

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Unexpected Threats *Season 2, Episode 8*

by:

Melanie P. Smith

Copyright © 2017 Melanie P. Smith
First Edition, First Impression

No part of this document or the related files may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the Author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. All trademarks are the property of their owners and are acknowledged by the proper use of capitalization throughout.

www.melaniepsmith.com



MPSmith Publishing

Unexpected Threats

Gage pulled up to the large house and debated. He and Ethan had never gotten along. His father, Drew Clayton, believed it was a matter of jealousy. Gage figured he was probably right, but that didn't help him much at the moment. If he didn't approach the arrogant man in just the right way, he'd get nowhere. Then, after Ethan slammed the door in his face, he'd probably call the sheriff to complain. Gage needed a plan, but after hours of procrastinating he still didn't know how to approach Ethan Weldon about his high school football ring.

Okay, Gage inhaled a deep breath and slowly let it out. He hates me because I was a Texas Longhorn and because I received a full scholarship to play football, something he always dreamed of doing himself. According to Drew Clayton, Weldon had big dreams and he was good. But he also had a chip on his shoulder and an uncontrollable urge to party. The day the college scouts had come looking, Ethan was hung over and off his game. He'd been offered a partial scholarship to Colorado University out of Boulder, but he'd been set on Penn State, Virginia Tech or even Texas U. Instead, Drew Clayton was offered a scholarship to Texas. Then, years later, his son Gage had attended his father's alma mater on a full scholarship as well. Then, Gage committed the ultimate crime... he went on to play in the NFL.

"This is not personal," Gage mumbled as he climbed from the car. It's official business. He'd just approach it that way and hope for the best. Within seconds he was standing in front of the large, decorative door waiting to ask for a favor from a man that hated his guts and always would.

"Deputy Clayton," Ethan said coldly. "Funny, I don't remember calling the police."

"You didn't," Gage said flatly. "But I do have a couple questions for you. I'm working a case that involves an old high school football ring." Gage pulled his own ring out of his pocket. "I was hoping you'd be willing to show me yours."

"Do you have a warrant?" Ethan challenged.

"It hasn't come to that... yet." Gage issued his own challenge. "But if that's what you want," he shrugged as if the idea didn't bother him at all.

"Come in," Ethan decided. He didn't have his ring, but he didn't want trouble and with their history, Gage Clayton just might cause him loads of it.

Gage followed the man into a masculine den and settled onto a comfortable leather couch. "Look," he began. "This can be real easy. You show me the ring, I leave and never bother you with this again."

"And if I don't?" Ethan asked. "Show you my ring?"

"Then you stay on the list and eventually Sheriff Walters or Deputy Carter will pull you in for a formal interrogation."

Unexpected Threats

“It’s that serious?” Ethan asked.

“I’m afraid it is,” Gage said, never taking his eyes off the man. Was this about the rivalry or was the man stalling because he didn’t have his ring? If the case went all the way back to high school and a drunken party up the canyon... well, Ethan was certainly a likely suspect.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” Ethan decided. “Because I don’t want trouble over this. But, I don’t have the ring.”

“What happened to it?” Gage asked.

“I lost it,” Ethan admitted. “In a bet. The thing is still here, in town I mean. It’s just not in my possession.”

“Can you tell me whose possession it is in?” Gage asked.

“If that’s necessary,” Ethan said hesitantly. “But, I will ask that you keep the details confidential. I know, with the... tension between our families, that’s unlikely but I’m still going to ask. You said this is official business. I hope you can keep personal feelings out of it.”

“Mr. Weldon,” Gage focused on the man sitting before him. “Whatever rivalry exists, it is between you and my father. It has nothing to do with me on a personal or professional level. I barely know you, I certainly don’t feel any tension towards you. I’m here about a ring, that’s the extent of it. I’m a deputy in this area and I’m only here to do my job.”

“I understand,” Ethan stood and began to pace. “Giles Sullivan has my ring. The insufferable man mounted it in a display case and proudly exhibits it on his mantle in his living room... for all to see.”

“Must have been a pretty good bet,” Gage grinned. Giles was the town drunk. A man that never graduated from high school, let alone played any sports. He was a screw-up and everyone knew it. The man might display his winnings on his mantle, but he rarely had company so nobody would ever see the item he was so proud of. At least that should be a small comfort to the man standing before him.

“Just my luck, the one and only time Giles ever got lucky and it was my football ring on the line,” Ethan sighed and dropped into a chair across from Gage.

“Why didn’t you just win it back?” Gage asked.

“He won’t put it on the table,” Ethan scowled. “He always envied those rings, always wanted one. To him, it doesn’t matter that he didn’t earn it. He won it and he’s keeping it.” Ethan stopped the rant he was about to break into and remembered who he was talking to. “Anyway, does that get me off the hook?”

Unexpected Threats

“I’ll have to pay a visit to Giles, but if what you told me is correct, you’re off the hook.” Gage stood and started for the door then stopped. “You know, whatever beef you have with my dad... it has nothing to do with me. I never competed with you, never really knew you. Just because I followed my dreams and yours got derailed... well, we all have to accept fate at some point. My career was cut short just like yours but I don’t blame anyone for it, especially not the next pro kid fresh out of school and eager to play the game he loves.”

“I don’t have a problem with you, Gage,” Ethan admitted. “It’s just every time I see you, I’m reminded of the life I never had. A life you did have. It’s a little hard to get past, so I just turn and head the other way.”

“Understood,” Gage nodded before he stepped through the front door and headed for his vehicle. He’d head over to Giles’ and check out the story. He had time, all his cases were cleared and so far, nothing pressing had been reported this morning.

Gage took the turnoff that led to Giles old cabin when he saw the smoke. “Margie, we have a fire,” he said into the microphone. He provided the limited information he had and worked his way toward the black cloud billowing into the clear blue sky. It didn’t take long before the fire truck pulled in behind him.

“Take the next right,” Myers, one of the local firefighters said through the radio. “It looks like it’s close to the ridge.”

“Copy,” Gage said before taking the turn and accelerating on the hard-packed dirt road. Within minutes a fully engulfed vehicle came into view. Gage jumped from his car but was stopped by two firemen with hoses attached to their small truck. They worked hard to put out the flames but in the end, the vehicle and all its contents were a total loss.

“Gage,” Myers called. “You need to see this. I’m guessing this problem is now yours... and it’s a crime scene. The crispy corpse is going to be difficult to identify and the car’s a total loss. I can’t even make out a VIN.”

Gage moved forward to study the body sprawled across the front seat. It was clear to him, the man... he thought it was a man... had been seated in the passenger side, not the driver’s seat. He rounded the vehicle and peered in the side window. From this angle, it was clear they had a homicide on their hands. There was a big gaping clue in the center of the body’s forehead. He needed assistance on this one. Who better than their resident forensics expert. He pulled out his phone and dialed Paige.

Unexpected Threats

Paige studied the vehicle, the body, and the surrounding area for several minutes before she moved forward and began the tedious task of uncovering forensic evidence. Gage had been right, identifying the victim was going to be difficult. She just hoped there were other clues that hadn't been destroyed in the fire that would help them. The first thing she did was survey the ground next to the driver's side door for footprints. Unfortunately, the firemen had destroyed any evidence that may have been left when they put out the fire. While she was there, she leaned in and tried to make out the VIN. No luck, the damage was too extensive in the interior of the car to make anything out. Myers informed her an accelerant had been used as a quick and efficient means of destroying the man and any potential evidence that might have been left in the vehicle.

With a sigh, she moved away from the car. She wouldn't disturb anything until Gage returned with a warrant. In the meantime, she'd fan out and see what she could find. If she got lucky, the perp parked close by and left something she could follow up on while they waited for the ME to work his magic. She was several feet away from the vehicle when she spotted the tire tracks. They looked like truck tires to her. They were certainly too large to be from a compact car like the one used to conceal the victim's body. She pulled her camera from her bag and began to take several shots. The threads might be impossible to track, but at least she'd found a clue.

Paige glanced up when she heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. Gage swung out of the car, paused to glance around and headed straight for Paige.

"Got the warrant," he said holding up a stack of papers. "Let's see if we can locate a usable VIN."

"With the accelerant, the inside is going to be toast." Paige joined her colleague and the two of them moved to the front of the vehicle. "Let's check the engine block. The front doesn't look as damaged as the interior."

"Yeah," Gage agreed as he pulled on the hood. After several tugs, it finally popped open and the two deputies peered inside. "Myers and Holt did their best to keep the fire from reaching the engine and the gas tank. A few minutes later and the damage would have been much worse. Give me your flashlight, I think I can make out the last few digits."

Paige handed over her light and waited for Gage. He shifted, pulled out a rag and wiped away the blackened crust that was coating the entire car.

"It looks like a zero, nine, one, eight, six," Gage straightened. "I can't make out the letter proceeding the numbers, could be an N, could be an H."

Unexpected Threats

“That should help,” Paige brightened. “Can you read the first numbers or letters? We know it starts with a one but if we can get the next two, we can identify the manufacturer. With the beginning and ending numbers, we’ll be able to track the vehicle to a current owner.”

“Right,” Gage leaned back under the hood and shone the light in front of the engine block again. “Looks like a one, the second digit is either a C or a G and then another one.”

“That helps,” Paige jotted down the letters and numbers.

“How?” Myers moved forward and asked the two deputies.

“Because it tells us that the vehicle is an American made car, that’s the one,” Gage said absently.

“And the second letter is the manufacturer,” Paige continued. “Gage said a C or a G. That means the car is either a Chrysler or a Chev.”

“It’s a Chevy Cruze,” Myers told her. “I can see that without a VIN.”

“And we have the last five, possibly six digits,” Gage added. “Which will identify the vehicle. Now we just plug the info into the DMV database and find our listing. Once we identify the vehicle, we have an RO... Registered owner.”

“It’s called investigating,” Paige grinned. “Technically, I only need the last six numbers to identify the owner.”

“What if the car’s stolen?” Myers asked.

“Then we’ve got nothing,” Gage said soberly. “So, let’s hope it’s not stolen.”

Paige moved to the driver’s side of the vehicle and pulled open the door. She had to press the button three times, but the trunk finally opened. “Let’s see what we have in the back.” Myers and Gage followed her and glanced inside.

