

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Hostile Annihilation *Season 2, Episode 9*

by:

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Previously on Paige Carter...

Dax is missing, abducted by a dangerous terrorist. He's survived captivity so far because the madman who has imprisoned him needs answers. An Iraqi informant who is also a good friend of Dax's has been murdered. A group of former Rangers, retired members of the team Dax commanded, have converged on Manti to find their leader by any means necessary. Williams, a former CIA contractor posing as an agent with Homeland Security, has been captured and transported to Mexico in hopes of obtaining information on Dax's whereabouts. The team frantically tries to gather clues before it's too late.

Dax slowly slid his left eye open and cautiously surveyed his surroundings. It only took a couple seconds to confirm he was still alone. The floor he'd been dumped on was a cold piece of concrete, the walls were covered in brick so ancient it had started to crumble, but he'd hit the jackpot with the two old, foggy windows that practically covered the adjacent wall. The glass was probably shatter-proof, but he could work with that. The room was much smaller than the large warehouse he'd been held in before - with none of the custom-made amenities. Clearly, the duo hadn't had the time to make the same preparations in this backup location as they had in the first one. Dax smiled. His luck had just turned. Instead of being in an impossible situation, he was merely in a difficult one.

He was still groggy from whatever drug Nassar had given him before he made a hasty get-away. Unfortunately, Dax had no idea how long he'd been out or where he was now being held. What he did know... the trip was unplanned and his captors were in a panic. Did that mean his friends had discovered where he was being held and Nassar had to move fast? Clearly, someone had caused significant problems for the crazy terrorist. But, in his haste, Nassar had made a serious mistake. Dax could tell his arms were secured with plastic zip ties. And, the ignorant man had mistakenly tightened the things as forcefully as he could. No slack, which meant they would be easy to cut.

Once Dax found a sharp surface, he'd be free. But first, he needed an escape plan. He wouldn't have long and Nassar still had a gun. Dax did not. He'd need to cut the plastic ties and escape immediately. It made things more difficult, the fact he had no idea where he currently was, but he'd have to wing that part. The first step was to locate the weak point in this structure and exploit it. Then, he'd break the ties and run. It wouldn't be easy. He was sure at least two ribs were broken and his ankle was now swollen and tender. Didn't matter. He had endured worse and he'd get through this, too. He had to.

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Ahmed had sacrificed his own life to personally deliver Intel to Manti. That alone made escape a necessity. But, equally important to Dax was making sure his friend didn't give his life for nothing. Once he was free, he'd figure out what the wily Iraqi had known. What he had wanted to give Dax. His body tightened at the noise just outside the heavy metal door. He quickly slammed his eyes shut and forced his body to remain perfectly still. He needed more time.

Paige sat in a comfortable lounge chair facing the large front window. She barely noticed the sturdy wooden rails that held up her front patio, barely noticed the giant old oak that she had always loved, barely noticed the beautiful mountains in the background, all she could see was that horrible room with the offensive metal table, the blood, and the sturdy restraints that nobody could escape... not even Dax.

Jericho moved across the room and settled into the chair next to Paige. "Stop thinking about it."

Paige glanced up and spotted Zeus outside, where was he going alone? "What?"

"If you let the emotions overwhelm you, if all you see is the blood and allow your imagination to run wild, you will never be able to investigate," Jericho said seriously. "I know that better than anyone."

Paige studied her boss... and her friend. He did know. He'd let emotions get in the way when her mother was murdered and by the time he bounced back, the investigation had been bungled beyond repair. "I understand, I do, but there's nothing to investigate. We're all stuck here waiting...the waiting is going to kill me." She glanced around the room at the remaining men and realized the waiting was getting to them as well. "It's going to kill us all."

"Paige," Jericho gave her knee a couple pats. "Stop acting like a scared girlfriend and be a cop. Dax is counting on you. I'm counting on you, Nathan Porter is counting on you, and even if they don't know it... those guys over there are counting on you."

"To do what," Paige ran her hands through her hair in frustration. "I don't have any clues to follow. There wasn't any evidence. You know I went through that farmhouse thoroughly. Then, I went through it again. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to think like a cop," Jericho sat back and raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"Meaning?" Paige asked.

"Meaning there was a lead, you missed it."

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“What? You found something I missed?” Paige said surprised. “What? Show me.”

“I realized something we all missed,” Jericho corrected. “Something you would have caught while we were still out at that dilapidated farmhouse if it wasn’t Dax’s life on the line.”

“What did we miss?” Paige demanded. “Jericho, we’re running out of time here.”

“Think... like a cop,” he added. “Havilland concluded the saddle shop was the only possible location and brought his deductions straight to you.” Jericho knew Paige was frustrated with him, but he needed her to re-engage. She wouldn’t do that if he just handed her his lead. She had to work it out on her own. Because Jericho was pretty sure, her keen mind was the only thing that would save her man... and at the moment, she was reacting to her emotions.

“Nassar knew we were coming because they were monitoring Dax’s house,” Paige said in frustration. “We all know that. What are you getting at?”

“And the two men began preparations to move their prisoner,” Jericho said unfazed.

“Or they killed Dax and Nassar headed out to dispose of the body,” Paige said soberly.

“No, they didn’t,” Hawk said, joining them. “Dax is still alive.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Paige disagreed.

“I do,” Hawk settled onto the couch. “Because if Dax was dead, they wouldn’t have bothered with the body. Nassar is wanted by pretty much everyone. If Dax was dead and he knew we were on the way, he would have simply left the body strapped to that table.”

“I agree with Hawk,” Jericho studied Paige, she still hadn’t realized what he was trying to tell her.

“So what did we miss?” Paige pushed.

“You tell me,” Jericho didn’t budge.

“You think we missed something?” Hawk demanded. Jericho ignored him.

“Okay,” Paige sighed. “They knew we were coming and let’s say, for argument’s sake, that you’re right. Dax is still alive. Hassan would know his prisoner is dangerous so how did they get him out of there?”

“They dragged him outside to the car,” Hawk provided.

“What makes you think so?” Paige turned on Hawk.

“The drag marks that went from the table, all the way down the hall and out the door,” Hawk said in challenge.

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“I didn’t notice drag marks,” Paige focused on Jericho. “And that’s your point. I missed something pretty obvious because I was too freaked out by that table and the blood.”

“Because you were emotionally involved,” Jericho corrected. “But, yes.”

“Okay,” Paige closed her eyes. “So, they drugged Dax... it’s the only way to get him to cooperate, especially since Nassar was heading out alone with a dangerous enemy. I agree that’s the most likely scenario but how does it help and what clue am I still missing?” Paige waited but Jericho remained eerily quiet. “Fine. Williams stayed behind then we showed up and captured him.” Paige furrowed her brow and focused out the window. “Why did Williams stay behind?” She focused on Hawk.

The three of them remained silent for several seconds. “I have no idea,” Hawk finally said. “It would have made more sense for all three of them to leave together just in case something went wrong. Williams could drive and Nassar could ensure Dax’s compliance.”

“Because he was supposed to clean up,” Paige realized. “He stayed behind to make sure they didn’t leave any clues for us to find. They knew we found them with the soil. Nassar wasn’t cutting ties. If he was, Williams would be dead. He wouldn’t leave a loose-end like that. Not when he could be captured and questioned... which is exactly what happened.” Paige focused on Jericho. “But how? We didn’t find a car. He appeared to be stranded out there, alone.”

Hawk glanced at Jericho then focused back on Paige. They had a point and the group had been so focused on their prisoner and evacuating him to Mexico none of them had done a thorough search for transportation.

Paige jumped to her feet. “I’m going back.”

“We’re going back,” Jericho stood. “But we’ll need to take separate cars. I have a meeting I can’t miss. I can only give you a couple hours at the farmhouse. I’m afraid if I reschedule, the individual I’m meeting with might not be as cooperative. Once I’ve finished, I’ll head back here and see if there’s been any progress.”

“I have to wait for Zeus to return,” Hawk also stood. “Carmen asked him to try to get pictures of the device attached to Dax’s back porch. She thinks she can identify the manufacturer through the serial number. As soon as he returns, I’ll gather up the boys and head your way.”

“You don’t...” Paige stopped and shrugged. “I’ll call you if I find anything before you arrive.” She turned and followed Jericho out the door, grabbing her jacket and slipping it on as she descended the front steps. “Who are you meeting?”

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“Samara,” Jericho paused. “I think she’s holding back. I scheduled the meeting before Dax went missing. I think if I talk to her alone, I might get her to confide the rest.”

“What do you think she’s holding back?” Paige frowned.

“I think she knows at least some of the guy’s names from that night,” Jericho sighed. “When Tracey was attacked at the party up the canyon. She said Tracey was engaged with a group from another school before a larger group from Manti interrupted the conversation. I think she knows at least some of the names of the boys from Manti.”

“Why would she hold that back?” Paige wondered.

Jericho shrugged. “That’s what I want to find out. Could be she’s scared, could be she actually knows who attacked Tracey... and Chaya.”

“I don’t think she knows, but I do think she was scared,” Paige considered. “I couldn’t tell if she was afraid of him because he’s stronger and a physical threat, or if she’s afraid of his power.”

“I got the same feeling,” Jericho agreed. “It might be a combination of both. Plus, taken as a whole, a group of athletes would be intimidating to someone like Samara. I am fairly confident she doesn’t know who attacked her friends... which only makes her more cautious and suspicious of all of them.”

“I think you’re right,” Paige told him. “If so, having me with you might make things more difficult. See you at the farmhouse,” she said before she jumped into her vehicle and backed out of the drive.

Zeus pulled out the small point and shoot camera the feisty woman had shoved at him and began to take pictures. He smiled as he worked. Carmen was a beauty, but she also had brains. In his experience that was a rare combination and something to be cherished. The warning Dax had given him the day he was abducted screamed in his head. Was he taking Carmen for granted? Was he going to lose her because he was terrified of commitment? He shoved the worry away and the fear, it was not the time to focus on his relationship. He needed to focus on Dax. Once he was sure he had captured the sophisticated bug from every angle possible, he shoved the camera back in his pocket and started back toward Paige’s house. He’d only taken two steps when he decided to walk the perimeter. If they were going to run this like a normal op, they should probably follow their normal protocol.

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Thinking of normal protocol, made his mind shift to his friend and leader. Dax was the best man Zeus knew. They couldn't fail him. None of them would be the same if they didn't find Dax in time. His thoughts returned to the prisoner that Thor and Ken had escorted to Mexico. Hopefully, his friends could get answers; some kind of actionable Intel that would help locate the elusive lunatic that had captured his friend and mentor. For about the hundredth time, Zeus questioned his own actions. Or, more to the point, inaction. He had never disobeyed an order, but maybe this one time... he should have. Would Dax be safe right now if he had?

