

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Bogus Prosperity *Season 3, Episode 2*

by:

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Paige pulled into Carmen's driveway and got as close to the back door as she could. She was halfway around the vehicle when Dax shoved open the passenger door and worked to pull himself to his feet. It took more effort than it should have, but with Paige's help, he was finally upright. Paige wrapped an arm around his waist for support as they made their way to the door.

Before Paige had a chance to figure out how she would get him inside, the door swung open and Zeus rushed out. "I got this."

"Thanks," Paige took a step back and Zeus moved into her place.

"I can walk on my own," Dax grumbled.

"Yeah," Zeus smiled. "I know, just like I could when you brought me back from Mexico. But, I'm here... might as well lend a hand."

Dax bit his tongue and let his friend usher him into the house. It wasn't the same. He wasn't anywhere near the condition Zee had been that night when they returned from Mexico. Not even close. But his ankle was broken and his ribs were still healing. He'd cracked a couple when he tumbled off the wall and hit the hard dirt below. Funny, the gunshot wound seemed to be the least of his problems. He wasn't sure that was anything to brag about. "Help me to that chair," he pointed to a recliner in the living room. "I want to sit up for a while."

Once Zeus got Dax situated, he returned to Paige's vehicle to help unload all the hospital stuff. "I haven't figured out how to get Dax some clothes without the guys knowing, but I'll figure something out. In the meantime, I'll loan him a few t-shirts and some PJ's. You doing okay?"

"I'm fine," Paige sighed. "He's grumpy. I wish you luck with that one, he's not used to being laid up for more than a day."

"I can handle Hamilton," Zeus shrugged. "What's the word on our favorite General?"

"I actually need to head out," Paige glanced at her watch. "He wants to have a quick meeting before I drop him at the airport. He's arranged for another private flight back, but we're running out of time."

"Go," Zeus gave her a little push. "I've got this. I'll get Dax settled and let Carmen know about the meeting. How many should we expect?"

"Me, Nathan, Jericho and Sean for now," Paige decided. "I know where you stand, Zeus but we have to be sure."

"I get it," Zeus grumbled. "I don't like it, but I get it."

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Paige was halfway across her front yard when she was stopped by Hawk calling her name. The tone of his voice told her he was not happy. “Can I help you with something?” she asked.

Hawk took another step forward, deliberately crowding her space. “You shut me out,” he said angrily. “The hospital won’t tell me a thing. They said I have to talk to Zeus.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Paige didn’t react to the looming figure, he was trying to intimidate her. It wasn’t going to work.

“It has everything to do with you,” Hawk growled. “Zeus isn’t answering his phone. Where is Dax? He’s not in his room. Did they move him to a new room? A care center? Has his condition changed?”

“All questions you are going to have to take up with Zeus,” Paige took a step backward. “Now, if you’ll excuse me... I’m in a hurry.” She turned and made it to the front door before Hawk responded.

“You’re breaking up our team,” Hawk accused. “If Dax survives this, he won’t like what you’re doing. You might want to think about that.”

Paige stepped inside and almost collided with Nathan.

“Ignore him,” Nathan said in greeting. “He’s used to being in control. He’s not used to someone like you, and he sees his team slipping away from him. How is Dax this morning?”

“Grumpy,” Paige sighed. “How are we going to get you out of here without them seeing you?”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll have to wait long,” Nathan smiled. “Blaze Hawthorn, is not a patient man. See, he’s already headed back home.”

Paige glanced out the window and saw that Hawk was already approaching Dax’s front porch. “I’m going to pull the car down the driveway,” Paige decided. “The house will block their view and we can load up your luggage and hit the road before any of them notice I’m leaving again.”

Within minutes Paige was back on the road with Nathan sitting in the passenger’s seat. She had tried to talk him into hunkering down, out of sight, in the back seat; but he refused. Apparently, that was not dignified enough for General Porter. *Men!* Sometimes she just wanted to throttle them.

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The group was gathered in Carmen's living room discussing the situation, catching Dax up on everything that had happened since his injury, and listening to the details about his capture and imprisonment.

"So," Zeus said; disappointed. "There's no chance you mistook Vato's voice? There's not even the slightest chance it was someone else?"

"Someone that knows me well enough to give Nassar direction? You know, 'he won't break... abduct someone he cares about and he'll talk.' Who else sounds like Vato that would know that?"

"I still say there has to be another explanation," Zeus insisted. "I know it looks bad, but we've all done things that look bad. Didn't mean we betrayed the team. Vato struggled after Maverick died, more than the rest of us. But, that's just because they were so close. He would never join up with Nassar... a known terrorist. He hates them more than we do, they killed his best friend. There has to be another explanation."

"Find it, then." Nathan glanced at his watch, he was running out of time. "Look into your friend, clear him, convince us he's still one of the good guys."

"Maybe I will," Zeus grumbled.

"Okay," Dax began. He was abruptly interrupted by pounding on the front door.

"Looks like the team is invading," Carmen sighed. "What do we do?"

"We can't ignore them," Sean decided. "They looked pissed. I think they'll just storm the door."

"Let them in," Dax decided. "Now's as good a time as any to confront them head-on."

"Are you sure you're ready?" Paige asked, concerned.

"I'm ready," Dax gave Sean a nod.

Sean slid the door open, then stepped back to let the group inside.

"Zeus," Hawk bellowed before he spotted Dax. His eyes grew wide, but he recovered quickly. "Dax, what's going on here?"

"I was having a meeting," Dax said casually. "Apparently, you needed something. From the looks of things, it must be urgent. Please, by all means, take the floor."

Hawk took Dax's cold stare like a punch to the gut. Had Paige Carter already turned their lifelong friend against them? Had Dax picked sides, and it wasn't the team? He didn't

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understand what was going on here. "I'm glad you're okay." Hawk began. "It would have been nice if someone had called us. We're here for you, after all."

Ken was across the room in a matter of seconds. "Man is it good to see you," he pulled Dax into a huge bear hug. "We've all been worried sick."

Dax smiled at his friend. He hadn't really believed Ken was in on the deception but everyone had to be vetted, just in case. From Ken's greeting, Dax was sure he could be taken off the list. "Paige said you had to return to Nephi, some family emergency. Everything okay?"

Ken frowned, "Yeah, I think so."

"Are Jaimie and the boys okay?"

"Oh, yeah. They're fine," Woolly said quickly. "It's my mom. She was shopping and someone shoved her while she was on the escalator. She went down hard and had to have her hip replaced. The surgery went really well but her recovery is slower than it should be. Needs constant care and with the boys and all... well Jaimie was having a hard time managing. I thought since you were..."

"I understand," Dax smiled at his friend. "Glad to hear the old lady is okay. She's strong and resilient. I'm sure she'll be up and around soon. Don't stay on my account if you need to get back..."

"No," Woolly shook his head. "I need to be here for you, at least for a few days."

"Alright, just be sure to take off if you need to. I'm fine now and family comes first." Dax glanced up and saw Jeeves had moved in behind Ken. "Jeeves."

"Hey, Dax." Jeeves wasn't sure what to say. Things were strained within the team and he didn't like it.

"I'm told you saved my life... a couple times," Dax held out a hand. "Thanks for that."

Jeeves stepped forward and pulled Dax into a hug. "No thanks necessary. We've been through too much for too many years. It goes without saying. I just wish we'd gotten there sooner and avoided the stint in the hospital altogether. I could have done without the coma as well."

Dax laughed. "Yeah, you and me both. Thanks for coming out on such short notice. As usual, Zee went off the rails instead of sticking to the plan."

"You needed the team," Hawk began just as the door flew open and Thor walked in.

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“You’re...oh, man. Welcome back,” Thor crossed the room, yanked Dax out of his chair and nearly off his feet. He stood there for several seconds, just holding on as if his life depended on it.

Hawk cleared his throat and Thor set Dax back into the chair.

“Sorry,” Thor took a step back. “I’m sorry boss, but it’s so good to see you. How come nobody called me?” He swung around and glared at Hawk. “You should have called.”

“I would have,” Hawk focused on Dax. “If I’d known.”

“You didn’t know?” Thor looked back at Dax in confusion.

“Where have you been, Thor?” Dax asked in response. “Zee said you just took off.”

“Oh,” Thor glanced around but his gaze stopped when it landed on Nathan Porter. “Can’t tell you that. It’s... classified.”

Dax frowned at the reaction Thor had to Porter. What was that all about?

“Paige,” Hawk said coldly. “I need a minute with my team and our commander. Do you mind escorting... your group of friends outside for a few minutes?”

“That’s up to him,” Paige motioned to Dax.

The two men stared at each other for several seconds. Hawk was clearly challenging Dax and his leadership. “No, Paige and the rest of these guys stay. Whatever you have to say, you can say it in front of them.”

“This is team business,” Hawk protested. “We don’t discuss team business in the presence of civilians.”

“Last I checked,” Nathan responded. “You retired. Guess that makes you one of us civilians.”

“I wasn’t referring to you, sir,” Hawk backpedaled. “It would be an honor to have you join us.”

“If he stays, I’m leaving,” Thor cut in.

Nathan narrowed his eyes at the large man. “I don’t believe we’ve officially met, Mr. Baxter. And yet, you seem to have some sort of complaint you’d like to lodge. Is this a personal attack or a professional one?”

“No complaint,” Thor shrugged. “Just won’t talk if you’re in the room.”

“Why is that?” Dax cut in.

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“I’m done here,” Thor turned and headed for the door.