“Is that some kind of safe?” Gage asked.

“Yeah,” Paige slipped on a pair of gloves and tried to open the lid. No luck. “Any ideas?”

“Nope,” Gage shrugged. “Let’s see if we can track down the RO then we can go from there. We might get lucky and find the safe belongs with the car and the owner can gain access for us. Otherwise, we’ll just have to break the lock and go from there.”

“I’m all for breaking the lock now,” Paige lifted the compact box out of the trunk. She moved to her own vehicle, pulled out a small toolbox and returned to the safe. Within minutes, she had the lid open and the contents revealed. The instant she saw the note, she stood and made

Unexpected Threats

a second pass around the vehicle. When she reached the passenger's side, she opened the door, crouched down and studied the body intently.

"What does it mean?" Gage asked when she returned.

"It means someone thinks we're stupid," Paige grumbled. "And they want us to believe our prime suspect is my neighbor."

"It's a pretty clean frame job," Gage agreed. "I mean, the bullet through the forehead... Dax is an excellent shot and he has military experience. There's no question he could pull that off. The tire tracks, bet they match Hamilton's truck and the note with his name and address, just in case we missed the rest. How do you want to play this one?"

"Meaning?" Paige turned to Gage, accusation evident in her glare.

"Meaning," Gage said casually. "We both know Dax didn't do this, but we have to talk to him anyway. We have to establish an alibi, get a statement on the record, you know... investigate the crime."

"We don't need Dax to establish an alibi," Paige disagreed. "Because I'm his alibi. Dax was with me all night. And, we were both sitting at my kitchen table having breakfast when the real suspect started this fire. I'm pretty sure Dax couldn't have a better alibi if he tried. He wasn't out here in the middle of nowhere killing this man and setting his car on fire because he was with one of the police officers investigating the homicide."

Gage grinned. "Epic fail and the perp should have known that."

"Which tells me we're not dealing with a local," Paige surmised. "I will need to talk to Dax, but I need to contact Nathan first."

"The general?" Gage asked, perplexed.

"Yes," Paige nodded. "Because I'd lay odds, this has something to do with that top secret committee he's running and if I'm right, Dax won't be able to discuss it anyway."

"Hello, Paige," Nathan answered the ringing phone.

"Nathan," Paige said flatly. "Are you busy?"

"Actually, I am."

Unexpected Threats

“Can it wait?” Paige pressed. “I have a dead body that is clearly a homicide and someone wants me to believe Dax is my prime suspect.”

“What?” Nathan stood and left the room. “Do you know who it was? Who is dead?”

“Not yet,” Paige admitted. “The victim was shot, there are signs he may have been tortured, and then he was set on fire. I’d say someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure I can’t identify my victim.”

“What points to Dax?”

“For starters,” Paige sighed. “A safe in the trunk with Hamilton’s name and address. Then there’s the envelope with some kind of top-secret mission summary. I assume that will point to Dax as well. Tire tracks that match his pickup truck and a bullet hole in the center of the man’s forehead, put there by a .40 caliber handgun. I know it’s a forty because they left the casing on the back floorboard just in case I’m stupid and didn’t connect everything else. You know, the very same caliber Dax never leaves home without. Do you need me to continue?”

“You don’t believe Dax had anything to do with this, do you?” Nathan asked. He knew he shouldn’t be having this conversation on his cell phone but he needed the basics, then he could decide what to do about it.

“No,” Paige sighed. “Whoever did this, they’re not from around here. The locals would know to check and see if Dax was with me before they tried to frame him for murder.”

“You can rule him out because he was with you when this happened?” Nathan said in relief.

“Exactly,” Paige confirmed. “So, what are you guys working on that would make someone want Dax out of the way?”

“What makes you think this has anything to do with me?” Nathan evaded.

“Cut the crap, General,” Paige said in irritation. “I need to know what I’m dealing with here.”

“I need to call you back,” Nathan decided. They’d said enough already.

“Don’t shut me out,” Paige argued.

“I’ll call when I can but it won’t be on this phone,” he disconnected and hoped Paige got the message.

Paige frowned and stared at her phone. Something was wrong. Did Nathan think his phone was bugged? If so, this might be bigger than she originally believed. She started to slide her phone into her pocket but changed her mind. Pulling it back out, she dialed Dax.

Unexpected Threats

“Hey,” Dax said in greeting.

“I need to talk to you,” Paige was worried. Whoever had done this was still out there and Dax could be in danger.

“What’s wrong?”

“The body Gage called me out on this morning?” Paige turned and walked away from the group. “Well, someone is trying to frame you for the murder. The evidence is piling up and it all points to you. I think someone wants you out of commission.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know,” Paige leaned against the trunk of an old tree. “But he had your name and address in the car when he died, there are tire tracks that will match your truck and he was shot in the forehead with a forty cal.”

“I see,” Dax considered. There had to be more. Sure, that all pointed to him but if this was a frame job there had to be more. “What else?”

“There are signs of torture,” Paige said softly. “He’s missing both pointer fingers, which will also make it impossible to get prints. His femur was fractured and so are a couple ribs. Any other evidence was destroyed in the fire.”

“And?” Dax pressed. There had to be something else pointing to him.

“And I found an operation summary in a safe, a fireproof safe left in the trunk. Someone wanted to make sure I found your information, a bullet casing and the summary,” Paige confided.

“Does it identify the op?”

“Only by name,” Paige told him. “Operation White Scorpion.”

“Shit,” Dax sighed. “Yeah, that was one of mine. Let me call you back. I need to talk to Porter.”

“He just hung up on me,” Paige advised. “Hopefully you can get more than I did. And, I expect the two of you to fill me in later tonight. I have to know what’s going on here, Dax. We know you didn’t do this because you were with me when it happened but if I’m going to identify my victim and find the murderer, I need the truth.”

“Has Nathan hung up on your before?”

“No,” Paige said, worried. “He hasn’t been himself lately and I got the impression he’s worried his phone is being monitored. Is that possible?”

Unexpected Threats

“Anything is possible,” Dax decided. “Be careful, I’ll tell you what I can when you get home tonight. Give me some time to do some digging. I have a few contacts of my own. That mission was top secret, Paige. Nobody should have a copy of the summary. If that got out, we have a leak at the Pentagon.”

“Do you think it’s connected with the committee?” Paige was growing more concerned by the minute. And now she was worried about her favorite general in addition to her boyfriend.

“Maybe,” Dax ran a hand through his hair in frustration. What was going on here? He needed answers and he wasn’t going to get them from Paige. “Give me a few hours. Stop by the house when you’re done for the night and we’ll talk. I’ll tell you everything I can.”

“Okay,” Paige agreed. She didn’t like it, but she also knew there were things Dax couldn’t share. She’d have to accept anything he was willing to give her. “It’s going to be late, I have a lot to deal with here before we can even remove the vehicle.”

“I’ll see you tonight,” Dax said. “Be careful and even if it’s late, come to my house when you’re finished. We need to talk.”

“I will,” Paige promised before disconnecting the call. Dax sounded worried, which terrified her. Dax never sounded worried. He was a warrior. If this upset him, it was big and it was dangerous. Paige took a minute to compose herself, then returned to the vehicle and got to work.

Dax was still trying to get answers several hours later when a brisk knock sounded on his front door. He closed down his computer and moved to the window. A man in a suit stood stoically on his front porch. He took a second to glance at the stairway, hoping his friend didn’t try to intervene if there was trouble. Zee was nearly recovered, but an altercation could be a setback. When he didn’t see his friend, he moved forward and pulled open the door.

“Maddax Hamilton?” the man asked as he flashed an open wallet then quickly slammed it shut.

Dax got a good enough glimpse to recognize Homeland Security’s blue and grey shield. This was getting interesting. “Yes.”

“I’m Agent Williams,” he held out a hand.

Dax studied the man’s profile, then glanced around. Where was the guy’s partner? These guys never traveled alone. He immediately decided William’s wasn’t who he claimed to be. He glanced at the outstretched hand but ignored it.

Unexpected Threats

“There’s been an incident,” Williams lowered his hand. “I’ll need you to come with me immediately.”

Zeus heard the knock and moved to the window to see who had come calling. Nobody they knew would knock on the front door that way. He instantly spotted a nondescript black car with a male occupant, but he couldn’t see the guy’s face. He pulled out his phone and snapped a photo of the vehicle. That’s when he heard voices in the main living area. Apparently, the man’s partner was the one who had knocked.

Zeus silently made his way out of his room and down the hallway. He paused at the top of the stairs and snapped another photo of the man speaking with Dax. That’s when he heard the demand.

“It’s not a request, Mr. Hamilton,” the angry man insisted. “We can do this the easy way or we can do it the hard way. You need to come with me.”

“I assume you have a warrant,” Zeus stepped forward and casually leveled his gun on the edge of the railing. “Otherwise, I’m afraid Mr. Hamilton respectfully declines your invitation.”

“This isn’t over,” Williams seethed. “You want a warrant? I’ll come back with a warrant. Your friend there... he just chose the hard way.” The agent yanked open the door and slammed it shut behind him.

“What was that about?” Zeus asked as he descended the stairs and settled in on the couch.

“I’m not sure,” Dax frowned. “Something is going on here and I don’t like it.”

Zeus straightened. “Meaning?”

“Paige is working a homicide,” Dax informed his friend. “And someone is trying to frame me for the murder. Now this,” he pointed to the door. “I’m not convinced that guy works for Homeland.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Zeus pressed.

“Paige found something at the scene,” Dax evaded. “Something that should be classified at the highest level. Something that never should have left the Pentagon.”

Zeus studied his friend. “But you can’t tell me about it?”

Unexpected Threats

“It’s above your pay grade,” Dax said absently as he began to pace. “Carmen’s been spooked lately and now this. We’re missing something and I think Porter knows more than he’s sharing.”

“What do you want to do about it?”

“I’m worried about your girlfriend,” Dax admitted. “Go, now. Pick up Carmen and bring her back here. I need to make some calls. Once I have answers, we’ll put our heads together and see what we come up with. I need Carmen anyway, she’s got the tech skills to sniff out our snitch.”

“You want Carmen to hack the Pentagon?” Zeus said in shock.

