

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Insidious Conspiracy* *Season 3, Episode 1*

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*by:*

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## Insidious Conspiracy

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Paige walked slowly through the bright white, sterile hallway. She hated hospitals, always had. She was only a child when her father passed away, but she remembered the pain in the air and the despair that surrounded her like it was yesterday. Ironic really, since her father didn't actually pass away in a hospital. He died, probably a violent death, on a top-secret mission in a strange country; surrounded by his men. She didn't know that at the time; she was just a small child. But, her mother's reaction and subsequent depression when she heard the news would live with Paige forever. It was years later when she learned the government had taken her father, a national hero, to the hospital where they created a cover story to hide the top-secret mission that had cost Dylan Carter his life. Her father wouldn't have cared, he would have expected the deception. He'd just say that's what he signed up for when he became a Ranger. She wondered if Dax would say the same.

She paused in the doorway and shook off the memories. That was all water under the bridge now. Paige blinked several times in an attempt to adjust to the dim lighting, glanced momentarily at the lifeless body of the man she loved, and silently made her way to the uncomfortable chair that folded into a make-shift bed. As she stared out the dirty window, she wondered how much more she could take. Dax was still in a coma after two long months and, with each passing day, his prognosis got worse. Her mind was constantly fighting her heart. She wanted to believe, wanted to cling to hope and ignore logic; but, each day it got just a little harder. She had to be honest with herself, nothing had changed since his surgery. Well, since he had complications from his surgery and slipped into a coma. Over time, the hospital staff had shifted from reassuring and supportive... to glancing away in pity.

Paige knew she was a mess; on the inside and the outside. She wanted to be angry with the doctors, the nurses... even the janitor when he interrupted the silence to empty the trash. But, deep down inside she knew they were probably right. She was just grateful Dax had given Zeus power-of-attorney over his medical decisions years ago. Zeus was clinging to the same hope; which was probably an illusion. At least they had that in common. They could still present a united front when challenged; not only by the staff, but some of the team. Hawk had stopped visiting weeks ago, Carmen insisted Paige and Zeus were only delaying the inevitable and Ken had returned to Nephi to deal with a personal crisis. Maybe they were clinging to false hope, but as long as Zeus held out... Paige was going to stand strong beside him. Unrealistic optimism was all she had left.

Paige brushed at her face, wiping away any evidence she'd been crying... again. She felt weak, and it annoyed her. She had to be tough, Dax would be strong if the tables were turned. She sighed and turned away from the window to glance at Dax, hoping somehow he'd give her the strength she needed to get through this. That's when she spotted her longtime friend, Sean Wilkins, standing in the doorway. She forced a smile in greeting and swallowed hard in an effort to compose herself.

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“I didn’t want to interrupt,” Sean said as he made his way across the room and settled in the chair next to her. “Any change?”

“No,” Paige said a little too abruptly. She shouldn’t take her frustration out on her friend, but he was a handy target. And, at the moment, she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“There’s still hope,” Sean said compassionately. “Dax is strong, we have to believe there’s still a chance he’ll pull through.”

Paige didn’t respond.

“Why don’t we go for a walk,” Sean suggested. “I’ll buy you dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” Paige barked.

“Paige,” Sean sighed. “You have to eat. Look at you, this isn’t healthy. How much weight have you lost? Ten pounds? Fifteen?”

“I’m not hungry,” Paige insisted. She glared at her friend in challenge, daring him to push her, daring him to give her a reason to unleash her anger on him. It had been bottled up inside for way too long. She needed a target, and tonight... Sean Wilkins seemed like a perfect mark.

Sean sighed and stood. “Never mind,” he was halfway across the room before he paused, turned and focused on Paige. “I really do hope he pulls out of this; for his sake and yours. I won’t bother you again.” Then, he turned and disappeared out the door.

Paige stared at the empty doorway for several seconds, confused and a little annoyed. Then it hit her, something was wrong with Sean and she’d missed it because she was too caught up in her own world to notice. She jumped to her feet and rushed to the door. Sean was already halfway down the corridor. She dashed forward, calling his name. He ignored her completely, didn’t even pause, didn’t react at all. She immediately picked up the pace and caught up with him just as he was stepping through the outer door that led to the elevator.

Paige reached out and set a hand on Sean’s forearm. “What’s wrong?”

Sean stopped and closed his eyes for several seconds.

Paige smiled, then realized that was the first time she’d been amused in over two months. This was Sean’s way of regaining control, a habit Paige had razzed him about since the moment they met. After several seconds, Sean opened his eyes and focused on Paige. Before he could say a word, she latched onto his arm and pulled him toward the row of guest chairs lining the far wall. Paige settled into the one in the middle, next to the window. Sean lowered himself into the chair next to her. Neither one spoke for several minutes.

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“I’ve been suspended,” Sean finally said. “Assistant Director Sam Keaton called my SAC this morning. He said they are conducting an internal review which will likely result in termination.”

“For what?” Paige’s mind was racing.

“Violating policy,” Sean grumbled. “Claims I went rogue when I assisted a domestic terrorist group composed of former soldiers on an unsanctioned rescue mission. According to him, I was obligated to call in HRT if the danger was legit.”

“Hogwash,” Paige jumped to her feet and began to pace. “I’m calling Nathan.”

“No,” Sean immediately rejected that. “It will only make things worse. If Porter saves me, I’m going to have a rep. One that will follow me through the rest of my career. Everyone will know I’m the guy that should have been fired, but I was saved because a certain powerful general stepped in and intervened.”

“Sean,” Paige sat back down and took his hand in hers. “That’s not what this is about. And if you weren’t in shock, you would see it for what it is. They’re messing with our team. This is just the most recent insidious attack. It’s all part of the whole.”

Sean frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Think about it,” Paige settled back against the wall. “Bryan’s death started it all off. They killed him because he stumbled onto their nefarious plan. Then, they panicked when they realized he was hooked up with Carmen, Nathan’s digital miracle worker.”

“You think Keaton is dirty? That he’s part of the group we’re chasing. The guys responsible for Dax’s condition?” Sean wasn’t convinced.

“I don’t know this Keaton guy,” Paige shrugged. “But it’s all just a little too convenient. Once this group realized Carmen was a threat, they took action. They are seriously whacked and desperate. Had to be to send a bomb to Nathan’s headquarters. Once Carmen was out of the way, or so they thought, they focused on Dax. He was the next biggest threat. We both know he’s supposed to be dead. But, we stepped in and stopped them. You are the one that made our actions possible. You transferred Williams to Mo down in Mexico. As a local I couldn’t do that, neither could Sheriff Walters. So, now they’ve shifted to you... to get you out of the way.”

Sean’s temper began to boil. Paige was onto something. When Special Agent in Charge, Clive Rickman had called him into the office and issued the suspension, Sean had quickly reminded him the mission wasn’t unsanctioned. And, he certainly hadn’t gone rogue. He’d been temporarily assigned to Nathan Porter’s team by the Bureau. His SAC sympathized. Sean didn’t always get along with the guy, but he thought Rickman even agreed with Sean’s position. Unfortunately, the order came from Washington and Rickman wasn’t in a position to argue with

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his boss. Rickman was a yes-man and would never go out on a limb for anyone... except maybe himself. The allegation didn't make sense, but Sean had been willing to accept his lumps and move on. If Paige was right and the bad guys had infiltrated the FBI, if they were setting up obstacles to make sure nobody got in their way... well, they were in for a big surprise. Because Sean was now livid, and he planned to orchestrate a few obstacles of his own. "If you're right, and I think maybe you are, they'll be coming after you next."

"I don't think so," Paige disagreed. "I'm just a local cop now. I think their next target will be the soldiers. I'm beginning to wonder if they've already set something up to deal with Thor. He's been gone for nearly two weeks now and none of the guys seem to know where he went, or why. Plus, Ken had to rush back to Nephi. They are scattering our team, I'm sure of it."

"But Carmen wasn't a high ranking player, either. She was just good at what she does," Sean sobered. "Just like you. We would never have found their hideout, wouldn't have captured Williams, and wouldn't have located the vehicle that led us to Dax - without you. I'm just saying you need to watch your back. These guys play dirty and they don't seem to care what kind of permanent damage they inflict as long as they achieve their goal."

"I'm watching," Paige paused to consider. "But I think they are, too."

"Meaning?"

"I get the feeling I'm being watched here; at the hospital," Paige confided. "I think they have a camera somewhere inside Dax's room. I've kind of glanced around, but unless I do a thorough search - which they will see me doing - I won't be able to locate it. Be careful what you say while you're in there, Sean. Even if you think you're alone."

Sean frowned. "Have you told the others?"

"Not yet," Paige sighed. "They all think I've lost my marbles, that I'm not accepting the facts. I'm afraid of Hawk's reaction if I tell him I believe there's a camera in there. He's going to think I've completely lost my mind."

"I don't think he will," Sean disagreed. "He's a little paranoid these days, too. Plus, he's working on some sort of plan to take the offense. I'm starting to think we should do the same. Can you get Jericho to meet us at Carmen's house? Zeus, too. I want to talk about this as a group and decide where to go from here. I don't like being..."

"Held hostage?" Paige offered.

Sean grimaced, but understood her point. "I can't believe I didn't see this sooner. My only defense is that I was blind-sided. I didn't even see it coming. The last few hours have been pretty much a daze to me. I didn't want to dump this on you, but I decided to be selfish. I needed a friend, someone that understands the bureaucracy, someone I could sit down with and

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talk it through, you know? Not once did I even consider the possibility it was a setup. I think you're right, this was just a clever way to get me out of the way."