“Thor, we need an answer,” Hawk tried.

Thor just kept walking. He made it to the door, swung it open and disappeared.

“Does someone want to tell me what that was all about?” Dax demanded.

“I don’t think any of us knows,” Hawk stared at the closed door, then focused on Porter.
“Do you know?”

“Not a clue,” Nathan stood. “But, on that note... I have a plane to catch. Paige, you ready to head out?”

“Yeah,” Paige glanced at Jericho, who had been terribly quiet throughout this entire ordeal.
“I think this meeting is over if you want to bolt. We’ll continue this at a later date.”

“I’m coming, too,” Sean put in. “I’ve got plans.”

Carmen gave Paige a panicked look. The last thing she wanted was to be left alone with a bunch of hot-headed soldiers.

“Carmen, why don’t you come with us?” Paige offered. “I’m sure Nathan wouldn’t mind and you can say your goodbyes in private.”

“Good idea,” Carmen grabbed a jacket and the three of them left the room.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Dax,” Hawk said as soon as Paige and her friends had left. “Because from where I’m sitting it looks like you’re taking sides and it’s not ours.”

“I’m curious,” Dax settled back in his chair. “Why are there sides, Hawk? Paige and Zee live here. Zee and Carmen were there when Nassar burst into my house and held me hostage. Paige is an officer of the law. It’s her job... her obligation to find and rescue me. She would have done that even if we weren’t dating. So, why exactly have you drawn a line in the sand and shut out the locals?”

“It’s the way we work, you know that.”

“It’s the way we used to work,” Dax corrected. “And we didn’t have a choice. Those missions were top secret. This mission, locating me? There was nothing top secret about it.”

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“Looks pretty secret to me,” Hawk glared at Dax, then focused his anger on Zeus. “Did you plan to tell us at all? How long were you going to let us think Dax was dead before you filled us in?”

“Don’t take your anger out on Zee,” Dax ordered. “He did what I told him to do.”

“Yeah?” Hawk dropped onto the couch. “And does that include having Carmen run backgrounds on the team, their financials? And...”

“And everything,” Dax finished. “Yes, it does. I find it interesting that you are so upset that Carmen ran a deep check on you, when you did the exact same thing on Paige, Carmen, Jericho and even Porter. I’m not sure what you thought you’d find on him. His information is more protected than ours.”

“That’s different,” Hawk insisted.

“How?”

“Because we always do a check,” Hawk said defensively. “We need to know who we’re working with; if they can be trusted. You know that.”

“I do,” Dax let that sink in. “Which is why I asked Carmen to do a more thorough check on you.”

“That’s BS and you know it,” Hawk jumped to his feet. “Are you seriously going to sit there and tell me you don’t trust your team? After everything we’ve been through? Years of honor, integrity and... Brotherhood thrown out the window for what? A woman?”

“No,” Dax was having a hard time holding back his temper. “For trust and... respect.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Hawk stomped to the door. “But, you should remember this... it was us... this team that came running when Zeus put out the call. We dropped everything to save you. We didn’t hesitate, we didn’t even stop to think about it. We just came. Can you say the same for them? People you barely know. I’m done with this. Have a nice life, Dax.” Hawk threw open the door, slammed it behind him and stomped down the stairs.

The room remained silent for several seconds.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” Jeeves also stood. “If that’s okay, I’d like to come back and check on you tomorrow. You look tired, I think you should try to get some rest.”

“Thanks, Giles.” Dax rarely used his teammate’s real names, but he wanted a closer connection with Jeeves today. And, if he came back the following day, maybe Dax could rule him out as well. He wanted to rule them all out, but his gut told him if Vato was involved... other members of the team could be as well.

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Ken waited until Jeeves was gone before he spoke. "Can you tell me why?"

Dax studied Ken for a long time before he responded. "I have reason to believe I've been betrayed by someone close to me. No, that's not right. I know I've been betrayed by someone close to me. I've been betrayed by someone I would have trusted with my life. Have trusted with my life. Someone on my own team. This team. Now, I need to know if he's acting alone or if more of you are involved. I don't like it, but I don't have a choice."

"You can't seriously believe any of us were involved," Ken began. "You think we set you up? That one of us helped that monster do this to you?"

"I know Vato did," Dax told him. "And, I know you haven't been in touch with him for months. I also know, because I had Carmen check, that he called you and me while we were in Mexico rescuing Zee."

"He called me, too." Zeus was sick about all of this. "Tried to reach me several times, but I was a little preoccupied... you know, rotting away in a cell, getting beat on just for kicks. Didn't get the message until I got back and he was long gone."

"Jamie told me he called when I got back, but by then he had already been deployed," Ken provided. "I figured he'd get back in touch when his tour was over. I sort of wondered if he volunteered for this one. He's been having a hard time lately. With all of us gone, he's even more lost than before. I think he feels abandoned by all of us... especially now that Maverick's gone."

"I know," Dax sighed. "But, that's no reason to turn."

"How can you be sure he did?" Ken pushed. "I mean, pissed off and abandoned is one thing but this... I'm having a hard time believing he's involved."

"I'm sure, because I heard it with my own ears," Dax sat back in frustration. "He called Nassar during one of our sessions. Told him torturing me to death wouldn't work. I'd just hold out to prove I was the better man or some nonsense. He suggested Nassar kidnap someone important to me if he wanted answers."

Ken dropped onto the couch in shock. "There has to be another explanation. Dax, there has to be."

"I also know, Thor is in regular contact with Vato," Dax continued.

"Now you suspect Thor?" Ken ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "That man dropped everything, even went to Mexico to help me deliver Williams to Mo...." he trailed off and Dax knew there was more, something Ken didn't want to say.

"And..."

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“I just remembered something, but it doesn’t mean anything. I know it doesn’t mean a thing,” Ken insisted.

“Tell me,” Dax ordered.

“Williams wouldn’t talk,” Ken began. “He didn’t say a word with me and Thor in the helicopter. Mo took Thor with him, to the safe house where he interrogated him. They left me at the village to guard the chopper. That’s when I left and met up with Ramin Trevils.”

“You did what?” Dax barked. “You met with Trevils, alone? After what he did to Zee?”

“Because of what happened to Zee,” Ken corrected. “It was safe, probably the safest trip I ever took if you get right down to it. He couldn’t risk anything happening to me because of what happened to Zeus.”

“I agree,” Zeus added.

“Oh, good. You agree.”

“It’s done, Dax. Let it go,” Zeus said softly.

“Fine, continue.”

“On our way back, Mo called,” Ken picked up where he left off. “Said Williams was starting to talk. I just thought it was strange at the time, and it hit me again when you said Thor is working with Vato. Williams wouldn’t talk when Thor was there, but as soon as he was alone with Mo, he sang. I just assumed it was because Mo used... well, tactics that we would never approve of.”

“And that’s probably the reason,” Zeus insisted. “Don’t condemn Thor on that. We have no idea how Mo got the guy to talk.”

“And then Thor shot Nassar,” Dax concluded. “Seems like a good way to make sure you’re not discovered. And what was the deal with Thor and Porter?”

“That was strange,” Ken agreed. “I’ve never seen Thor like that before.”

“Yeah, me either,” Dax focused on Zee.

“Don’t look at me,” Zeus barked. “I don’t believe Thor or Vato betrayed you. I think there’s an explanation. And if you took my advice and just talked to them, you’d probably hear what it is.”

“So,” Ken said hesitantly. “When you’re finished investigating me and decide I can be trusted again, will you let me know? I’m on your side, Dax and I’d like to be on your team. This thing is big and if we don’t stop it... I’m worried nobody will.”

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“You’re cleared,” Dax said. “I want to clear all of you, but I have to do this my way. Can you live with that?”

“I trust you,” Ken stood. “Now, I’m going to head back and see if I can talk Hawk down. Give him some time, I think he’s just feeling betrayed. I can understand where he’s coming from. I wasn’t only shocked when I walked in and saw you here, I was hurt. We’ve always trusted each other, risked our lives for each other, and Hawk’s... well, if I had to guess, he’s also hurt that you didn’t come to him.”

“I know,” Dax sighed. “And, I would have. But, I’m having a hard time understanding why he’s treating Paige and the rest of these guys like they’re the enemy.”

“Dax,” Ken shook his head. “It was easy for you. I think you’d been preparing yourself to leave since the moment you signed up. The rest of us...well, we all felt a little lost once we got out. The real world, it’s not the same as the corp. Hawk is still trying to find his place and what happened here tonight, well it hit him harder than the rest of us because it’s all he knows. And, I think what you did was a condemnation of sorts. You hurt him, in his mind you betrayed him. He got sucker punched and he never saw it coming.”

“You don’t think he’s involved?”

“I know he’s not,” Ken shrugged. “But that’s something you have to figure out for yourself. I’m sure hearing Vato call Nassar while you were being tortured by the monster was its own kind of sucker punch. I tend to lean the same direction as Zeus. I think there’s an explanation, but it’s going to be hard to get as long as Vato’s in Iraq.”

Paige had just settled in behind her desk the following morning when a call came in. Clerk at the Top Stop had a suspicious hundred and thought it might be fake. Easy call, if it turned out to be counterfeit, she’d just call in the Secret Service. When she exited the building, she nearly collided with Agent Sean Wilkens.

“Hey,” Sean said in greeting. “Just the woman I was here to see.”

“In the mood for a road trip?” Paige asked. “I got a call.”

