or Havi. He also raced and knew the industry. Why had Tolman insisted on her? She was halfway up the stairs when an idea hit her. She'd corner Jericho in the morning and beg him to assign Havi to help.

Paige ran a quick comb through her hair before she left her bedroom, wondering what to do about dinner. She was standing at the top of the stairs when her doorbell rang. *Probably Dax*, she decided. And rushed to see if he had read her mind and stopped somewhere for takeout. She was smiling when she swung open the door and spotted two men standing on the front porch. One was Dax, and he had a large bag in his hands. The other was Wyatt. She still hadn't decided if he was innocent, or if he had an end-game she hadn't discovered yet.

"Apparently," Dax took a step forward and entered the house. "You have a cousin."

"Uh," Paige motioned for Wyatt to enter. "Yeah. Wyatt, this is my neighbor, Dax Hamilton. Dax, this is my cousin Wyatt Darrow. His mother was my father's sister."

Well, that explained the connection. "You didn't mention a relative would be visiting," Dax accused as he set the large bag on the kitchen table. "There might be enough for three."

"That's okay," Wyatt declined. "I just stopped by to see if Paige would be free tomorrow night. I was hoping we could have dinner and spend a little time together. I have to leave town for a few days and I'd love to catch up before I go."

"Will you be returning to the area or moving on after the job?" Dax asked.

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Paige narrowed her eyes and watched Dax instead of Wyatt. Clearly, he already knew about Wyatt and she was getting the distinct feeling her neighbor didn't trust her cousin. Had Jericho enlisted Dax to keep an eye on the situation? Of course, he had. She pushed back the annoyance as she waited for Wyatt's answer.

"I'd like to return," Wyatt glanced at Paige. "It's been too long and once the job is over, I should have some free time before we move on. I thought I'd come back here, maybe spend a week or so catching up. If it's okay with you, I was hoping we could reconnect. You know, keep in touch even after I have to leave."

"I'd like that," Paige decided. "But I have to ask... why now? I mean, I haven't seen you in years. We were both just kids when dad died. The last time I saw you was at Aunt Sadie's funeral and you barely said two words to me. Once you and Uncle Boyd moved... well, there hasn't been a word from either of you in years. Why now, Wyatt?"

Wyatt shrugged and glanced at Dax. He wasn't going to discuss his reason for being here with a stranger in the room. "I missed you. When we moved, dad wouldn't let me keep in touch. Then, you and Chaya moved and I had no idea how to get in touch. I heard you had moved back here to Utah and I was in the area. That's all. I just want to reconnect. Neither one of us have much family and we always got along... as kids, I mean."

"Okay," Paige decided to drop it. "To both. I'd like to have dinner and catch up and I hope you'll come back... in a couple days after the job. We can catch up and see if we have anything in common. I don't have many relatives, it would be nice to stay in touch with the ones I do have."

Dax wasn't sure that would be nice, but he kept his opinion to himself. He'd learned long ago, you got more answers by listening than talking. He was determined to get answers from Wyatt.

"So," Dax settled onto the couch. "Paige mentioned her Aunt Sadie. Did I hear that correctly? Your mom died, too?"

"She did," Wyatt sat in a lounge chair opposite the neighbor. Clearly, Paige was dating the guy so he would have to win him over if he wanted a relationship with his cousin. "It was only a couple years after Dylan died. Mom loved Paige's dad. She was younger than him and he was always the cool, protective, loving older brother. Dad hated him. I think that's why, once mom was no longer with us, he distanced himself from the entire family. I was rarely allowed to call grandma and we never visited. I heard she died a few years back as well and Chaya returned to her childhood home. That's why I mistakenly believed I could reconnect with both Aunt Chaya and Paige. By the time my aunt died, dad had completely severed all ties with mom's family."

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Dax was actively listening, cataloging the information he was getting from Wyatt. Any little bit would help Carmen determine the identity of Wyatt Darrow. She'd attempted a search earlier, but needed more information to narrow down the right Wyatt Darrow. "Where do you live now?"

"Oh," Wyatt evaded. "Here and there. My job keeps me busy and on the road most of the time."

"You have to have a residence somewhere," Dax pushed. "I mean, you have a driver's license. That requires permanent residence somewhere."

Wyatt frowned. Was he being interrogated? It sure felt like it. "Dad lives in Kentucky. I use his address for now. I'm still looking for the perfect location to settle."