Zeus's mind was still preoccupied as he made his way through the thick trees that lined the back side of Dax's property. He was abruptly pulled back to the present when he heard movement behind him. He whipped around and came face to face with a stranger, his only thought... he was going to be too late.

Daniel was crouched in his favorite spot, fully hidden by the cover of trees. Something was going on and he wanted to know what. Had Paige called in a group of her federal friends to help bring down the man that had killed her mother? Did she know it was him? Did she feel so threatened that she brought in five big, strong men to protect her? He liked that idea. A smile spread across his face as he reveled in the power. He was a dangerous man that shouldn't be crossed. He proved that years ago with Tracey... then again with Chaya. Of course, in his mind both of those incidents had been self-defense. Something that couldn't be avoided. Manti's newest deputy was different. With Paige, he'd gone on the offense. And, it was a good thing he had. Paige Carter was digging up old skeletons... she should be scared. She was going to need all the help she could get. And, if he got the chance, he would reunite her with her mother. Maybe sooner than planned. This entire situation was getting out of control.

Daniel's heart began to beat a little faster at the idea of killing a cop. No, he wasn't a killer. He was just a practical man that was willing to do anything necessary to preserve his own life. Plus, he was now married. He had to protect his wife. She'd never survive a scandal. Anyway, nobody would really miss Paige Carter. Her entire family was now dead. Really, he'd be doing her a favor. He pushed to his feet, turned and spotted that man that was currently headed his way.

Daniel froze, terrified of the muscular form moving towards him. It took several seconds before he realized the intruder didn't know he was there. He dropped to the ground and frantically began searching for a weapon. His eyes landed on a large branch that had fallen from a nearby tree. If he could just get behind the stranger, he might be able to knock him out and escape. This one had been in town for a while now. He wasn't one of the newcomers Paige had invited to help. No, he was some friend of the nosey carpenter that lived next door. But, clearly still a threat.

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Daniel had to try, he had to succeed, otherwise he was going to get caught lurking somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. And if this guy, or anyone for that matter, saw him... Paige and Jericho would know he was the man they'd been looking for. He couldn't risk it, the sheriff could never know he was involved. Daniel slid sideways, slowly making his way toward the fallen branch. Once he was in position, he slowly, silently raised it above his head. Then he charged.

Zeus didn't recognize the man trying to attack him, he didn't have time to think of anything but defense. As the stranger swung the large branch at Zeus' head, he raised his arm and deflected... or attempted to. The man missed his target, barely. But, a sharp broken edge of one of the branches sliced through the sleeve on Zeus' sweatshirt. Pain radiated up his forearm just before he felt the sticky liquid saturate his sleeve.

Zeus was struck with so much force, far more than he'd expected, that he had to take a step back to steady himself. Unfortunately, in his attempt to brace for another blow, his foot caught the edge of a fallen tree and he stumbled, lost his balance and landed hard on his already injured hip. Excruciating pain flowed through his entire torso, blackness threatened to overcome him but he was a soldier, passing out was not an option. He gritted his teeth and focused on the trunk of a nearby tree until the sensation passed. Once he was sure he was stable again, he pushed to his feet and, using all his senses, located his target. The stranger was running towards the back road.

Zeus forced his body to comply as he broke into a dead run. The instant he broke through the trees, he stopped at the edge of the dirt road and realized he was too late. A dark colored Camaro with no plate was speeding away. He watched as the vehicle made the turn around a curve too fast, waited as the back tires slide smoothly to the left then caught and propelled the vehicle forward. He continued to watch as the vehicle disappeared leaving a thick cloud of dust in its wake. When he was sure the guy was gone for good, Zeus turned and began limping his way back to the house. Identifying the intruder would have to wait. Carmen needed her photos. Was he connected to the situation with Dax or was it just Paige's voyeur again? Zeus sighed and slowly made his way across the backyard and into the kitchen. He'd clean up a little before he joined his friends.

Daniel pulled into the ancient garage and shut down the engine. He was in trouble, big trouble. He needed a plan. The man in the woods saw his face. Daniel had narrowly escaped this time. At least nobody knew about the restored car. They'd never trace that back to him. But, the man saw his face. And once the no-good, interfering nuisance told Paige and Dax what happened, they would surely know who he was. Did they already know? He couldn't risk discovery. He couldn't go to jail. He needed a plan, a fool-proof plan that would ensure this

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situation was resolved once and for all. No more investigating, no more questions, no more anything. Paige Carter had to die... tonight.

He pulled out his phone, called the office to let them know he wouldn't be in. Then, he locked himself in his private den determined to devise a plan that would get him out of this mess. He had to be quick and effective. There could not be any mistakes this time, neither Paige Carter nor her pesky neighbor could survive. He'd have to take out all the additional men as well. There was no way to know how much Chaya's daughter had shared with the group by now. *Okay, Daniel thought with a sigh. I'm going to have to go big this time.*

Hawk glanced up and spotted Zeus in the kitchen. He started to relax then realized his friend was injured. "Jeeves," he called across the room. "Go see what happened to Zeus." He glanced at the closed door and debated. Carmen had been clear if anyone interrupted again... she would disappear and they'd never find her. Would she consider this an exception to her unreasonable rule? He should just leave her in the dark... that would teach her to lay down such irrational demands. But he couldn't do it. She was in love with the reckless fool... anyone could see that. If he didn't let her know her man was hurt, Hawk feared that would be an unforgivable offense. He moved to the doorway and started to knock.

"What part of...?" Carmen began as she flung open the door. She stopped abruptly when Hawk simply pointed to the kitchen and silently waited. Carmen spotted Zeus and ran to his side.

Zeus smiled up at his woman and fished the camera from his pocket. "I got what you needed."

"This happened getting the photos?" she asked in horror.

"After, actually."

"What happened to you?" Hawk demanded.

Zeus quickly walked them through the details of the attack. When he finished, the room was silent.

Carmen was the first to speak. "Do you think it's Paige's stalker or was it related to Dax?"

"I'd say that's the million dollar question," Zeus frowned. "Where is Paige, she'd be the best one to answer that one?"

Hawk stepped forward and explained the situation to Zeus. He was just finishing up when his phone buzzed. "Tell me you've got something."

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“Not a lot,” Ken admitted. “We arrived at the village. Thor is going to accompany Mo while he transports the prisoner. We don’t think there will be trouble but William’s was spouting off about contacts in Mexico. We thought Mo could use a little help if there was an ambush.”

“And you?” Hawk asked.

“I’ve arranged for a Jeep,” Ken lowered his voice. “One of the locals said he can spare it for an hour. I’m heading in to hook up with Ramin Trevils.”

“No,” Hawk barked. “We agreed he was our last resort.”

“And Williams isn’t talking,” Ken pressed. “Although...”

“What?”

“On the way out, the guy was cocky,” Ken provided. “More than he should have been. He said you guys would be chasing your tails for days. Something about never finding the compound down there... and then he said it was out of your range. I don’t think Dax is in Manti any longer.”

“Then where the hell is he?” Hawk demanded. “I hope Mo understands how important this is and he’s not just playing us... gaining control so he can enact a little payback.”

“Mo understands,” Ken assured him. “You know how he feels about Dax. I trust him, if anyone can get answers from this guy... it’s Mo. Now, I gotta go. I have less than an hour to hook up with Trevils and get back to the village.”

“Ken, don’t do this,” Hawk ordered. “It’s too dangerous. We all know what happened the last time Ramin was involved. He’s paranoid and his form of crazy nearly got Zeus killed.”

“Actually,” Zeus corrected. “His right-hand man nearly got me killed. Ramin Trevils had nothing to do with it. Plus, ask Ken... Emilio Mendoza paid dearly for his betrayal.”

“I heard that,” Ken provided. “And he’s right. Emilio is dead and Ramin’s men know what will happen if he’s betrayed again. Plus, he’s feeling indebted to us at the moment. If anyone can get answers about Williams or Nassar’s contacts in Mexico... it’s Ramin. We need to take advantage of the timing. I’ll check in as soon as I can. Hopefully, Thor will be back at the village when I return and we can start home immediately.”

“I don’t like this,” Hawk grumbled. “But do what you have to. Just watch your back. I don’t trust Trevils nearly as much as you seem to.”

“Trust?” Ken laughed. “Not even a little. I respect his power and his resources. I’ll keep an eye out but I seriously don’t think you have anything to worry about. Ramin will not risk

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another attack so soon after the ordeal with Zeus. He needs to save face and another incident would make him look weak. I'm pretty sure I'll have my own private escort to the meeting place and probably back to the village as well. I'll let you know before we ship out. Huey's got to get the ship back before dark or our little mission is going to be detected and questioned by Porky."

"Don't cut it too close," Hawk warned. "The last thing we need is interference from Major Polk." He disconnected and turned his attention to Carmen. "Ken think's Nassar has left the area. If that's the case, we're wasting our time searching for abandoned buildings close to Manti. We need to know where he'd go... south of here."

"I have an idea," Carmen said immediately. "Let me download these photos. If I'm right, Dax is out in the middle of nowhere... out in the Utah wilderness, I mean. I think the device these guys used to monitor us was built by Retrocero Inc."

"Who is that?" Jeeves asked.

"It's owned by Cole Reynolds," Carmen admitted.

"As in the Gentleman from Arizona?" Hawk frowned. "Isn't he on your team?"

"Yes," Carmen said angrily. "And, if I'm right... he's Nathan's mole."

"Just because he owns the company that built the bug doesn't necessarily mean he's dirty," Hawk warned.

"The bug is still in R&D," Carmen countered. "Only an inside guy could get their hands on the device. Nobody's more inside than Reynolds."

"But isn't that too obvious?" Zeus asked. "I mean, the instant we found it... we'd know who it belonged to."

"They don't think we can find it," Carmen grinned. "I admit, I probably wouldn't have if it wasn't for Nathan. He told me to scan that frequency and see if I found anything. It operates completely independent of all the other surveillance devices. Completely different signal, different frequency, the works. Nathan, knowing he has a mole on the committee, hit on it immediately. He suspected Reynolds and had me check. He was right."

"Okay," Hawk considered. "But doesn't that mean Dax could be in Arizona?"

Carmen shook her head. "Too close to home. He has a cabin out in the wilderness. Well, it's a fortress, really. He inherited it from his mother's father... or grandfather, uncle, something. I'm digging up dirt on the man as we speak. If you hadn't interrupted, I'd probably have the exact location pinpointed by now."