"I think I've been in a daze since the moment Dax fell off that wall," Paige admitted. "This. Keaton messing with you, with your livelihood, it's what jerked me out of my funk. They've gone too far and they need to pay."

"They went too far when they kidnapped Dax," Sean corrected. "And, like I said, I think Hawk is working on payback. Whatever he's doing, he wants to bring these guys down in a big way. A way that is demoralizing and very public. Normally, I don't agree with those kind of tactics but for this group, I'm willing to make an exception."

"I'll call Jer and see you at Carmen's in thirty," Paige stood.

"Sounds like a plan," Sean also stood. "And, thanks. I already feel much better. I prefer pissed as hell to depression and guilt. I can't believe I accepted everything so easily. Especially when we know how ruthless these guys are."

"I'm sure, in time, you would have gotten there on your own," Paige smiled. "Once you stopped reacting to the news and really thought about the big picture. Now, I need to grab my stuff then I'll see you at the house. I'll call Carmen and tell her we're on the way. Zeus may already be there, anyway. He's been spending most of his time at her place or here with his best friend."

Sean pushed the button on the elevator. The door opened immediately and he disappeared. Paige pulled out her phone and started back toward the room. She hit send and waited for her boss to give his standard, grumpy greeting. Instead, the phone went to voicemail. She tried again, same result. That wasn't like Jericho. Paige made her way across Dax's room, snatched up her bag and headed out the door. Once she was back at the elevator, she punched in Margie's number. Jericho's assistant would know where he was.

"Hello, Paige," Margie greeted.

"I need to talk to the boss, do you know where he is?" Paige asked, more concern coming through her voice than she'd intended.

"Tolman contacted him just as he was leaving," Margie's voice also held concern. "The DA said Jericho was in trouble with the ATF and if he didn't head over to the office immediately, the Feds were going to arrest him and ask questions later."

Paige stepped from the elevator and moved quickly toward her vehicle. Another piece of the whole. She should have seen this one coming. If they got rid of Jericho, Paige wouldn't have any authority to assist Nathan's team. She'd be pulled from the case because the office would be in chaos. "I'm calling Nathan, Margie. Try not to worry, he'll sort this all out."

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“Jericho isn’t going to be happy when he finds out you called in the General.”

“Nathan and Jericho are going to have to put their egos aside and work together for a while. We need to fight this war as a team, otherwise we’ll never win.”

“You lost me,” Margie admitted.

“It’s all part of the plan,” Paige said, a little frustrated she was the only one that saw the obvious. “Dax in the hospital, Sean suspended, and now Jericho being interrogated by the ATF. They’re trying to divide and conquer. I’m not going to let that happen. If we all try to fight our personal, individual battles alone; the enemy is going to win. I’m not all that keen on losing this one.”

“You think someone got to them?” Margie realized. “You think this group, the ones that killed that cop in New Orleans then kidnapped Dax, has a contact in the ATF and they are using that connection to pull Jer out of the mix.”

“I know it,” Paige said confidently. “And, I’m calling in my own big gun to head this off before it gets out of control.”

“You do that while I call Riley,” Margie decided. “I tried to talk Jericho into taking my boy with him to begin with, but the stubborn man refused. Said he didn’t need a lawyer because he hadn’t done anything wrong.”

“Good idea,” Paige smiled. “If nothing else, an attorney can stall while I get the ball rolling with Nathan.”

They disconnected and each woman immediately called in reinforcements.

“Paige,” Nathan answered. “Has something changed?”

“Not with Dax,” Paige admitted. “But I have a problem. Well, two actually. I need your help.”

“Anything, just say the word.”

Paige began to run him through the situation with her boss then concluded with the details about Sean’s suspension.

“Sean’s problem is easy to resolve,” Nathan considered. “But it’s going to take time. Rickman has the paperwork. Director Mason approved that transfer himself and Rickman knows that. So does Keaton; I’d bet the farm on that one. It’s a bluff, a way to get Wilkens out of the picture while they move forward with their plan... whatever it is.” Nathan grumbled, clearly frustrated they hadn’t figured it all out yet. “But Mason’s in California. I’ll do what I can until

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he returns to DC. But, in the meantime, tell Sean as far as I'm concerned he's still on my team; and he's not suspended."

"Can we get away with that?"

"Yes," Nathan said in dismissal. "Now, the thing with Walters I think I can handle tonight. Tell him to keep his mouth shut and make sure he doesn't incriminate himself, but stall his interrogators as long as possible. I'll call Director Braxton. If he won't step in, my next call will be to the Attorney General. I'll get back to you, but don't worry about your boss. This is all smoke and mirrors. Plus, it gives me a new lead into the man running things here in Washington. Hang in there, everything is going to work out okay."

"Thanks," Paige let out a relieved breath. "A bunch of us are meeting Carmen tonight to come up with a new plan. I'm not a fan of being on the defense all the time. I'm used to taking the offense and I plan to do just that, starting now."

"That's my girl," Nathan was also relieved. Sounded like Paige was finally bouncing back. Now, he just needed Dax to wake up. Well, he needed a lot more than that... but, it would be a good start. "Love you, kid. I'll try to call back tonight, but it may not be until tomorrow afternoon."

"No rush," Paige decided. "Just save my friends."

"That I can promise," Nathan disconnected with Paige and dialed an old friend.

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Jericho studied the two men sitting before him. If they thought they could come into his town and intimidate him... well, they were going to be deeply disappointed. Their allegations were absurd and he refused to respond out of principle. They couldn't seriously believe he set those explosives himself. Really, to what end? And the idea he murdered Daniel Owens in cold blood was plain lunacy. The idiot banker hadn't stumbled onto Jericho, Walters had stumbled onto the banker. As if that wasn't enough, the dynamic duo had conjured up some fantasy about Jericho killing Chaya years ago. He was still baffled by that one. Maybe if he sat here long enough, they'd disclose more details. Maybe they'd explain their theory and how they got there. It would be nice if they started with motive because Jericho didn't have one. Not for Daniel and certainly not for Chaya. The entire interrogation was absurd and Jericho wasn't going to cooperate with this nonsense. Not even District Attorney James Tolman would change his mind on that.

Everyone present glanced at the door when a loud pounding sounded outside.



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“I thought you said we wouldn’t be interrupted,” one of the agents challenged Tolman. The pounding continued.

Tolman stood, made his way to the door and slowly swung it open. Riley Gonzales pushed his way into the room.

“It has come to my attention that the two of you have been questioning my client for the past two hours without representation.” Riley set his briefcase on the table and glanced around for a chair. He spotted one in the corner, drug it over next to Jericho and casually settled in... Glaring at the two ATF Agents in challenge. “I’d like an explanation.”

“He never requested a lawyer,” one of the agents finally provided.

“Did you read him his rights?”

“He’s the Sheriff,” the other agent barked. “I certainly hope he knows them by now.”

“Be that as it may, unless you read him Miranda before this fiasco began, anything discussed prior to this moment is inadmissible and will ultimately be suppressed. You’re a federal agent, I’m certain you know that by now.”

“Challenge all you want,” the first agent said angrily. “The man’s a murderer and he’s going to pay.

“Am I to gather from that statement we are here regarding a homicide investigation?”

“That’s right,” the second agent said smugly.

“Who is the victim?”

“For starters,” the second agent continued. “Chaya Carter.”

Riley glanced at Jericho then focused on Tolman. “How is Chaya Carter’s death a matter for the ATF?”

“She was shot,” the first agent said immediately.

“With an illegally obtained firearm?” Riley challenged.

“We haven’t determined that, yet.”

“Then we haven’t determined jurisdiction, either. That should be easy enough. Can you name any other death by firearm case, that did not involve an illegal firearm, the ATF commandeered from the locals?” Riley continued. He was having fun and his mother had asked him to stall. He could happily report back that he’d done as asked.

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“I’m not going to...” the agent stopped when his phone began to ring. He glanced at the display, flashed a panicked look at his partner then answered.

“Agent Jarrett,” the man said in greeting. “No, sir. Yes, Agent Reese is with me. I understand. No, sir. I’ll take care of it immediately. Goodbye, sir.”

The room remained silent for several seconds.

“Are we finished?” Riley finally asked.

“Um,” Jarrett glanced at his partner. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

“Will you be questioning my client in the future?”

“No,” Jarrett stood and looked at his partner. “Apparently, he’s been cleared. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Sheriff Walters. I hope you will accept my sincere apology for wasting your time.”

“I’m not sure how sincere, but apology accepted,” he motioned for Riley to move toward the door. The two men silently exited and walked side-by-side to the parking lot. Jericho turned to address Riley. “Mind telling me what that was all about and how did you get the charges dropped so quickly?”

“Not my doing,” Riley smiled. “I was just a pawn in my mother’s chess game. I was told to stall because she was working with Paige on something. I stalled. Although, they did resolve this thing a little too quickly. I was just getting started.”

“Sorry to interrupt your fun,” Jericho grumbled as he climbed into his vehicle.

“Mom said to head over to Carmen’s place,” Riley slid his briefcase into the backseat of his own car. “Apparently the gangs all there and waiting.”