“I might,” Dax studied his friend. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Only if you get her thrown in prison,” Zeus decided.

“I have faith in our girl,” Dax told him. “You might try it sometime. She’s a keeper and if you take her for granted much longer, you just might lose her.”

“We’re not having this discussion,” Zeus stood. “I’ll get Carmen but if she says no to the hacking, the answer is no.”

“She won’t say no,” Dax said confidently. “Go pick her up and come right back. If you’re not here in an hour, I’m going to come looking. We’ll figure out a plan for dinner once we’re all here.”

“We’ll be back,” Zeus promised. Carmen lived less than five minutes away. He had plenty of time to discuss the problem before Dax confronted her with his request.

Dax was about to make another call when there was a faint knock on his door. He set the phone down in frustration, so far he had more questions than answers. When he peeked through the window, he spotted the delivery truck pulling away. He cautiously opened the door and spotted the package on his doorstep. One glance at the address and he relaxed. He wasn’t sure what Nathan had sent him, but it would have to wait. He had one more call to make before Zee got back. He placed the box on the coffee table and made his way to his room. Minutes later, he had the satellite phone activated and operational.

“Dalia,” Dax said in greeting. “It’s me, Dax Hamilton. I need some information.”

Dalia hesitated. “I need to verify.”

Unexpected Threats

“The scorpion has left the desert,” Dax said without hesitation.

“He lives in the castle in the air,” Dalia responded.

“Are you alone?” Dax asked. “Can you talk?”

“Quickly,” Dalia said urgently. “What is it?”

“Can you confirm the location of the scorpion?”

“No,” Dalia frowned. “He said he was coming to you. He really has left the desert. Have you not seen him? He...”

Dax heard muffled voices and realized Dalia must have placed a hand over the mouth piece. Seconds later she returned.

“I must go,” she warned. “He was bringing the details to you. If he didn’t make it... he must be dead. I can’t talk now. Find the scorpion.”

Dax ended the call, shut down the phone and secured it with the rest of his military gear. He slowly made his way to the living room and settled in to wait for Carmen and Zee. Worry engulfed him, but he tried to push it away. Dalia Abadi-Basara was still living in Iraq. She was still working with the US troops and under protection. Other than Ahmed, she was the only local Dax trusted. And, Ahmed Al-Hashim was like a ghost. He had no home, no means in which he could be contacted by the outside world. No family left, no friends and no way to confirm his status... alive or dead. Ahmed would have a handler, of course. A Ranger that had replaced Dax when he retired. A soldier that didn’t know Ahmed’s identity but knew how to retrieve the valuable information Ahmed uncovered. But if Ahmed had traveled in secret to the US hoping to deliver information to Dax in person, the Kurdish militant didn’t trust the man assigned to receive the Intel.

What did Ahmed know? And why hadn’t he made contact? Was it too dangerous? Did someone follow him? Did the man that had come by the house earlier have something to do with the mystery? Of that, Dax was positive. Unfortunately, everything else was a mystery. He still had more questions than answers. But Ahmed’s presence did tell him one thing. Another attack was brewing... a plot that was huge and imminent. Nothing else would force Ahmed out of his homeland. There was no other explanation, no other reason Ahmed would travel to Manti to meet up with Dax after all this time. He just wished he’d had a chance to see his friend one more time. Because deep in his gut, Dax knew the dead body Paige was trying to identify was the brave, selfless militant Dax had come to respect years ago. The man who had been tortured, shot and set on fire was Ahmed Al-Hashim. And, he had died before he completed his mission.

Unexpected Threats

Carmen and Zeus stepped through the front door carrying Chinese takeout. “We brought dinner,” Carmen declared before Dax could say anything. “And, I want food before we discuss hacking, law-breaking and mayhem.”

Dax forced a smile and stood. “Let’s eat in the kitchen.”

“You okay?” Zeus asked once they settled in for the meal. “You seem upset, did something happen while I was gone?”

“No,” Dax brushed him off. “I’m fine. Let’s talk about it after the meal.”

The group was just cleaning up when a knock sounded at the door.

“You two stay here,” Dax turned and started for the door. “I mean it. No matter what happens, stay here.”

Carmen looked at Zeus, panic evident in her eyes.

“Get in the pantry,” Zeus ordered. “Don’t come out, no matter what. Do what Dax said. I need to see who it is.”

“Zeus,” Carmen protested.

“Hurry,” Zeus gave her a little push, relieved when she did what he asked. He moved cautiously into the doorway but couldn’t see a thing. He waited, listening carefully to see if he recognized the visitor. When he couldn’t make anything out, he moved forward and made his way down the short hallway that led to the living area. Zeus paused, positioning his body so Dax could see him, but the man in the doorway couldn’t. He knew the instant Dax registered his presence.

“I told you before... I’m not going anywhere with you,” Dax said soberly. “I haven’t changed my mind.”

“And I told you,” Williams said through gritted teeth. “We have some questions. You will need to come with us so we can clear things up. A man is dead, Mr. Hamilton. We believe you know something about that.”

“You would be wrong,” Dax took a step back and to the side. He positioned his body so the man calling himself an agent couldn’t see his left arm. “Where is your partner?”

“What?” Williams asked.

“I’m not an idiot,” Dax said as he gave Zeus the hand signal to remain in position. “If you work for Homeland Security, you have a partner. Where is he? Protocol dictates that the two of

Unexpected Threats

you confront me together. You aren't allowed to take a suspect into custody alone. Unless I see your partner, I'm calling the cops."

Williams narrowed his eyes at his target and considered his options. The instant Dax saw his partner, he'd know they weren't with Homeland. But, if he didn't comply, the guy was going to call in the locals and things would get complicated. He didn't have a choice, he had to call in Nassar. He pulled out his phone and pressed speed dial. Williams turned and had a brief, muffled conversation then straightened and quietly waited. Within seconds, there was a knock on the door. Williams pulled it open and stepped back to reveal his companion.

Dax shouldn't have been surprised, but he was. Never in his wildest dreams would Dax have imagined a time when Fakhir Nassar would be standing in his living room. The man was a thug. A high-level terrorist wanted by more than a dozen organizations nationally and even more internationally. How in the world, did a man on every watch list imaginable enter the US without detection? And why? Ahmed must have discovered something big, something this man wanted hidden. And, he was desperate enough to risk apprehension and imprisonment to achieve it. Or was it Ahmed that he wanted? If anyone realized what Ahmed was doing, if they learned he was a spy... it was a distinct possibility. But if it was just Ahmed they were after, Nassar would be in the wind already. No, Ahmed was here to deliver Intel and Nassar was here to make sure the data never saw the light of day.

"Fakhir," Dax said calmly hoping Zeus would follow orders and just take notes.

"It is time to go," Nassar said. "Or would you like me to talk to the woman next door instead?"

Zeus took a step forward but stopped when Dax gave him the signal to back down and contact command. Who was he supposed to contact? They didn't have a command, they were retired.

Nassar moved forward, his steps deliberate and calculated. Dax remained frozen in place as he studied the enemy's movement closely. He was ready for the attack, but still couldn't prevent it. Nassar flicked his wrist and a tiny dart lodged into Dax's throat.

Dax reached up and pulled out the offending object, understanding it was too late. Whatever had been on the tip of the dart, was now in his system. He couldn't prevent his own abduction, but he could protect Zee and Carmen. He could protect Paige. He wouldn't resist, hopefully that would buy them some time. He sent Zee one last command then let Nassar and Williams escort him across the room, out the front door and into a waiting vehicle.

Zeus slammed his fist into the wall in frustration. He'd never disobeyed an order from his team leader before and he wasn't about to start now. But, he could gather Intel before they disappeared. He pulled out his phone and snapped a shot of this Fakhir guy. Then, he stepped

Unexpected Threats

onto the front porch, making sure he remained hidden in the darkness and snapped another shot of the vehicle. Then another. He kept snapping pictures until the vehicle backed out of the driveway and disappeared.

“What happened?” Carmen demanded when Zeus stepped back into the house.

“They got Dax,” he said soberly.

“Why didn’t you stop them?”

“He ordered me not to.” *Screw command*, Zeus decided. He was calling in reinforcements.

“Zeus,” Carmen practically screamed. “What are we going to do about Dax?”

“I’m calling in the team,” he said as he punched in the number and waited for the call to connect.

“Hey, Zeus,” Hawk said in greeting. Surprise and joy radiated from his voice.

“Dax was just abducted,” Zeus advised. “I need help.”

Hawk pushed away from his chair and left the restaurant where he was enjoying a rare night out with friends. “Tell me what you know.”

Zeus filled him in on both visits. “I’m calling in Ken. He’s living in Nephi now so it shouldn’t take long for him to get here.”

“The rest of us will be there as soon as we can,” Hawk promised. “Will Porter talk?”

“Probably not to me,” Zeus admitted. “But I think he’ll talk to Carmen. I’ll have her try his cell.”

“Keep comms to a minimum,” Hawk ordered. “I’ll bring some burners. We don’t know how deep this goes or what we’re dealing with. I don’t want to risk it.”

“I agree,” Zeus told him. Once he disconnected, he called in Kenny then he turned to address Carmen. “We’re going to your house. I need you to gather up all your computer equipment and bring it back here. I’m not letting you out of my sight until this is over and I think we might need you on this. Dax said something about hacking the Pentagon. Do you have a problem with that?”

Carmen grinned. “Not at all. But, I think we need to call Paige. She should know about this.”

“Dax asked her to stop by after work,” Zeus said as he took her hand and pulled her out the door. “She said she’d be late so if we hurry, we’ll be back before she gets home. We’ll talk to

Unexpected Threats

her in person. That man threatened her before he took Dax. I have to believe it's the only reason Hamilton went willingly. Well, that and the poisonous dart the prick flicked without warning."

"Poisonous dart?" Carmen gulped. "I didn't see that part."

"You shouldn't have seen any of it," Zeus scolded. "I asked you to wait in the pantry."

"And Dax asked you to wait in the pantry," Carmen countered. "I guess neither one of us is all that good at following stupid orders."