"Dinner's ready," Paige interrupted. "You two come in here and eat." She'd been listening to the conversation, a little annoyed at the interrogation Dax was conducting on her cousin while at the same time grateful. She had wanted to ask the same questions, but worried he might take offense and bolt if she pushed too hard. It was interesting that Wyatt used his father's address as a home base. He'd told her yesterday, during their conversation on the porch he and his father no longer got along. So, why keep that contact? Why tie himself to a man he so clearly resented... maybe even despised?

Conversation turned casual over dinner. Wyatt agreed to stay when he realized there was plenty of food for three. The group spent the next two hours sizing each other up, wondering if the other could be trusted. Once the table was cleared and the dishes dealt with, Wyatt made his excuses and left for the night. He made his way to his vehicle, hoping he'd have Paige to himself when they met for dinner tomorrow night. He had to know if she could help him and he was sure the neighbor, and obvious boyfriend, would not understand.

Daniel stood in the shadows, watching the daughter of the woman that he had come to hate with every fiber of his being. She just might destroy him. She might accomplish in death what she'd been unable to accomplish in life. Either his world would be destroyed and he'd spend the rest of his life in jail, or he'd get away with murder. Paige Carter, the daughter of a woman he thought he had loved in high school, then had wanted to silence as an adult, might just bring him down and he had no way to stop it. He had no control over the outcome. He just wished he knew how much the girl had discovered. If Stan hadn't abandoned him, if the young prosecutor had just done what he was told, Daniel would know how to proceed. But the kid surprised him. He could admit Stan had the kind of backbone Daniel hadn't counted on... hadn't recognized until it was too late. He had made a mistake, he never should have forced a man who lived by

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the law to break the law. But, at the time, Daniel had thought Stanley Donaldson was weak. Now he knew the kid wasn't weak, and that worried him almost as much as Paige Carter.

He straightened and started to turn, ready to leave when he saw the car. The same white, nondescript rental he'd seen the previous day. Was someone else watching Manti's newest deputy? If so, why? He remained in place, silently studying the car and the man inside for several minutes before he decided to leave. He'd never seen the man before, which meant he wasn't a local or a new resident of the area. The man was a stranger, a visitor to the area and for some reason, he seemed to be in town to spy on Paige Carter. Daniel was intrigued by this new development and determined to discover the girl's secret. It might be something he could use to get out of this mess and Daniel was all about using any means necessary to save his own life and his reputation.

Ahmed Al-Hashim watched from two doors down as a man and a woman entered Hamilton's home. Dax was inside, he knew that for sure. But he was beginning to think the guy never spent two minutes alone. He might have to find another way, figure out a contingency plan if he couldn't get to Hamilton. The mission was too important and his instincts told him, he was running out of time. If he couldn't get to Hamilton, maybe he could get to his girlfriend. It had become obvious, almost immediately, that the woman living next door had an intimate relationship with the retired military man. She might be Ahmed's only option. He pondered the possibilities as he pulled from the curb and headed home.

"Busy place," Wyatt observed when Paige slid onto a chair across from her cousin.

"Local gem," she shrugged. "We all love the Farmhouse."

Wyatt frowned. He had wanted to get Paige alone and he was sure this was not the place to talk about something as sensitive as his dilemma. That discussion would have to wait. Maybe she'd agree to a walk after dinner. Things were getting more dangerous and he needed her advice on how to handle the problem... before he left town.

It was nearly two hours later when Paige and Wyatt strolled casually down the sidewalk. "You said you needed advice on something," Paige prompted. "What's going on?"

"First," Wyatt considered. "I need to know something."

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“Okay,” Paige stopped at the light to cross Main Street and enter Pioneer Park. There was a seating area where they could discuss the situation, whatever it was, in private.

“If I tell you something,” Wyatt began. “And if it’s... illegal. Do you have to arrest me? I mean, can I be an informant or something so I don’t have to go to jail?”

“Are you involved in something illegal, Wyatt?”

“Indirectly,” he admitted. “I didn’t know, not at first but... well, yeah.”

“I’m going to ask you some questions,” Paige decided. “I want you to answer the questions. Only answer the questions. Do not elaborate or volunteer anything that I don’t ask. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Wyatt frowned.

“Did you commit the crime? By that I mean, you personally. Wait. First, what are we talking about here?” Paige corrected.

“Grand Theft Auto,” Wyatt sighed. “I guess that’s what you call it. I know that’s a bit Hollywood but I’m talking about stolen cars.”

Paige studied her cousin for several seconds. “Did you steal a car?”

“No,” Wyatt said immediately.

“Were you there when a car was stolen?”

“No,” Wyatt answered.

“You said indirectly,” Paige began. “Did you sell a stolen car?”