"Is it hidden?" Zeus asked.

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“Sort of,” Carmen answered. “Nobody is supposed to know about it. He’s kept it a secret, which tells me he’s hiding something.”

“Brilliant deductions, Einstein,” Hawk grumbled. “Isn’t that the point... in keeping something hidden?”

Carmen glared at the annoying soldier for several seconds before she continued. “Reynold’s assistant slipped up, told me he had a place just outside Salina off I-70. Apparently the mountains up there are popular for hunters but his place is hidden down a side road.”

“If it was supposed to be a secret, why did she tell you?” Hawk wanted to know.

“She was venting,” Carmen shrugged. “Apparently, I’m easy to talk to. Nancy was frustrated because Reynolds had her assessing the value of the place. He said he wanted to sell as soon as possible. Apparently, he needed some fast cash to cover a bad investment. She said the property was in bad shape. Nobody had been out there for years. Nancy arranged to have the property appraised and even had a prospective buyer when Reynolds suddenly changed his mind. He told her to forget it and freaked out. Demanded to know who knew he owned the compound, had she told anyone what she was doing, who did the appraiser think owned the place? Nancy was beyond livid. She told me she’d rearranged her plans and was going to be late for some big family gathering and couldn’t change her flight again... all for nothing.”

“When was that?” Jeeves asked.

“Last summer,” Carmen said absently. “Nassar must have given Reynolds the influx of cash he needed in exchange for a secluded, private place he could stay undetected.”

“Go study the pictures Zeus took of that bug,” Hawk ordered. “Make sure we’re on the right trail. I’ll call Paige and tell her we’re not going to join her. We need to focus on finding Reynolds compound. Five gets you ten that’s where we’ll find Dax.”

Paige and Jericho stepped away from the wooded area and moved toward the farmhouse. “We’ve been wandering aimlessly for the past forty minutes. There’s nothing here. Maybe we were wrong about the vehicle.”

“We aren’t wrong,” Jericho insisted. “But you just identified the problem. We’ve been wandering aimlessly.” He focused on the old saddle shop.

“You want me to go inside again?”

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“No,” Jericho said softly. “That’s the last thing I want. But I think we need to go inside. We need a clue, something that will point us in the right direction. I’m beginning to wonder if they parked the car a fair distance away to protect it in case we... interfered.”

Paige focused on the building. She really did not want to go back inside there. “Okay,” she turned to Jericho. “I can do this. You have a meeting to get to. Go ahead and leave. I can handle this. I’ll call you if I find anything.”

Jericho studied Paige for several seconds. “I can’t even begin to tell you how disappointing it is that you think I’d let you go in there alone.”

“I’m fine, really.”

“And I was fine that day we visited the Tillman factory,” Jericho said soberly. “Give me just a minute to cancel my meeting and we’ll... well, we’ll see what we see.”

“Don’t cancel,” Paige pressed. “You said you had a couple hours. Let’s get this over with and then you can head out. I’ll be okay, I promise.”

“Okay,” Jericho considered. “Then let me see if I can postpone. Samara will probably welcome the delay. Just give me a minute.” It took less than five minutes and Jericho was standing beside Paige again. She looked a little white. “You going to be able to do this?”

“Yeah,” Paige said, trying to sound confident but knowing she just sounded a little sick. “Yes,” she said more forcefully. “Let’s go inside.”

“I’m here, Paige,” Jericho said, placing a supportive hand on her shoulder. “I’m going to be right here. And, Hawk is right. Dax is still alive. Remember that. We’ll get in, see if we can see anything and get out.”

“No,” Paige stopped and turned to look at Jericho. She took a deep breath, glanced at the building then focused on her boss. “I have been thinking like a scared girlfriend. Dax is strong, he’s the strongest man I know. I think that’s the reason I haven’t been myself. He’s not dead. Hawk was right, they would have left him here. He’s fighting for his life and I need to do the same. I’m not weak, I’m a cop. We’re going to go inside and investigate.”

“That’s my girl,” Jericho smiled and motioned for the door.

Paige stepped into the room and paused, took a deep breath and surveyed the room as a cop, not a frightened woman who was terrified the man she loved might not survive. She spotted a light switch and flipped it on. Florescent lights began to flicker then solidify. After another long, deep breath Paige began to walk the room. “I see the drag marks Hawk described. He’s right, they drugged Dax while he was still on this table then waited for him to pass out. I can see two sets of footprints so both Nassar and Williams must have taken him to the car.” She moved

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to the window and glanced out. "I'd say Nassar's vehicle was parked just outside that door. But where did they hide their vehicles while they were here? When they weren't using them."

Jericho knew she wasn't really asking so he too began to move around the large room. He moved to a corner and spotted a long chain attached to the wall. "Paige?"

Paige moved in behind her boss and studied the area. "They took him off the table when they were finished and locked him up here." She pulled a flashlight from her bag and crouched to get a better look.

"What is that?" Jericho asked immediately when Paige illuminated what looked like a stain on the wall.

"Blood," Paige rummaged around in her bag again and pulled out another light. She switched off the flashlight and raised the UV light to the wall.

"Brilliant SOB, isn't he?" Jericho whispered as he studied the writings.

"He was expecting Zeus," Paige decided.

"Military code," Jericho agreed. "But it was risky. It's going to cause a delay. We're here but we have no idea what that stuff means."

"No," Paige straightened and pulled out her phone. "Here hold the light." She handed the flashlight to Jericho. Once he had the symbols well lit, she began to snap pictures of the wall. "Now, I send them over to Zeus and see if he can tell us what they say." Paige hit several buttons on her phone then waited. It didn't take long. "Hello," she answered on the first ring.

"Where did you find these?" Hawk demanded.

"Funny, you don't sound like Zeus," she pointed out. "Can you read it?"

"We can read it," Hawk answered. "Where did he write it?"

"In the saddle shop," Paige answered. "There's a spot in the corner where they chained him to the wall when they were finished with... you know. I'm guessing he was too weak to fight back... or they drugged him before they moved him. Anyway, it's written in blood then he wiped it so they wouldn't know what he was doing. They just look like smudges to the casual observer."

"Good eye," Hawk praised. "It says they have two vehicles and one is hidden down the road, to the east. There should be a building of some sort, if I had to guess a barn or a... silo of some kind. The code's not that detailed. Look for..."

"I got it," Paige's mind was racing. "I think we saw the building earlier. What else?"

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Hawk hesitated.

“Tell me,” Paige pressed.

“He’s injured,” Hawk admitted. “Broken ribs, electrical burns, possibly a broken ankle. The burns have to be severe or he wouldn’t have mentioned them. We need to find him... soon.”

“Thanks,” Paige glanced at Jericho and realized he’d found something else. “Any other updates I should know about?”

“Yeah,” Hawk told her. “Ken called, they don’t think Dax is in your area. Carmen thinks he’s somewhere near Salina... where ever that is.”

“An hour or so south of here, I think.” Paige turned to ask Jericho and nearly collided with him. “How far is Salina?”

“About an hour down southeast of here, easiest route is down eighty-nine.”

“It’s about an hour and you’re right, that’s no longer our jurisdiction,” Paige frowned at the metal object Jericho was studying. “We’re heading over to the barn, might take a while if we find the car. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Out,” Hawk said before disconnecting.

“What is that?” Paige asked, moving in closer to Jericho to study the object.

“I’m not sure,” Jericho admitted. “Seems out of place, though. I thought maybe it was another one of those bugging devices when I saw it but that’s not it. Maybe Carmen can tell us.”

Paige took the small object from Jericho and turned it over in her hand. “It looks like a tracker.”

“To track who?” Jericho asked.

Paige pulled out her phone and hit redial.

“What’s up?” Carmen asked.

“Why am I getting everyone but Zeus when I call?” Paige demanded.

“Zee’s busy at the moment,” Carmen said cryptically. She didn’t want to worry Paige until she got back. “Can I help?”

Once again Paige took a photo of the object and sent it to Zeus’s phone. “That was here, in the saddle shop. Jericho found it shoved between the slats of a shelf. I’m thinking it looks like some kind of tracking device. What do you think?”

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“It’s a tracker,” Carmen confirmed. “Hey, you guys remove a tracker from Williams before he was transported?”

“No,” Hawk moved forward to study the photo. “Send me that, I need to alert Thor and Mo.”

“Paige,” Carmen called. “Put that in your car and bring it back here. I want to have a better look at it. But, take it next door. We’re supposed to be working at Dax’s house. We can use that to our advantage. I’m not sure how yet, but I want to use it. If Thor finds one on Williams, maybe we can talk like we put the device on a decoy and sent him to Mexico to throw them off and send ‘em on a wild-goose chase or something. I’ll work out the details with Hawk.”

“Good idea,” Paige dropped the device into her bag. “I’ll let you know if I find anything else. You sure Zeus is okay?”

“Yeah,” Carmen said abruptly. “Gotta go.”

“There’s something fishy going on with them,” Paige decided. “Let’s go see if we can find that car and get out of here. I’ve had about all I can take of this place.”

Twenty minutes later, the duo stepped cautiously into an old but sturdy barn. They spotted the gray Dodge SUV immediately. Paige held up a hand when Jericho began to move forward. “Wait,” she studied the surrounding area. “Nassar could have set a trap in case anyone but Williams found the thing in here. Give me a minute.” She crouched, low to the ground, and flipped on her flashlight. Once she was sure the coast was clear, she nodded to Jericho and they approached the abandoned SUV.

“Think it’s safe to check the doors?” Jericho asked.

“Yeah,” Paige decided. “I think they got cocky and believed the hiding spot was safe and secure. Let’s see if there’s anything inside that will help.” Paige pulled open the passenger door at the same time Jericho opened the driver’s side.

“Looks like luggage in the back,” Jericho observed as he slowly slid his flashlight over the interior.

“Rental contract,” Paige pulled some papers from the glove box. “They reserved it through the end of December.” She glanced up, intrigued. “Why would they rent a car for that long?”

“They wanted a buffer, maybe?” Jericho shrugged. But he wasn’t feeling that casual about the news. His gut was telling him there was more.

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“I don’t think so,” Paige disagreed. “We assumed Nassar followed Ahmed to Manti to prevent him from sharing information. If that’s the only reason he was here, they wouldn’t still have this car. We believed he grabbed Dax because he didn’t get what he needed from Ahmed. What if we were wrong?”

“Then this is bigger than we thought and there is something else going on,” Jericho surmised. “Something we need to figure out before it’s too late. But our first priority is finding Dax.”

“Let’s check the luggage,” Paige decided. She climbed from inside the car and shoved the rental forms into her pack then followed Jericho to the rear of the vehicle.