Dax woke to discover he was in some kind of warehouse and he was tied to a large, metal table. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on each of his senses. He could smell freshly cut hay from the open window and he could hear crickets chirping in the distance. Okay, it was still night time. He hadn't been out long. Unless he'd been out twenty-four hours, but he didn't think that was the case. Something moved in a nearby room, a chair? Maybe a table. He could hear two voices... Fakhir and the man calling himself Williams. That was a crock, the guy didn't work for Homeland Security any more than Dax did.

He forced his body to relax as he focused on the voices. Fakhir was angry about something, a shipment hadn't come in. Could this have something to do with the cop's murder in Chicago? The ties Carmen found to New Orleans? Maybe it was all connected. Maybe his involvement in Porter's committee was the reason he'd been taken and this didn't have anything to do with Ahmed. And, maybe pigs really did fly. It might be connected, but Dax was more convinced than ever that the body Paige was working belonged to the obstinate Iraqi militant. And within a matter of minutes, Dax would learn firsthand just what methods of persuasion the duo had used on his friend. He'd been tortured before and lived through it. He could survive again... maybe. This time he was dealing with Fakhir – a man that might just behead him and move on. But the man must need something and that gave Dax leverage. As long as those two believed he had what they wanted, he was in control. He planned to use that to his advantage.

"I'm glad to see you are awake," Fakhir said as he stepped through the door. "The chemical on the tip of the dart was temporary but believe me when I tell you, it could easily be permanent. I am going to ask you some questions. You are going to give me the answers I seek. Then I will kill you quickly. We both win as long as you tell the truth."

Dax remained silent.

"You understand, yes?"

Dax still didn't answer.

Unexpected Threats

Fakhir shook his head, displeased. “We’ll do this your way then.” He pulled out a cattle prod and pressed the end against Dax’s side, under his ribs and held it for several seconds.

Dax’s body jerked upwards involuntarily. He clamped down, relaxed his muscles and rode out the pain. It wasn’t the first time this tactic had been used on him but Fakhir didn’t need to know that.

“Now we talk, yes?” Fakhir asked.

Dax studied the ceiling, wondering if he could remove one of the tiles and escape from above.

Fakhir mumbled in Arabic and once again forced electricity into Dax’s side. The man would cooperate, eventually. They all succumbed in the end.

Paige pulled into her driveway, tired, frustrated and hungry. She glanced toward her neighbor’s house, wondering if she should bother him tonight or wait for morning. She was surprised to see a strange Lincoln Navigator parked behind Dax’s truck. She shoved open her door and took two steps toward the house when her neighbor’s front door flew open and Carmen raced toward her. Before she knew what was happening, her friend had her tangled in a huge bear hug.

“Hey,” Paige stumbled back a step. “What’s this about?”

Carmen released Paige, took her hand and pulled her toward Dax’s open door without answering. The men inside were driving her nuts. It was hard to breathe through all the testosterone and ego currently contained inside the ancient home. But the worst part was not knowing if Paige had been abducted, too. She’d called Nathan Porter a million times and still hadn’t heard back from her boss. Her friends were in danger and there was nothing she could do about it.

Paige stepped into the living room and froze. There were five buff, somber, unfriendly faces staring at her. Well, four... Zeus was still friendly. He jumped to his feet and moved to stand next to her.

“Hey, everyone,” he wrapped an arm around Paige’s shoulder. “This is Paige Carter and she belongs to Dax.”

Paige frowned. “Actually, I don’t belong to anyone. I do however, date the man in question. Where is Dax, anyway?”

Unexpected Threats

“She doesn’t know?” Hawk glared at Zeus.

“Know what?”

“You need to come in and sit down,” Carmen wrapped an arm around Paige’s waist and maneuvered her to a lounge chair.

“Carmen, what’s going on?” Paige asked as she set the file that contained everything she knew about her current case on the coffee table in front of her. “Where is Dax?”

“He’s been abducted,” Zeus said, kneeling in front of Paige and taking her hands in his. “Two men claiming they worked for Homeland Security came by. They said they needed to question him about a dead body.” He glanced at the file Paige had brought with her. “I’m guessing probably that case.”

“Wait,” Paige pushed Zeus away as she leaned forward. “Homeland isn’t investigating my murder. Why do you think they are connected? And if Dax is with Homeland Security, he hasn’t been abducted.”

“We don’t think they are Homeland,” Carmen moved to a folding table that held her computer, printer and other tech equipment Paige couldn’t begin to identify. “Zeus was able to take pictures before they left. Here’s the vehicle, we ran the plate and it’s not government issued. Here’s the first man, he called himself Agent Williams but I’ve identified him as William Broadbent. He doesn’t have a criminal record, in fact he was squeaky clean until now.”

“Meaning?” Paige wheezed out. She could barely breathe. Two men claiming to be Homeland Security had taken Dax... right on the heels of another man being tortured and killed. That couldn’t be a coincidence. What was Dax going through at this very minute?

“Meaning,” Hawk stepped forward. “Carmen also identified the second man,” he dropped another photo on the table in front of her. “Fakhir Nassar.”

“Fakhir...” Paige stood, ran from the room and lunged into the bathroom. She knew who Fakhir Nassar was and knowing he had taken Dax made her physically ill. She dropped to the floor and dry heaved for several minutes before she finally stood and rinsed her mouth. She stared at her reflection in the mirror for several seconds and gave herself a silent pep talk before she pushed open the door and returned to the group. “Who are you?” she demanded of the men as she dropped back into a chair.

“Oh,” Zeus moved to the chair next to Paige and took her hand. “This is our unit. Dax’s unit, I should say. That’s Hawk,” he pointed to the intimidating man that had provided Fakhir’s name. “He’s our second... in command. And, you know Ken over there.”

“Hey, Paige,” Ken said soberly.

Unexpected Threats

“And that’s Thor,” Zeus pointed to a giant in jeans and a t-shirt that hugged his muscles and would probably fit the Hulk. “And, that guy over there is Jeeves.” Zeus finished, pointing to the corner.

“Why are you here?” Paige asked, confused.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Hawk asked. “Dax is missing, we’re here to find him.”

“But...” Paige looked around. “Wait, how long ago was he taken?”

“A few hours,” Carmen said quietly.

“Hours!” Paige erupted. “Has anyone called Nathan?”

“I tried,” Carmen rushed forward. “I’ve left him at least a dozen messages but he’s not returning my calls.”

Paige reached into her purse and dialed the general.

“Paige,” Porter answered, clearly agitated. “I said I’d call when I could. I don’t have any answers for you. Just hang tight until morning.”

“Dax is missing,” Paige got out before her eyes began to water. She knew telling Nathan would make it all real.

“I sent you a present,” Nathan responded. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be home so I had it delivered to Dax. Why don’t you open it up tonight and we’ll talk about it in the morning?”

Paige stared at the phone in horrified shock. She’d just told Nathan Dax was missing and he wanted her to open a present? Then it hit her. “Did Dax get something in the mail from Nathan?” She glared at Zeus.

“Not that I know of,” he began to frantically look around the room.

“Yes,” Carmen said, jumping to her feet and rushing into the kitchen. She returned with a small box addressed to Dax Hamilton with a return address that she didn’t recognize but it had Nathan Porter’s name on it. “It’s a little weird, the address is wrong so I put it in the kitchen.”

Paige snatched up the box, pulled out a pocket knife and sliced through the packing tape. Inside were two cell phones and a card. She yanked out the card and read it out loud. “Dax, I’ll explain everything. Keep one of the phones and give the other to Carmen. I need your help. The instant you receive this package, call me. I took the liberty of programming my number for you. Just speed dial one. Anxious to hear from you. NP.” She pressed one for several seconds then waited as it dialed a number she didn’t recognize. Nathan answered on the first ring.

“Tell me what you know about Dax,” he said in greeting.

Unexpected Threats

“I’m putting you on speaker,” Paige advised before pressing the button and setting the phone on the coffee table. Her file fell to the floor, the contents spreading out across the floor.

“I’m here with Carmen and a bunch of guys I don’t know,” Paige advised. “They say they belonged to his Ranger unit.”

Hawk moved forward and studied the contents of the file Paige had knocked to the ground. He crouched and retrieved a photo of a man he knew well. “Why do you have this photo?”

“What?” Paige asked absently, then lunged forward and snatched up her documents. “That’s police business and not something I can discuss.”

“What’s going on?” Nathan demanded.

“Blaze Hawthorne here, sir,” Hawk moved forward. “We have a situation and I think it just got more complicated.”

“Paige called me this morning,” Nathan advised. “I believe my phone is being monitored and the conversation we had may be the reason Dax is in trouble.”

“It’s worse than you think,” Carmen provided. “Zeus was able to snap pictures of the men that took Dax. They gained entry by claiming they worked for Homeland Security but they don’t. The first man was William Broadbent and our suspicions about him are now confirmed. He’s working with the enemy. The second man, the one that shot Dax with some kind of medicated dart was Fakhir Nassar. I’ve confirmed it, sir. The pictures match.”

“What in the hell is Nassar doing in Utah?” Nathan demanded. “How did he enter the United States for that matter? He should have been identified immediately and detained.”

“I think I know,” Hawk said quietly. “But I’m unable to discuss it at this time. In fact, I’m not sure I could even discuss it with you in private. My information is still highly classified.”

“I’ve read through the file, the op plan, the details of Operation White Scorpion,” Nathan told him. “If we need to discuss that mission, I’ve been completely read in as of an hour ago.”

“That makes things easier,” Hawk relaxed. He grabbed the phone off the table and left the room.

“Anyone know what that was about?” Ken asked. “I’ve never heard of Operation White Scorpion.”

The room erupted in conversation. Nobody seemed to know anything about the mission. No one but her. Paige reached into her file and pulled out the summary. “I do.”

“What?” Thor barked. “How?”

Unexpected Threats

“Because this document was left at the murder scene on a case I’ve been investigating all day,” she held up the document. “While Rambo in there talks to the good general, let me read you a story.” Paige cleared her throat and began to read. When she finished, the room was silent.

Jeeves was the first to speak. “Okay, so Hawk and Dax cultivated an informant. One that was able to gain access to top-level Al Qaeda operatives. How does that play into this?”

“It plays,” Hawk said joining the group. “Because our informant is dead. Paige found his body this morning.”

“How...” Paige began.