“No,” Wyatt said, wondering how long this would take. It would be easier if he could just explain, but he understood his cousin was trying to protect him.

“Is your involvement more than knowledge of the theft?” Paige asked.

“Knowledge of the theft and involvement in the transport of goods,” Wyatt provided.

“This has to do with your job?” Paige realized.

“Yes,” Wyatt confirmed.

“So you escorted the vehicle that transported the stolen goods?”

“Yes,” Wyatt confirmed.

“And you are leaving tomorrow?” Paige asked. “You leave on your next job tomorrow?”

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“The shipment has been delayed a day. I leave the following morning,” Wyatt corrected.

“Are you transporting a Lamborghini?”

“Uh...” Wyatt hesitated. “Should I answer that?”

“No,” Paige shook her head. “You just told me everything I need to know. Well, actually... one more thing, what is the destination? You said you leave the day after tomorrow. Where are you going?”

“California,” Wyatt studied Paige and wondered if he was doing the right thing. He wanted out, had wanted out the instant he learned the company he worked for was dirty. But, his dad threatened him and he caved to the pressure, just like he always did when Boyd Darrow got involved.

“Give me a day to work this out. I’m going to list you as a confidential informant. I’ll need to notify the FBI but I have a friend I trust,” Paige decided. She’d call Sean and see if he could take the case. “I don’t want to know anything else. Just give me a day. I’ll do my best to protect your name. We also need to figure out a way to keep you out of the run this time. If the feds intercept the truck on the way to California, we can’t have you there to get arrested. Can you call in sick?”

“I’d rather not,” Wyatt admitted. “If I do, they’ll know it was me. We need to find another way out.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. “Can you crash the car? I can respond and hold you up until they’re tired of waiting and decide to continue without you.”

“Again,” Wyatt objected. “I’d rather not. I’m good... At driving I mean. If I crash and then the rest of them get arrested, they’ll be suspicious.”

“Let me think about this, maybe I can come up with something,” Paige decided. “I’ll keep you out of the loop. That way, you don’t have to act surprised, you will be surprised. If you don’t know what the problem is, you won’t know how to fix it.”

“I guess that will work,” Wyatt agreed.

“Can you do this, Wyatt?” Paige asked. “Can you go with my plan, abandon the transport and let the feds step in and arrest your crew? Once I get the ball rolling, you can’t change your mind. You can’t tell them they’re burned. Can you keep quiet and let us arrest the men you work with?”

“I think so,” Wyatt said cryptically.

“What does that mean?”

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“I’m going to tell you straight up,” Wyatt decided. “My dad’s sort of involved. Not in the theft or the transport, but he knows what’s going on. He’s the one that hooked me up with these guys. They’re friends of his and he knows exactly what that company is doing. He’s not going to be happy if he finds out I’m the one that ratted them out. To be honest, an already bad situation will get worse if he learns I came to you and spilled the company secrets.”

“Is he benefiting from the thefts?” Paige asked. She knew Boyd Darrow was a criminal. It’s the reason her uncle never got along with her dad... or her mom. It’s the reason Dylan Carter had done everything in his power to get his kid sister away from the man. It hadn’t worked, her dad died before he could convince his sister to leave and take her son with her. Then, Sadie died unexpectedly of a freak aneurysm less than two years later and Boyd had taken their son and disappeared.

“I don’t think so,” Wyatt said slowly. “If he is benefiting, it’s indirectly. Maybe through the company that purchases the merchandise. Any involvement dad has in this will be sheltered and difficult to connect.”

“I’m not going to connect him, unless I have to.”

“What does that mean?” Wyatt asked.

“It means,” Paige hesitated then sighed. “I’m not looking to throw your dad in jail. But, this is not a local matter. You guys are transporting stolen vehicles across the country. That makes it a federal issue. I don’t have a choice, I have to call in the FBI. Once we open this door, I’m not going to be able to control it.”

“I understand,” Wyatt rubbed his hands over his eyes. “I don’t want dad to suffer for this. I just want out. Initially, I had no idea what was going on. I drive the pilot car. There was no reason for me to know. I stumbled onto the operation a few months back and I wanted to leave, but dad intervened. I’m not going to go into that, but he stopped me. I know telling you about it will cause him problems and I’ve accepted that. I’m not sure I can accept responsibility if he goes to prison over it.”

“What if I promise not to mention Boyd?” Paige suggested. “I’ll contact Sean and I’ll figure out a way to get you out of the transport without anyone suspecting your involvement. Then we let the feds work the case. If they connect your dad, they connect him. But they won’t connect him through you or me. Can you live with that?”