“Sure,” Sean pivoted and followed Paige to her patrol car. “What’s the call?”

“Possible fake hundred,” she told him as she shifted into gear and left the lot. “Should be quick and easy. If the bills legit, I’ll just short-form it. If the calls legit, I’ll confiscate the bill and call in the Service to take over. What brings you out this morning?”

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“I thought I’d let you know Nathan made it back to DC in one piece,” Sean adjusted the seat to get more comfortable. “Apparently, he hit the ground running. I got the official letter this morning confirming my suspension has been lifted and I am officially assigned to Nathan Porter’s committee until further notice. It was crystal clear and drafted by the director himself. I work for Porter, answer to Porter, get my assignments from Porter and am only subject to disciplinary action initiated by Porter or the director himself. Rickman was a little put off by the entire thing, but I guess he’ll get over it... eventually.”

“Nathan said he’d get it resolved, looks like he kept his word,” Paige glanced at Sean as she pulled into the parking lot of the local Top Stop. “You look worried.”

“A little,” Sean admitted. “Word is going to get around. I don’t want a rep, you know. I don’t want people thinking I have an in with the top dog. And, the last thing I need is for Rickman to think I’m getting some sort of special treatment. Once I’m reassigned back to the Bureau, he’ll be relentless in making sure I know my place.”

“Yeah,” Paige exited the car and waited for Sean to join her. “He’s a lot like Grey that way. And the only way to get Carmen out of the doghouse was to transfer her to Porter. Rickman might see this as the same sort of deal and take it out on you.” She smiled at him before entering the store. “But, I have faith in you. I’m sure you can take it.”

“But, do I want to?”

“What does that mean? You’re not thinking of quitting are you?”

“No,” Sean assured her. “But I might have to request a transfer if it gets too difficult. Rickman can hold me back if he wants to. I love my current assignment, the location is perfect and I get to spend time with my sister and her kid, more than I ever thought I could.”

“But, we’re talking about your career and you have to do what’s best for you and hope your family understands.”

“Exactly,” Sean knew Paige would understand.

Paige took a minute to glance around the store before approaching the store clerk. There were a couple patrons browsing the isles, but nobody that looked like a threat. “You called in a suspicious bill?”

“Yeah,” the clerk pulled an envelope from under the counter. “I also pulled the tape... our surveillance video. I thought you might need it to identify the woman that brought this in.”

Paige slipped on gloves before gripping the edge of the bill and holding it up to the light. It was a good replica of the original. Not perfect, but good enough it would pass most cashiers.

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“Good eye,” Paige focused on the woman behind the counter. “What made you think it was a fake?”

“At first, it was the woman,” the clerk began. “She was a little off. It’s hard to explain, but she was impatient, tried to rush me through, you know. That only made me work slower. I thought maybe she had a partner in the store and was trying to distract me while they bolted with some merchandise. When I realized she was alone, I studied the bill a little closer. It looked okay... almost. I don’t know what about that bill tipped me off, but something didn’t look right. When I asked her for ID, she challenged me. Said she was paying in cash and wanted to know why I wanted it. When I insisted, she took off. Left her stuff on the counter and just split in a huff. I really hope that thing is counterfeit or I’m going to be in deep with my boss. He says I’m not... accommodating enough with the customers. I guess I challenge them too frequently. But, nobody steals nothing on my watch.”

Paige smiled at the bad grammar. “It’s a fake.”

“So, now what?”

“Now, I take the bill and the video and call in the Secret Service. Counterfeiting is their jurisdiction. I’ll just need your name and personal information for the report. Shouldn’t take long. You might hear from an agent in the next couple days, but other than that... you did your civic duty and you can go back to business as usual.”

“Alright, the name is Mandy. Mandy Johansen,” the clerk... Mandy, relaxed. After giving Paige the necessary information she went back to helping customers. “Do you think I need to call my boss?”

“Probably a good idea,” Paige decided. “If they tried here once, they might try again with a different employee. Your boss might want to warn the rest of the crew to look out for fakes.”

“Okay,” Mandy sighed. “He won’t be happy that I’m bothering him but I guess it’s the right thing to do.”

“Good luck with that,” Paige gave her a friendly smile. “And, here’s my card if you... or he, has any questions.”

Paige and Sean left the building and headed straight for the police car. “You in a hurry?” Paige asked once they were situated and back on the road.

“That depends,” Sean said with a grin.

“On why?” Paige rolled her eyes. “Meaning, if I want your help with the Secret Service, you’re busy. If it’s something interesting, you have time.”

“Exactly,” Sean grinned.

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“Just before that call came in,” Paige sobered. “I got the packet on Brian’s murder, from Chicago. I thought if you had time, we could go through it together. You might catch something I miss. Two sets of eyes are always better than one.”

“I’ve got time,” Sean said immediately. “Plus, that’s legit. I can report to the good general that I’ve been working the case all day. But, I thought the gun running was out of New Orleans. How does a murdered cop from Chicago connect?”

“Brian worked in Chicago,” Paige agreed. “He was killed on duty but Carmen found a bunch of stuff about guns being shipped illegally out of New Orleans. It’s all connected somehow. I just haven’t figured out all the details, yet. Thanks for sticking around to help,” Paige sighed. “I didn’t know Brian well, but I met him once and he was important to Carmen. I have to warn you, this might get a little...”

“Emotionally draining?” Sean provided. “I know, especially after the incident with Dax. Just another good reason for me to stay and help.”

Hawk watched as Paige walked to her police car and drove away. It was early, he thought Dax might still be out on the back porch enjoying his coffee. He had waited, impatiently, knowing she’d be headed out to work to start her day. That meant she’d be gone for several hours. Plenty of time to hash this out and get things back on track... if Dax was willing to cooperate. He made his way across the backyard and paused at the foot of the stairs. He spotted Dax immediately. His old friend was watching him intently. “Can I join you?”

Dax shrugged and pointed to an empty chair.

Hawk settled in next to Dax, considering his opening carefully. At least Dax had relocated and was staying with Paige now instead of Carmen. “First, I want to apologize for yesterday. I was taken by surprise at first, then...” he paused and sighed. He wasn’t sure the best way to continue.

“Then you got offended and you became defensive,” Dax offered. He understood and if Hawk wasn’t part of this, he knew he’d regret what he had to do. But he did have to do it and he hoped when it was all said and done, his friend would forgive him... if there was anything to forgive.

“Pretty much,” Hawk was watching Dax. “Anyway, I slept on it and I guess you have a point. But, I think I do, too.”

Dax smiled. “That’s your idea of an apology?”

Bogus Prosperity

“Dax,” Hawk gritted his teeth and pushed down the anger that was starting to boil inside him. “Any chance we can forget what happened last night and start over?”

“Sure,” Dax watched Hawk closely. He knew the man, almost better than he knew himself. If Hawk was involved with Vato, he’d see the signs. This impromptu meeting had presented the perfect opportunity for Dax to do a little interrogating of his own.

“I don’t understand all the secrecy,” Hawk began. “I want to. I trust you, so I know you had a reason, I just can’t figure what it was.”

“You know me,” Dax began. “Probably better than anyone else on the team. Except for Zee. So, you know I had my reasons. You say you trust me. Do you trust me enough to answer some questions?”

Hawk studied Dax for several seconds. At first, he felt defensive and betrayed... the same as he did the previous evening. Then, he saw something in his leader’s eyes. Pain, not physical pain but raw emotion. Something Dax never let show. Something he rarely felt. There was more to this story. And if Hawk knew anything about Dax, he knew the guy never did anything without a good reason. Someone had betrayed them. “I’ll answer any question you have for me on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“Once you’re finished,” Hawk leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. “Once you trust me again. When you know, without a doubt that I’m not involved in whatever it is you discovered, you tell me it was.”

“Who what was?” Dax realized Hawk knew him too well. He’d figured it out. He knew that Dax knew they had a spy in their ranks. He just hoped Hawk wasn’t involved because if he was... he had just lost the element of surprise and everything just got a little more difficult.

“We can talk about that later,” Hawk pushed that aside. “Ask away.” He didn’t like being interrogated this way, but he’d do it. He’d accommodate Dax because his friend was suffering and because they needed to get back on track if they were going to solve this mystery and stop the bad guys.

“First,” Dax considered. “Zee said after Nassar and Williams arrested me, he called you.”

“He did,” Hawk settled back in the chair again.

“And you dropped everything and flew out that same day?”

“I contacted the guys and we all flew out, yes.”

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“Do you have a job?” Dax wondered. Ken’s words had stuck with Dax and he wondered what Hawk was doing to adjust to civilian life now that he left the Rangers.

“You’re wondering if I’m drifting, a man without a purpose?”

“Something like that,” Dax evaded.

“I’d have to say I am drifting, in some ways. But, I’m not lost. I’m not looking for some higher purpose. I’m just taking my time. When I settle in somewhere, I want to know I made the right choice.”

“So, no job then?” Dax knew Hawk had done a couple jobs for Brent while he was visiting Florida. He just wondered if the guy would admit it. And who else he’d worked for since he’d come home.

“I spend some time down in Sarasota,” Hawk shrugged. “Did a couple missions for Brent. Mostly I just pick up odd jobs here and there. Pays the rent until I decide where I want to land.”

“You hook up with any of the others?” Dax hoped the question sounded casual. “Maybe freelance with other Rangers on the side?”

“Other than this mission?” Hawk focused on Dax. “No.”

“You have to know there’s a reason I’m asking,” Dax decided to give a little. “So, other than Brent you spend any time with the other guys on the team?”