“And if anyone asks, I didn’t just tell you that,” Hawk lowered himself into a chair and studied Paige. “I don’t know you but the general ordered me to read you in.” He turned to face Carmen. “He said you have a higher clearance level than me, but again... I don’t know you.”

“Hawk,” Zeus locked eyes with his friend. “I know them both and I’ll vouch for them. I can see Porter already did. Paige might not have clearance, but she’s solid. And she’s working the case for the locals. But honestly, none of that matters. She’s in love with our leader and the feeling is mutual. Read her in.”

The two men stared at each other for several seconds before Hawk looked away. He glanced around the room, stopping on each of his men before moving on. “I trust each of you with my life and with my secrets. I know without a doubt every man in this room would lie, without a flinch, if anyone asked if I shared top-secret information with them.” He turned to face Carmen, then Paige. “Would you?”

“Lie?” Carmen asked. “Absolutely, because this runs deeper than even you know. And before I came out here, my boss told me I should deny everything if cornered by anyone. And since my clearance is higher than yours, Mr. Hawthorne, I know more about the situation we’re dealing with than you do. In my opinion, if anyone asks... they’re working for the enemy and can’t be trusted. So, hell yeah, I’d lie... and I’d enjoy doing it.”

Hawk couldn’t help it, he smiled. “What about you?”

Paige studied the man sitting before her. She didn’t know him either and she wasn’t entirely sure she could trust him. “Lie to who?”

“Wrong answer,” Hawk stood and started to leave the room.

Paige grinned. “You know, trust is a two-way street. How do I know I can trust you to keep the information to yourself if asked?”

“Fair enough,” Hawk returned. “Yeah, I’d lie. You want to know why?”

Unexpected Threats

“I do,” Paige never blinked. The man was trying to exert his authority over her and it wasn’t going to work. They were in her town, and a madman was currently torturing the man she loved. She did love Dax. They’d never said it out loud, never expressed their feelings that way, but she loved him and she would do anything if it helped her get him back alive.

“Because Dax is more than a team leader,” Hawk told her. “Each and every man in this room would go to the wall for that man. We’d do it without hesitation, without reservation. We’d do it because Dax Hamilton has literally saved the life of every man in this room. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for him. Even if that means breaking my oath to this country and disclosing highly classified information to my team and a local deputy who doesn’t come close to having the necessary clearance to know the details.”

“Who is the man in the photo?” Paige asked.

“You don’t know?” Hawk asked.

“No,” Paige admitted. “We tracked the vehicle, it was a rental. The man was obviously using a fake name, but we were able to locate the cabin he’d been living out of through his financial records. The name is fake, but it’s good and he’s not stealing the money as far as we can tell. He opened the account himself. That photo was captured from a video at the car rental agency. We’re still trying to put a name... a real name, with the face.”

“Ahmed Al-Hashim,” Hawk provided. His expression went cold. “And if those two men killed him, they will pay dearly for their crime.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but first we have to find them,” Paige studied Hawk. He made her uncomfortable and she wasn’t entirely sure she could live with his idea of justice. She knew Dax was a seasoned military operative. She knew he was Special Forces, just like her father. But, Dax was compassionate and good. This man... he was hardened and cold. If Nathan told her to trust him, she would but she wondered if she could live with the means he used to get to the end.

“Can you tell us about Ahmed?” Zeus asked. “Why do you think he came here?”

“Ahmed was a good, honorable man,” Hawk began. “He lived a fairly good life with his wife and his young son. I think the boy was eight when a group of soldiers entered his village and slaughtered over fifty innocent, unarmed families. That is when Ahmed vowed he would get revenge. He was Kurdish, but he pretended to be Sunni. It was easy enough, records in Iraq are non-existent. He traveled for days to join their fight. Risked everything and convinced them he was on their side. Nobody knew he was part of the village they had destroyed days earlier. Nobody knew him at all. He had skills he learned as part of the Kurdish resistance, which allowed him to move up the ranks of this new army. Soon, he was meeting with top-level men.

Unexpected Threats

Terrorists that were responsible for horrific attacks. Most were individuals the FBI had on their most wanted list. The DOD did the same.

One day Ahmed was shopping in a haji mart when American soldiers entered the area, accompanied by their Kurdish translators. Dax just happened to be in the group and the man assigned to his unit was a distant relative of Ahmed's. Dax never told me what happened that day, but from what I gathered... he was injured saving Ahmed's life. Somehow, miraculously Ahmed was also able to maintain his cover. The two of them developed a friendship. The meetings were coordinated by Ahmed's cousin under the cover of darkness. All contact was kept secret from both sides. Dax insisted on it. He wanted to make sure when he left, Ahmed would be safe."

"What happened?" Jeeves asked.

"Ahmed funneled information to Dax. Dax developed and carried out op plans in a way that protected Ahmed but stopped the enemy. It worked and over the next year we took down a lot of bad guys," Hawk reminisced. "Then Ahmed came across something big. The operation that took down the towers was so successful, they wanted an encore."

"And you guys stopped it," Thor nodded. "Operation White Scorpion."

"Yes," Hawk agreed. "And still, nobody ever knew Ahmed was involved. We protected that man's identity. Paige just read you the summary. His name is never mentioned. There are only two people on earth that know Ahmed was involved. Me and Dax. I know I never told a soul and we all know Dax didn't either. So, the question I have now is why? Why was Ahmed here and why did Fakhir need to torture and kill him?"

"Are you sure he didn't give in?" Paige asked, remembering the damage to the body and knowing there was more she couldn't see due to the fire.

"I'm sure," Hawk said confidently. "Whatever they were after, they didn't get it from Ahmed. If I had to guess, it's the reason they wanted Dax."

"Part of the reason," Carmen corrected. "This thing is big. You know that. The fact Paige found classified information in the trunk of Ahmed's car tells us how high up the corruption goes. The fact Nathan sent out burner phones and refused to talk to any of us on his cell phone tells me there's more. Part of that is Dax. He scares them and he should. So, they need him out of the way before they try to implement their master plan. You guys know that better than anyone. But, I think maybe there's more. I intend to find out what. Excuse me, I have a call to make."

"Can you tell my favorite general that I'll be keeping Dax's phone until he returns," Paige asked. "These guys brought their own burners with them so they won't need this one." She turned to address Hawk. "You did bring your own, right?"

Unexpected Threats

“Right,” Hawk looked at Zeus. “Where does Dax keep his gear?”

“In his room, why?”

“Sat phone,” Hawk stood. “I need to know if he made a call today.”

“Who would he...?” Paige didn’t finish her question because the infuriating man had already left the room. She sat back, wondering what she was supposed to tell Jericho about the mess that had landed in their backyard. And Gage. Maybe she needed to call Nathan, too.

Paige was up before the sun. She had so many things running through her head. She flipped on her kitchen light and jumped in surprise when she saw Carmen sitting at her small table. “What are you doing here?”

“Coffee should be done,” Carmen stood. “And I need a cup before we talk.”

Paige filled her mug then moved to sit across from Carmen. “Talk.”

Carmen studied her friend, took a sip of coffee, and sighed. “You need to decide your boundaries.”

“Come again?”

“What are you willing to do to get Dax back and what line can’t you cross?” Carmen began. “I’ll use me as an example. Technically, I’m still employed by the FBI but I am assigned to Nathan. Nathan’s committee consists of FBI, CIA, Pentagon officials, Congressmen. Each group has a different set of rules. Some of the things Porter asks me to do would get me fired at the Bureau, but in my current assignment it’s perfectly okay. You used to be FBI, now you’re local PD. You have different rules. And... Well, those guys over there... every one of them is military. Not just military, they were Rangers. They have different rules of engagement than you. Different tactics, a different threshold. I guarantee there is going to come a time during this mission when you’ll have to make a decision. You will have to decide what you can live with if it means getting Dax home safely?”

“You want me to break the rules?” Paige frowned.

“Oh,” Carmen took another sip of coffee. “I want you to do so much more than that.”

“I think I’m still missing something,” Paige turned to stare out the window. The sun was finally starting to come up. She needed to wrap this up and get outside. She wanted to search the area where the men parked their car and look for evidence.

Unexpected Threats

“You are missing a lot,” Carmen admitted. “Some I can tell you, some I can’t. This is all connected. The reason I’m here. The threats to me. I had a long conversation with Nathan last night and he knows all of this. But, that car... the men that took Dax. They’ve been driving by my place for days. Zeus and I have been careful and I don’t think they know I live there. We tried to make it look like the place was rented by Zeus. Nathan is going to call me this morning and we’ll play like I’m still vacationing in Bali. Then we’ll cut off all communication on his regular line.”

“Is he being monitored, then?”

“Yes,” Carmen sighed. “And he’s frantic about it. He thinks it’s his fault Dax was abducted. They orchestrated this elaborate plan to make the locals believe Dax murdered that man. Then you called Nathan and immediately told him the plan didn’t work. A few hours later, Dax was taken. He thinks if he talked you into believing it was Dax, maybe...”

“It’s not his fault,” Paige insisted. “He tried to get off the phone but I wouldn’t let him. I continued on, talked over him and insisted he had to listen to me. If anyone is to blame, it’s me.”

“It’s the two men that showed up here and took Dax that we need to blame. Zeus is a mess, too. He was here and didn’t try to stop it. They threatened you, Paige. We think that’s the only reason Dax went so easily. He ordered Zeus to stand down.”

“And Zeus obeyed the order because Dax was his leader,” Paige realized. “He did the right thing. From what I know about Fakhir, if Zee had interfered, he’d be dead.”

“I agree, but that doesn’t make Zeus feel any better about all of this,” Carmen said soberly. “Which brings me back to my original point. I’m here because of Brian. We’ve been able to track his movement and I found some stuff on his computer. He stumbled onto a gun running operation out of Chicago. One that led to New Orleans... to a shipping yard. I’m not sure yet, but I think I can connect some of the illegal activity to the State Department.”

“Our government is running illegal guns?” Paige said in shock.

“High-level personnel at State and maybe the DOJ are running illegal guns,” Carmen corrected. “The ties are hidden with some of the players working for non-profits, generic memos and approval requests. It’s complicated and difficult to unravel, but I’ve been working on it for months. I’ve been able to track some of the shipments back from the incident with Brian. Now, Nathan tells me his phone is bugged and Tyler Lloyd was murdered. We have a mole on the committee and that hit Porter hard. He handpicked every member of that team. They all go way back. Before this, Nathan would have trusted those people with his life, he’s had them over for dinner, introduced them to his family, gone into battle with some of them. I’m worried about him. He’s not doing well and that’s dangerous. We need him at the top of his game if we’re going to survive this.”