“It won’t be easy,” Wyatt warned. “I can’t think of a way to get me out that won’t look suspicious when they get arrested for the auto theft. But, if you can swing it, I guess I can live with it. Like I said, dad is pretty insulated. He’s careful that way, which is the reason he’s never done jail time before now. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

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“I know your dad has always been involved in criminal activity,” Paige admitted. “Dad wasn’t exactly subtle about that. He and mom discussed the situation at length. Dad wanted to help his sister escape. He wanted to get both you and Sadie away from your father and his influence. He just died before he could resolve the issue. Mom always worried about you, especially after Aunt Sadie passed away. She just didn’t have any standing, so she accepted the situation the way it was. I’m just saying, you didn’t reveal anything I didn’t already know.”

“So,” Wyatt changed the subject. “Now what?”

“Now,” Paige stood. “You go home and report in or whatever. Wyatt, do not tell anyone about our conversation. If you tip them off, I can’t save you. I’m going to start the ball rolling tonight. From here on out, you’re out of it. I’ll figure out a way to sabotage the run so you will have to stay in town. Other than that, we’re both out of it. You have to promise me you won’t blow this. I’m putting a lot on the line to protect you.”

“I promise,” Wyatt agreed. “I came to you, remember? I want out. I just want to live to find a new job... a new life.”

“Do what I say and you’ll live,” Paige promised. “And maybe, when this is all over, you and I can actually spend time getting to know each other.”

“After all this?” Wyatt asked.

“We didn’t know each other well,” Paige shrugged. “Not as kids, and certainly not since our parents died. But you came to me, anyway. You’re trying to do the right thing. I’m not going to hold the sins of the father against you. I know he pressured you, is still pressuring you. And, I also understand it wasn’t easy... knowing he’s at risk over this. Trust me, Wyatt. I’ll help you and we’ll go from there. Your mom was always very good to me. I liked her a lot and it was hard to lose her so soon after losing dad. Let’s get through this, then we can figure out the future okay?”

“Okay,” Wyatt stood. “And, thank you. By the way, the feeling is mutual. I loved your dad and respected him. What he did was dangerous and we all knew that. Plus, dad hated him. But mom... she idolized him. We used to sneak out of the house, so we could come see you guys. Mom told me if things ever got bad... I could always trust Dylan and Chaya. When Dylan died and mom got sick, she told me not to let dad pull me into his world. She made me promise I would go to Chaya if I needed help. I came here to honor that promise. Mom would be disappointed in me... if I ended up in jail because of dad. I’m not going to end up in jail, Paige.”

“Good.”

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Ahmed slid silently through the shadows and returned to his car. Step one of his plan was complete. He might not be able to get Hamilton alone, but the woman next door was rarely home. He slid behind the wheel and started the engine. He'd still try to corner Dax, but if he failed... at least part of his plan was a success. The weatherproof box was safe and secure, hidden beneath the woman's front porch. It was time to begin the next phase of his plan. This phase would be dangerous, but he'd put it off long enough. Ahmed pulled away from the curb moments before Paige approached her house and turned into her driveway.

Paige stepped onto her porch and heard voices coming from the rear of Dax's house. She paused to listen and realized Zeus and Carmen had joined her favorite neighbor for an evening outside. She hesitated, knowing she should call Sean and explain the situation immediately. But, she wanted to talk to Dax first. She made her way through the house, into the kitchen and out the back door. She had only taken a few steps when Dax spotted her. He was out of his chair and across the lawn in seconds.

"Did you enjoy your evening?" he asked, more than a little curious about her dinner with Wyatt Darrow.

"It was informative," she evaded.

"Meaning?"

Paige glanced up, saw Carmen and Zeus were engrossed in their own conversation and decided to confide in Dax and bring him in on the plan. She pulled him toward her own back porch and began to outline the situation.

"Have you talked to Jericho about this?" Dax asked.

"Not yet," Paige frowned. "Why?"

"Because he didn't trust the guy from the start," Dax provided. "And apparently he was right. Before you call in the feds, the Sheriff should know what's happening in his county."

"Walter's asked you to... what?" Paige asked, annoyed.

"To keep an eye on Darrow... and you," he admitted. "But he didn't need to ask. I would have done it on my own once I met that troubled cousin of yours."

"Because?"

"Because he was evasive and suspicious," Dax shrugged. "And, in the spirit of total disclosure, I asked Carmen to do a thorough check. She hasn't found anything on the kid, but his

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father is another story. He's been the main subject or a secondary suspect in over a dozen investigations, but somehow he skates on all charges. If I had to guess, he's a whistleblower himself. And, if it kept him free and clear... I think he'd throw his own son to the wolves to protect himself."