Jericho watched as Riley climbed behind the wheel and disappeared from the parking structure before he started his own engine. Instead of pulling away, he just sat there contemplating the situation. None of this passed the smell test. He needed answers and Paige Carter was the only person that seemed to have any.

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“I’ll go with Zeus tomorrow when he visits Dax,” Carmen decided. “I have a device that will tell me if someone is monitoring his room. Once we know, we can decide how to proceed.”

“Make sure they don’t see you,” Paige ordered. “That’s why I haven’t investigated. I don’t want them to know we’re onto them.”

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Just then there was a knock on the door. Sean stood and answered it, smiled and stepped back to let the local sheriff inside. “Glad to see you’re still free.”

Jericho focused on Paige. “Porter’s doing?”

“Yes,” Paige admitted.

Jericho frowned but moved to an empty chair and settled in.

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“Havi,” Susie called out as she disconnected with the caller.

“What’s up?” Officer Duncan Havilland asked as he approached the nighttime dispatcher.

“I have two details holding,” she admitted. “One is a 911 hang-up, the other is an active domestic.”

“Try calling back on the hang-up,” he demanded.

“I already tried, twice. It just rings and rings,” Susie practically apologized.

“Where is the domestic?”

“Out near Laurel Bluffs,” she said, glancing at her notes. “Looks like it’s right on the border.”

Havilland glanced around the office, his gaze landing on Logan Reed. He’d be a good cop; someday. Oh, well. The rookie would have to venture out alone sometime. Might as well be tonight. “Reed,” he called over his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Logan jumped to his feet, eager for action.

“You take the emergency hang-up but be on your toes. You never know what you’re walking into. Could be a mistake, could be trouble. I’ll call Dean and see if he’s available to back you.”

“I thought he was off tonight,” Reed objected.

“He’s on call,” Havilland glanced back to Susie. “I’ll take the Domestic, but call over to the Bluffs and see if they have a man that can back me. Tell them I’m just leaving the station but I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

Susie nodded and grabbed the phone. The two officers left the building together.

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Logan pulled off the main highway onto a long dirt drive. The house was secluded and surrounded by ancient oaks. He briefly wondered if the eighty-two-year-old homeowner was the one to plant them. He smiled at that, still surprised that his contact had a driver's license. She must be in good shape, even at her age. He was sure this call was nothing, maybe a medical issue. At eighty-two, the woman probably fell and broke her hip or something. Havilland was overreacting. Logan was sure of it. It still burned that the senior officer had called in Bridges. Dean was supposed to be at some awards celebration. The guy was a legend in the racing industry and he broke some record the previous week. Would his colleagues ever respect him? Ever accept the fact he was a cop, not a child? Didn't he prove he could do the job last spring when he dealt with the Suttons and the Newton clan... and the burning barn?

Logan slowed as he took a bend in the road and spotted Dean's vehicle. Even off-duty the man beat him to the scene. He pulled in behind Dean and checked in with Susie, advising her they had both arrived.

"Hey, Logan," Dean greeted. "How you want to handle this?"

Logan paused in surprise. "I thought."

"Your call, I'm just here to back you. Give me some direction, boss." Dean remembered what it was like to be the new guy. He thought it might do Logan good to take the lead.

"Okay," Logan considered. "Well, Susie said there was no answer when she called but I think we should just attempt contact like we would on any other detail. We know someone is inside, they have to be... the call originated from this residence."

"Sounds like a plan," Dean motioned for Logan to lead the way. So far, so good.

Logan climbed the rickety, old, wooden stairs and waited to ring the bell until Dean was positioned slightly behind him and to the right. They were both surprised when a male in his early to mid-forties opened the door.

"Can I help you, officer?" the man frowned.

"Could you please step out of the house, sir?" Logan requested.

"What is this about?"

"We just have a few questions," Logan assured him. "Are you alone here?"

"No," the man answered slowly. "My wife is napping in the other room. She's not feeling well. I feel like I'm being harassed for no reason, why are you here?"

"We need you to step out on the porch," Dean reiterated.

"I don't think I'm comfortable doing that," the man objected.

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“Can I see some identification?” Logan asked.

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that this residence belongs to Sophia Burgess. Is she here? We’re going to need to speak with her immediately,” Logan was starting to get suspicious now... and impatient. There was no reason for this man to act so hostile unless he was up to no good.

“I’m afraid she’s out of town,” the man said a little too quickly.

“Alright,” Dean moved forward. “We’ll need your information then... for the report.”

“What report?” the man demanded. “Why are you here?”

“We received a 911 hang-up call a few minutes ago. Any reason you didn’t answer the phone when we called back?” Dean pushed.

“I guess I didn’t hear the phone,” he frowned. How did the infuriating old hag get to a phone?

“Who do you think made the call?” Logan asked. There was something off here.

“I have no idea,” the man shrugged. “Maybe you got the wrong house.”

Dean saw movement at the side of the house just in time. He shoved Logan who tripped on the raised threshold and collided with their suspect. All three men went down. Dean covered his head and face with his arms as pellets from a shotgun blast peppered the entire area. He pushed into a crawling position, drew his weapon and fired. The woman went down before she could get off a second shot.

“Bianca!” the man shouted as he jumped to his feet and tried to push past the two deputies standing in his path.

Logan recovered quickly. He too jumped to his feet, grabbed the man trying to flee and pushed him against the wall of the house. It only took a couple seconds to handcuff the guy and shove him into a chair. “Talk!”

“What?” the man looked at Logan in confusion.

“Your name, now.”

The man glanced toward the lifeless form of the woman he loved, moisture began to form in his eyes but he blinked it back. “You killed a helpless, innocent woman for no reason.”

“Name?” Logan demanded, then shrugged. “Unless you want to be booked as John Doe. Doesn’t matter to me either way, I’ll get your identity, eventually.”

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“Ethan,” he whispered. “It’s Ethan Cabot and you just killed my wife. I’ll have your badge for that.”

“Doubtful,” Logan said as he pulled the man to his feet and perp walked him to his patrol car. He stopped next to Dean, who had moved to the woman, checked her status and was also headed for his car.

“Want me to call medical?” Logan asked.

“Naw,” he glanced at the man in cuffs. “You handle him. I’ll call medical and notify the sheriff. It’s going to be a long night.”

“We still have to clear the residence,” Logan objected. “We have to locate Sophia Burgess.” He glanced to the side when he heard a vehicle approaching. “Looks like Havilland can help you with that.”

Duncan Havilland climbed from his car, took one glance around and decided he chose the wrong detail. “Looks like you boys got yourself a cluster.”

“You can say that again,” Dean sighed. “I need to call the sheriff and get medical en route. This man needs to be transported and we still haven’t searched the place. Sophia Burgess, the eighty-two-year-old homeowner, seems to be missing.”

“I’ll take this joker off your hands,” Havilland said, taking the arm of the prisoner. “You two clear the place and see if you can find our missing owner. I can also get medical en route and call Jericho on my way to the jail.”

“Good plan,” Dean looked at Logan. “You okay with that?”

“Yeah, sounds like a good plan.”

Havilland turned away before he let the smile spread across his face. Dean was a good trainer and letting the kid think he was in control would be good for his confidence. He shoved the suspect into the back of his car before he called back to Logan. “You got a name for this yahoo?”

“Said it’s Ethan Cabot,” Logan called back. “By the way, how’d you handle the DV so quickly?”

“Didn’t,” Havilland shrugged. “Laurel Bluffs did. They arrived while I was still en route and realized it was really their call. Canceled me before I got there, so I figured I’d come out here and rubberneck. Glad I did. Looks like you two needed the help.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed. “Good call. Don’t forget to call the Sheriff. He gets testy if we wait too long to inform him there’s trouble.”

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Dean and Logan cautiously entered the residence and methodically cleared one room after another. They located Sophia Burgess in a small bathroom at the back of the house. She was battered and bruised, looked malnourished and mad as a hornet on a hot summer day. She was also chained to the toilet.

“Get me out of here,” she demanded.

“Sophia Burgess?”

“Of course, I’m Sophia Burgess. Who else did you expect, Queen Elizabeth?”

“My partner will see if he can find the keys,” Dean said as he crouched next to the old woman. “How bad are you hurt?”

“Not enough to stop me,” Sophia warned. “Get these chains off me. I’m going to kill that no-good niece of mine. Then, I’m going after her husband.”

Logan returned to the bathroom with a set of keys. “Let’s see if one of these works. And, I regret to inform you... uh, well your niece was killed a few moments ago in a shootout with one of our officers.” He didn’t think he should mention it was Dean that had killed her family member.

“I hope her weasel of a husband is dead, too.”

“No, ma’am,” Dean shook his head and forced his face to remain sober. What he wanted to do was laugh. This woman was a fighter and her spunk is probably what saved her life. “He’s on his way to jail. How did you get to a phone?”

“My niece is an idiot,” she answered in a matter-of-fact tone that left no room for disagreement. “She left the cordless on the counter. It was easy to trick her... I just gave her a little distraction and slid the phone into my sweater pocket. By the time she finished securing the window, she had forgotten all about the telephone. That girl was always a moron but her husband? That man is the devil.”

Logan slid the last of the chain away from Sophia and stood to hold out his hand. “Do you think you can stand up? We have EMT’s on the way but I think some fresh air might do you good.”

Just then two men appeared in the bathroom doorway. “We’ve got this,” one of the EMT’s told the officers. “I’d rather carry her out on the stretcher, but you’re right. She could use some fresh air.”