“No,” Hawk said again. “Bucket and Solo are still in. I did a couple missions with the two of them before I got out but we don’t seem to have a lot in common these days. I met Solo while he was on leave... five, maybe six months ago. We met up, had a beer and immediately realized it was a bad idea. He wanted to talk about the job and couldn’t, I didn’t really want to hear it, anyway. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“Jeeves? Wooley? Thor?”

“Not until this mission,” Hawk said soberly. “We basically went our separate ways. I thought about looking them up, eventually. I was headed west anyway and I heard what happened to Zee down in Mexico. Thought I’d drop in and see how he was. Thought maybe you and I could catch up as well. Clearly, my plans changed and I’m here, now. I called those guys in because you were in trouble. You’ve saved our hides more times than anyone can count. It was a no-brainer... for all of us.”

Dax let that pass. None of them would ever forget the past, but nostalgia wouldn’t stop him from weeding out any traitors on his team, either. “What about Vato? You talk to him since that last mission?”

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“Yeah,” Hawk shifted and crossed one ankle over his knee.

Dax watched the movement and knew his friend just became uncomfortable. “How’d that go?”

“Not well,” Hawk confessed. “He apparently blames me for Maverick’s death.”

“What?” Dax asked, surprised. “If anyone is to blame, it’s me. That man died saving my life.”

“Which is why Vato blames me,” he said softly. “We got into it, nearly ended in a physical altercation. I walked away, but it wasn’t easy. That man accused me of being a coward.”

Dax settled back in his chair and shifted. His broken ankle was starting to ache. So Hawk and Vato had a falling out.

“You want to move inside?” Hawk offered. “Might help to elevate it, I can help you to the recliner if you want.”

Dax was about to decline but decided Hawk was right, elevating his ankle might make the throbbing stop. “Sure and thanks.”

Once they were situated in the living room, Hawk picked up where he left off. “Vato seems to believe I neglected my duties. He said I should have been the one to go in that night. He’s probably right. I was your second, it was my responsibility. I would have, I hope you know that. Maverick just beat me to it.”

“I’ve never blamed you for what happened that night and I never will,” Dax said immediately. “You shouldn’t blame yourself, either. We knew it was dangerous going in. We knew there was a chance none of us would make it out. I accepted that risk when I ordered you guys to go ahead. You accepted it when you stepped in as leader in my absence. We rescued our victim and destroyed the compound. The mission was considered a success, even with the loss. I...”

“Dax, it wasn’t your fault either,” Hawk pointed out. “Maverick stepped up but each and every one of us would have done the same. Like you said, the mission was dangerous and we all knew going in we might not make it back home.”

“Vato doesn’t really blame you,” Dax decided. “He just needs a villain and he’s convinced himself it’s you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hawk shrugged. Clearly, it did matter.

“So,” Dax considered. “You and Vato aren’t on speaking terms these days?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

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“I already knew that,” Dax admitted. “Like I said, Carmen ran everything.”

“Dax, can you tell me if this has something to do with Vato?” Hawk asked. “I know it has to be one of us, something happened that made you question your team. The only thing that would do that... after all these years, is if one of us betrayed you somehow. Was it Vato?”

“Vato is involved,” Dax admitted. He was pretty sure Hawk had cleared his name this morning, but he still needed answers.

“So,” Hawk frowned. “I’m not in the clear yet. Have you crossed any of us off the list? I’m guessing Zee passed the test early on. What about me, Jeeves and Ken? Never mind, don’t answer that.” Hawk stood and began searching for a pen and some paper.

“What are you doing?”

“Does that cop of yours keep a pad of paper around here anywhere?”

“In the top drawer of that table over there,” he pointed to the corner of the room.

Hawk scribbled something onto the pad then tore off the sheet and held it out for Dax.

“What is that?”

“The number goes to a burner,” Hawk said soberly. “Only my parents and my sister have the number. The other is the account number to my secret stash. An account in the Caymans. I live... frugally. Everything is dumped into that account. The jobs I did for Brent gave me the funds to start it up. There’s not a lot, but I can account for every penny.”

Dax took the information and shoved it into his pocket. As extensive as Carmen’s background had been... both pieces of information hadn’t been discovered. “Why are you giving these to me?”

“Let’s call it... a good faith effort. That’s me cooperating with your investigation,” Hawk decided. “I firmly believe the only way we are going to win this thing, is if we are all on the same team. Something has jeopardized your trust in our team... your team. I need you to clear my name as soon as possible so we can get back to work. I don’t have anything to hide, Dax. You can trust me... like I trust you. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can start working together instead of against each other.”

“And, if I told you Vato went dark?”

“I’d be shocked,” Hawk said honestly. “And I’d want to know what makes you so sure he’s working against you.”

“He called Nassar,” Dax told him. Sometime in the past hour he realized keeping that knowledge to himself was futile. It was also impossible. He’d told too many people, the rest of

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the team would know before the day was over. “The prick was breaking my fingers, trying to get me to talk, when the phone rang. He put it on speaker while he cleaned up. I heard Vato’s voice loud and clear.”

“On purpose?” Hawk considered. “You know he did that on purpose. It was a mind-game. He was trying to break you. You do know that, right?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dax focused on Hawk. “It didn’t work. I escaped, Nassar is dead, and I learned Vato was involved. All-in-all, I’d say we’re the ones ahead on that one.”

“What exactly did Vato say?” Hawk was surprised at the information, but not convinced. “Did he reveal anything that would tell you what their plan is?”

“You’re not going to argue with me?” Dax asked. “Not going to tell me I have it all wrong?”

“Do you?”

“No,” Dax sighed. “I know what I heard. It’s just...”

“Everyone else has argued Vato’s case,” Hawk provided.

“Exactly,” Dax ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know Vato is involved in this. I heard him. I would recognize that voice anywhere. Still, I was beginning to question myself. I’ve gotten the same response from every one of my guys. Not Vato.”

“Except me,” Hawk frowned. “I wonder, does that help clear my name... or make me more suspicious?”

“Good question,” Dax smiled.

“Are you comfortable telling me what he said? Maybe we could talk it through like we used to.”

“He said some nonsense about the torture,” Dax admitted. “He said Nassar was fighting a losing battle. Some nonsense about me resisting just to show I’m the bigger man. He suggested Nassar kidnap someone I care about and told my captor I’d talk to save a loved one.”

Hawk frowned. “But that’s not true and Vato knows it.”

“You don’t think I’d cooperate if Nassar had Paige?”

“No,” Hawk said confidently. “You’d get pissed. You’d work even harder to escape with Paige, but you would never give up any Intel. Not even to save Paige from being tortured. I have no doubt about that, Dax. Vato knows that, too. He gave Nassar bad Intel. The question we need to answer is why.”

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“And what’s your answer?” Dax asked. He had more doubts now about Vato’s involvement than he’d had before. It was one thing to defend Vato because he was a friend and a teammate. It was entirely different to question his involvement because of his actions. And that’s exactly what Hawk just did. Dax hadn’t worked it through that far. Hawk was right, he would never have answered Nassar’s questions, not even if he brought in someone Dax cared about. That tactic would only make him more determined to get free... and to make Nassar pay for his crimes. Vato knew that.

Hawk stood and began to pace. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “On the surface, the evidence is too strong to dismiss. Vato’s got a distinctive voice. Which I believe is the reason Nassar took the call on speaker in the first place. He wanted you to know a friend had betrayed you. He was trying to break you. And, just like when I walked into that house last night and saw you sitting there... hearing that conversation must have been a sucker punch. A blow you’ve been struggling to deal with ever since. But Vato’s motives have to be analyzed. He gave bad advice to Nassar. Is that because he wanted Nassar dead? Maybe to take his place? Does it mean he’s on our side and was buying you time to escape? Trying to motivate you? Or was he sending you a message? This is actually something I can look into if you’ll let me. Take that info, run the financials, check the phone records, do what you have to do to clear me. Then, let me help.”

“Go ahead and look into it now,” Dax decided. “I’ll give this to Carmen but you need to know this doesn’t clear you. If you have one burner we didn’t find, you could have more. And there’s still the question of Thor.”

“I think you should consider one more possibility,” Hawk faced Dax. “Someone very powerful is trying to break up the team. They used Keaton from the FBI to go after Sean. The ATF has been hassling Walters. Wooley’s mother was mysteriously shoved down the escalator. And, Thor has been disappearing on top-secret personal missions for weeks. What if it’s all a setup? What if this is just another way for our enemy to split us up? Divide and conquer.”

“Could be,” Dax agreed. “But it still doesn’t explain why Vato called a known terrorist and how he knew I had been captured and was being tortured when he’s deployed at the moment. I also don’t believe it’s a coincidence that Ahmed came here from Iraq at the same time Vato is working in Iraq. It’s all connected and we both know it.”

“I agree,” Hawk sighed. “And, no matter our differences, I don’t want to believe Vato is involved in this. The evidence is strong, but we don’t know enough. I’ll let you know what I find. We can go from there. Let me know when I make it back on the honorable soldier list. I’m looking forward to working with you on this. It’s one of the things I miss the most. You, our friendship, is one of the things that I miss the most. I hope one day soon, you will believe that.”