"Probably," Paige sighed. "I'll call Jericho and fill him in. Then I have to call Sean and report my findings to the FBI. Once I'm done with that, and I'm keeping Wyatt's name out of the FBI's reach... I have to come up with a brilliant plot to keep my terrified cousin in Manti while his crew heads to California. One that doesn't make him look like a weasel."

"Want my help?" Dax asked, taking Paige's hand in both of his.

"Yes," she said immediately. "Because I can't think of a way to do this without Wyatt looking like he's bolting. I asked him to call in sick, he said that's a no go. I also asked him to crash his car, but he says that's no good either. He claims his driving is too good to fake a minor accident. I've got nothing and we don't have a lot of time. He's supposed to leave the day after tomorrow. That means I have to call Jericho tonight, then Sean. Once I'm done, I have to devise a brilliant plan that nobody knows about. One that doesn't land Wyatt in a hospital once we're done. On a positive note, I think I just solved the case of the missing Lamborghini. If all goes well, I'll get a check in the plus column with the DA and the Mayor will have to love me."

"What's not to love?" Dax stood and held out his hand. "Let's go visit with the dynamic duo for an hour or so. Then you can call Walters and Sean Wilkens. And, I'll figure out a way to keep your cousin out of trouble."

"Sounds like a plan," Paige said, feeling a little lighter and more optimistic than she had when she pulled into her driveway only moments ago.

Paige sat with Jericho on the back porch, anxiously waiting for Dax and Havi to return. The guys were sabotaging Wyatt's pilot car. Well, Dax was sabotaging the car. Havi was parked just up the road, ready to respond if the department got a call reporting a burglary on the property. The men believed that if Dax could drain most of the anti-freeze from the radiator and all of it from the reserve tank, the vehicle would make it a few miles outside of town before overheating and leaving Wyatt stranded on the side of the road. The supervisor would have to call in a tow truck and if they were lucky, the rest of the crew would head to California and leave Wyatt to deal with the mechanical problems. Nobody would suspect Wyatt of incapacitating the car because the guy would never do anything to damage his baby.

Paige stood and began to pace back and forth in the darkness. "What's taking so long?"

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“Relax, Paige,” Jericho said unconcerned. “They’re just being cautious. Those two have things handled. And, I’m listening to the calls. Nobody has reported anything suspicious out there. I trust Hamilton to know what he’s doing. I’d rather talk about your cousin. Are you sure Wyatt can pull this off? Are you sure he will?”

“I’m sure he can,” Paige settled back into her chair. “And I’m pretty sure he will. He came to me and I think he takes after his mother. He seemed truly trapped when we talked about his dad. Boyd has always been a bully. I remember dad begging Aunt Sadie to leave him. My parents even offered her a place to stay until she could get back on her feet. Wyatt’s mom refused, knowing mom and I would be vulnerable when dad left the country on one of his missions. She worried about us and deep down, I think she really loved the dirtbag. When she died, Wyatt had to learn to cope. But Sadie made him promise her he wouldn’t do anything illegal and if his father tried to force him into a life of crime, he’d come out here and ask mom for help.”

“I guess that explains his abrupt and unexpected appearance in your life all of a sudden,” Jericho admitted. “I didn’t like him. The moment I laid eyes on the guy, I knew he was trouble. He came to you eventually, but he brought a mountain of problems with him. I hope this works and I hope you’re right. Because I’m not entirely sure the guy won’t cave and blow the entire op tomorrow.”

“Well,” Paige settled back against the chair. “If he does, that won’t be our problem, will it? I turned the information over to the FBI. Agent Sean Wilkens will be handling the take-down and the paperwork. I like that part best. Well, next to the fact he now owes me a favor. A big one if he gets the bust. And we both know that might come in handy in the future. What is it about this town of yours anyway, Sheriff Walters? I’ve dealt with the feds more as a deputy the past couple years than I ever dealt with the locals when I was an agent.”

“Karma,” he smiled. “Yours, not mine. We rarely dealt with the feds before I hired you so, I believe the influx is all your doing Deputy Carter.”

“I disagree,” Paige said then jumped to her feet when she heard Dax’s truck. “Sounds like they’re back.”

The two men walked casually toward the back of the house.