“I could use a glass of water,” Sophia argued. “And, I can walk.” She braced her hands on the closed toilet seat and slowly rose to her feet. “And, a good steak... medium rare. I’m starving.”

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“Sorry,” the EMT said as he moved forward and placed an arm around her tiny waist. “Water I can do, but just a sip. Too much and it will make you nauseous. The steak will have to wait.”

Logan and Dean watched as the two men lifted the woman onto a stretcher and carried her out the door.

“Now comes the hard part,” Dean sighed as he moved toward the front door.

“I’m sorry,” Logan followed. “It was bad enough you got called in on your night off. It bites that you have to go through the shooting protocol to boot.”

“Not your fault,” Dean said as they stepped onto the front porch. He was greeted by the local District Attorney, James Tolman.

“Gentlemen,” Tolman said in greeting. “Walk me through what happened. I already received a call from Fairfax. Ethan Cabot is filing an unlawful death suit against the two of you and the department. I hope this was a clean shooting. Otherwise, it’s going to get ugly.”

“Tolman,” Jericho had arrived without anyone noticing. “Tell me you’re not trying to interrogate my men without their rep.”

“Walters,” Tolman frowned. Where had the sheriff come from? He hadn’t even seen him arrive. “Your men shot a helpless woman, I’m just trying to find out if they had a good reason for their actions.”

Jericho frowned. This was not like James and the woman was not helpless, the shotgun she’d used in an attempt to kill his men was still lying next to her. “A word in private.”

The two men moved away from the scene and into the woods.

“You want to tell me what that was back there?” Jericho demanded when he was sure they were out of earshot.

“I’m getting tired of cleaning up your messes,” Tolman barked. “I spent two full hours this afternoon shielding you from the feds and as an added bonus, I get to deal with yet another officer-involved shooting incident this evening. What’s next, Jericho? What outrageous and indefensible event can I expect as an encore?”

“What is this really about, James?” Jericho asked. “Because it has nothing to do with my man defending himself and a fellow officer against a woman intent on killing them both.”

James Tolman sighed, ran his hands through his hair in frustration and turned away. He paced for several seconds before he turned back to address his lifelong friend. “Fairfax is



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threatening an unlawful death suit. He's prepared to go public with this one. I'm not sure I can survive the bad publicity."

"The public loves you," Jericho said dismissively. "Sure, it's an election year but last I checked; you were running unopposed."

"Yeah, well... things change."

"Who?"

Tolman gave another long sigh. "New guy. Some hotshot attorney from New York. Says he inherited Paulina Kobrick's place and decided he'd like a slower pace."

"I thought she left that place to Remi?"

"So did I," Tolman shrugged. "But, Trenton Moore contested the will. Guess it wasn't as cut and dry as Remington always believed."

"What's the relation?" Jericho wasn't buying it. Remington Kobrick the second was a doting grandson to Paulina. She adored that kid, and the feeling was mutual. It was common knowledge that when Paulina died, she'd be leaving her estate to her only family... Remi, his wife and their new baby. Remi and Megan were conflicted, of course. They couldn't wait to get out of the city and raise their son in the country, but that meant losing someone they loved. Jericho didn't believe this Trenton Moore had any right to the property.

"No idea," Tolman shrugged. "I didn't know anything about it until tonight. Not long after you left, actually. I was just leaving the office when a cocky stranger pushed his way into my office. He declared, with more bravado and confidence than warranted, he was running against me in November. Said it was time for a change and he was just the man to provide it. Some nonsense about demand justice, demand Moore."

Jericho rolled his eyes. "And you're worried he'll spin this thing against you?"

"I have no doubt he'll try," Tolman said immediately. "Tell me it's justified."

"I would," Jericho grinned. "But when have you ever listened to me when it comes to an OIS?"

"Really?" Tolman grumbled. "You're going to go there? You know I have to operate strictly by the book when it comes to an officer-involved shooting."

"Which is why I'm surprised you asked," Jericho countered. "But, yeah. From what I hear, it was justified. The shooting is clean, James. Dean didn't have a choice. The woman took a shot already and was gearing up for a second attempt when he took her down. And, I know you don't want my advice but I'm going to give it, anyway. Get in front of this. Hold a press

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conference, immediately. Make it clear to the public the shooting was tragic but unavoidable. They're going to believe you, not whatever spin this Moore guy tries to put on it. You have an advantage... your community knows and loves you. He's an outsider and as much as it shouldn't matter, around here... it does."

"Sorry about the..." Tolman glanced at the front porch. "Well, sorry I jumped the gun and tried to talk to your men. I broke my own rule. We've established protocol and I'm well aware he has rights. I won't make that mistake again."

"So," Jericho paused to consider. "Was it the ATF or Moore that got you all riled up?"

"Both, I guess." Tolman pulled two business cards from his pocket. "Those two answer to someone. Here's the information, thought it might come in handy. They called a supervisor after you left. I only heard one side of the call, but their boss was not happy with the way things went down today. I'd watch my back if I were you. I'm not sure they're finished with you."

Jericho took the cards. He wasn't finished either. And, he had the perfect solution. His good buddy, Clark, would enjoy a little business and it would leave Carmen free to work on the big picture with Porter. "There's something fishy about this Moore guy showing up... now, at the last minute. I'm giving you the same advice. Watch your back. I know it's probably not kosher, but it might be worth a little investigating. If I were in your position, I'd want to know all I could about one Trenton Moore."

"I thought of that," Tolman admitted. "But, a sitting District Attorney investigating his political opponent would not be received well by the public. I don't want to look like I'm a bully, or worse... that I'm abusing my power for personal reasons."

"Okay," Jericho smiled. "Then, I'll have Paige do it." He walked away before Tolman had a chance to respond.

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The following evening, Paige was parked down the road from Trenton Moore's, formerly Paulina Kobrick's, residence. She wasn't happy with the new assignment. Jericho was taking her away from the hospital. Away from Dax. She wondered if that was by design. She wondered if they'd all become just a little too paranoid. Sure, a stranger moving to town and challenging James Tolman in his prime was odd. It was even a little too coincidental with everything else that was going on. And, the fact he hailed from New York added suspicion. But, on the other hand, the guy might be legit. Manti was a great place to live. She pushed her body a little lower when a car slowed and parked in the driveway of the residence she was monitoring. A man slightly older than James Tolman, but far more gray and distinguished looking climbed from the expensive BMW and headed for the front door.

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He looked like a smarmy lawyer to her and he was just a little too cocky. Was that more paranoia or good sense? Right now, Paige really didn't know. She jotted down the license plate and pulled away. The first step was to verify he really was who he said he was. The next step... talk to Remi and see what the relationship was and how the shyster attorney had bilked Paulina's favorite grandson out of his inheritance.

Two hours later, Paige was sitting next to her Carmen in front of the computer. Her friend still hadn't found a connection between Trenton Moore and Paulina Kobrick. She had found the papers filed with the court. He claimed to be a distant cousin but Paige was now convinced the man was lying. It was time to call Remi.

"I've got nothing here, Paige. If that man is related to Paulina Kobrick, I'm related to Elvis," Carmen settled back into her chair with a sigh. "This is all some kind of con. I ran his financials and nothing pops. It doesn't look like he's in trouble, nothing to indicate he's desperate for money, but there's also nothing connecting him to gun running in New Orleans. I know you think this is connected somehow, but it might just be a dirty lawyer cheating a nice guy out of a valuable estate."

"I don't know that it is connected," Paige argued. "But, it's a little suspicious and way too coincidental. I never did like coincidences."

"I know," Carmen sighed. "Right now, I can't connect it, though. Talk to the grandson, see what he has to say. Maybe he can connect the dots somehow."

Paige stood and moved to the couch before making the call. "Hi, is this Remi Kobrick?" Paige asked the male voice that answered.

"Yes, this is Remi."

"You don't know me," she began. "This is Deputy Paige Carter. I work for Sheriff Walters, in Manti...Utah."

"Oh, yes. How can I help you?"

"I'm calling about your grandmother's will."

"Why? I lost everything, what does this have to do with law enforcement?"

Paige explained how Trenton Moore had moved to town and challenged the local DA. "We all thought Paulina was leaving her place to you. And, I have to be honest, the entire situation seems a little suspicious. I've researched the guy for hours and can't find a connection to your family. Do you know how he's related?"

"I don't believe he is," Remi said flatly. "I think he made it all up. I don't know why and I know that sounds like I'm being petty and a sore loser but I honestly don't believe he is related

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in any way. I can't explain why he'd do it. I can't give you a reason he'd target me or my family but if I had a relative, even a distant one, my grandmother would have mentioned him. She did not."

"Can I ask why you didn't force the issue, make him prove his relation in court?"

"I can't afford it," Remi confessed. "As much as that place means to me, I can barely afford the necessities. Diapers, baby formula, new clothes practically every week. I'm barely holding on. There's no way I could justify spending what little we do have on an expensive attorney."

"What if you didn't have to?"

"I don't understand," Remi said, clearly confused.

"I'm wondering if you want to file a police report," Paige answered.

"For what?"