Unexpected Threats

“I think I can help with that,” Paige decided. “I want to spend an hour or so going over Dax’s yard. There might be clues that will tell us where they took him. Once I’m finished, I’ll call Nathan. I might be able to get through to him. Is there anything else you’re not telling me?”

“No,” Carmen drank the last of her coffee. “Nathan had me do a deep run on all the guys in the unit. I think I trust them. Zeus trusts them and I couldn’t find anything even slightly suspicious on any of them. Nathan is understandably hesitant but unless one of them does something that brings their actions into question, I think we need to operate under the assumption they’re the good guys.”

“I agree,” Paige sat back. “Dax trusted them, too. He knows them, has gone on missions with them. I think we can assume their only mission here in Manti is to rescue their leader. And, I agree... they’ll use any means necessary to achieve their goal. I hadn’t thought of the rules of engagement issue,” Paige admitted. “You’re right... they are going to do things differently than I would. I’m going to have to talk to Jericho, see how he wants me to handle this from our end.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary,” Carmen stood. “Nathan said he’s going to call the sheriff and tell him as much as he can. He doesn’t want you getting in hot water over this, but it’s bigger than a simple homicide. This is a matter of national security and at the moment... everyone is under suspicion. Nathan will make sure Jericho doesn’t talk to anyone about the operation.”

“Well,” Paige stood. “I guess that makes my job easier. Now, you go back and see what Rambo and his band of militants have planned for the day and I’m going to search for clues.”

“What is she doing?” Hawk asked as he watched out the front window.

“What she does best,” Carmen said casually.

“She’s collecting dirt,” Hawk grumbled.

“She’s collecting evidence,” Carmen said without looking up from her computer screen.

“Whatever,” Hawk settled into a chair next to Carmen. “Have you traced the money?”

“No,” Carmen sighed. “I don’t feel like I’m getting anywhere. So, you better hope Paige finds a lead we can follow up on.”

“Jeeves,” Hawk called. “What do you have for me?”

Unexpected Threats

“Not much,” he admitted. “These guys are careful. It’s not like a normal mission. Not even the ones we’ve worked since we retired. We normally have weeks to gather facts and filter out the bad Intel. We’re running out of time but we don’t have a single thread to tug. There just aren’t any leads to follow.”

“Keep digging,” Hawk ordered. “Dax is counting on us. Ken? Maybe you should call Mo.”

“I’d like to wait on that,” Ken frowned. “After the ordeal with Zeus and the Mexican prison, those ties are a little strained.”

“I..”

“I’m not blaming you,” Ken interrupted. “I’m just saying I’d like to wait.”

“Fine,” Hawk relented. “But if we haven’t found anything two hours from now, you call Mo.”

Paige slid the tiny pieces of leather into a bag and checked the seal before looking up. Jericho had arrived. She straightened and waited for her boss to approach her.

“Did you find anything we can use?” Jericho asked.

“Maybe,” Paige held out the bag. “This looks like leather. Can you think of any old manufacturing plants, clothing warehouses, anything like that nearby? It would have to be vacant and secluded.”

“Not off hand, but I’ll do some checking,” Jericho offered. “How are you holding up?”

“Don’t ask,” Paige clamped her jaw tight in an attempt to hold back the emotions.

“What’s in the other bag?”

“I have some dirt samples I need analyzed,” she held out the bag. “I was thinking I might over-night them to Sean.”

“Split the sample,” Jericho told her. “Send some to Sean and give the other half to me. I’ll hand-deliver it to our lab and see what they can tell me. I know people, too.”

Paige held out the bag. “There’s more over there. I’ll get another sample for Sean and I won’t argue. We could use all the help we can get if we’re going to find Dax.”

“Paige,” Jericho sobered.

Unexpected Threats

“Don’t say it,” Paige shook her head. “I’m doing my best to work the case but I’m worried once I involve Sean, they’re going to try to take over. Fakhir is pretty high up on the ‘Must Capture’ list.”

“I’ll handle that,” Jericho assured her. “What can I do to help?” He glanced up and studied Dax’s house. “With them... or anything else.”

“I’m not sure how to handle them,” Paige admitted. “Carmen pointed out something I hadn’t thought of. Their methods are drastically different than ours. What they are allowed to do... or just do, that’s going to cross a line I can’t cross as a law enforcement officer. What am I supposed to do about that?”

“I trust you,” Jericho began. “But you’re right. You can’t control them and nobody expects you to. The main objective is to get Dax home safe. How they do that... honestly, I don’t care. I know I’m not supposed to say that, but I’ve grown attached to the kid. I care about him, too. And those men in there... any one of them would give their own life to protect Hamilton. I can see it in their eyes.”

“When did you talk to them?” Paige asked, surprised.

“Last night,” Jericho shrugged. “After I spoke with Porter. We’ve come to a tentative agreement. One I think I can live with and I hope you can, too.”

“Which is?”

“I’ll make myself available,” Jericho focused on Paige. “I’m not taking over your case but I want to be close. If anything questionable happens, I’ll take the heat for it. I don’t want you to be put in a position of defending yourself... or them.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Paige argued.

“I do,” Jericho disagreed. “And I will. If we catch one, or both of the men responsible. You can bet those guys are going to conduct an interrogation. I’m going to let them.”

“What if...”

“I’m going to back off,” Jericho clarified. “I’m going to write up a report that very clearly states the feds came in and requested a professional favor. They informed me the men were wanted in connection with terrorist activities and it was a matter of national security that I transfer custody to a team of Agent Wilken’s choice.”

“So,” Paige considered. “We are bringing Sean in on this?”

“We’re not,” Jericho corrected. “General Nathan Porter, retired, is... probably already has.”

“And Sean’s team?”

Unexpected Threats

“I have a feeling it will consist of Carmen and five egomaniac, control freak, retired Rangers,” Jericho grinned. “And I’m fine with that, too. Are you?”

Paige thought about the situation for several seconds. “Yeah, I’m fine with it.”

“Good,” Jericho gave her a quick pat on the back. “I can be reached on my cell phone if you need me.” He held up the bag of soil samples Paige had collected. “I’m going to see a lady about a dirt analysis. Wish me luck.”

“Do you think Margie could look into the old factory angle?” Paige called out as she held up the bag that contained a leather strip. “I think with the soil and the leather, we might be able to narrow down their location.”

“Send her a photo,” Jericho decided. “Then mail that to Sean as well. Maybe the feds can use that high tech equipment to tell us something about the material. In the meantime, I’ll have Marge checking abandoned buildings.”

“I’ll go take a picture now,” Paige scooped up another soil sample. “Then I’ll get these in the mail. Do you think Nathan already talked to Sean? I’d like to warn him they’re coming.”

“I’m sure he has,” Jericho yanked open his car door. “Give him a call, it should be safe.”

Paige finished packaging up the materials and stepped into the room where Carmen and the five men were huddled around her computer. “Did you guys find something?”

“I’m not sure,” Carmen admitted. “I hacked into the city’s camera system and I found something strange.”

“What?”

“Ahmed,” Hawk glanced up. “What’s that?”

“I’m sending them to the FBI to be analyzed,” Paige set the package on the table next to the front door. “What about the camera system?”

“Ahmed drove by this camera on Main Street twice a day, for several days, ending three days ago,” Carmen told her.

“You think he came here?” Paige surmised.

“Makes sense,” Zeus agreed. “If he was trying to talk to Dax, wouldn’t he stake out the house in hopes of catching him alone?”

Unexpected Threats

“But, Dax is rarely alone,” Paige provided.

“Right,” Zeus agreed. “Because I’m always here. But Nassar didn’t know that because they think I live at Carmen’s and that Williams guy was seriously surprised when I popped out and interrupted him on his first visit.”

“Would Ahmed leave something here?” Paige asked Hawk. “Would he break into the house when Dax was gone to make sure the information got into his possession somehow?”

“If he was desperate,” Hawk shrugged. “He’d probably leave it somewhere he considered it safe. I’m not sure he would try to break into the house, though. He’s not a skilled burglar, he’s a skilled soldier.”

“That might be something to think about after we find Dax,” Paige considered. “Anyway, does any of that help you? The traffic cams around the city?”

“Not so far,” Carmen slumped a little lower in her chair. “But, I’m not giving up. I have another search running over there,” she pointed to her laptop. “I’m working on it, Paige. If there’s something to find, I’ll find it.”

“I want to get those in the mail,” she told the group. “Sean called the delivery service and if I can get them to the office before five, they can have the package to the Bureau in less than three hours. We should have the results in the morning.”

“See ya,” Carmen gave a little wave. The men just stared and clearly thought analyzing dirt was a waste of time.

Dax tried to shift but stopped abruptly when his entire body erupted in pain. He could handle the stupid cattle prod. The electrical current was painful, but temporary. He could handle a fist to his kidney, his stomach and even his face. What he was having a hard time handling were the broken ribs. Normally, he could even handle that. But, right now, tied to this cold metal table, he just couldn’t find a position to relieve the pain.

Dax thought of Paige and hoped she was okay. They had threatened her, claimed they’d leave her alone if he came quietly, but men like Fakhir couldn’t be trusted. His mind started to wander and an image of Ahmed popped into his head. He shoved it back. He wouldn’t survive this if he let sorrow take root. With a little luck and a lot of talent, Zeus, Carmen and Paige would be able to track his location. But he couldn’t rely on luck. He knew it was up to him to escape on his own. If he wanted to survive, and he did want to survive, he’d need a plan. He had to find a way to get off this table and surprise the enemy. He gave his wrist another tug and

Unexpected Threats

nearly gave in to despair. There was no way he'd get out of the metal constraints on his own. They were welded to the table. He needed another plan. Hours later, he drifted off still trying to come up with a solution to an impossible problem. His only hope was pretending he had the information Ahmed came here to deliver. As long as they believed he was the only one that knew where it was, he'd live.