“Your dirty deed is done,” Havilland said in greeting. “But I have to warn you, it’s not cheap. I had to cancel a date tonight and I intend to collect on the debt in the near future. Sheriff, you owe me a night off. And you,” he pointed to Paige. “You are going to work the shift of my choice to make up for the inconvenience.”

Paige rolled her eyes. “I’ll think about it. Did you have any trouble?”

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“Nope,” Dax settled into a chair across from the sheriff. “It was easy. They’re too confident. The place was locked up, but there wasn’t a guard and I didn’t even see a camera. I realize they’re not local and the warehouse belongs to another company, but you’d think they’d take some precautions considering the value of the merchandise.”

“Did you see the Roadster?” Jericho asked.

“Nope,” Havi answered. “I’m betting they have it stashed inside the building. From what I could find, Reyo Transports leased the facility for a month from the owner. They have access to the garage, the buildings and the outer yard. Wyatt’s car was parked in the yard. Everything else, other than the trailer they use to transport the property was out of site. Most likely inside the building.”

“Okay,” Jericho stood. “Sounds like my work here is done. I have no knowledge of the break-in or the vandalism. My deputy was nowhere near the location of the suspicious activity and I personally spent the evening with Paige Carter and her dubious neighbor Dax Hamilton. I can report to work in the morning with a clear conscious and a solid alibi.”

“Somehow,” Havi laughed. “I don’t think you’ll need it once the mayor and our illustrious DA realize Charles Corvene’s Lamborghini has been recovered unscathed.”

“Let’s all hope it is unscathed,” Jericho said soberly. “Otherwise, we all might be in deep trouble.”

Wyatt arrived at the stockyard, still worried about the upcoming events. He had no idea what Paige had come up with to get him out of harm’s way. He didn’t even know if the feds were on board and the crew was about to get caught in the act. He didn’t know anything, but Paige had said that was best. He turned the corner and came face-to-face with Rico Chavez, the semi-driver of this small operation. “Morning, Rico.”

“Hey, kid,” Rico shifted to the left. “Better get loaded up. Boss is in a foul one this morning. I think he wants to pull out immediately.”

“I haven’t had a chance to go over the car,” Wyatt objected.

“The car is fine,” Salvador LeDoux barked. “You keep that thing in top shape and I don’t have time for the delay.”

“What crawled up your...” Joel Morgan, the man who rode shotgun and watched out for trouble began.

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“Shut it,” Salvador interrupted. “I got a call from the boss this morning,” the top supervisor added. “There’s been a change in plans. We need to head out immediately if we want to arrive at the port in time for the transfer.”

“How many times are they going to change the plans?” Joel complained. “We were supposed to leave yesterday, but the plans changed. New plan, we should have another hour to load up and hit the road. Now, we have to pull out immediately. That doesn’t give us time to double and triple check the area, make sure we didn’t leave nothing behind. Someone’s gotta talk to the man and tell him to stop with the last minute demands.”

“Great,” Salvador shrugged. “Good luck with that. I’ll be sure to attend your funeral. Load up, we’re late.”

Wyatt moved to the rental they’d been using while in town, retrieved his bag, and slung it over his shoulder. He was nervous, worried the change in timeline would mess up the plan to get him out of the transport. What if the feds weren’t in place, what if they missed the truck and blamed him for the mistake? His gut began to churn and he wondered if he’d created a bigger problem for himself by confiding in his cousin. Only time would tell and right now, time was something he didn’t have much of. He dropped his bag on the back seat of the pilot car and glanced around. The other men were already loaded up and ready to pull out. He glanced at Salvador and waited for the signal. Once the boss motioned his way, Wyatt pulled onto the highway headed out of town. Clearly, whatever plan Paige had to save him... had failed. He was stuck. He was going to be arrested with the rest of the group and knowing his father, the man would let him rot there without a second thought.

The convoy was three miles out of town when trouble hit out of nowhere. The group consisted of Wyatt’s pilot car in the lead, the semi and enclosed trailer that contained the expensive cargo in the middle, and Salvador’s company SUV in the rear. They were on I-fifteen, headed southbound when the check engine light on Wyatt’s car started flashing. Within seconds, smoke was billowing out of the hood. He had no choice, he had to pull over. Wyatt signaled and made his slow descent onto the shoulder of the highway. The semi followed and Salvador pulled in behind them. The instant he came to a stop, the angry supervisor jumped from his vehicle and stomped his way to Wyatt’s car.

“What now?” Salvador demanded.

“Looks like the radiator,” Wyatt provided. “It overheated and the reservoir looks completely empty. If I had to guess, I’d say the thing must be cracked. It’s the only explanation.”