"Felony fraud," Paige said seriously. "If this guy is not related, he has no standing to contest the will. Your grandmother wanted you and your family to inherit her estate. From where I'm sitting, this sounds like a solid case of fraud. Trenton Moore is taking advantage of the fact you are struggling. He's a hotshot attorney from Manhattan. He can afford this fight, you can't. I think he was counting on that. If you wanted to fight it, you'd have to hire an attorney. He is one. He can utilize his firm to get what he wants and con you out of the life you were depending on. At least if I start an official investigation, he'll have to prove his relationship. And because it's a criminal investigation, it won't cost you a dime. It will cost you a complaint. I can't do this unless you are willing to go on record and challenge him. If you agree to be the complainant, I'll get the ball rolling and see where it leads."

"What if he comes after me?"

"I'll charge him with witness tampering," Paige said immediately.

Remi considered for several minutes. "Okay, file the report."

The instant Paige disconnected with Remi her phone chimed again. She glanced at the display then hit answer. "Hello, Nathan."

"I found a connection between Keaton and Cole Reynolds," Nathan said in answer.

"The Retrocero Inc. guy?" Paige asked.

"Yeah," Nathan told her. "Cole is on my committee and the evidence is piling up against him. He's involved, but I'm not convinced he's the leader."

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“What’s the connection?”

“They went to college together,” Nathan answered. “Rumor has it they’re Frat Brothers. I’m still trying to confirm that.”

“We knew they were behind this thing with Sean but it’s nice to have proof.”

“Any change with Dax?”

“Not yet,” Paige sobered.

“Hang in there,” Nathan tried to comfort her. “Dax is strong, if anyone can pull through this... he can.”

“Hope springs and all that,” Paige sighed. “Do you have time to look into someone else for me?”

“Has something else happened out there?”

“I’m not sure,” she gave Nathan Trenton Moore’s name and explained the situation. Nathan agreed it sounded suspicious but wasn’t ready to include it as another attack on the team. “Tolman is too peripheral.”

“I agree,” Paige admitted. “At first, I wondered if we were just being paranoid, but after talking to Remi I know there’s something there. The question is, what. It’s entirely possible his actions are nefarious, but unrelated. I just find it interesting that he comes from New York. It seems all of our trouble has originated from that area recently.”

“I’ll look into it and let you know what I find,” Nathan promised. “Do you happen to know the law firm? Where he worked before he moved west?”

“Actually, I do. He listed it on his website. Can you believe he just completed the official paperwork today and he already has a political website?” That alone made Paige suspicious. “Says he worked for Yarber, Sardano and Douglas the past fourteen years.”

“Really?” Nathan perked up.

“Meaning?”

“Well,” Nathan considered. “Cole’s uncle just happens to work for the same firm. And, last I heard YSD handled all of Retrocero’s contracts.”

“Bingo,” Paige sat up straight. “Carmen searched for hours and couldn’t find the slightest connection to Paulina Kobrick but after ten minutes with you, we have a connection to Cole Reynolds. That is too much of a coincidence for me. And, it fits - in a roundabout way. These guys are trying to cause problems. The ATF agents failed and their boss was pissed. Then,

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suddenly Tolman has a challenger. Someone that will keep him preoccupied so he can't help keep the rest of us out of jail. I have to warn you, I've exceeded my patients with these guys. If they want a war, they just guaranteed they've got one. Not just from me, but they've attacked too many people that are willing to fight back."

"Promise me you'll be careful and you won't do anything impulsive or dangerous," Nathan said, concerned. Paige was right, these guys just poked the dragon and before it was all over, Nathan was sure they were going to get burned. Fried to a crisp, actually. Paige and Sean's wrath was bad enough. Toss in Sheriff Walters, the local DA and worse... an angry team of Rangers; and Armageddon was going to look like a tropical paradise in comparison. The group they were after had just made a serious miscalculation; one that was sure to end in disaster. Nathan's day suddenly looked just a little brighter. Now, they just needed Dax and his team could take the offense. "Warn Walters and the DA," Nathan decided. "Let them know this Moore guy is dirty and they need to watch out. This group is ruthless and they are too unpredictable."

"How much can I tell Tolman?"

"For now, just let him know we believe Moore is part of the group we are after. I'll decide what he should know and when. Then, I'll touch base when the time is right. Paige, don't do anything reckless."

"Love you," she said in response. "Now, I have to go. I want to stop by the hospital before it's too late." She disconnected before Nathan could call her on the non-answer she gave him. She didn't plan to do anything reckless but desperate times...

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Paige climbed from her bed and stumbled down to the kitchen. She needed coffee. As she poured water into the machine, sorrow engulfed her. This was the time of day that always reminded her of Dax. She missed their morning ritual and wondered if those days were gone forever. She started the machine then made her way to the living room to wait. She'd catch the morning news while she enjoyed the fresh aroma of freshly brewing java.

"And in other news," the anchor continued. "Manti's race for District Attorney has already heated up. We have Trenton Moore in studio today. Mr. Moore, tell us about yourself and what's happening in Manti. I understand there have been some developments since you announced your candidacy yesterday."

*Well, that didn't take long,* Paige thought to herself. She turned up the volume so she could hear the rest of the report then made her way to the kitchen. Her black miracle of life was finally

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ready for consumption. And, this morning she was going to need at least three cups to get her moving.

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Paige had just settled behind her desk when Jericho exited his office and made his way to her visitor's chair. Once he was settled, he took a minute to study his deputy. "You look like hell."

Paige shrugged. "Feel that way, what's up?"

"Trenton Moore has filed a complaint with the county council. He's demanding they terminate you immediately."

"Awe," Paige grinned. "Now you've hurt my feelings."

"He has also informed me, he expects my resignation before the end of the day. And, Tolman should not only resign, but Moore is demanding our favorite DA pull his name from the ballot in the upcoming election; it's the ethical and sensible thing to do after all."

"How about an all-expense paid trip to Disneyland while he's at it? I mean, if you're going to be ridiculous... might as well ask for the world, right?"

"So far, nothing about Disney but he wants an answer on the rest immediately."

Paige smiled as she raised her middle finger to her boss. "How's that for a response?"

"Can you send that to me in writing?"

"Sure," Paige flipped on her computer. "Just give me a minute, I'll Google it and get back to you."

Jericho laughed. "That's not necessary. I'll pass on the sentiment, but my way will be a little more subtle. Did you have a chance to visit Dax yesterday?"

"Yeah," Paige frowned. "No change."

"What about the gang of militants? Anything new I should know about?"

"No," Paige shook her head. "Not that I know of, anyway. Zeus tries to keep us informed, as much as Hawk allows. I'm sure they're up to something, I just don't know what yet."

"Maybe Dax will rein them in, get them to cooperate," Jericho stood. "We are all on the same team here. We want the same thing, it would be nice if those guys understood that."

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“They understand,” Paige shifted in front of her computer. “They just think they’re better equipped to handle it on their own. By the way, did you catch the news? Moore didn’t wait long to go public with his complaints. Sounded like a petulant child to me, I doubt he won the hearts and minds of the locals.”

“I’m not worried about Moore,” Jericho decided. “He’s out of his league. Tolman might come across as dignified and easy-going but he’s no fool. He’ll punch back and punch hard. Trenton Moore won’t even see it coming.”

“Good,” Paige decided. “Another failure for them... a win for us. We’re stacking them up. Now, we just need to figure out our knockout move. I want every one of them behind bars or in a grave, from the man at the top all the way down to the bottom. No one escapes this, Jericho.”

“I agree,” he gave her a nod in approval. “Now, get to work. I have a meeting with the Mayor.”

Paige cringed, opened her email and got to work.

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Cole Reynolds glanced up and frowned. “We agreed you would never come here. Now there’s a record of us together. We need plausible deniability.”

“I’m not visiting you,” the Colonel stated flatly. “I dropped by to deliver a bouquet of flowers to Flo. She loved them, by the way.”

“Still,” Cole considered. “What do you want?”

“You know what I want,” the Colonel said. “We need to escalate the attacks. Nathan Porter is defeating us at every turn.”

“Nathan Porter is preoccupied with saving his team,” Cole countered. “Our goal was to keep him busy with other things so he would stop focusing on us. It’s working.”

“That was your plan,” the Colonel disagreed. “Our first shipment is late. Our buyers are growing impatient. If we can’t deliver soon, they will find someone who can. We have millions riding on this mission. We need to up our game and shut down Porter for good.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Let me take Hamilton out, permanently. Then we can focus on Porter. Hamilton should already be dead. Nassar was going to handle that little problem for us. Where he failed, Nox will succeed.”



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“Fine,” Cole said with a dismissive hand wave. “He’s nearly dead already, take him out. I don’t see how that helps, but he’s insignificant at this point.”

“He’s not,” the Colonel disagreed. “Because Porter will attend the funeral. It will get him out of DC and vulnerable in Utah where we can silently take him out, too. Then nobody will stand in our way. We’ll be back in business and the shipment can be sent immediately.”

Cole didn’t like it, but the plan had merit. “I’ll agree to it on one condition. After Porter, the deaths stop. Nobody else needs to die. If we rack up too many bodies, it will make us vulnerable. Someone is bound to connect the dots and you and I will end up behind bars. I’d like to keep my freedom. What good will millions do us if we can’t enjoy it?”

The Colonel didn’t agree, so he didn’t answer; just slipped away unseen. The same way he arrived.

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“I want her fired immediately,” Trenton Moore growled. “She’s overstepped. She took a civil matter and turned it into a criminal fishing expedition. I have rights and Paige Carter is stomping all over them. I’m sure you don’t want me on your bad side, sheriff. The new District Attorney and the local police department will have to work closely together. Let’s start this relationship off right. Fire that insolent busybody before the end of the day.”