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Dax sat, silently analyzing the conversation he had with Hawk long after the man left the house. His gut was telling him his long-time comrade was telling the truth. But, could he trust his gut? He also realized Hawk was the only member of the team that had reacted from an analytical standpoint rather than an emotional one when he learned of Vato's involvement. He smiled. That was the reason Hawk made such a good Army Ranger... and a leader. If Dax were going to be honest with himself, he had to admit he too had been looking at the situation through emotion, rather than logic. Did that exonerate Hawk, or prove his guilt? That was still one question Dax couldn't answer. But, he knew someone who might be able to. The one person he knew he could trust... he'd talk to Paige when she got home from work. Maybe she'd have some insight. Otherwise, he was back to square one, and that was one place he didn't want to be. In the meantime, he'd call Carmen and relay the new Intel.

Sean and Paige had been going over the new file on Detective Brian Stewart for nearly two hours when a stranger in a black suit walked through the front door. The man approached Margie's desk, had a brief conversation, and then made a beeline for Paige. She knew the instant Sean saw the fed. He visibly stiffened and his features became hard and unfriendly. She was about to ask him about it when the stranger spoke.

"Sean Wilkens," the guy practically sneered. "Figures I'd find you here. I heard about your trouble; it was only a matter of time before you got yourself fired. Looks like the Bureau finally realized their mistake. You should never have been hired in the first place but finally, your days are numbered. Who's the phony now? I admit, you lasted longer than I thought you would. But we both knew, eventually, the sham would be up and you'd show everyone just how inept you truly are. Let me guess, you're here hoping the locals can use another incompetent, washed-out agent on their team."

Paige jumped to her feet, but Sean placed a hand on her arm to stop her. "I assume you're here to pick up the evidence Paige recovered this morning. I'd watch myself if I were you, Ray. She's out of your league. One misstep and you'll realize just how far."

Paige remained standing. Her gaze followed Sean's angry form as he made his way across the room and shoved open the front door. The instant he disappeared, she turned to glare at the newcomer. "I'm going to need to see your credentials." She dropped back in her chair in an act of defiance. She wouldn't say what she was thinking, she still believed in professional courtesy. But if the man didn't leave soon... she just might change her philosophy on that one.

"You're going to want to be more selective," the agent warned as he held out his credentials. "You know, do a better job of picking your friends."

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“Agent White,” Paige glanced at the Secret Service seal. “I highly suggest you keep this visit professional. Here’s your evidence.” She held out a bag that contained the hundred-dollar bill and the video disc. “Good luck.” She flipped open the file she’d been reading, a clear signal the discussion was over.

“I’m going to need your report as well,” Agent White said angrily.

“Margie can pull that for you,” Paige didn’t look up. “Just request a law enforcement copy on your way out.”

“Deputy Carter,” Ray fumed. “It’s been a long day already and I still have to drive back to Salt Lake this evening. There’s no reason for you to be this difficult. We both know you could just pull up the report and print it from your desk. You wouldn’t want me to complain to your boss, tell him you were less than... cooperative would you?”

Paige was already in the process of doing just that. Anything to get this annoying man out of her sight. She clicked print then focused on the man that had just ruined her day. “Go ahead, but I doubt talking to Sheriff Walters will get you the results you’re looking for. However, I suspect if I called your supervisor... I just might get the results I’m after.”

The man stepped forward until he was looming over Paige’s desk. He was obviously angry but before he had a chance to speak, Gage seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“Paige, you okay?” Deputy Clayton asked, placing his large body between Paige and the stranger.

“Sure,” Paige smiled. Agent Ray White wasn’t quite so cocky with Gage nearby. “Agent White was just leaving.” She reached behind her desk, snatched the report off the printer and shoved it toward White.

“Agent?” Gage asked. “What agency? You’re not acting like a law enforcement official.”

“Secret Service,” Ray said absently as he grabbed the report and turned to leave.

“Oh,” Gage glanced at Paige. “Did you call him?”

“Yeah,” Paige sighed. “I got a call this morning, at the Top Stop. Turns out some woman passed a hundred. It was fake.”

“And he’s here to collect the bill?”

“I’ll be in touch if I need anything else,” White said, clearly uninterested in the exchange.

“Yeah,” Paige focused on Ray White. “Now he’s leaving. Probably has some dignitary he needs to babysit. You know, some guy that has zero chance of running into danger. Agent Ray White is a very important man with a very important job. See ya, or not.”

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Gage frowned. "Before you go, can you take this too?" Gage held out an evidence bag. "I was just about to call you guys."

"You caught another one?" Paige frowned. "Two in one day? The counterfeiters must be here, in town. But are they visiting or are they residents?"

"That's the question," Gage continued to watch his friend and the agent. He hadn't felt this much tension between two officers since... well, Havilland started working here.

"Meet me at the bank," White demanded. "I need you to go through every hundred-dollar bill they have to see if the perpetrator has used more."

Gage started glancing around the room. His movement was exaggerating and obvious.

"What are you looking for?" White demanded.

"The other Secret Service agent," Gage said flatly.

"I'm the only agent here, you idiot," White growled. "We need to get to the bank."

"You see," Gage settled into his chair. "There's the rub. I'm afraid I don't work for you, Agent White. And neither does she," Gage pointed his thumb in Paige's direction. "So, unless there's a mouse somewhere in the room that takes orders from the feds... we're a little busy. And counterfeiting... well, that's not our jurisdiction. We've fulfilled our obligation. We turned the evidence over to you. If you don't know where the bank is, I'm sure Margie can give you the address."

White's face turned an unhealthy shade of pink. Paige was about to address the man when Sheriff Walters stepped into the building. He glanced around the room and frowned when Agent White headed his way.

"Are you in charge here?" White demanded.

"Last time I checked," Jericho focused on his deputies.

"Well," White held out his business card. "I'd like to make a formal complaint."

"In regard to who?"

"Those two," he motioned backward. "Deputy Carter and...well, I don't know that man's name."

"For?" Jericho asked.

"Refusing to cooperate with my investigation," White said immediately.

"Paige?"

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“Go ahead, take his complaint,” she smiled at White. “I have one of my own to lodge. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll be here when you’re finished.”

“You are not seriously calling my supervisor on this?” White spun around to face Paige. “On what grounds?”

Paige stood and smiled. She rattled off three policy numbers and waited. It didn’t take long.

“I’m withdrawing that complaint,” White fumed. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do at the bank. Of all the places I could have been sent today, I landed in hick-town USA. I don’t have time to deal with Sheriff Jed and his two hillbilly deputies; Elly May and Jethro the buffoon,” he mumbled on his way out the door.

“Do I need to know what that was about?” Jericho asked, watching the agent disappear out the door.

Paige couldn’t help herself, she laughed out loud. “What’s wrong Sheriff Jed? Possum stew giving you indigestion?”

Gage smiled. “Maybe a good long swim in the ceee-ment pond will settle your stomach.”

“The two of you jokers getting back to work will settle me just fine,” Jericho grumbled. “Is that something I need to worry about?”

“Maybe,” Paige sobered. “I haven’t figured him out yet.”

“What did you threaten him with?” Jericho finally asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Just a couple rarely used codes that he violated and he knew it,” Paige shrugged. “They have to do with professional conduct and how federal agents interact with their fellow law enforcement officials. Now he’s been warned and he knows I have pull with his boss. Peter Elliott and I go way back. It’s the reason Agent White was sent here so quickly. And knowing Peter, he told Ray to play nice.”

“Somehow,” Gage put in. “I don’t think he got the message.”

Jericho frowned.

“I’ll let you know if he complains, Jer,” Margie added. “But that man was rude and unprofessional from the minute he stepped through that door. What he said to Sean Wilkens...”

“Sean was here?” Jericho asked.

“Yeah,” Paige moved forward. “The file came in from Chicago. We were working on it together. Then, White came in and insulted Sean right off the bat, said he was inept and a fraud.

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He was practically tapping out a happy dance right in front of my desk. Sean handled it, better than we did, actually. He just left and I got to deal with Agent A-hole. But those two have history, I'd bet my career on that."

"Why is he here?" Jericho pressed.

"Oh, sorry." Gage grabbed his report from his desk and handed it to his boss. "I confiscated a fake hundred. I came back to the office to call the Secret Service and found White looming over Paige like he was going to hit her or something. That's when I found out Paige got one this morning, too."

"You sure you don't want to file that complaint, Paige?" Jericho studied his deputy.

"I'm sure," Paige shrugged that off. "But I think we have a counterfeiter in the area. I know it's not our problem, which is why Officer Friendly is over at the bank sifting through hundreds; but, I think we need to send out an alert. Let the rest of the crew know to be on the lookout just in case."

"I agree," Jericho turned to Margie. "Will you take care of that and make sure Susie's aware so she can handle the calls on the night shift?"

"I'll take care of it," Margie assured him.

"Now," Jericho focused on Gage. "I need the two of you to play nice with the federal agent. But, I want to know if he gets out of line. Paige, you might have pull with his boss, but a call from me will hold more weight in the end."

"I don't think that's going to be necessary," Paige assured him. "I can handle White. And, I saw his reaction when he thought I was really going to call his boss. That man is on thin ice and my knowledge of their procedure worries him. If Gage can resist his urge to body slam the insulting prick, we'll get through this just fine."

"I'm not making any promises, but I'll do my best." Gage glanced at Jericho before he made his way back to his desk.

Margie answered the phone and frowned. "Hold please," she said politely before putting the call on hold. "We have another one. This time it's over at Fred's Sports Grill. Trina will be waiting for you."

"I'll go," Gage grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

"And I'll inform our federal agent he has another possible crime to deal with," Paige sighed, grabbed her jacket and headed for her car.