"Please tell me you have something," Paige said when she picked up the phone. She was groggy, irritable and dead tired. Dax had been gone more than thirty-six hours. Was it even possible he was still alive?

"I have something," Sean assured her. "The soil sample you gave me contained neatsfoot oil."

"I don't know what that is," Paige admitted.

"I didn't either," Sean smiled. "Grotto said they use it to oil saddles, to keep them pliable and protects it... if it gets wet."

"Saddles?" Paige considered. "And leather. I need to call Margie."

"I'm headed your way," Sean informed her. "I'll hook up with you after I drop my stuff with my sister. You're stuck with me until this is over so don't argue."

"No argument here," Paige said cheerfully. "I like working a case with my favorite Feebie."

"See you when I see you," Sean disconnected.

Two hours later, Paige was sitting in Hamilton's living room with five impatient, frustrated, angry men. She couldn't blame them, she was frustrated too. But, she didn't have to put up with their constant attacks and mumbled digs at her, her profession, or her competence. She was about to confront Hawk directly when the doorbell rang. "I got it." She stopped to peek out the window, then flung the door open and smiled at the two men standing just outside. "You, I was expecting," she pointed to Sean. "Why are you here?" she asked Havilland.

"Margie sent me," Havi smiled. "And I thought you might need backup."

Unexpected Threats

Paige rolled her eyes. “You thought right. Come in, tell me what you found.” She escorted the men through the living room... past five sets of prying eyes... into the kitchen. “Want a soda or something. Or, if you’re off duty there’s beer.”

“We’re good,” they both said at once.

“Do you have a laptop or something handy?” Havi asked. “I need you to pull up a map of the area.”

“Carmen?” Paige asked, sensing her friend just outside the door.

“On it,” Carmen rushed to her desk, grabbed the computer and headed back to the kitchen, Zeus on her tail.

Paige glanced up to see that Hawk had also followed.

“If you guys want to join us, we can take this back in the living room,” Paige said coyly. “I just thought since I was so inept at my job, you wouldn’t be interested. I mean, I’m a lowly cop in a small town. I’m sure you brilliant military guys have something far more important to handle while we speak among ourselves.”

“We didn’t say that,” Hawk protested. “We simply asked if you had anything new. The attitude, well that’s on you. This isn’t a competition, Paige. I realize we don’t know each other, but if we’re going to save Dax... it would help if we could start working together.”

“I agree... together. As a team. It would also help if you stopped treating me like you’re the expert and I’m the pion,” she countered. “Because my skills might not be all muscle and tactics but they just generated our first lead.”

“Are we done here?” Havi glared at Hawk. “Because I’m pretty sure I know where those men were before they parked in the driveway out there.”

“Where?” Carmen asked.

“Pull up Manti on the map,” Havi ordered.

Carmen went into her classified satellite imagery system and pulled up Manti.

Havi raised an eyebrow. “May I?” he pointed to the computer.

Carmen immediately slid the laptop across the coffee table, positioning it in front of Havilland.

“Margie and I were talking,” Havi provided as he zoomed in closer. “And with the new information from the soil, we realized we were thinking too big.”

Unexpected Threats

“The warehouses and factories you mean?” Paige asked.

“Right,” Havi stopped playing with the map and looked at Paige. “I remembered the old saddle shop... Saddledoo, I think.”

“Old?” Jeeves asked.

“Yeah,” Havi turned to look at the stranger. “The old man started it years ago. He lived out here...” Havi pointed to the map. “Pretty far away from the main part of town. He got tired of riding his horse for miles when he needed simple leatherwork done. So, he figured it out for himself and then started making repairs for his neighbors. Other ranchers in the area with minor saddle repair work. His daughter grew up in the shop and picked it up and ran with it when he passed. She actually made saddles as well as making repairs.”

“Are they still there?” Paige asked.

“No,” Havi shook his head. “The kid... I think her name was Alice, no Andie. She met a guy, got married and when they had their first kid they decided to move out of state somewhere. The place is still out there, but it’s vacant. I suspect the family still owns the land... well, and the shop but it hasn’t been operational for years. Too far out of the way for any other kind of business I think.”

“Show us where it is,” Paige insisted. “Is that the road to Laurel Bluffs?”

“It is,” Havi agreed. “The property is on the border. It’s technically in both unincorporated Sanpete and Laurel Bluffs but the buildings are on the Sanpete side.” He moved the mouse to follow the old road that was no longer maintained and stopped when two buildings came into view. “This one,” Havilland pointed to one of the buildings, “is obviously the house. This one was the shop.”

“Can I see that?” Hawk asked. He took the computer, zoomed out and started taking notes on a small pocketbook. “Do you know what this is?” He glanced up and focused on Havilland.

“Nothing, really.” Havilland pointed to a section of the map that was a different color than the rest. “Over here used to be a large coral. That section was the feeding and loading area for horses and cattle. It’s basically a large meadow now.”

“Have you been out there recently?”

“Sure,” Havi shrugged.

“Could we land a helicopter in that area?” Hawk glanced at Ken.

“There were logs piled up over here the last time I was out there,” Havilland pointed to a section off to the side. “But this area should be large enough for a bird.”

Unexpected Threats

Hawk gave Ken a nod and the man disappeared out the back door.

“Won’t they hear us coming?” Paige asked.

“Maybe,” Hawk studied Paige for several seconds. “You asked me to include you. I’m going to include you. My team will drop in here,” he pointed to a grassy area between the house and the saddle shop. “We drop in, rappel from the bird and hit the residence first. If they’re out there, that’s where Fakhir will be. The chopper will land here,” he pointed to the meadow. “And you and the fed offload and join us.”

“Jericho will insist on coming as well,” Paige informed him. “I don’t know about Havi, that’s the sheriff’s call. I do have a question, though.”

“Go ahead,” Hawk prompted.

“You only have five guys. If one of them is flying the helicopter that means four. How are you going to secure the house and the shop? That’s too few men. They could slip out the back and get away without you even knowing they were there.”

“Trust me,” Hawk looked at each of his men. “Five men is more than enough. We’ve handled larger operations with fewer resources more times than I could count. And, the pilot is extra...that makes six.”

“Fine,” Paige decided. “I’ll trust you with tactics. I need to make a couple calls. Nathan needs an update and I need to bring Jericho in.” She stood and left the room.

“Mr. Nassar!” Williams frantically called. “They found us. We must leave.”

“How?” Nassar barked in frustration. He still didn’t have answers and he was growing impatient with this prisoner.

“The woman,” Williams explained. “The female cop. The one that figured out Hamilton didn’t commit the murder. She’s too smart for a small town like this. She retrieved soil samples from the driveway and had them analyzed. Tiny particles apparently fell from our tires. There was something in the soil that led to this old shop. They are already developing a plan to invade. We must leave immediately.”

Fakhir threw the cattle prod against the wall in frustration. “I will leave. Get my bag. I’ll have to drug the prisoner and transport him to the secondary location. We can’t risk escape. You stay behind and clear out the house. Make sure there is nothing left behind that could lead

Unexpected Threats

those men to our other compound. Be quick, clean up and then follow me out. Go, get my bag. We must leave. I'll need your help to get Hamilton in the back of the car."

Paige climbed into the helicopter and settled in next to Jericho. She was a little surprised and extremely impressed at how quickly these men developed a plan of attack, then put the thing in motion without hesitation. She studied Dax's friends, focusing on each one as they double-checked their gear and prepared for take-off. She shouldn't be surprised, this is what they did. They were the experts. Trained men who had executed countless missions in worse conditions than these. And, Dax had been their leader on most of them. She had a new appreciation for the life he left behind, and had to remind herself the man she loved wasn't just a small town carpenter. He was a dangerous, well-trained machine. Just like the five soldiers currently crowded into a Black Hawk helicopter that was taking up the entire parking lot of the local Sheriff's Office. Good thing visiting hours were over at the jail. She was extremely curious and wondered how in the world the team had arranged for the military transport but didn't dare ask. What would she do if they said it was stolen? Borrowed without permission? Redirected from a training mission? No, she wouldn't ask. She'd remain blissfully ignorant.

Paige watched out the window as they flew over the city. She marveled at how different the place she now called home looked from this vantage point. They continued past back roads and within minutes the pilot began a slow decent at what looked like mere inches above the tall pines. The team began their last equipment check before sliding open the large door and moving methodically toward the opening. Paige continued to stare as five men disappeared in seconds. Moments later, the helicopter came to a gentle stop in a meadow just a few yards away.

Jericho, Sean, and Paige jumped from the bird and ran toward a secluded building they hoped contained a man they all cared for and respected.

"Dax?" Paige called as she darted into the empty building that used to be a successful saddle shop. She froze when she saw the metal table and the four thick metal rings welded in the perfect position to secure two arms and two legs. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the blood. Suddenly, large hands were resting on her shoulders and someone forcefully turned her around and pushed her outside. *How long had she been in there, anyway?*

"You don't need to see that," Jericho pulled her into his arms and held her while she regained her composure. "Is he..." she couldn't say it. Couldn't ask.

"No," Jericho assured her. "I don't think so. I think they were warned. Somehow they knew we were coming and one of the men escaped with Dax. It sounds like he's been relocated."

Unexpected Threats

“What?” Paige pushed away and straightened. “How could they know? That’s impossible. How did they find out we were coming?”

“I don’t know,” Jericho said honestly. “Hawk is trying to get information from the guy that called himself Williams but he’s clammed up. I’d like to join them. Do you think you can handle it?”

“Let’s go,” Paige said angrily. “I want answers.”

The two of them walked into the residence and joined the other men. Sean was leaning against the wall. Thor had wrapped his large arms around their suspect and currently had the man securely locked in place against his big chest. Hawk was trying to get answers. Ken was standing next to Sean and Zeus and Jeeves were missing.

“Where is he?” Paige demanded. “Where is Dax?”

Williams glanced up, spotted Paige and smiled. “I want a lawyer.”

Apparently, Williams’s cocky attitude set Thor off because he lifted the man in the air and marched out the door. The rest of the men followed.

“Where are you taking him?” Paige demanded as she stepped outside and glanced around. She turned to her boss. “What are they doing?”

“Let’s give them a few minutes,” Jericho decided.

“But...” Paige began.