“I’m afraid I have an entirely different point of view on this,” Jericho said, gritting his teeth. “Paige stays. You, on the other hand, can go.”

Trenton Moore’s face turned a bright shade of red, then went almost purple. “You’re going to regret this.”

Jericho smiled as the infuriating man stomped out the door and slammed it behind him. He continued to smile when Margie appeared in the doorway.

“Guess that didn’t go well?”

“On the contrary,” Jericho stood and moved to the window. “I think we finally understand each other.”

“And Paige? Does she still have a job?” Margie asked, knowing the answer.

“What do you think?” Jericho frowned when he spotted the black government vehicle. “Why don’t you go home early today?”

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“Are they still out there?” Margie might go home, but she’d be calling Riley. Her son could be as big a headache as the cocky lawyer that just left. And she thought it was about time the ATF had a really big headache... of the Migraine variety.

“Yeah,” Jericho turned back to face his assistant. “Go home, I’ll handle this.”

“Expect a call from Riley,” Margie called back as she disappeared out the door.

“Great,” Jericho settled back into his chair. “That’s all I need.” Just then his phone began to ring. “Sheriff Walters.”

“Jericho, it’s Clark.”

“I didn’t expect to hear from you until tomorrow at the earliest. What do you have for me?”

“An intense desire to help you take that snake, Trenton Moore down... hard.”

“I think Paige might agree with you,” Jericho settled back to hear what Clark Anderson found. He knew everyone he knew would find it strange that he employed the services of a Private Investigator. But, Clark was more than a typical PI. He had contacts the police could never cultivate and the kid was a wiz when it came to fleshing out the dirt... no matter how hard a person tried to hide it. He was sure the guy employed tactics and methods that would get an officer in hot water, but he didn’t care. He considered himself an ends kind of guy.

“I don’t know what that means, but the guy is a con artist in a fancy suit,” Clark grumbled. “I’ve located two previous victims... families he claimed to be related to. He lied. Just like this time, he barged in, cleaned them out, and then split. The last one was two years ago. Grant Sudbury hit it big in the market. Lucked into a couple big investments that paid off in a big way. When he passed away unexpectedly, Trenton Moore swooped in and cleaned out his portfolio. Didn’t care that Grant’s daughter was counting on that money to pay for her child’s medical expenses. The kid has some rare disease and needs another surgery right away. If his parents can’t scrape up the funds to pay for it, the kid won’t live much longer... not that Moore cares. He shipped the money overseas. I’m still trying to find the account, but things are more... complicated in the Caymans.”

“I might have someone that can help with that,” Jericho considered. “I’ll have Carmen contact you directly. Whatever you can scrape up... that we can prove would be great. The sooner we get that guy out of my town, the better.”

“I’ll work with Carmen and see what I can do,” Clark decided not to tell the good sheriff he planned to take the money as soon as he found it. It belonged to the daughter and she needed it more than some slick, underhanded lawyer. He was sure Jericho wouldn’t rat him out, but he didn’t want his mentor to be disappointed. Clark Anderson owed his life to Walters. If he hadn’t caught him committing some petty theft years ago, Clark would probably be rotting in a cell

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today. Instead, Jericho came down on him hard... and protected him. He taught him honor and respectability. Stealing a bunch of money, even if he gave it to the victims of Moore's crime, probably wouldn't seem honorable to Jericho Walters. No, better he not know about it.

"Anything on the other guys?"

"Uh... yeah," Clark shifted gears. "Your two ATF agents seem legit. I think they are just following orders. Their supervisor, on the other hand, is questionable. The guy has a pretty serious gambling problem. Rumor has it he was in big trouble a few weeks ago, then suddenly he came into the funds to settle the debt. No word on who he sold his soul to, but there's no doubt he sold it to someone. I could follow up, ruin the guy by turning him into Internal Affairs but..."

"But the agents are harmless, so drop it. I'm not ready to ruin the guy... yet." Jericho glanced back out the window and sighed. If they wanted to waste their days sitting in front of his office, he'd just ignore them. "You up for a slightly more difficult challenge?"

"Bring it on," Clark smiled. "I've got some free time, what do you need?"

"I'll email you the names of a few former Rangers. See what you can find."

"I thought you were working with those guys," Clark said, surprised.

"We are," Jericho hesitated. "I just want to know who I'm working with."

"Alright," Clark decided. "I'll get started, but this one is going to take some time. It's not easy to break through the brick wall the government erects to shield these guys."

"Whatever you can find will be fine," Jericho assured him. "Now, I'm going to let you go. Send me the bill. I'll sleep on the Trenton Moore problem and decide how to proceed. I'd like the details. I think Paige could use it in her criminal case."

"I'll send you what I can," Clark promised. "Give me a few weeks on the other assignment. I'll be in touch."

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Paige, Carmen and Zeus walked slowly toward Dax's hospital room. They were later than originally planned because Carmen got a call from a friend of Jericho and the two of them hit on something big. Paige didn't know what yet, but Carmen seemed thrilled with the discovery. They were only a few feet away from the door when chaos erupted. Nurses rushed past, shoving them to the side. A doctor made his way into the room and quickly shut the door. Paige didn't

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take the hint. She shoved it back open and stepped inside. “What happened?” she asked a nurse that tried to rush past her.

“I don’t know,” the woman said in panic. “Somehow the machine got shut down.”

“His life support?” Paige asked in horror.

“Yes,” the woman answered. “Please, give us space.

Paige was about to argue when Carmen pulled on her arm. “What?”

“I found the camera,” Carmen glanced above them.

“Can you get it? Without them knowing?” Zeus asked.

“Give me a second,” Carmen pushed a series of buttons on the device she was holding then motioned to Zeus. “Go ahead, grab it.”

Once Zeus pulled the device from the wall, he handed it to Carmen. The two women silently left the room. They were standing in the hallway, discussing their options when another alert sounded.

“What’s going on here?” Carmen said in surprise.

Paige watched as several nurses moved into a room across the hall. Once again, chaos reigned. Paige and Carmen stepped just inside the room located across the hall and a few doors down from Dax. For the second time in minutes, they witnessed medical personnel frantically trying to save the life of a patient. This time, they failed. Carmen fiddled with the recording device in her hand for several seconds, then placed it on a table nearby. She turned to Paige and pressed a finger to her lips in the universal sign for silence.

Paige gave Carmen a questioning look. Her friend flashed a huge smile then mouthed “no video, just audio” to Paige. They waited as the nearby machine sent out a loud, solid beep and the monitor showed a solid green line. Almost as one, the medical personnel stepped back from the dying man in defeat.

“I’m calling it,” the doctor announced. “Time of death twenty-one-thirty-seven.”

Carmen pointed to a large plastic cup positioned next to the sink. It was half-full of dark liquid. Paige snatched up the cup and held it out to Carmen. Her friend grabbed the recording device and dropped it into the cup. “Let’s get out of here,” she said as she turned toward the door. Paige carried the cup into the hallway. The device sizzled for a second, then gave a soft pop.

“I think it’s dead,” Paige dropped the cup into a nearby trash can.

## Insidious Conspiracy

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“Yeah,” Carmen grinned. “And our enemy thinks Dax is, too. Should buy us a little time. Hopefully, enough time to develop a plan to keep him safe. But, I have to ask... what is going on at this hospital? Two machines just coincidentally go off at almost the same moment? What are the odds?”

“Not as long as you might think,” Paige glanced back at the man’s room. It was silent now. “That’s the fourth time this week that patient has gone into cardiac arrest. I asked the nurse about it yesterday. He’s an elderly patient. She said he was suffering from heart failure. They’ve been trying to reduce the water that’s collecting around his heart but the medication caused his kidneys to shut down. There’s apparently nothing they can do for him but make him comfortable. The nurse I talked to said it was a miracle they were able to bring him back yesterday. They expected him to go last night, this morning at the latest.”

“So, we just got lucky and the timing worked out for us,” Carmen glanced back at the closed door. “It’s sad, and I honestly didn’t think it would work. I assumed they’d revive him the same as they did Dax. I just thought...”

“You saw an opportunity and you used it,” Paige said in understanding. “I would have done the same.”

“Does that make me an awful person?” Carmen wondered. “I just took advantage of a stranger’s pain and suffering.”

“No, it makes you acute and quick thinking,” Paige smiled at her friend then immediately sobered. Someone tried to kill Dax tonight. She should have anticipated that. After all, he was a threat that Nassar had already tried to eliminate. The two friends silently made their way back into Dax’s room. It was nearly empty now. Zeus was standing in front of the large window, silently staring into the darkness. Dax was connected to the same machines, which were now working again.

“The doctor said he’s stable,” Zeus moved to stand next to Carmen. He took her hand and focused on Paige. “I’m heading downstairs to the cafeteria. I need coffee. You want anything?”

“No, I’m good,” Paige moved closer to the bed and took Dax’s hand. “Take Carmen, she can fill you in on what we just did. If we’re lucky, it bought us some time.”

Carmen grabbed her tablet off the table, Zeus must have set it there, then moved to stand next to Paige. “I’m going to send the new information on Trenton Moore to your boss. I think with what I’ve uncovered and the documentation from you, it should be more than enough to arrest him immediately.”

“Okay,” Paige said absently.

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“Paige,” Carmen waited for a response. “We don’t know how long Dax... well, we can’t be sure there wasn’t damage. You need to prepare yourself. He may not recover from this. And, if he does, he may never be the same.”