Jericho pulled open the back hatch and studied the contents. He reached out and clicked open a hard plastic case, then instantly regretted it. Inside was a large collection of what could only be torture devices. He started to slam the lid closed but Paige stopped him.

“We need to check them for blood,” Paige said softly. Her imagination wanted to run wild, but she was doing her best to stop it.

“Paige, I can do this back at the office,” Jericho moved to close the lid again.

“Jericho,” Paige said louder. “I’m fine. If this is what he used that means he doesn’t have them to use again. I’m fine with this.” She pulled out her UV light again. “Let’s check.”

The instruments were clean, meticulously so. Paige was able to detect slight amounts of blood where the hand met the blades or where the instrument folded closed. Probably not enough for DNA but enough to prove they were the tools Nassar or Williams had been using on their prisoners.

Jericho secured the case and set the offensive container aside. “I’ll take those with me when I go. Once my interview is over, I’ll swing by the office and book them into evidence before I head back to your place.”

Paige forced her gaze from the case and focused on Jericho. “I’m going to consider that good news. I’m telling myself if we have his tools, Nassar will be forced to use his fists or more conventional means on Dax. I want to believe that’s good news. That Dax is trained to minimize a blow. I know I could be completely wrong, but I’m going to try to convince myself leaving that behind was a break... for Dax, and us.”

“I’m going to tell myself the same,” Jericho said soberly. “And with any luck, we’ll be right. Now, let’s get through this and see if this William Broadbent guy left us any leads. A cell phone or laptop would be nice.”

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“I’ve got a phone,” Paige held up a smartphone. “But it has a security code. Maybe Carmen can break in. I’ll keep this and take it back to the house.” She straightened and frowned as she watched Jericho pull items from a briefcase.

“I’m going to guess that .40 Cal belongs to Dax,” Jericho set the gun to the side. “But what do you think this is?” He held up a plain black box slightly smaller than a mobile phone.

Paige took it and turned it around in the palm of her hand. “I have no idea. Do you think it belonged to Ahmed? I don’t see how it’s the device they were looking for. If they got it why abduct Dax?”

“Unless they planned to take our favorite soldier all along,” Jericho considered. “I suppose that could be some sort of storage unit. But it seems unlikely Hassar would leave it behind if it was important.”

“Right,” Paige said sarcastically. “Because that offensive case of sadistic, inhumane doom wasn’t important to a cold-blooded killer like Nassar?”

“Okay,” Jericho conceded. “You have a point.”

“This looks like some kind of high tech electronic device. I’ll give it to Carmen and see if she knows what it is.”

Jericho glanced back inside the briefcase then handed it to Paige. “There’s nothing in there that tells me a thing. Hopefully, Carmen will have more luck.”

“The rest of this is just luggage, clothing, shaving kits, you know... the usual. Why don’t you head out? I’ve got this. I want to go over it more thoroughly and then I’ll call Frank and have him tow it back to the office. I guess I should contact the rental agency and let them know we have their car.”

“Don’t,” Jericho shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Why?”

“We don’t know who is involved yet,” Jericho reminded her. “I want to keep the fact that we’ve located and impounded the vehicle a secret. At least until we find Dax. Remember, Nassar has no idea what happened to Williams. By now he’ll realize his partner is missing, but he doesn’t need to know what happened just yet.”

“You think he’ll panic and take out Dax then bolt,” Paige realized.

“I think it’s a possibility,” Jericho admitted. “One we can take off the table if nobody knows what we’re doing.”

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“Not completely off,” Paige countered. “But I agree, let’s keep this to ourselves for now.”

“Before I go,” Jericho studied Paige to make sure she was okay. “Can you call Carmen back?”

“Sure, why?”

“I just thought of something,” Jericho admitted. “Nassar probably has realized the man he calls Williams is missing. I’m thinking the first thing he’ll do is call one of his contacts. They’re going to try to find out if William Broadbent was arrested. That means they’ll access my jail system. I’d like Carmen to monitor things... do what she does, maybe watch for computers out of DC or something. It could be someone we already know about, but it might be someone else.”

Paige pulled out her phone and punched in Carmen, grateful she’d transferred her important numbers to the burner Nathan had provided.

“What now?” Carmen answered. “I’m working here.”

“Grumpy much?” Paige said, unfazed. “I need you to do something for me.” She proceeded to explain Jericho’s concern and asked for a trace on anyone out of Washington.

“Actually,” Carmen punched in a new code. “I need five minutes to finish what I’m doing then I’ll take a look at the local system. Most have some kind of log, each system is different but I should be able to skim through and see if anyone was looking for the elusive Mr. Broadbent. Then, I’ll set up a filter so if anyone searched for him specifically I’ll know immediately.”

“You can do that?” Paige asked, then corrected herself. “Of course you can. I’ll let you get to it. Tell the guys I’m going to be a while. It will probably be close to dinner time before I get back. I’m going to search the car and then I’ll need to hang out and wait for the tow truck. I’ll get back as soon as I can.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Carmen told her. “I’m out.”

Paige slid her phone back into her pocket. “I’m good here, I’ll meet you at the house later tonight and you can fill me in on your talk with Samara.”

“Count on it,” Jericho said before he turned and left Paige alone with her car. He knew she’d spend at least an hour going over every inch of the thing but when she was finished... they’d have everything there was to find.

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Dax gritted his teeth as Nassar broke another finger. If he could just get through this session, he could make his escape. He remained silent, determined not to give Nassar the satisfaction of showing just how much pain he was really in.

“You will tell me what I want to know,” Nassar fumed. Where was Williams? He needed his tools. This was getting him nowhere. He focused on Hamilton, determined to break every one of the man’s fingers if he didn’t get the answers he desired. They were running out of time. He was about to select another finger when his phone began to ring. Anxious, and a little worried about his missing partner, Nassar gave his prisoner one last kick to the stomach before stepping out of the room.

His finger left a bloody mark on the screen as he slid across the surface to answer the call. Frustrated, Nassar pressed the speaker button, set the phone on a small concrete ledge protruding from the wall and began to clean his hands with a handkerchief. “This better be an emergency,” Nassar barked. “I was working on Hamilton. I’m finished playing games with the stubborn fool. If he doesn’t give me what I want tonight, I’m ending it.”

Dax was braced for the pain, expected to hear the quick snap of another finger when Nassar’s phone began to ring. He was surprised when his tormentor kicked him one last time then left the room. He forced his breathing to slow and remained perfectly still hoping to hear something that would tell him where he was currently being held. Instead, he received a blow he would never have believed possible. The distinct voice on the other end of the call was a voice Dax would recognize anywhere. It came from a man he believed he could trust. A man he considered a brother, a trusted friend and loyal ally. One of his men was working for the enemy.

“By working you mean torturing, I assume,” came a male voice. “I told you that is never going to work. Not on Dax Hamilton. You need a new tactic. The only way to get what you need is to threaten someone he cares about. He’ll give you what you want if you have something he wants. Otherwise, he’ll let you torture him to death out of spite just to prove he’s the better man. But that’s beside the point, you will not kill him tonight. You agreed to try things my way. I need another day, two tops. You gave me your word Nassar.”

“And if I changed my mind?”

“You already know my conditions. I haven’t changed my mind.”

Nassar started yelling in Arabic, neither man understood a word he said. “Fine, one day. Then, I do things my way. With or without answers... the infidel dies.”

“We’ll see about that,” the voice said in dismissal.

“Why did you call?” Nassar demanded. “Do you have news?”

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“My source says General Porter is getting restless,” the man said. “He’s working on something but nobody knows what. The staff is talking, wondering if he’s going to head to Utah for a break for the holidays. I’m guessing it would only take a slight nudge to get him out of DC.”

“And then our man will be in charge,” Nassar considered. “And the mission will be back on schedule.”

“Temporarily,” the man corrected.

“Maybe not,” Nassar continued to strategize. “Porter could have an accident while he’s in Utah... a fatal one.”

“Seriously?” the man said clearly irritated. “Now you’re going to knock off a highly respected general? Yeah, good luck with that. Because if you follow through with that idiotic plan you’ll be dead in about a minute.”

“I’m not asking for your permission,” Nassar barked. “I’ll call you if I need you.” He disconnected the call and stomped down the hall, away from his prisoner.

Dax held his breath and waited for Nassar to return. Twenty minutes passed before he decided his crazy enemy was finished for the night. He waited another fifteen before he started to put his plan in motion.

Paige stepped into her neighbor’s house and glanced around. She set the tracking device, the black box and the GPS unit on the coffee table. She couldn’t access the GPS data, it also had a passcode. Carmen might be able to get in. Paige hoped her friend could crack the code, it might be their only hope to find Dax alive. At least she’d found it. Williams had hidden the thing well. So well, she nearly missed it. If she hadn’t lost her footing, she probably wouldn’t have located the magnetic box secured underneath the passenger seat of the rental car.

Paige sighed, took another quick look around then secured the residence and headed home. She’d gather the crew together, discuss what she’d located, find out what they were hiding and then go from there. The more she thought about Carmen’s plan to misdirect the enemy, the more she liked it. And, knowing Hawk... he probably already had a twenty point op plan mapped out to do just that. She stepped through the front door, spotted Zeus on the couch and forgot everything. “What happened to you?”

“I tripped,” Zeus said with a grin.

“Not likely,” Paige settled onto the couch next to Zeus and waited for an answer.

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Zeus sighed, then began to tell his story.

Jericho was still reeling from his conversation with Samara. Had Gage hid his father's presence at that party on purpose or had Drew Clayton kept that secret from everyone, even his son, for all these years? Surely Gage knew his father had a football ring, one he'd obtain the same year as everyone else on the list. How had his deputy eliminated his father as a suspect? Had he? Or did he just make an assumption, one that couldn't be defended if this went to court? Samara had said Drew left early that night. That Drew's girlfriend at the time, Darla Vernon, was sick and she needed a ride home. Samara was positive about that. She was also sure that Drew left before Tracey disappeared... while her friend was still visiting with the guys from another school. Still...

The terrified woman wasn't much help, but she had given him a couple names. One they had already cleared; Ethan Weldon. But she also remembered Ethan's friend Tom Lafferty because at the time Ethan never went anywhere without Tom. He'd been surprised when she suddenly remembered Danny Fletcher was also in the group. Jericho had met Danny and he wouldn't have pegged him as a partier. The biggest surprise, the reason Samara knew it was a group of jocks from Manti that interrupted Tracey's conversation with the outsiders, was the presence of Giles Sullivan. These days Giles was the town drunk, a vagabond that was more of a nuisance than anything. Apparently, his teenage years were spent trailing after the football team like a mascot, desperately wanting to be accepted. Samara explained that back then, if Giles was present, so were the jocks. She'd given him one additional name, a man that no longer lived in Manti but he came from a prominent family at the time. These days, Tyron Olsen was a sitting congressman for the great state of California. Could be motive for murder, he'd have to see where Tyron was when Chaya was killed.