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“Margie,” Jericho continued to frown as his two deputies bailed from the building. “Call the local motels and hotels, tell them to be on the lookout for fake bills. If this is a visitor, they have to stay somewhere.”

“And if it’s a local?” Margie asked.

“Then we have a bigger problem,” Jericho admitted. “Because they are going to be harder to find.”

“Paige got some grainy video from the Top Stop,” Margie informed him. “The quality is terrible, but I didn’t recognize her. That doesn’t mean much, they could be new to the area.”

“Let’s start looking,” Jericho turned to leave them mumbled under his breath, “The sooner we get rid of the fed, the better.”

Margie smiled, picked up the call to tell Trina Deputy Clayton was on his way, then started making phone calls to the local businesses. She’d also prepare a quick press release. Jericho might want to notify the locals, but Agent White was technically in charge. He’d be the one to make the final call on that one. In any event, they’d be ready.

Paige stepped through the front door, dropped her gear and settled into the recliner unwilling to move another inch. She glanced up and saw Dax watching her.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Rough day,” she straightened to study him more closely. “You look a little worn out yourself. Everything okay?”

“There was something I wanted to run by you, but tell me about your day first,” Dax patted the couch next to where he was sitting, inviting Paige to join him.

Paige sighed, stood and made her way to the couch. She practically dropped to the surface and snuggled in next to Dax. They sat there for several minutes before Dax prompted her to talk.

Paige sighed and straightened. “It’s nothing really,” she began. “Just... well, I got a call this morning. Possible fake hundred at the Top Stop. Sean was headed in to tell me Nathan made it back to Washington okay and Sean is now cleared to return to work. We verified the bill was phony and I called the Secret Service. Sean and I went back to the office. The complete report on Brian’s murder in Chicago came in so we were hard at work, going through everything when this Secret Service guy marches in and starts insulting Sean. He took it but left mad. I can’t find him. He’s not returning my calls, his sister has no idea where he is and...”

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“And you’re worried about your friend,” Dax said in understanding. “I’m sure he’s okay. If the guy pounced the moment he arrived, they must have history.”

“That’s what I think, too,” Paige frowned. “And he probably just needed some time alone. That’s how Sean deals with things. First, he stew alone. Then, he confides in someone he trusts. I just hope he doesn’t stew too long because that guy is not worth it.”

“Sounds like he got under your skin, too.”

“Once Sean left, he insulted me, then called Gage an idiot,” Paige smiled.

“And somehow... he lives?”

“Then he insulted Manti, called it hick-town USA and said Jericho is Sheriff Jed Clampett. I’ve been crowned Ellie May and Gage, apparently, is Jethro the buffoon.”

“He better hope he doesn’t have to work with you again,” Dax concluded.

“Oh, he does. Because we were discussing the situation with Jericho when we got another bad bill. Someone used a fake fifty to pay for dinner at Fred’s.” Paige sighed. “And I got to deal with Agent A-hole all over again,”

“No wonder you look beat,” Dax shifted her slightly so he could rub her shoulders. “Do you think they’re local or tourists?”

“No idea,” Paige said softly. “But I was surprised they’re passing hundreds and fifty’s. Usually, counterfeiters only cloak one type of bill. They must have access to sophisticated equipment to pull this off.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Dax said confidently. “You always do.”

“Not always,” Paige disagreed. But if she had to deal with Mr. Congeniality, she wanted to catch the bad guy. It only seemed fair. “Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Dax walked her through his conversation with Hawk that morning. She stopped him a couple times to ask questions but mostly just listened. When Dax was finished, he waited anxiously for her assessment.

“Before I say anything,” Paige said carefully. “Am I discussing this with you as a police officer, a team member, or your girlfriend?”

“All the above,” Dax said impatiently. “I just want your take, Paige. Right now you are the only person I know I can trust completely.”

“Okay,” she turned to look him in the eyes. “I don’t think Hawk is involved. I never have. We don’t exactly get along and I think he’s an arrogant... overly confident jerk, but he’s not

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dirty. And, I know this Vato guy was a member of your team and anything is possible... I'm just not convinced Hawk's involved. I worked with him... as much as he'd let me. I saw how desperate he was to find you. If he knew where you were... he deserves an Oscar. My gut says he's on your side. I think he always will be."

"Okay," Dax let out a relieved breath. "My gut says the same, but I'm just not sure I can trust my gut at the moment."

"Then I'll trust it," Paige leaned in and gave him a gentle kiss. "I know this Vato thing has you turned upside-down. I'm sorry for that, but you have good instincts. You need to find a way to trust yourself again. They tried to take you out for a reason and I think it was because you're the only one that can figure this all out. They're afraid of you. We can use that, but you have start trusting yourself again."

"It's not that easy," Dax looked away. "Vato was mine, now he's working against me. I just can't reconcile any of this."

"Hawk has a good point," Paige pressed. "I hadn't thought of it that way before, but he's right. Vato lied. Is it possible he hasn't turned against you? Is it possible he was trying to save you, trying to give you a reprieve, time to escape?"

"I've considered that all day," Dax told her. "That's about the only thing I've had on my mind since Hawk left this morning."

"And?"

"And I still don't know," Dax admitted. "If he's not involved, that message wasn't just a stall tactic, though. I'm sure of that. If he's not there willingly, I think they have someone important to him. It would explain why Thor keeps disappearing. It would also explain why Vato tried to reach me, Ken and especially Zee before he shipped out."

"Because Zee is an extraction guy," Paige said in understanding. "But he was tied up... literally. Locked up in prison in Mexico. Makes sense, but can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Dax said immediately.

"What does your gut say?" Paige waited. "Does this scenario feel accurate or does it feel like you're grasping at straws because you want him to be one of the good guys?"

"I told you, I don't trust my gut."

"But I do," Paige insisted. "What is it telling you?"

"I honestly don't know," Dax admitted. "I guess it's telling me I need to find Thor. He's the only one that has the answers and he's disappeared completely."

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“Hawk doesn’t know where he went?”

“Nope,” Dax shook his head. “Thor has gone completely off the grid and that worries me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I doubt I’ll need to do anything,” Dax shifted in frustration. “Zee wants to go after him. He thinks, with Carmen’s help, he’ll be able to find Thor and get the answers we need.”

“He wants Carmen to go with him?”

“No,” Dax answered. “Carmen will stay here. Zee will just phone in, tell her what he needs and have her run it from her place.”

“It sounds like it might be a good idea,” Paige decided. “What don’t you like about it?”

“If anyone can talk Thor down, it’s Zee,” Dax began. “Those two are tight. Zee is probably the only one that could get answers from Thor about Porter, his immediate distrust, and his mysterious trips.”

“But?”

“But what if Thor is involved?” Dax barked. “What if both Vato and Thor are working for the enemy? Zee will be alone and vulnerable because he wants to trust them. His faith in those two could be the weakness they will exploit.”

“I think Zeus and Thor are close,” Paige said slowly. “I saw them together. Even if Thor was involved, I don’t believe he would ever harm Zeus. He’s big and can be scary, but underneath it all... I think he’s just a big teddy bear. Especially when it comes to his team.”

“So, you trust Thor?” Dax asked, seriously.

“I’m leaning that way,” Paige evaded.

“But?” Dax parroted her earlier question.

Paige smiled. “But, he’s leaving all of a sudden. He hasn’t told anyone what he’s doing or how to find him and he’s hiding something. I don’t know what. I couldn’t begin to tell you if it has something to do with Reynolds and his band of thugs but I do think it has something to do with your team. Maybe Vato, maybe not. I don’t have enough information to venture a guess. The way he immediately went after Nathan was also strange. And, whatever caused that... it’s new. He didn’t act that way when we were searching for you and Thor knew Nathan was involved.”

“Maybe Vato told him something,” Dax said absently. “They’re in constant contact. Maybe the distrust is Vato’s doing.”

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“Maybe,” Paige shrugged. “Maybe not. That’s just speculation until you talk to Thor. You know I don’t deal in speculation.”

“I know,” Dax brushed a finger over her lips. “That’s why I needed to talk to you. Sorry to dump this on you after such a long, complicated day.”

“I don’t mind,” Paige hesitated but decided to continue. “Dax, will you answer something for me and be completely honest?”

“I’m always honest with you, Paige.”

“Does your hesitance to clear Hawk have anything to do with the way he treated me? Because I don’t need you to protect me from your friends. He could be a jerk at times and I know he was inside making fun of me when I was out in your driveway collecting dirt particles to analyze. But, that’s all separate from this. He didn’t know me and he didn’t like me. I can live with that. I can’t live with it, if you’re shutting him out as a punishment for the way he treated me.”

Dax didn’t answer for several minutes.

“I thought you said you’d answer honestly,” Paige prompted.

“I will,” Dax pulled Paige close. “As soon as I figure out what the answer is. I want to say no, absolutely not. But, I guess deep down, I know it has played a part. How much? I can’t answer that yet. It shouldn’t influence my feelings at all. But, I care about you. I expect my men to accept that. I expect them to treat you with respect. Things would have been different, Hawk wouldn’t see you as a threat... if you had met under different circumstances. I don’t think I’ve forgiven him for the way he’s been treating you. Does that play a part in my... outlook on the situation? I think maybe it has.”

“Then you have to set that aside,” Paige insisted. “Because Hawk and I... we’ll find a way to work through this. You have to let us do that on our own and you can’t punish him for not liking your girlfriend. It’s not fair and you, Dax Hamilton are always fair.”