“I know,” Paige settled into a chair next to the bed but continued to hold Dax’s hand. “I can’t go there right now.”

“Let’s go,” Zeus moved in and pulled on Carmen’s arm. “Paige needs a little time alone with Dax.”

“We won’t be long,” Carmen assured her.

Once her friends had left, Paige rested her head on the side of Dax’s hospital bed and let herself cry. She knew Carmen was right. If shutting off the machine had cut off all the oxygen to Dax’s brain, he may never wake up. Or worse, he may never be the same as he was before. For such a strong, independent man... any amount of brain damage would be worse than death. It was time to discuss the unthinkable. When Zeus returned, she’d broach the subject of shutting off the machines for good.

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Dax hurt...everywhere. But, something told him he had to open his eyes. Was he awake? Partially awake? Where was he? Suddenly, he remembered where he was. Nassar was trying to kill him. He’d escaped the warehouse, fled into the woods and the brick wall... he remembered the brick wall. He had to find a way over the brick wall. Then a flash of pain. Was he lying helpless in the forest? He had to get up. He had to run before Nassar found him and finished the job he’d started days ago. His eyes flew open, expecting trees and damp ground. Instead, he was surprised to see dim lights and cabinets. He glanced to the side and realized he was connected to some type of machine. He was in a hospital. How had he gotten here? Was this just another sick torture method Nassar thought up? Was the liquid flowing into his body some kind of poison? Or truth serum, maybe? A noise to his right caught his attention and he turned his head slightly to investigate. Paige, not Nassar. Did Paige find him? Save him? It took him a couple seconds to realize she was crying. He had to do something, soothe her somehow. But, his body ached and he wasn’t sure he could move.

Paige bolted upright when she felt Dax squeeze her hand. Was that just an involuntary muscle spasm or something miraculous? Her gaze landed on his face and she was shocked to see he was awake. “Dax?”

“Hey,” Dax croaked. “Do you think a guy could get a sip of water? My tongue feels like sandpaper.”

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“Dax!” Paige jumped to her feet and ran to the door. “Nurse! I need you in here, now!”

“Paige?” Dax said in confusion.

“I can’t believe you’re awake,” she moved to the sink and filled a small cup full of water. “Just take a sip. The Nurse will tell you if it’s okay to have more.” Right on cue, a friendly nurse stepped into the room.

“What’s going on? You said you need help?”

“He’s awake,” Paige beamed. “He says he needs water. Is that okay?”

“Let me get you a mug of ice water and I’ll page the doctor,” she turned and disappeared in an instant.

Dax waited, impatiently, for the nurse to return. Why the strange reaction? He was about to ask when Zee and Carmen stepped into the room.

“What’s going on?” Zeus asked immediately.

“He’s awake!” Paige pointed at Dax.

Zeus shoved the coffee at Carmen and rushed to the bed. “Man, is it good to see you awake.”

“How long was I out?” Dax asked.

“Two months,” Paige practically whispered.

“What? Seriously?”

“You had complications after surgery and slipped into a coma,” Zeus added. “Dude, you had us worried.”

“Wow,” Dax was shocked by this new information. “What happened to Nassar? Did he get away?”

“Thor shot him, right after he shot you off that wall,” Zeus said, still smiling. He couldn’t believe his friend was finally awake.

“Thor?” Dax frowned. “What was he doing there?” Distrust settled in the pit of his stomach as he remembered the phone call he’d overheard. How many of his friends had turned against him?

“The gang all came when they heard you were in trouble,” Zeus answered. “Hawk, Thor, Woolly, even Jeeves managed to get away to help.”

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“And Vato?”

“Naw,” Zeus settled onto the couch. “He’s still deployed... Iraq, again. Sucks for him, he was supposed to have at least a year before another mission.”

Dax frowned. Vato was in Iraq? And, his friend and informant had fled Iraq with sensitive Intel that the enemy was desperate to retrieve. Coincidence? Not likely.

“You think you’re up for visitors?” Zeus asked. “I need to let Hawk and the others know you’re okay.”

Dax considered for several seconds. “Not yet, close the door.”

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“It’s done,” the Colonel said, sliding onto a chair across from Cole Reynolds. “Dax is no longer a problem.”

“Already? You’re sure?” Cole asked.

“Yeah,” the Colonel shrugged. “Vox was in Vegas. Took less than five hours to get in, shut down the machines and bolt. He’s on his way to Salt Lake as we speak. Piece of cake.”

“And you’re sure it worked?”

“I’m sure,” the Colonel frowned. “But that bug you gave us failed. Something went wrong when they rushed in to save the soldier. We lost video, but the sound held out long enough to hear the doctor pronounce the guy. He’s dead alright, went down just after nine-thirty Utah time.”

“Good,” Cole relaxed a little. At least something had finally gone their way. “We may need Vox to return, though.”

“I figured we could use him to take out Porter. He’s going to hang out in Salt Lake for a few days, then he’ll swing by Manti and eliminate the irritating general.” The Colonel waved down a waitress to order a whiskey. At least Cole had access to a nice club they could use for their private meetings. The guy was beyond paranoid about getting caught. He really needed to lighten up a bit. Things had shifted and they were back in business. Next task... get rid of Nathan Porter.

“Porter is... missing.”

“What do you mean, missing?”



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Cole shrugged. “No idea. My guy went by the office as we discussed. He was all set to tail him, but Porter wasn’t there. The secretary said he left this morning, went out of town. If I had to guess, he’s visiting his wife. We still haven’t been able to locate her. I’m guessing Nathan shipped her off, sent her into hiding until this whole thing is resolved. We’re approaching the weekend, he’s probably just visiting his woman for a few days.”

“Then we’ll have to watch the airport in Utah,” the Colonel decided. “We won’t know when he heads out, but it will take at least a couple days to plan the funeral. Chances are pretty good they’ll wait until early next week. I’ll call Vox, tell him to lie low for a couple days then head out and monitor incoming flights for Porter.”

“Good idea,” Cole tipped his glass and downed an entire shot in one gulp. “I doubt he’ll arrive before Sunday so Vox has a little down time before his next mission.”

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Nathan Porter stepped through the revolving doors of the hospital and made his way to the information desk. The trip had been impulsive... something he prided himself in never being, but he had a gnawing feeling he was needed in Manti. “Can you tell me what room Maddox Hamilton is in?”

“Are you family?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Porter lied.

She tapped a few keys, then rattled off a room number and wished him well.

Nathan stepped from the elevator and made his way down the long corridor. It wasn’t long before he spotted the room number he’d been provided. He frowned when he realized the door was closed. Should he knock? No, Dax was unconscious. He’d just step inside and take a peek. His frown deepened when he realized the door was locked. *Now what?* He rattled the handle again, hoping to get someone’s attention. The door swung open and the man known as Zeus peeked out.

“Porter? What are you doing here?” Zeus asked in surprise.

“I came to visit Dax... and Paige,” he pushed on the door and Zeus immediately took a step back and swung the door wide open.

“Come on in,” Zeus invited. “We were just discussing a few things.”

Once Zeus closed the door and locked it again, Dax spoke. “Porter, what are you doing here? You should have stayed in Washington.”

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Nathan was surprised to see Dax was awake. That must be a new development or Paige would have called. He glanced around the room and spotted his girl standing in front of the window. She turned slowly toward him, then closed the distance and practically fell into his arms. Nathan immediately began to rub her back. The girl was a mess. He should have come sooner, but she sounded okay on the phone. In person, he could see she'd lost weight and, if he had to guess... she'd barely slept in weeks.

"I was expecting a greeting that was a little more... friendly, Dax. Glad you're back among the living."

"You misunderstand," Dax pushed himself into a sitting position. The task took more energy than it should have. "I overheard a conversation Nassar had with... well, someone I considered a friend. They want you here. They were trying to figure out a way to lure you here. They need you out of Washington and out here, you're vulnerable. Nassar was going to orchestrate a fatal crash. They thought they could take you out and make it look like an accident."

"Somebody tried to kill Dax tonight," Paige added. "These guys are determined to get him out of the way for good. Carmen and I made them think they succeeded."

"Looks like I left town just in time," Nathan wrapped his arm around Paige and guided her to the couch. They both settled in and Nathan pulled Paige in close to his side. "They don't know I'm here. In fact, they have no idea where I am. I caught a ride with a friend. I won't be on any passenger list. And trust me, they'll be watching." His mind was racing and he thought he knew the enemies plan. "If I'm right, they tried to kill Dax to get me out here. I would never have missed his funeral... especially with you involved." He placed a gentle kiss on Paige's forehead. "They didn't expect me to take off before they put their plan in motion. I left early this morning, stopped in to see Sophie, then came straight here. I'd already left the airport by the time they made their attempt on Dax here. We have a little time before they catch on. So, if they think you are dead, why all the secrecy and the locked door?"

"Because," Zeus said soberly. "Dax was about to tell us why he doesn't trust his own team."

"The Rangers?" Nathan asked.

"Yes," Dax nodded. "Nassar was in touch with Vato," Dax focused on Zeus. "And I want Zee to convince me he's not involved. He and Vato go way back... nearly as far as Vato and Thor. I'm thinking it's a little too convenient that Thor shot Nassar before anyone could question him."

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“You can’t seriously believe any of us would betray you like that Dax,” Zeus objected. “And if you don’t trust me by now... well, there’s nothing I can say that will change your mind. I’m outta here.”