Drew's presence was the thing that bothered him the most. Gage hadn't mentioned his father's name on the list. Was that because it was never there, or because Gage had located his dad's ring and crossed him off before anyone could question it? There was only one way to find out... he'd have to call his deputy and ask. Jericho slowed as he approached Paige's residence, hesitated only a second then continued on down the road. He had to talk to Gage before he met up with Paige. He could call, but he'd need to find a place he could have complete privacy to do it. He considered and discarded several options before he settled on the dirt road that ran along the back woods next to Dax's place. He'd just pull onto the dirt road, find a spot with cell service and make the call.

Jericho slowed and made the turn onto the dirt road. He continued to coast along the dusty trail as he watched the display of his phone, determined to find a strong signal. As he maneuvered around the last bend that emptied out just behind Hamilton's place, he stared in

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wide-eyed shocked at the black Camero parked snugly on the side of the road. Had he just stumbled onto their suspect? He positioned his vehicle to make an escape from the rear impossible and unsnapped his holster as he cautiously moved forward. Within seconds, he knew the car was vacant. But who did it belong to? He hadn't seen the thing anywhere, not once, since he'd moved to this town. He'd remember if he had whether it was on the road or secured in a parking lot or a driveway. Jericho had owned one just like it a long time ago. Not nearly as clean, this one had been carefully restored and looked brand new. His had a few dents, a little rust, and the upholstery had seen better days. And still, he had loved that car. Cherished it until the day it let out one last billowing cough from the tailpipe and died. That had been years ago, right after he'd graduated college and a memory for another day.

Jericho moved forward, carefully placing the tiny spike strips under each tire before silently making his way into the cover of trees. If Chaya's killer was lurking nearby, Jericho was going to catch him. After traveling less than ten feet, Jericho spotted the man's trail. So far, this year was a dry winter. The few snow storms that had come through were mainly in the high country. Here in the valley, the ground was moist as a result of several rain storms and early morning frost that made the ground soft. Whoever was after Paige, hadn't seemed to care about leaving prints. An uneasy feeling overcame the sheriff and he quickened his pace, not enough to alert his prey but he had to find out what the man was up to. Every instinct he had told him he was walking into trouble.

Once Jericho reached the edge of the forest, he paused to take in his surroundings. That's when he spotted the dynamite. The man had strategically placed a large bundle, more than was necessary to take the structure down, on each corner of Paige's house with another small bundle positioned in the center of each wall. As he moved closer, he realized a large string of det-cord was attached to each bundle, chaining all the explosives together. Whoever had killed Chaya was trying to kill her daughter and if Jericho didn't find him quickly, the man just might succeed. But why? Why now? Why today?

Once he reached the corner of the house, he took a second to study the makeshift device. If he cut the cord at the corner, this side of the house would be safe. He slid his knife from his pocket and carefully cut the cord then kicked the end several feet into the yard. At least anyone positioned on this side of the house, might have a chance to escape if Jericho didn't reach the madman in time. He moved cautiously toward the back porch, pausing to see if he could locate anyone inside the kitchen... no such luck.

When he reached the far corner of the home, Jericho froze in shock. His mind was racing as he sifted through the clues they had gathered. Daniel Owens was a bank manager and a coward... and apparently, he was also a killer. Okay, maybe that did fit. Only a coward would force an innocent kid off a cliff so he wouldn't have to face the consequences of a sexual assault. Only a coward would empty a magazine of bullets into a sweet, innocent woman like Chaya Carter. Only a coward would harass and terrorize his victim's daughter the way he had tried to

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bully Paige. Anger flowed through him with so much intensity he wasn't sure he'd be able to control his temper.

"Daniel," Jericho said as he moved a little closer to the murderer currently crouched on the ground, attaching his long string of det-cord to the last bundle of dynamite. Jericho could see the device clearly. Daniel had attached a blasting cap to this final bundle with a long fuse running from the center stick. The fuse was long enough that Daniel could have lit the fuse and escaped safely without detection. The plan was risky, but it might have worked. "I need you to put your hands where I can see them and slowly, very slowly, stand up and turn around."

Daniel froze, Jericho wasn't supposed to be here. He'd waited until he was sure the group had settled in for the night. Sheriff Walters should be home, tucked safely away for the evening. Instead, he was here... getting in the way. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold-plated lighter. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

Jericho saw the lighter and knew before the night was through, he just might be responsible for the death of the man who had killed the love of his life. Would Paige keep that secret? Or, would a shadow fall over a justified shooting? He couldn't think of that now, couldn't let it play into the situation at hand. If Daniel didn't comply, Jericho had no other choice... he'd have to shoot a man that had been born into privilege. A man who belonged to an iconic, local family. A man whose family name would be tarnished forever. The image of the cufflink Jericho found clutched in Chaya's hand popped into his head... that also fit now that he knew it was Daniel. Something inside Jericho shifted and settled. He had finally identified Chaya's killer. The clues finally all lined up correctly. After over a decade of searching, Jericho had finally discovered the identity of the man that killed Chaya. He finally had a face to blame for the destruction, finally knew who had destroyed his dreams and stolen his happiness. Daniel Owens had nearly destroyed Jericho completely. And he was going to make sure the man paid for his crimes. "Daniel," Jericho warned.

"We both know I'd never survive prison," Daniel said as he turned slightly to study a man he had always admired. "I was hoping tonight could end things. I hoped that with Chaya's interfering daughter out of the way, this town could go back to normal. That the entire sordid ordeal would finally be over. I never wanted to involve you in this. But, I'm sorry... now that you know, I don't have a choice. I'm afraid you will have to go out with the rest of us."

"It doesn't have to end that way," Jericho took a step forward.

"Don't," Daniel grabbed the end of the fuse. "It does have to end. Like I said, I'd never survive prison. I'm not a criminal. I'm just a simple banker and a loving husband."

Jericho looked at the man before him. Clearly, the guy was delusional. "You killed Chaya for no reason."

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“I killed that nosey woman in self-defense... because she couldn’t mind her own business,” Daniel spat. “If she’d just stayed out of it... but no, she couldn’t do that. She had to keep pushing, pushing, pushing. She couldn’t leave well-enough alone.”

“You saw her car,” Jericho realized. “From your family residence on the hill. Your backyard overlooks the old factory. You saw her drive up and you had to investigate. Did you plan to shoot her that night? Is that why you took a gun?” Maybe if he kept talking, someone inside would hear them and investigate. If he just had help, he may not have to shoot his suspect.

“My grandfather bought that property and built his estate on that hill for that very reason,” Daniel said nostalgically. “Once he and grandma inherited the Tillman Factory from her father, they wanted to be close. He thought hard work and dedication would carry them through the recession. He was wrong, which is why I have to work at that stupid bank. Oh, the trust has enough to cover the essentials; taxes, insurance, upkeep but my family was iconic in Manti. The factory is what kept the town together for so long. I could hardly live like a popper, and I certainly couldn’t spend time in prison for having a little fun with that girl. She was nothing, she should have been flattered. Instead, she told me no... an Owens? Anyway, if she had just given me what I wanted none of this would have happened in the first place. Then Chaya Carter moved back to town. That woman had no right to pursue something that happened all those years ago. It was in the past, it should have stayed there.”

“Tracey was Chaya’s best friend,” Jericho fumed. “Of course she wouldn’t just let it go.”

“Which is why we are here tonight,” Daniel flipped open the lighter. “And it’s why all of us are going to die. Ironic really. You, your deputy inside... that large man who interrupted me earlier... if you would have just stayed out of my business, well... we’d probably all die of old age. Instead, you forced me to end it all tonight.” Daniel moved to flick the lighter.

Jericho knew he didn’t have a choice. He’d gotten all the answers he was going to get. When Daniel moved to light the flame, he fired once. A man he’d hated for over a decade... a man he would never have suspected... hadn’t suspected... had basically crossed off the list Gage Clayton had whittled down to less than a dozen men... was dead... at his hand. He should care that he’d taken a life, should regret the need to use deadly force, should be worried that Tolman... or Stan wouldn’t understand. But none of that mattered. Right now, all he felt was tired.

Hawk, Jeeves, Zeus and Paige rushed out the front door and rounded the corner to spot Sheriff Walters standing over the lifeless form of a large man.

“We needed him alive,” Hawk growled. “He probably knows where they are holding Dax.”

“He didn’t,” Paige stepped forward and took the sheriff’s weapon. “You okay?”

“Paige,” Hawk barked.

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“Hawk,” Paige said in the same tone. “This man had nothing to do with Dax or his disappearance. You’ll just have to trust me on that.” She glanced around and spotted the dynamite. “We need the bomb squad.”

“Zeus,” Hawk turned to address his man. “Take care of it.”

“On it,” Zeus moved forward and began studying the amateur setup. “This shouldn’t take long.”

“I think we need an expert,” Paige argued.

“Zeus is my expert,” Hawk moved forward past the body lying on the ground and studied the sheriff. “You’re sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” Jericho sighed. “He confessed, Paige. It was him all along. I should have seen it. The factory, his family owned it... on his mother’s side. I forgot about that. He’s a coward, which also fits the profile. He’s on the list.”

“I bumped him to the bottom of my list, too,” Paige admitted. “I just couldn’t see it. I mean, he snuck out the back when that fugitive robbed the bank.”

“I should have...”

“Stop it,” Paige demanded. “Maybe we should have, but we didn’t. Tell me what happened before I call Tolman.”

“He said someone saw him,” Jericho recalled.

“I saw him,” Zeus confirmed as he rejoined the group. “That was the man I encountered in the forest this morning. The guy that attacked me.”

“You’re sure?” Hawk asked.

“Positive,” Zeus nodded. “I think we took each other by surprise. Then after I went down, he ran. He was gone before I could get to the back road. He fishtailed on the soft dirt, going around that curve. The vehicle was black and old; that’s all I saw.”

“You spooked him enough he panicked, I think,” Jericho closed his eyes and tried to sort his emotions. “He was stringing that cord, connecting it to large bundles of dynamite so he just had to light one fuse and escape. Might have gotten away with it, too. Like I said, he was pretty much off the list before tonight.”

“There’s enough dynamite to blow a hole the size of Pluto attached to this house,” Zeus said soberly. “Someone cut the cord over there, I assume that was you?” he focused on Jericho.