“Can you fix it?” Joel, who had jumped from the passenger side of the semi asked.

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“Not out here,” Wyatt said soberly. “If we can get a tow into the next town, maybe. But it’s going to take time.”

“Time is one thing we don’t have,” Salvador considered. “We’re going to have to leave you here. Can you handle it alone? I can leave Joel with you but I’d rather not. One man down is bad enough. Rico and I could head out alone, but...”

“But then you don’t have a wingman if something goes wrong,” Wyatt finished for him. “You guys go. I can get this. I’ll call for a tow and have them take it back to Gunnison. They should have a shop there, the town is big enough. If not, I’ll find a motel and work on the thing myself. If I can find the leak, I may be able to repair it and catch up.”

“No,” Salvador shook his head. “Get the tow and find a hotel. We’ll hook back up with you later. If not here, then we’ll all meet in Vegas. You’ll never catch us with that kind of delay. It would be a wasted trip. Just take care of the car. We have another run in a few days and we’ll need the pilot to escort the large equipment Lander Construction is moving from Vegas to Denver. We can’t take any chances on that run.”

“Are you sure?” Wyatt asked, concerned. Was this Paige’s plan or something else? “We never split up, not like this.”

“I’m sure,” Salvador decided. “Joel, get back in the truck. We’re heading out. Call me, Darrow if anything goes wrong. We can’t delay the Vegas job for anything.”

“I’ll be in touch once I know what’s going on with the car,” Wyatt promised. He pulled out his phone and called Paige. She would know where he could get a tow in this area. And that way, he could ask her if this was her plan all along.

Paige, Wyatt, Dax and Jericho settled in for a meal of Fried Chicken, coleslaw and biscuits while they awaited a call from Agent Sean Wilkens. The FBI had altered the original plan and, rather than stop the men on the highway, they had set up in California on the dock in Los Angeles. If everything went according to plan, they would recover more than one missing vehicle and could charge the group with multiple felonies instead of just one.

So far, no mention of Boyd Darrow had surfaced with the feds and Paige hoped it stayed that way. She didn’t want Wyatt to have to deal with the guilt and feeling of responsibility if his father ended up in prison along with the rest of the organization. It was going to be bad enough when Wyatt’s father learned his friends were behind bars and Wyatt had escaped prosecution because of a mechanical problem. Reyo may not put it all together, but Wyatt was positive his father would. Probably because dear old dad had orchestrated similar schemes in the past.

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But, Boyd Darrow didn't realize Paige was now on his trail. And, she had the expert skills of Carmen Fennelly assisting her. One wrong move and her career criminal uncle would find himself the target of a federal operation he couldn't slither out of. She planned to keep that particular plan to herself. Wyatt didn't need to know she was watching his father now. He wouldn't need to know her involvement if the man got himself arrested, either. For the most part, she thought her cousin was a good guy. A little lost and even more conflicted due to his father's influence, but he was trying to do the right thing. He was trying to live the way his mother wanted him to. Paige just hoped, after this was all over, he'd be able to find a legitimate job with an honest company. Otherwise, he just might give into his father's pressure and fall in with another criminal enterprise. If he did, Paige wouldn't be able to save him again. She wouldn't, because he wouldn't deserve her help.

Wyatt jumped and Jericho sat up straighter when the distinct ringing of Paige's cell phone began to chime. "Sean, please tell me you have good news," Paige said in greeting.

"I have great news," Sean practically yelled into the phone. "We got them. All of them. The boat was full of stolen cars. I mean, seriously high-end expensive vehicles just like the Lamborghini. It's fine, by the way. Not a scratch on the thing. And the records these guys kept... well, I'm just going to say I owe you big time. You just gave me the bust of a lifetime my friend. My SAC is happy, the owners are going to be thrilled and my colleagues are jealous. Not bad for a few hours work and a quick drive to the coast."

"I'll be sure to collect," Paige warned as she grinned. "I'll let you go. I'm sure you have tons of evidence to process and I expect my victim's car in the next twenty-four."

"So demanding," Sean teased. "I'll get it processed and returned as soon as I can. We're not going to want to hold onto these beauties. I wish you were here to see it. In addition to your Roadster, we've got three Ferrari's, two Aston Martin's and a Bugatti. And those are just the ones I remember. These guys are going down and they're going down hard. With just the ones I mentioned, we have seven major felonies just for the thefts. Not to mention money laundering, the illegal transport over international waters and about a half-dozen other charges that we know of. It's going to be a long night, but so worth it."

"Then I'll let you get back to it," Paige told him. "Just remember me and the boost I just gave your career when I call in desperate need and you're the only man in the world that can help."