“I’ll think about it,” Dax shifted to stand. “I promise. But right now, I’m starved. Dean brought takeout from Dirk’s. You ready to eat?”

“Absolutely,” Paige jumped to her feet. “Beyond ready.”

The next afternoon, Paige was sitting at her desk plotting the information she had gathered on the counterfeiters on a digital map. She had dates and times when the bills were passed as

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well as locations plotted when Sean walked through the front door. Paige remained silent, watching her friend as he made his way to her desk and settled into her visitor's chair. She waited for him to speak first, knowing the slightest thing could make him withdraw.

"Sorry about yesterday," he began. "I guess you've figured out by now Ray White and I have a history. A complicated, contentious history."

"I gathered," Paige straightened and settled into her chair. "You should probably know he's still in town. We had another report of fake bills at Fred's and Gage retrieved another one just after we seized the one at the Top Stop."

"Thanks, but I'm good now," Sean insisted. "Ray won't get to me again."

"Because?" Paige asked.

"Because he's a bully, a loud-mouthed bully, but nothing more than an annoyance. I don't need his approval and we both know I'm not on the verge of getting fired. That alone will drive him crazy. I can live with that."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Sean sighed. "But you deserve to know. I'm afraid he's going to take his frustration out on you. He's figured out we're friends by now and he won't let up until he leaves. I'm sorry for that, too."

"That's not your fault, Sean."

"And still... I'm sorry for it," Sean stood, doctored a cup of coffee and returned to Paige's chair. "Ray and I went to college together. We were never friends, more like rivals. We both knew we wanted to work for the FBI when we graduated, which meant we ended up in the same classes more often than not. He's competitive but lazy. He wanted the best grade, wanted to beat my scores, to show me up, but he wasn't willing to put in the time."

"And you aced everything you ever tried," Paige smiled. "That had to drive him nuts."

"It did," Sean admitted. "At first I felt bad, but not bad enough to relax my own personal standard. Later, I decided it was on him. He wasn't willing to work for what he wanted. He just thought it should be handed to him. It didn't take long to realize he was born into money. His parents were rich and gave him everything from the moment he was born. Not rolling in it, but enough that he was spoiled. He was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it... with very little effort."

Paige stared at Sean in wide-eyed shock. "He's the one."

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“Yeah,” Sean said softly. “He’s the guy that stole my girl just to prove he could. Then, after he was sure I would never forgive her, he dumped her... again, to prove some twisted point. He ruined both of our lives and I let him.”

“Sean,” Paige stood and moved her chair around the desk next to his. “You told me the story. We talked about this... we talked it to death. Lisa made a choice; clearly the wrong one. But, she’s not a victim in this. You are the only victim. And I still believe, if she truly was the one, if she was in love with you the way you loved her, she never would have cheated with that man in the first place. You’re holding onto a fantasy and it’s holding you back. Until you let her go, you will never be able to move on. I thought you had finally put the heartache and the pain of betrayal behind you.”

“I thought I had,” Sean sighed. “Then Ray White walked into your office and it all came rushing back. I hate him with every fiber of my being. I hate everything about him. I hate the way he treats people, I hate his arrogance, I hate...”

Paige smiled. “I get the idea. And, for the record, the feeling is mutual. Even without the history.”

“What did he do?”

Paige smiled. “For starters, he called Gage an idiot. Then, he called Jericho Sheriff Jed Clampett. You should have seen his face,” Paige laughed out loud.

“And you?”

“I’m Ellie Mae, of course.”

“What else?” Sean pressed. “I know you, and that’s not enough.”

“It doesn’t matter, Sean,” Paige brushed that off. “Because I don’t care what he thinks. It didn’t take long to realize that. He’s insecure, especially when you’re around. And, he’s afraid of me. I called Peter yesterday. Elliott’s your good friend Ray White’s supervisor. We have nothing to worry about. Agent Hateful has been put in his place and he’s running scared.”

“Be careful, Paige,” Sean warned. “That’s when he’s the most lethal.”

“I wish I had known,” Paige said in answer. “I wish I knew exactly who he was the instant he stepped through those doors. I was far too kind to him yesterday. I don’t think I’ll make that mistake again.”

“Let it go,” Sean requested. “He’s not worth it.”

Paige shrugged. “It’s up to him, really. But, after what he did to you... he better watch his step.”

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“Paige,” Sean said more forcefully.

“So, you want to help with the phony money case? Or, should we pull the murder back out and finish that up?”

“I’ll let you choose,” Sean decided.

“Then I pick money,” Paige flashed a mischievous smile. “I can’t wait to see Agent White’s face when two inept FBI washed-outs solve his mystery and arrest the bad guys before he does.”

“I should say no,” Sean smiled back. “But, I have to admit, I’m going to enjoy this.”

“Then let’s get started,” Paige moved her chair back around the desk. “Before I show you what I’ve been working on, I have one more question.”

“Shoot,” Sean said absently as he studied the map Paige was creating.

“You said both of you knew you were going to be FBI agents. But, he works for the Secret Service. How come?”

Sean grinned. “He tested at the Bureau, he applied at the same time I did. He was rejected, I got hired. Just another reason he hates me and wants to see me fail.”

“So he just gave up and decided he’d rather be an overpaid babysitter?”

“You might get away with calling them that with Peter Elliott, he has a sense of humor. But, go there with White and he’ll blow a gasket,” Sean warned.

“Good to know,” Paige was still grinning. “But, seriously. He just gave up his dream because he failed once?”

“Yeah,” Sean shrugged. “That’s the way he works. He’s always been like that... well, he was like that in college, anyway.”

“Then he never would have made it as an agent,” Paige concluded. “I wonder how he’s survived all this time in the Service.”

“He’s smart,” Sean drug his chair around the desk. “Don’t underestimate him. Just because he’s lazy, doesn’t mean he’s stupid.”

“I don’t know,” Paige pulled out a notepad. “He did tell Gage he was an idiot. I’m surprised he lived after that one.”

“Can we get to work and stop talking about White?” Sean asked. “He’s already taken up more of my time that I’d like.”

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“Sure,” Paige grabbed a pen and started tapping the pad. “We’ll get Gage to help as soon as he stops in. Between the three of us, we’re bound to come up with something to follow.”

Dax stepped into the bakery and paused to enjoy the amazing aroma of freshly baked goods. He loved it here. Loved the smells, loved pretty much everything they baked. His mouth began to water as the sweet smell of sugar and chocolate flooded his senses. He was glad he’d reneged on his promise to stay home. Paige was not going to be happy with him, but she was hovering. And, he had to do something to show her he was capable of living his life again.

He moved forward to scan the large display case when Chelsea rushed toward him. “Hey, Dax. I was wondering if you could look at something for me. Maybe, I don’t know, tell me what you think and if I should call the police.”

“What’s going on?” Dax immediately surveyed the open floor plan. When he didn’t see an immediate threat, he relaxed. “Does it have something to do with that table you blocked off?”

“Nothing serious,” Chelsea assured him. “It’s just... well, a customer paid with a fifty-dollar bill and when I went to put it in the safe, I thought it looked strange. I thought maybe you could look at it and we could decide if it was worth calling the cops.”

“Go get the bill,” Dax pulled out his phone. “I’m calling Paige. Someone has been passing fake bills around town. I’m afraid you’re going to be out the fifty. She’s going to need it for evidence.”

“I understand,” Chelsea sighed. “Which is why I blocked off that table. It was busy at the time, mostly takeout orders. The woman approached the counter, said she was in a hurry and handed me the fifty. She said something about keep the change and the two of them left. I was surprised, the bill couldn’t have been more than thirty and that was a huge tip. But, they looked like tourists and sometimes we get wealthy customers who are generous. I took care of the line and then grabbed the fifty to drop it in the safe. That’s when I really looked at it. I’m not sure why, but it looks... off. Maybe the color, or it’s missing something. Anyway, that’s when I realized I was probably out fifty bucks. I also remembered they were sitting at that table and I hadn’t had a chance to clear it yet. As you can see, they ordered coffee. I was hoping maybe the police could get prints or something. Maybe if they arrest the couple, I could get restitution. I’m not out much. Just, you know, the thirty but it’s early in the season and money is tight.”

“Quick thinking,” Dax grinned. Chelsea may have just provided the lead Paige was looking for.

“Dax,” Paige said in answer. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

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“Paige,” Dax scolded. “We talked about this. Just because I called, it doesn’t mean I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.”

“Then you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Dax said through gritted teeth. This overprotective crap had to stop. “But, I need a cop. You available?”

“Then you’re not fine.”

“I am, but Chelsea... here at the bakery, needs a cop,” he corrected. “She was passed a fifty this morning, and she thinks it was your counterfeiters.”

“Then why did she call you?”

“She didn’t call me, I’m here.”

“What?” Paige jumped to her feet. “We agreed you wouldn’t leave the house for at least two more days. What are you doing at the bakery?”

“Getting an oil change,” Dax said sarcastically.

“Dax,” Paige fumed.

“Paige,” Dax parroted her tone.

“I’m on my way,” Paige grabbed her jacket then realized Gage and Sean were watching her intently. “We have another fake bill, at the bakery. Dax is there waiting with Chelsea. Apparently, donuts are more important than his personal well-being.”

Sean laughed. “I’d say donuts are pretty good one’s personal well-being. You want a back?”

Paige paused to study Gage. “Someone has to call White.”