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“It was,” Jericho affirmed. “I realized what he was doing and figured if he got the thing lighted before I stopped him, at least the entire house wouldn’t explode.”

“It was a valiant effort, but he has enough TNT that the blast, the compression from that blast... would have been deadly for all of us,” Zeus corrected. “I’ve disconnected the cord, but that stuff is old and I’m thinking unstable. You might want to call in that bomb squad of yours if they have a bomb box they can bring out. We need to get the stuff contained before it blows.”

“So,” Paige studied Zeus. “I guess you’re the explosives and munitions guy in this operation.”

“And extraction,” Zeus confirmed. “You probably figured that out already, with the whole incident in Mexico and all.”

“I wondered,” Paige sighed. “But I wasn’t sure when Ken and Dax went down to extract you.”

“Yeah,” Zeus scowled. “Things went FUBAR almost immediately.”

“So that makes Ken...” Paige asked.

“Logistics,” Hawk told her. “Contacts, equipment, anything we need.”

“And do you have a specialty?” Paige asked. “Other than management?” She knew the conversation was annoying the impatient leader, but she hoped the delay would give her boss a few minutes to settle and gather his thoughts before Tolman arrived.

“Intel,” Hawk turned to study the man who had tried to kill them all. “And I failed when it comes to that one.”

“He’s a local problem,” Paige countered. “He wasn’t on your radar because he wasn’t your problem.”

“I disagree,” Hawk said soberly. “He just tried to kill all of us. If he had succeeded in lighting that fuse... well, we’d all be gone.”

“I guess that makes Jericho the hero of the day,” she placed a comforting hand on her boss’ forearm. “I know this isn’t how you wanted it to end, but you didn’t have a choice. Not from what you said and apparently he confessed to the rest. I’m looking forward to hearing about that conversation sometime. First, I think I need to call Tolman.”

“I’m going to contact Gage,” Jericho decided. “He’s familiar with the case with none of the conflicts you and I have.” Jericho paused, wondering if that was actually true. “He can take over the scene, process everything and we can go from there.” He’d get Gage alone and discuss

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the situation with Drew at a later date. Right now, he needed someone on the case he knew he could trust.

“I’m thinking we should also contact Sean,” Paige said hesitantly. “He’s familiar with... well, all of it. It will make things easier. Sean can deal with the domestic terrorist stuff... there’s no problem making a case on that with the dynamite. And Gage can deal with the shooting and Tolman.”

“Okay,” Jericho sighed. “Let’s get this cleaned up so we can get back to finding Dax.”

Paige walked around to the back of the house and dialed her old friend. Within minutes, she’d explained the situation and had a promise from Sean he was walking out the door. She turned to look for Jericho and collided with Carmen. “Geez,” she said as she took a step back.

“You should call Porter,” Carmen grinned as she settled onto one of the patio chairs.

“I’ll deal with him later,” Paige brushed the suggestion aside.

“He needs to know what happened out here,” Carmen pressed.

“Why?” she didn’t want to deal with the overprotective man at the moment.

“Because,” Carmen glanced toward the house next door. “They are still monitoring our communication. The bad guys know we’re in the middle of a...situation at the moment. The General might be able to use that to flush out the mole.”

Paige hated to admit it, but her favorite tech wiz had a point. “Fine, I’ll call him.” Paige pulled out her phone, selected Nathan’s name and hit send. “But if he freaks, I’m handing the phone to you.” She was still smiling at Carmen’s response when Nathan answered the call.

Paige glanced up and spotted Sean. *Thank goodness!* She started toward him when she spotted a second vehicle... Gage had arrived and it looked like he had Thor and Ken with him. All three men climbed from the vehicle and headed in the opposite direction.

“Hey,” Sean said as he climbed from his car. “What do I need to know?”

“The DA is on the way,” Paige warned. “And there’s something you should probably know.”

Sean glanced up at the tone he detected in Paige’s voice. “What’s wrong?”

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Paige took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. “The man’s name is Daniel Owens. He’s the bank manager, you met him a few months back... at the robbery.”

“Okay,” Sean studied his friend. “Why did he want you dead?”

“Because he’s the man that murder my mother,” Paige glanced away.

“What!” Sean stared in wide-eyed shock. “Talk about burying the lead.”

“He was hiding in the forest over there,” Paige pointed to the wooded area next to Dax’s house. “Zeus stumbled onto him this morning. Daniel shoved Zeus causing him to fall and reinjure his hip allowing Daniel to escape. Best we can tell, Daniel showed up tonight to blow up my house because he panicked. He was afraid someone would figure out he was the one harassing me, which would implicate him in my mother’s murder and Tracey’s death. He was determined to get away with it, no matter how many people died to ensure his freedom.”

“There’s more,” Sean pressed.

“There is,” Paige admitted. “I’m just deciding if I should tell you.”

“Paige,” Sean pressed. “If I know, I can help.”

“Jericho is the one that shot Daniel,” Paige confided. “He tried to stop Daniel, but when he moved to light the fuse to blow up the house, he didn’t have a choice. I wasn’t there, but I believe him. When I got there, Daniel was lying on the ground, Jericho was standing there in shock and the lighter was only a few inches from the fuse.”

“Is that a problem?” Sean asked. “Sounds like a good shooting. What has you worried?”

“My mom and Jericho... they were involved when she was killed,” Paige told him. “Nobody knows about that and they don’t need to. It’s irrelevant to your investigation but I don’t know what Tolman knows or what Jericho is going to tell him.”

“Let me get a look at the scene,” Sean decided. There was a lot to sift through and they didn’t have time for this. They needed to work on finding Dax. “What are you going to do?”

Paige didn’t answer for several seconds. Her world was falling apart and she was powerless to stop it. “I’m going to find Carmen and talk Hawk into joining me next door. We need to work on finding Dax and give whoever is listening an explanation for one of their tracking devices ending up in Mexico.”

“Clearly I’m missing a lot here,” Sean frowned. “Let me handle the problem at your house and then you can fill me in on the rest.”

Paige walked away and approached Hawk. “We need to head next door and set up an explanation for why the tracker ended up in Mexico. Then, I think we should head over to

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Carmen's place. Those guys are going to be here a while and we can't get into my house while they investigate."

"Let me get the guys," Hawk walked away.

The group gathered in Dax's living room. Once everyone was settled, Paige took the lead. "Zeus, things are crazy at my house and I talked to Deputy Clayton. He thinks they will be busy over there most of the night. I was thinking maybe we should relocate to your place for the night."

"Good idea," Zeus grinned. He was going to suggest they work out of Carmen's tonight. Paige just beat him to it.

"Molina called," Ken provided. "He said the tracker arrived and he gave it to a local, asked him to attach it to his truck and drive around town a few hours every day. He likes the idea of giving the men responsible for Diego's death the run-around."

Hawk gave a nod to Carmen. They had discussed this and she knew how to lead the conversation where he wanted it to go.

"I was thinking," Carmen began. "You guys found those tracking devices at the saddle shop. We know Dax was out there but his captors had relocated before you arrived."

"Right," Paige focused on her friend. "Did you find out why?"

"Well," Carmen glanced at Hawk before she continued. "What if someone attached the trackers and Nassar didn't know? I'm thinking once they found the devices, they ditched them and then ditched the location just to be safe. We thought they saw you coming, but what if they moved before... maybe even before we narrowed in on the farmhouse?"

"It makes sense," Hawk winked at Carmen, Zeus scowled. "We acted on the Intel immediately. There's no way anyone saw us coming. I'm not sure that helps us locate the new place, but it does explain why they moved. Now how do we find the new location?"

"I haven't found anything so far," Carmen sighed. "I think I hit a brick wall."

"Jericho and I went back to the saddle shop today," Paige added. "We didn't find anything either." She reached out, picked up the GPS device and the strange black box and handed them to Carmen.

"What are you going to do with that?" Zeus asked, pointing to the tracking device.

"I don't think it works," Carmen grinned. "I'm thinking Nassar wasn't happy when he found out someone planted a tracker on him. He probably stomped on it or something. Leave it there, I'll take it apart tomorrow when we get back and see if there's anything to learn from it."

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“Let’s head over to my place,” Zeus stood. “We’ll have to figure out sleeping arrangements and I’m beat.”

The group stood and followed Hawk out the door.

Carmen stepped into her house and immediately dropped into her oversized lounge chair. “Okay, now let’s have a real conversation. I’m curious about this box. I’ve scanned it. It’s not transmitting anything but I haven’t seen anything like it before.”

“What do you think it could be?” Jeeves asked.

“I’m going to set that aside for now,” Carmen decided. “I’ll call Nathan in the morning and see if he can help with it. In the meantime, I’m more curious about this GPS unit.”

“Do you think you can access the data?” Hawk asked.

Carmen snorted. “Do you think the sun will come up in the morning?”

“How long?” Hawk ignored the sarcasm.

“Talk to me,” Ken answered his phone after only one ring.

“The guy is being difficult,” Mo admitted. “He wasn’t nearly as cocky once Thor left him here... alone with me. I think we have finally come to an understanding.”

“Meaning?” Ken asked, not sure he wanted to know.

“Meaning, Williams says he doesn’t know exactly where the new compound is located,” Mo sighed. “I believe him. Trust me, if he knew the location, he would have told me. He said he was just supposed to head to Salina, then Nassar programmed the route into a GPS. He thinks the property belongs to a guy by the name of Cole Reynolds.”

“That matches our Intel as well,” Ken told him. “Problem is, Reynolds hid the records. Carmen is sifting through corporations and subsidiaries but so far we’re not having a lot of luck. I have to tell you, we were counting on you to get more. Nassar has realized by now that Williams isn’t going to show. There’s no telling what he’ll do to Dax. It would be safer to take him out and disappear.”

“Safer,” Mo agreed. “But I don’t think that’s the plan. Williams is still holding back on me. I’m going to keep working him but I thought you should know about the GPS and Salina. If I get more, I’ll let you know. My relief should be here any minute. Once he arrives, I’m headed your way. Shoot me a text with the address if and when.”

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“Don’t come to Manti,” Ken decided. “Head to Salina. We’ll have to relocate down there eventually, we can meet up with you there. That way we can all head into the wilderness together.”

“I’ll check in when I arrive,” Mo clicked off.

“Mo is coming to Utah?” Paige asked, worried.

“It was part of the deal,” Ken evaded.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Paige asked. “Because I don’t. I think it’s a horrible idea. I already skirted a line by letting you hand our prisoner over to him. Why?”

“Why what?” Hawk asked.

“Why was it part of the deal?”