"Anytime, day or night my friend," Sean agreed. "I'm there. Always would be, I didn't need this bust for that. I'll call you tomorrow, after I process the cars and get a couple hours. We'll make arrangements to get the car back to Mr. Corvene."

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“Later,” Paige said before she disconnected the call. She turned to address Wyatt. “The op was lucrative. The feds appreciate your assistance and so do I. We would never have known about these guys if you hadn’t helped. Now for the important question.”

“What’s that?” Wyatt asked hesitantly.

“What’s next for you?” Paige asked. “You can’t work for Reyo. You’re out of a job and my source tells me you are paying the mortgage on the house your dad lives in. How do you plan to make ends meet?”

“I’m working on something,” Wyatt evaded.

“I’d like to know what,” Jericho insisted. “My department stepped in, sheltered you from prosecution, and I believe we have a vested interest in your future. Have you been approached by someone or is your dad hooking you up with another questionable operation?”

“Both,” Wyatt admitted. “Dad called just before I came over. He somehow knew Rico and the rest had been arrested and he predicts the others will be rounded up within a matter of days. He told me to quit and move on. He suggested another friend, said he expects me to have a new job before the first of next month. I also got a call from a guy I know. An acquaintance I met while I was working at the raceway back in Kentucky. I’m thinking about accepting his offer.”

“I have two deputies in the racing business and I have a third option, if you want it. Both Havilland and Bridges mentioned the same reputable racing team. They’re looking for a good driver. Not for racing, but for transport. The pay is better than you were making with Reyo and the guys are as clean as they come. If my men recommend them, you can’t find a better job in the industry.”

“I’d like to look into it,” Wyatt agreed. “I think my guy is clean but I know yours will be. I want to make my mom proud. I don’t think I’ve done a very good job of that so far. Your option, that’s a second option not a third. My dad’s suggestion is out for sure. I don’t trust him and I know anyone he lines me up with is as dirty as they come. He knows how to protect himself, but I’m not sure he cares if I’m vulnerable or covered. I’d like to strike out on my own and see how I do.”

“I know you want to help your dad out,” Paige studied her cousin. “But at some point, I think you should make him pay his own way. He’s an adult. It’s his responsibility to pay his own mortgage. And, at some point, you just might want to buy a house of your own. Nobody has the funds to buy two houses at the same time. Well, nobody I know anyway.”

“I understand,” Wyatt said softly. “But, it’s complicated.”

“And I won’t pry,” Paige promised. “Now, who wants ice cream?”

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The group celebrated well into the evening. The mayor would be happy when he learned his biggest donor's car had been returned unscathed. The DA would be happy when he learned his friend had been taken care of so quickly, and the feds were happy to have a huge bust they could brag about. Paige? She was happy, too. She'd been instrumental in helping a cousin in need. A childhood friend she had believed was out of her life forever. After only a few short days, they had developed a new bond. One Paige hoped would last a lifetime. Wyatt reminded her of another life... another time. A world where her father was alive and well and her mother enjoyed spending time with the sister she'd never had. She'd avoided those memories for years, believing it best to leave the sorrow in the past.

But, the reunion wasn't all bad. Some of the memories were good. Like the time Paige's father had arranged for a weekend in the Hamptons at a friend's beach house. Boyd had been out of town at the time, so Sadie and Wyatt had joined them. Paige and Wyatt had practically lived on the beach making sandcastles and trying to ride the waves. She hadn't thought about that weekend in years. Wyatt had, though. He had relived the memory, telling the story to Paige's friends as they waited to hear the fate of the men in California. He had also admitted it was the best weekend he'd had in his life. Paige hoped, once he got settled with Havi and Dean's friend, Wyatt would have a million best weekends waiting in his future. And, she hoped he'd tell her all about them. Because she realized now that remembering her father and her mother, wasn't nearly as painful as it had been when she was alone. Before she'd moved back to Manti.

Ahmed watched the group and wondered if he should just join them. He'd come to accept the fact that running into Dax Hamilton while he was alone was nearly impossible. He had a friend living with him, which made things difficult. And, when he wasn't home with the friend, he was spending time with his neighbor. If it was just Dax and the woman, he might approach him now. But they appeared to be having some sort of party. The timing was all wrong. Maybe he'd get his chance tomorrow. If he couldn't approach Hamilton while he was alone, he'd have to do it while he was with his roommate or his girlfriend. Ahmed was getting desperate and he knew time was running out. He would have to act soon. Otherwise, he might never get the chance.