“Paige,” Jericho said sternly. “This is no longer our investigation. Do you remember when I told you my intention was to engage in a little professional cooperation?”

“Yes,” Paige said slowly.

“Well,” Jericho studied the closed door that led to the saddle shop - where the men had disappeared. “It started several minutes ago. We apprehended the man who was impersonating an officer. At that time, Agent Sean Wilkins informed me the FBI was looking for Mr. Broadbent in connection with terrorist activity. In the spirit of cooperation, I immediately transferred custody of our prisoner to the feds. I have no idea what happened to the guy once he was no longer my prisoner. And, neither do you. We are not going into that building and that’s an order.”

“Do you think they strapped him to that table? The one with blood... Dax’s blood. Where they...” Paige stopped and swallowed hard.

“I have no idea,” Jericho shrugged. “I hope so. I hope they scare that man so severely he has nightmares for the rest of his miserable life.”

Unexpected Threats

Paige glanced up in surprise. “I thought...”

“You thought I’d give in to his idiotic demand for a lawyer?” Jericho asked. “Not likely. I have no idea what those boys plan to do with that man, but at the moment I’m thinking of myself as a means kind of guy.”

“How did they know?” Paige asked again. “We kept it to ourselves. The only outside help we got was at the FBI lab, with the samples and that Black Hawk. How did they know?”

“That is something I intend to look into,” Jericho said as he continued to watch the closed door. “If there’s a leak, I plan to find it.”

“What if...” Paige yanked out her burner phone. “I need to call Nathan.”

“Go ahead,” Jericho continued to stare at the door. He tried not to speculate on what was happening inside.

“Paige,” Nathan answered on the first ring. “Did you get him?”

“No,” Paige wiped away a tear. Somehow, the instant she talked to Nathan everything became real... and so much worse. “They have William Broadbent. The Ranger’s I mean, they’re trying to question him as we speak. They knew. Somehow they knew we were coming and Nassar moved Dax to another location before we got here. Nathan, how did they know?”

Nathan Porter seethed. “I’ll look into it. I promise, I will get to the bottom of this. Do you still trust the men? The unit, I mean. Do you think one of them could have tipped them off?”

“No,” Paige considered. “No, I don’t think it was us. I know it wasn’t Sean or Jericho or Havilland. Do you think... what if they are monitoring the house? You said this goes high up. What if they planted something to monitor us? Is that possible?”

“Is Carmen with you or did she stay at Hamilton’s place?”

“No,” Paige slid her hand into her pocket. “She’s at my house with Gage and Havi. She didn’t feel safe out here and she didn’t want to stay there alone. I asked the guys to keep her company at my place until we get back.”

“I’ll call her,” Nathan assured her. “She has the equipment to do a thorough scan. If they planted something, she’ll find it and remove it.”

“No,” Paige said quickly. “Leave it. We might be able to use it. If they have a way to monitor us, we might be able to throw them off. You know, give them a false sense of security. We can move the operation to my place. Have Carmen scan my house first. Make sure it’s safe. Then we’ll deal with my neighbor’s. If we find something there, let’s figure out a way to use it to our advantage. If not, you have another mole to uncover. And, I’d start at the lab.”

Unexpected Threats

“It could be both,” Nathan decided. “Are you okay?”

“It’s Dax you should be worried about.”

“But...” Nathan paused. “I’m talking about the interrogation. Are you going to be okay?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Paige decided. “Jericho turned the prisoner over to the feds. We assume he’s being transported to a secure facility where he can stand trial for his crimes.”

“That’s my girl,” Nathan smiled. “Remember that company line and you really should forget about the guy. Just don’t think about it and it won’t bother you.”

“Are you telling me he’s going to be tortured?” Paige wondered.

“No,” Nathan disagreed. “I have no idea what’s going to happen to him. I’m telling you, neither one of us needs to know.”

Just then, Zeus and Jeeves exited the main residence. “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you when I get home.”

Zeus made his way to Paige, Jeeves stopped to talk to Jericho.

“What now?” Paige asked.

“I’ll go see what Thor and Hawk got out of the guy,” Zeus shrugged. “There’s nothing in the house that will help, but you’re the evidence expert. Maybe you should give it another go.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “I’ll do a search. What if he doesn’t talk? What will you guys do?”

“I think Ken is calling Mo,” Zeus said softly.

“Isn’t Mo the guy that helped Dax when he and Ken went after you?” Paige asked, wondering what Mexico had to do with this.

“He is,” Zeus confirmed. “He’s a cop, the Federales.”

“That’s not how you say it,” Paige rolled her eyes. “It’s Policia Federal, bozo.”

“Toe...mato, Toe...matto,” Zeus smiled. “Let me see what the plan is and I’ll fill you in, okay?”

“Zeus,” Paige grabbed his arm. “They knew we were coming. I’m going to ask this because I have to...”

Unexpected Threats

“No,” Zeus answered. “It wasn’t one of us. It wasn’t the pilot, either. We have a problem, a leak somewhere but it wasn’t one of us.”

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “That’s what I told Nathan.”

Zeus smiled in approval. “Be careful, girlie. Another day or two and you just might start thinking of yourself as part of the team.”

“I think I already do,” Paige said softly.

Paige did her best to search the tiny residence, but there was nothing to be found. She ran through it twice before stepping back onto the front porch in defeat. She stepped forward and stopped next to Jericho who was leaning against a sturdy wooden railing. The two of them stood silently, pondering their next move. Several minutes later, Hawk exited the other building. “I thought I’d bring the two of you up to speed. The man isn’t talking. He’s cocky, thinks he’ll get a lawyer and turn the tables on us. Maybe have us arrested and he knows your buddy in there is a fed. He’s trying to use that as leverage. Thinks he can claim police brutality or something. Basically, I think I got all I’m going to from him.”

“What does that mean?” Paige asked.

“It means,” Hawk glanced at Jericho. “We’re transporting him to another location. Somewhere he doesn’t feel so confident.”

Jericho gave the slightest nod.

“Where?” Paige asked. “Like Gitmo or something?”

Hawk laughed. “That would be a possibility if we had the time, but no. Ken called Mo. They’re working out a plan as we speak. Some little village where they can meet up in private.”

“Mo is in Mexico,” Paige pointed out.

“Exactly,” Hawk confirmed. “Alejandro Molina is a police officer in Mexico. Ken sent him photos of the two men that abducted Dax and requested his assistance. Mo happily agreed, but he insisted we transport our prisoner to him. There’s a village on the border. I’m told it’s half US, half Mexico. He wants to meet there. Mo recognized both of the men immediately and he’s rather anxious to have a little chat with our good friend Williams in there.”

“Why?” Paige asked.

“Because Mo has been looking for the duo. He also answered the question of how Nassar snuck into this country without detection,” Hawk told her. “Williams apparently met up with Nassar in Mexico. The two of them obtained weapons and a rather extensive collection of drugs before heading for the border. Williams helped Nassar sneak into America with the assistance of

Unexpected Threats

a seasoned coyote. Unfortunately, they encountered a man by the name of Diego Cardenas who tried to stop them.”

“What happened?” Jericho asked, but he already knew.

“Nassar killed Diego, shot him between the eyes and left him to be scavenged by animals,” Hawk provided.

“Friend or relative?” Paige asked.

“Fellow police officer,” Hawk answered. “Mo says Diego was a good man. Had a wife and two kids. Some of the cops have a bad name, people think they are all corrupt but not Mo and he says not Diego. They were just hard working cops like you, and Nassar gunned one of them down out of convenience. Plus, Mo owes Dax. He wants to do what he can to help.”

“Are you okay with this?” Paige asked Jericho.

“I am,” Jericho told her. “Sounds like a legal extradition to me. We captured a fugitive and turned him over to the FBI. The feds were informed the man was wanted in Mexico on a homicide charge. Sounds like these guys are being extremely cooperative and understanding. I wish you luck in your travels.”

Paige stared at her boss in shock. “No reservations?”

“None,” Jericho said. “In fact, I’m relieved. I was afraid these guys would have to do something unpleasant to get the man to talk. Once he’s out of the country, he becomes someone else’s problem. It’s a way to maintain our integrity... as a country, I mean.”

Paige turned on Hawk. “If Dax dies because you’re driving that man all the way to Mexico to have him interrogated, I will never forgive you.”

Hawk grinned. “Who said anything about driving?” He gave her a wink and walked away.

“Are they taking the helicopter?” Paige demanded of Jericho. “What about us?”

“If I had to guess,” Jericho smiled. “I’d say those two vehicles are for us.”

Paige watched the men’s Navigator and Carmen’s SUV pulled up the drive. Gage, Havi and Carmen jumped out and approached their colleagues.

“Nathan sent us,” Carmen explained. “And I have information on that other thing. You are going to have roomies for the foreseeable future.”

“That means we’ll need to sit down and try to remember everything we’ve discussed in that house,” Paige frowned. “It’s going to be impossible.” She turned as Ken and Thor escorted their prisoner from the building. Williams was still smiling as they made their way across the open

Unexpected Threats

yard. He sobered when they walked right past Paige and her group and continued into the narrow woods. The rest of the men joined their group. Apparently, only Ken and Thor would accompany the prisoner on to his new destination.

“Where are you taking me?” he screamed. “I demand a lawyer.”

Paige thought she should feel sorry for the man. She expected to feel something... sympathy, unease, apprehension. But, she didn't. His attitude only made his actions seem more egregious somehow. He sold out his country, smuggled a terrorist into the homeland illegally and stood by - maybe even helped - while his partner killed an innocent cop who was just trying to do his job. No, Paige didn't have a problem with the plan. Not now that she saw how unrepentant the man was about everything he'd done. Not when she thought of Dax, alone somewhere with a madman that had tortured, killed and mutilated the body of another good man.

She stood there, gazing into the darkened trees long after the two soldiers and their prisoner had disappeared. She continued to watch and listen as Williams screamed for help in the distance. Then, she shifted slightly and watched the skyline as the distinct sound of a helicopter filled the air. The group waited silently as the pilot prepared for lift-off. Then, they stood mesmerized as the flying transport vehicle passed overhead, continued over the old dirt road and finally disappeared.

Jericho turned to Paige and wrapped an arm around her shoulders as he guided her toward the vehicles. “Let's go home.”

TO BE CONTINUED...