“Because Nassar killed his friend,” Hawk said flatly. “So, when this is all over... we’ll hand Nassar over to Mo as well.”

“You never said...” Paige began but stopped when Ken’s phone rang again. “Does that thing ever stop ringing?”

Ken smiled. “Not when I’m on a mission.” He turned so his back was to the group then answered the phone. “Wooley speaking.”

“Nassar is working with a man named Akmed,” Ramin said in answer. “Akmed is dangerous. He’s known to run illegal weapons and munitions. And he’s a terrorist. He will blow anyone up that gets in his way.”

“We already knew that,” Ken said, disappointed. “But thank you for checking.”

“I’m not finished,” Ramin told him. “Akmed has done business with Edwardo Contreras.”

“Your biggest enemy,” Ken smiled.

“This problem of yours has peeked my interest,” Ramin admitted. “I will find out what Nassar and Edwardo are planning and let you know. There are rumors... whispers of something big and sinister. So far it is believed the trouble will only impact our neighbors to the north. I’m intrigued and will look into this further. If I learn what is brewing, I’ll be in touch. Let’s just call it mutual cooperation involving a shared enemy.”

“What’s the catch?” Ken asked. Ramin never did anything for free.

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“No catch,” Ramin promised. “One more thing, I was told there is a compound in the wilderness. A shipment will be headed that way next week. To a place called Oak Ridge something. Do you know this place?”

“No,” Ken motioned to Carmen. “What else do you know about this Oak Ridge compound?”

“I’m still investigating,” Ramin told Ken. “My source was not very... what do you say? Dependable? He said something about ducks and some kind of berries.”

“Ducks and berries?” Ken said, confused.

“Gooseberry?” Carmen asked.

“Could it be Gooseberry?” Ken asked.

“Yes, yes. That is it,” Ramin affirmed. “So Goose eat berries where you live?”

“I’m not sure,” Ken laughed. “But Gooseberry is a wilderness area south of here. I think you may have just given us the clue we needed. I believe Nassar is holding Dax near there.”

“Give Dax Hamilton my best when you find him,” Ramin said in closing. “I’ll be in touch.”

Carmen was sitting at her kitchen table, frantically tapping on her laptop. Paige was hovering over her shoulder. “Sit,” Carmen pointed to a chair. “I need space.”

“Sorry,” Paige settled into the chair next to her friend. “Did you find him?”

“Hand me the GPS unit,” Carmen held out her hand, palm up.

Paige started to stand but stopped when Hawk dropped the device into Carmen’s hand. Carmen plugged the unit into her computer, pressed a few keys and synced the memory to the satellite map displayed on her screen. Suddenly a trail led from the city of Salina, east on I-70 and then turned onto a side road called Gooseberry Road, it continued southbound past Gooseberry Campground and then north on a road labeled Oak Ridge Road.

“Bingo!” Carmen exclaimed as she punched her fist in the air.

“We found Dax,” Paige whispered.

“Let’s head out,” Hawk turned and headed for the door all the men followed.

“Shouldn’t we take a minute to develop a plan?” Paige asked as she rushed after them.

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“We’ll plan on the way,” Hawk said, never looking back. “Jeeves, Wooley, Thor, Zeus... you’re with me. Check the back and make sure we have what we need. Otherwise, we’ll have to swing by Dax’s place before we hit the road.”

“I need my medical bag,” Jeeves advised. “It’s in the spare room... at Hamilton’s house.”

“And we stashed the bag with the walkies and the extra ammo in his basement,” Ken added. “We have to stop back and load up the rest of the gear.”

“I’ll follow you. I need to check in with the sheriff,” Paige shrugged. “What are you going to do?” she asked Carmen.

“I’m going to stay here and gather more information, call Nathan, then I’m going to try to figure out what that other device is. I don’t need to go out there and I think I’d just get in the way. I can do more good here. Just keep me posted. And when you find Dax...”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Paige gave her friend a hug then rushed out to her car. Hawk was already halfway to her house by now.

“Tolman left very specific instructions,” the woman jumped in front of Paige before she could enter her house. “Unless the world is coming to an end, you can’t go in there.”

“Lady,” Paige growled. “This is my house. I’ll go in there if I want to go in there.”

“You can’t...”

“I don’t have time for this,” Paige said before she shoved open the door and pushed her way inside.

Tolman jumped to his feet and glared at Paige. “I left strict instructions...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Paige waved her hand in the air in dismissal. “Jericho, we found the compound. We know where to find Dax. The guys are already on their way to Salina. I need you. Mo is meeting us there and those guys...” she glanced at Tolman. “I just need you.”

“I’ll come,” Sean jumped to his feet. “Don’t argue, you know I can help.”

“I’m not finished here, Jericho,” Tolman insisted. “Whatever she’s talking about... it can wait.”

Jericho pulled out his phone and dialed Gage.

“Yes, sir,” Gage answered.

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“I need you to meet me on the front porch,” Walters began. “We’re headed to Salina so tie things up and get here as soon as you can.”

“I need ten minutes,” Gage turned and headed for the bomb squad.

“You have ten minutes,” Jericho said to Tolman. “Then, done or not... we’re leaving.”

“Thank you,” Paige hugged Jericho then practically ran out the door. Sean followed.

“You driving or am I?” Sean called out.

“You drive,” Paige decided. “I need to call Nathan.”

“What kind of lead do they have?” Sean asked as he sped onto the highway.

“A few minutes,” Paige glanced at the clock. “And a million miles. They’re developing a plan on the way. That means when we arrive, they’ll have a complete op plan sorted out and you and I... we’re going to be in the dark.”

“Call Nathan,” Sean said, never taking his eyes off the road. He was closing in on a dark Navigator that he thought he recognized.

“Paige,” Nathan said in greeting. “Please tell me nothing else has happened out there.”

“We found him,” Paige said softly. “We think we found him. We’re all headed to Salina. The guys... Dax’s team is ahead of us. They said they’re developing a plan on the fly. Any idea what Sean and I will be walking into?”

“Just remember, all of them are professionals,” Nathan tried not to let the stress and the worry come through. “You are working with an elite team... Dax couldn’t be in better hands. Stick with Sean, you two work well together. The most important thing is finding Dax, but don’t get separated. Nassar is ruthless and he won’t hesitate to abduct you or use you to his advantage. Promise me you will be careful and call me the minute things settle out there.”

“I know this is hard for you,” Paige could hear the stress in Nathan’s voice and wondered if there was more he wasn’t telling her. “Is everything okay out there?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Nathan evaded. “Are you wearing your vest?”

“I will,” Paige promised.

“And you have plenty of ammo?”

“Yes,” Paige bit her tongue, she knew he needed this.

“Tell Sean I’m counting on him to keep you safe,” Nathan demanded.

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“I’ll keep him safe,” Paige countered.

“I love you, Paige,” Nathan whispered. “Be safe and I’ll talk to you later.”

Paige frowned as she slid the phone back into her pocket.

“Problems?” Sean asked.

“I’m not sure,” Paige admitted. “But first thing’s first. Let me see if Carmen was able to get a diagram of the main residence.”

Paige took a deep breath then silently pushed open the door and stepped from Sean’s sleek government vehicle. The two of them met at the front of the car and waited for Hawk to yank bag after bag from the back of their SUV and hand each one to a different man. He motioned for Paige and Sean to join him.

Paige moved forward and realized Hawk was facing a small board with an outline of the property diagramed in detail. “When?” She froze when she saw the group had picked Mo up somewhere along the way.

“Wooley did it on the way,” Hawk said absently. “You and Sean will head inside with me and Jeeves. We’ll go right, you take left. We clear one level then meet back up and move to the next.”

“Sounds good,” Sean said studying the layout of the building. “Obviously we’ll do the main level first but then do you want to move up or down?”

“Down,” Hawk decided. “If Dax is inside, chances are good he’ll be in the basement.”

“I agree,” Sean continued to study the layout.

“What will the rest of the guys be doing?” Paige asked.

“Thor and Zeus will clear the right side of the property as well as any outbuildings they encounter. Ken and Mo will go left.”

“Ken?” Mo asked.

“That’s still Wooley to you,” Ken grinned.

“Is your prisoner still alive?” Paige couldn’t help herself.

“He was when I left,” Mo shrugged. “Now... your guess is as good as mine.”

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“Will Mexico be keeping him?” Paige refused to look away. Mr. Alejandro Molina was trying to intimidate her. It wouldn’t work.

“Of course,” Mo grinned. “The man murdered a police officer. I assumed you would understand the ramifications of that action.”

“Technically,” Paige disagreed. “Nassar murdered a police officer. William Broadbent did not.”

Mo focused on Hawk. “I didn’t realize your cop was present when my friend was killed. Maybe I should take her back to Mexico when I return.”

“Drop it,” Hawk barked. “You guys head out,” he motioned for the four men to proceed. “You two... follow us. Keep quiet and stay together. We’ll pause on the front porch.” He handed both Paige and Sean a small walkie. “Keep it simple,” Hawk glanced at Sean then back to Paige. “We only speak to relay information or answer a question.”

“Really?” Paige grabbed the walkie. “I was thinking I’d keep up a play-by-play just for kicks.”

Hawk turned and started for the front door.

“By the way,” Paige whispered. “Gage and Jericho are on their way. They were delayed ten, maybe fifteen minutes. You want me to text them instructions?”

“Tell them to come inside and secure the front door while we clear the main floor,” Hawk decided. “Then they can join up with us while we clear the basement.”

Paige pulled out her phone and typed a quick message. “Done.”

Hawk pressed his finger to his lips and moved toward the front door.

Dax couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in this much pain. His fingers were so swollen, they felt like they would pop. He gritted his teeth and slid backward before forcing his arms upwards just a litter further. He pressed harder, giving his wrists a slight jerk and finally heard the tiny pop of the zip tie breaking just before it fell from his wrists and settled onto the cold concrete floor with a soft *click*. Okay, first step complete. Now, he’d need to break out the window and hope there was some kind of cover nearby. He was running blind now. He thought of the military mission’s he’d commanded for years and appreciated the analysts, the Intel and the comprehensive plans that were compiled long before he or his team got involved. Thoughts of his men... of one man that had deceived him... tried to surface, but he pushed them aside. His

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life would depend on his total concentration. He could deal with the betrayal if he survived this mess in one piece.

Nassar heard the glass breaking and ran to the window to investigate. His heart began to beat a little faster when he saw the team of four on the front porch. How had they located his position? Had Williams been captured? Had the fool talked already? That was a problem for another day, right now he had to find a way out of this building. He didn't get the chance to kill Dax Hamilton, he'd always regret that. But, his life - his survival - was more important. He could deal with Hamilton later.