“I trust you,” Dax grinned. “And that’s the response I was looking for. You pass. Thor? I won’t know until I speak with him. Vato was close to all of us, but those two are tight. If he went to anyone for help, it would be Thor... then you, Zee. But he’d also know you’re the first two I’d suspect. Anyone that showed up to ‘help’ in my time of need... well, they’re now on the suspect list.”

“What does that mean?” Carmen asked.

“It means I need you to do me a favor,” Dax focused on Carmen. “I need you to run all my men. Go deep, I want everything... phone records, financials, the works.”

“Hawk will know as soon as I do,” Carmen warned. “He’s doing the same on us. The minute I start looking into him, or any of the others, he’s going to find out.”

“What?” Zeus barked. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“The same reason she didn’t tell you I already had her run an initial check on your team,” Nathan said soberly. “Carmen is a professional and she knows when to keep things to herself. Telling you would only cause problems. You’re not exactly known for your patience and tolerance. If you knew the team was spying on us... yes, all of us... you would have confronted Hawk about it. We didn’t want him to know we knew.”

“You and I...” Zeus focused on Carmen. “We’re going to have a nice long, private, chat about all this later.”

“A basic run wouldn’t work on my men,” Dax told Nathan. “It was worthless and a waste of time. They all know how to cover their tracks. Carmen needs a full, deep run. See what you can find on the black web. Financial will be hidden somewhere, off-shore most likely. Start with their phone records. They wouldn’t use their regular cell, see if anyone purchased burners recently.”

“Hawk did,” Zeus provided. “He issued one to all of us. You have the numbers, Carmen. Run those first.”

“Does that mean you’re coming around?” Dax asked.

“No,” Zeus disagreed. “But, the sooner we clear them, the sooner we can focus on the real targets. None of these guys had anything to do with your abduction... I’d stake my life on that.”

“I hope you’re right,” Nathan mumbled.

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“Thor has been out of town for over two weeks,” Paige focused on Zeus. “Where is he?”

“He didn’t say,” Zeus shrugged. “Just said he had an emergency he had to handle. Thor is not involved in this and nobody will convince me he is. Sure, he’s close to Vato but he’s loyal to Dax. He’d die before he put his leader in danger. You may not trust him, but I do.”

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Jericho made his way toward the room Dax was occupying. He knew he’d find Paige inside. He tried to turn the knob, but the door was locked. He knocked briskly, concern taking over when his knock went unanswered. He was just turning, to track down a nurse to open the door when it suddenly flung open. Zeus stood, blocking his entrance and wearing a scowl.

Jericho pushed past the man and glanced around the room. “General,” he said in greeting.

“Sheriff,” Porter acknowledged.

“I heard what happened,” he glanced at Dax was surprised to see he was now awake. “Welcome back, son.”

“Thanks,” Dax watched Jericho as he moved to address Paige. Maybe the good sheriff could help until he cleared his team and knew who he could trust.

“I guess my offer for around the clock protection isn’t needed,” Walters settled into a chair across from Paige.

“Not at the moment,” Paige glanced at Carmen. “We bought us all a little time.” Paige proceeded to explain what Carmen had done and why they were sure the enemy believed Dax was dead. “And, at the moment they don’t know Nathan is in town. We’d like to keep it that way.”

“I agree,” Jericho told her. “Now that Dax is awake, any idea how long he has to stay? I’d like to move him before anyone realizes he’s alive. I’d suggest my cabin, but I don’t think you can get to it, yet.”

“The guys are staying at his place, but we could put you up,” Zeus gave Carmen a pleading look.

“Yeah,” Carmen nodded. “I have room at my place and this way, if you want, we can even keep your condition a secret from the men. Hawk’s a bit of a... well, he’s not much of a team player if you’re not one of his precious Rangers. He never drops by these days. If he wants something, he just drops in next door and grills Paige.”

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“What about Nathan?” Paige asked. “If we suspect one of your guys... he can’t stay with me or they’ll know.”

“Nathan is going back to Washington,” Dax said staring at his current boss. “Aren’t you?”

Nathan grinned. “I’m staying with Paige tonight, then I’ll make arrangements to return to Washington sometime tomorrow. By the time anyone realizes I was here, I’ll be on my way back to the cesspool of corruption. Don’t worry about me.”

“I appreciate you taking the time to check on me,” Dax added. “But in light of the fact they want you out of the way, I think that’s where you need to be. In Washington, directly in the way of any future plans they might have. We need you to keep the committee going, keep the pressure on... officially. And, I’ll do what I can to keep it on from here... unofficially. Once I get settled with Zee and Carmen, we’ll touch base and coordinate a new plan.”

“I agree,” Nathan stood and held a hand out to Paige. “You ready to head home. I could use a little rest and I want to have some time to visit before I head back.”

“Uh,” Jericho stood, too. “I need just a minute with you, Paige, before you take off.” He turned back to Dax. “Get some rest, I’ll meet up with you tomorrow. It really is good to have you back.”

“Good to be back,” Dax told him. “Before you take my girl, can I have just a minute alone?”

Everyone left the room to give the couple some time to reconnect.

Paige moved forward and settled on the side of Dax’s bed. “You scared me.”

“I know,” Dax took her hand and began drawing circles on her palm with his finger. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Paige sighed.

“We’re going to get through this,” Dax promised. “Will you come back tomorrow and get me? I want some time with you. We need to talk things through. I’ll tell you everything I know, you tell me what’s been happening since I was taken by Nassar. You are the only one I truly trust, Paige. I’m 99.9% sure I can trust Zee. He’s always been solid and he would have given his life to protect me, I know that. I also know, he would have tried to stop Williams and Nassar from abducting me, but I ordered him not to. If I hadn’t, he’d be dead. If he was working with them, he would have reacted... or acted differently. But I’m 110% sure I can trust you. We need to present a united front going forward, do you think you’re up for that?”

“Absolutely,” Paige climbed onto the bed and snuggled in close to Dax. “I love you, Dax Hamilton. Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

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Dax leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Paige's lips. "I'll do my best."

They stayed like that for several minutes before Paige stood and sighed. "I need to go. I wish I could stay with you tonight, but I think I should spend the evening strategizing with the good general. Plus..."

"Plus, you miss him and he rarely makes it out for a visit. I'm wiped out anyway," Dax assured her. "Once you all leave, I think I'm going to call it a night and try to get some rest. Hopefully, I'll have more energy in the morning."

"I'll be here as soon as I can," Paige promised. She gave him one last kiss, then stepped into the hallway in search of her boss. It didn't take long, he was casually leaning against the wall across from Dax's room.

"Let's step in here," Jericho motioned to an empty waiting room a few doors down the hall.

"Is something wrong?" Paige asked the moment the door closed.

"No, it's good news, Paige. Not more bad. I came by to check on things here... on you, but also to let you know that between your investigation, the complaint from Remi, and the stuff Carmen sent over; we were able to arrest Trenton Moore about an hour ago. He's furious, and so far he's not talking, but he's not going anyway. He's going down for felony fraud, at least two counts. There was another family a couple years ago that lost everything because of him. He's going to pay for a very long time. And Tolman is now running unopposed again."

"Sophia Burgess also heard about Pauline's will and how Remi was in limbo until it all gets settled. Apparently, the two women played bridge every month and Sophia was more than a little angry when she heard the news. She asked Remi and his family to stay with her for a while. Remi's wife has agreed to take care of Sophia until she recovers from her injuries. The spunky old woman was facing months in a rehab center, but knowing she'll have full time care at home has appeased the doctors and they've agreed to the arrangements. Oh, and you'll be happy to know Fairfax has dropped the unlawful death suit against Dean and the department. Apparently, Ethan Cabot decided to focus on his criminal defense rather than waste time on a frivolous civil case he knows he can't win. With all that... and Dax's miraculous recovery, I'd say this is turning out to be a stellar day."

"I thought we lost him," Paige whispered. "When someone snuck in and turned off the machine, I thought it was over. Then, suddenly, he was awake and squeezing my hand in comfort."

"Sounds like Dax," Jericho pulled Paige in for a hug. "It's been a long two months. Go home, take tomorrow off and catch up with the arrogant General. If you want a few days with Dax, I can swing it. It's time you put you first for a while, Paige. You're tired, stressed and on the brink of collapse. I'm here if you need me, all you have to do is call."

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“Thanks,” Paige choked back tears. She was tired and stressed, but she was also so relieved. Dax was going to be okay and she had an entire evening with Nathan. They had a lot to catch up on and... they needed a plan. “I’m okay, but I appreciate the offer. I will take tomorrow if that’s okay. I need to get Nathan back to Washington and help to get Dax settled. For a while, Dax is going to count on me... and I’m going to have to count on you. There’s not a lot of trust in this group. I’m glad I have you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Jericho gave Paige a hug. “Now, go spend time with your guest.”

“Oh,” Paige stopped at the door. “What happened with the ATF?”

“They’re still around,” Jericho shrugged. “If they want to waste their time following me around... I can live with that.”

Paige couldn’t and she planned to broach the subject with Nathan as soon as they got back to her place. There were a lot of subjects she planned to broach. Sean Wilkens was another. In the meantime, she was going to rejoice in the fact that Dax was okay. Better than okay, he didn’t seem to have any permanent damage from his ordeal. Today was a good day and Paige was determined to embrace it.