Nassar slid the sleek Glock into its holster then snatched up a second handgun just in case. He slid the compact 9mm he smuggled from Iraq into his ankle holster and made his way silently across the room. Once he reached the door, the ruthless militant peered into the hallway. He relaxed a little when he saw his pathway was clear. He slipped into the shadows and soundlessly made his way to the other side of the ancient house. He carefully descended one stair at a time down the well-hidden servant's staircase and stepped into the dark, musty kitchen. From there it was only a few steps to the back door. The wood creaked slightly as he yanked open the heavy wooden barrier and ran into the cover of trees directly behind the main residence.

Nassar had scouted the entire compound before he decided to use the property as a backup. It was always best to be prepared. He knew if he went to the right, his pathway would be cut off by a large brick wall. To the left was an open meadow, a fenced in area and a dirt road. His only escape was directly behind him. He'd have to head into the wilderness, maybe make his way to the creek - then wait. Once the group realized he was gone, they'd take his prisoner and head back to Manti. The insufferable soldier would need medical attention immediately. Then, Nassar could return to the house, pack up and disappear. At least he'd been careful. His vehicle was positioned on the other side of the brick wall, hidden behind a thick stand of trees. He just had to survive one night, that's all. It would be cold, it was winter in these mountains. But, so far... there wasn't snow. He had survived worse. It took a strong man to survive a summer in Iraq.

Nassar stumbled over logs, tripped on protruding rocks and cursed out loud when a tree branch struck him square in the face. He was making too much noise and he wasn't entirely sure which direction he was now traveling. He froze and crouched against the trunk of a tree when he heard a sound. He wasn't the only one in the forest. Nassar slowly slid to the side and settled lower to the ground as he waited to see who was headed his way. A huge smile spread across his face when he spotted his prisoner. In the commotion, Hamilton had also escaped. If he played things right, he just might get the opportunity he longed for... he may still get to kill the man who had caused him so much trouble over the past two days.

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Dax was grateful for the trees, but he also knew he wasn't alone. He could feel someone watching him. How had Nassar located him so quickly? Dax made an abrupt turn and headed to the right. Maybe he could lose the hunter in the woods. Dax figured he had an advantage. He'd spent time in the forest all his life. Nassar was from the desert. He wouldn't know the tricks, wouldn't be able to read the sounds... and if luck was truly on Dax's side, the man that wanted him dead might even get lost... turned around to the point he wouldn't know if he was headed north or west.

A sound behind him caught his attention and he ducked into a thick stand of bushes that lined the area directly in front of his position. As he forced his body further into the shrubbery, he hit a wall... literally. He had worked his way... probably with his luck, to the only solid barrier on the property. He was stuck with nowhere to go but over. And if Nassar was close by... Dax would be discovered before he could lever himself to the other side. But, what was the alternative? He was positive his ankle was broken, his shin was now bleeding from the long, precise cut Nassar had inflicted earlier that day. His fingers were throbbing, at least three of his ribs were broken and sixty percent of his body was covered in deep, raw burns. Conclusion? He was a mess and his only hope of escaping was over that wall.

"This level is clear," Hawk called out. "Let's move downstairs. Paige, when we hit the bottom, you go left again. Jeeves and I will go right. Jericho, glad you could join us. You and your backup man... fall in behind one of us. You decide which looks like the larger section."

"You holding up?" Jericho whispered to Paige before they started forward.

"I'm fine," Paige whispered back. "Tolman?"

"It's covered," Jericho told her as they started to descend the stairs. The entire group grew silent as they made their way onto the concrete slab that covered the entire basement.

"He's gone," Hawk called out.

"Not again," Sean grumbled as he turned and headed for the other side of the building.

Paige stepped into the room and did a quick check of the area. One of the large windows was broken out of its frame. "Do you think he escaped?"

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“Maybe,” Hawk didn’t want to give false hope, but that was exactly what he thought. He pulled out his walkie as he turned to leave. “Dax is on the loose, keep an eye out and watch for Nassar. He could be in pursuit.”

“Split up,” Hawk ordered. “Jeeves stay with me. Paige you and Sean head right. Jericho, take your man and head toward the back of the property. Watch for my men and please don’t shoot any of my guys by accident.”

“Does he think he’s the only one that’s ever worked an op?” Sean grumbled. “He acts like we’re security guards he just pulled in from the mall.”

“Ignore him,” Jericho scowled. “And stay in touch. I want to know where you are at all times.”

“Copy that,” Paige said as she pulled out her walkie and turned right. “Zeus, Sean and I are headed your way.”

“Copy,” Zeus whispered. “I think we have company.”

“Hurry,” Paige called over her shoulder to Sean. “There could be trouble brewing.” She worked her way over fallen logs, soggy leaves and low hanging branches. At least the ground was soft enough they could move around up here without crunching leaves or squeaking as they moved across a bed of snow. Several minutes later, she came to an area where the trees stopped and a flat meadow butted up against a sturdy brick wall. Sean had just moved in beside her when Paige spotted Dax. Her entire body froze in shocked horror as she watched a series of events unfold. Events that she was too far away to stop, events that she knew would change her life forever.

Dax took a deep breath to steady his aching body. It was now or never. He had to act... had to try, even if the attempt killed him. He would not return to that musty basement to be tortured to death by a madman. At least out here if he died... it would be quick and relatively painless. He shoved his back against the wall and pushed upwards. Within seconds he was standing again, now he just had to accomplish the impossible task of scaling a brick wall. Piece of cake. He reached up, braced the top of the wall with both hands and jumped.

His fingers ached, his ribs were screaming for him to stop, but he held on, pulled a little harder, shoved upwards with his toes and finally forced his left leg over the top of the barrier with a loud grunt. Within seconds, he was able to scramble to the top of the large structure... the wall was thicker than he originally believed... and was preparing to drop to the other side when the loud crack of a high powered handgun echoed throughout the night. He pushed out, tried to

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force his body to the other side, hoping he could find safety if only for a moment when the bullet found its mark. Pain engulfed him, heat sliced through his torso just before his world went black and his body fell over the wall and struck the ground with a resounding thud.

“Noooo!” Zeus yelled before he broke into a dead run and tried to catch up with a fleeing Nassar. Several things happened in a matter of seconds. A second shot rang out—breaking the calm silence that had engulfed the wilderness like a sinister omen. Zeus skidded to an abrupt stop, lost his footing and fell backward in shock. And, Nassar’s lifeless body fell suddenly to the ground a few feet away at a grotesque angle, one that seemed fitting somehow after all he had done. Zeus looked to the side, to the area where the shot had originated and spotted Thor. His friend was clearly angry, but still had his .40 caliber Smith & Wesson pointed at the enemy. An enemy that may have just killed the best friend Zeus had ever had.

Hawk and Jeeves reached Dax first. Jeeves dropped to the ground beside his friend and frantically began searching for the damage.

“How bad?” Hawk asked as he settled to the ground on the other side.

“Bad,” Jeeves said gravely. “I’m not sure I can save him.”

“You can,” Hawk disagreed. “You will.” He glanced up when he heard his colleagues running toward them.

Paige reached Dax’s body and immediately dropped to the ground. “How can I help?”

“There are so many injuries,” Sean whispered. He reached out and put a supportive hand on Paige’s shoulder. He wouldn’t say it, not out loud, but it would take a miracle and even then... he wasn’t sure Dax could survive.

Paige felt like she was treading under water. She knew the rest of the men had joined them. She knew Sean was standing beside her, had somehow known the instant Jericho flanked her on the other side and Gage moved to stand behind her. But she couldn’t hear their muffled voices, couldn’t understand what Jeeves was saying.

“I’m losing him,” Jeeves called out. “Ken?”

“That’s my transport,” Ken called out when they heard the distinct sound of a helicopter overhead. “We need a landing zone.”

Paige was still kneeling on the ground when two men lifted Dax onto a stretcher. She remained there while Dax’s team helped rush him to the waiting bird. Continued to sit frozen

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when the engine roared to life, the wind picked up and the helicopter lifted gracefully into the air. She still didn't move when the men gathered around and silently stared at the bloodstained earth in front her.

"What are you going to do with the body?" Mo finally asked.

That simple statement jerked Paige back to reality. "Body?" Had Dax died while she sat there weak and immobilized?

"Sean?" Hawk focused on the federal agent.

"It's a crime scene," Sean shrugged. "The shooting will have to be investigated."

Jericho considered. "I agree, but we'll need to call in Sevier County on this. All of us, well except Agent Wilkens... maybe, are out of our jurisdiction."

"Is that going to complicate things?" Hawk asked.

"Maybe a little," Jericho admitted. "They will probably be upset we didn't notify them earlier. Luckily, that's not my problem. Consider the prisoner transferred into the custody of you, Agent Sean Wilkens. What the FBI does to deal with that man's body is now out of my control."

"I tried to call Nathan," Zeus offered. "He's not answering so we'll have to deal with this on our own. We should be able to use his name to justify our presence here... the former military team, that is. The rest will be up to our new favorite agent."

"Then let's hope I can use my charming personality to smooth things over," Sean smiled. He turned to see Paige's reaction and realized she was still crouched on the cold ground. "Why don't you guys head back to the car? Maybe you could check on Dax and see if there's an update. I need just a minute, then I'll contact the locals."

Hawk focused on Paige for several seconds, nodded, then turned and started back toward the house.

"Come on, kid," Jericho gripped Paige's forearm and gave it a gentle pull. "We need to get you to the hospital."

"Did he...?"

Sean stepped forward and took her hand. "It's bad, Paige. You need to be prepared for that. Jeeves lost him completely but brought him back around. He may not survive the ride to the hospital but we did all we could. You need to be prepared and I'll help you through whatever happens." He glanced at Jericho then Gage. "We all will. There's still hope. If anyone can survive this, Dax Hamilton can."

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Jericho wrapped a strong arm around Paige's shoulder. "Just take one step at a time. It's all you can do. We'll let these guys handle cleanup out here until the locals arrive and I'll drive you to the emergency room."

Jericho started forward then glanced back and spotted Gage. The big man liked everyone to believe he was strong and tough, but at the moment his deputy was having a hard time keeping it together. Dax had touched the lives of his entire department. Jericho just hoped the stubborn, but loveable, carpenter was as resilient as he used to be. Because he wasn't sure Paige Carter could survive losing the man she loved on the same day she discovered the identity of the man that killed her mother. Jericho wasn't sure he could handle it himself. Daniel Owens had died today by Jericho's hand. Unfortunately, he had taken far too many answers with him to the grave.