“You take Sean, hook up with Dax and see what you have. I’ll track down White and meet you there.”

“I owe you for this one,” Paige said sincerely. “Sorry.”

“Not accepted,” Gage smiled. “I’ll collect one day and this favor is going to be huge.”

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Paige stepped into the bakery and glanced around. She spotted Dax sitting casually at a table sipping coffee and munching on baked goods. She did her best to set aside her anger and approached him.

“Try harder,” Dax said in greeting.

“What?” Paige asked, confused.

“You don’t like that had the nerve to venture out in the big bad world alone. You think I disobeyed your order, which I did because I don’t take orders from anyone. So, you’re mad but you’re trying not to let it show. You’re on a professional call and this is personal. You’re going to need to try harder. Your mad is showing.”

“Dax,” Paige warned.

“Paige,” Dax returned.

“I can’t do this right now,” Paige said in frustration.

Dax retrieved a cane and used it to stand. Before Paige knew it was coming, he wrapped an arm around her waist, yanked her against him and planted a deep, seductive kiss on her lips.

Paige was lost in the moment... for about a second. Then she pushed away and took a step back. “Dax Hamilton!”

“Yes, Paige,” Dax was grinning.

“I can’t begin to tell you how inappropriate that was,” she inhaled deeply. “I’m on an official call.”

“I know,” Dax casually settled back in his seat. “I called you. Before you get started, I assume that fed of yours is on his way, so you don’t have much time. Chelsea blocked off that table over there,” he pointed to the corner. “Because it’s where the couple was sitting. If you can’t get fingerprints off the mugs, you might be able to get DNA.”

Paige was now smiling. “Thanks, I’ll deal with you later... when I get home. Do you need a ride?”

“No,” Dax sipped his coffee. “I drove.”

Paige opened her mouth to chastise him, quickly shut it again, turned, and walked away. She knew she was being excessive but she couldn’t help herself. Dax had spent over two months in a coma. He was still healing. But, now that he was awake, he wanted to act like none of that had happened. She couldn’t do it. She cared too much. Her instinct was to hover, even if it drove the man crazy.

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“I found your bad guys,” Sean said, dropping two packets on Paige’s desk.

Gage pushed to his feet and joined them.

“Shirley and Joseph Wilmoth,” Paige read. “And lookie here... they both have warrants for their arrest.”

“Check fraud,” Gage observed. “Looks like they upped their game a bit.”

“True,” Paige agreed. “But fraud is fraud. Counterfeiting isn’t much of a stretch when you think about it. It’s kind of the next big step.”

“Do we have to tell White?” Gage asked.

“Yes,” Sean said immediately. “It’s his case and if it were anyone else, they’d be here working with us right now.”

“True,” Paige said slowly. “But, I told him we may have prints. He blew me off. Said I was chasing unicorns, and he’d drop by later this afternoon to check in and see if I had any real leads to follow. I’m inclined to wait.”

“I told him not to underestimate you,” Sean sighed. “That man never could take advice from anyone. We’ll do this your way. I’m not even here, remember.”

“Let’s get Margie to help us,” Paige jumped to her feet. “We need the names of every guest in every hotel here in town. If they’re not on the guest list, we’re screwed.”

“Yeah,” Gage said. “Because they’re into fraud, which means they probably have fake ID’s.”

“Exactly,” Paige began to pace. “Maybe we should send photos with the request for the lists. Let the hotel’s know if they pass the fake bills at their fine establishments, they’re out the money. Might get them to cooperate.”

“I’ll get Margie,” Gage stood. “She can contact the motels, hotels, B&B’s and cabin rentals in the area. Then, I think we should split up. Print off a bunch of photos and take them to the restaurants, gas stations, anywhere we think they might drop in. If we spread the word and provide photos, the entire town will be looking for these guys. We’ll catch them, our community is awesome that way. The instant they’re spotted, we’ll get a call.”

“Good idea,” Paige glanced at Sean. “You in?”

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“Yeah, let’s print off those photos and get started.”

“Here,” Paige held the rap sheets out to Gage. “Give those to Margie, when White shows up, she can give him what we found. Where he goes from there is up to him.”

“Good idea,” Gage took the papers. “Then he can’t say we impeded.”

Paige pulled up each photo, pasted into one document with limited details and printed off a hundred copies. If they needed more, she’d stop in at the copy store and see if they were willing to donate to the local PD. Once each of them had a large stack, they fanned out to cover the entire town. Before they finished tonight, their two perps wouldn’t be able to go to a public bathroom without being spotted and reported. Paige had a good feeling about this, and if she was right... they’d have their dynamic duo behind bars before the weekend.

It was late when Paige stepped through her front door. She glanced around the room and spotted Dax in the recliner. He looked upset. Had something new happened? “You okay? And, yes... I know you’re tired of me asking. But... well, you just look upset. Did something happen today?” She moved forward and settled onto the couch.

“Zee left,” Dax rubbed a hand over his face. “I have a bad feeling about this, but he wouldn’t listen. He’s off to track Thor down and physically drag him back here if necessary.”

“We sort of knew that was coming,” Paige pushed backward and crossed her legs in an attempt to get comfortable. “He’s been threatening this ever since Thor took off.”

“I know,” Dax barked. “Don’t you think I know my men?”

“Don’t take this out on me, just because I’m handy,” Paige warned. “Of course, you know your men. I’m just saying you couldn’t stop it and you know that. You’ve known it the entire time you were trying to convince him to stay.”

“I did,” Dax sighed. “Sorry. I’m just... I should have gone with him.”

“But you couldn’t and that frustrates you,” Paige said in understanding. “But, you said yourself... Thor and Zeus are close. Thor won’t hurt him. You have to believe that.”

“But, what about the others?” Dax was restless and he couldn’t ignore the feeling that Zeus was walking into a trap. “I told him to take Hawk, but he refused. He said we needed him here. But, this is insane. Zee should not be out there, risking his life, all alone.”

“What if we do this?” Paige straightened her legs and moved closer to Dax. “Zeus is going to stay in touch with Carmen. He promised he would, plus he’s going to need her help. I’ll talk to Carmen and if she senses he’s in trouble... you and I will head out immediately and join him. That will give you a few more days to recover and I’ll let Jericho know I may need to head out with little notice.”

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“You would do that?”

“In a second,” Paige assured him. “And in the meantime, try to have faith in Zeus. He’s good at what he does.”

“I know,” Dax conceded. “But I can’t help worrying.”

“Now you know how I feel,” Paige grinned. “But I’m working on it. I know you’re not helpless and I think, because of my own fears, I’ve been treating you like you are. I’ll try to do better. I’ll try to trust you to know what you’re doing if you’ll do the same. Trust Zeus. He’ll call if he runs into trouble and he’s tough. You know that, look at what he survived in Mexico. If they couldn’t break him, Reynolds and his group won’t be able to, either. We’ll be there, the second he needs us... we’ll be there to help.”

Dax pushed himself up until he was standing. The process was slow, but Paige realized he was doing better already. Maybe going out was good for him after all. “I have dinner in the kitchen. I’m sure you’re hungry. You’re getting in late, did Chelsea’s lead pan out?”

“We got prints,” Paige followed him into the kitchen. “Sean tracked them to a married couple that’s wanted for fraud. Now, we just have to find them.”

“And the Secret Service guy?”

“He thinks I’m hunting unicorns,” Paige smiled. “I really can’t stand that guy and I can’t wait to move in and steal his glory out from under his nose. He’s going to blow when Sean and I arrest his suspect. And, I know his boss. Peter and I worked together on a project in Washington a few years back. Agent Elliott has very little tolerance for bloviating and pomposity. He expects hard work and results. Ray White is going to have to do some fast talking on this one, especially if I’m able to make the arrest instead of him.”

“And that’s what you’re hoping for?”

“More than you know,” Paige settled in at the kitchen table.

“I think there’s more to the story than his constant jibes and insults,” Dax settled in across from her.

Paige filled her plate, then began to tell Dax the story of Sean Wilkens, a girl named Lisa Conlin and Ray White... a rival with a mean streak and no boundaries.

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“Paige,” Margie called out. “Nancy, over at the Yardley says a couple just checked in that match your photos. They’re using the names Ember and Grady Schoell. She said the woman just booked an afternoon spa treatment and paid with a hundred.”

“Tell her we’re on our way,” Paige got a nod from Gage as he jumped to his feet and joined her at the front door.

“Hey, Nancy,” Gage said in greeting. “What room?”

“They’re in the Sunshine Room,” Nancy held out a key. “Just up the stairs and to the left.”

“First door?” Paige asked.

“Right,” Nancy bit her lip, worry written all over her face.

“Do me a favor,” Gage move toward the stairs. “Keep the rest of the guests occupied down here. We don’t want anyone coming up behind us.”

“I can do that,” Nancy bit down on her bottom lip a little harder.

Paige was nearly at the top of the stairs when a movement caught her eye at the front door. She motioned for Sean to join them, then continued down the hallway. Once she reached the door, she whispered instructions to Gage. “I’m going to knock, tell her there’s a problem with her spa appointment. Ask her to schedule a new time. You stand over there to the side. Once I get her out of the room, you and Sean can go in and take care of her husband.”

“Sean?” Gage asked, just before the agent rounded the corner and joined the large deputy.

Paige gave them a nod before she briskly knocked on the closed door.

“We don’t want to be disturbed,” Shirley Wilmoth, Ember at the moment, called out.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs. Schoell,” Paige called out. “But, I’m afraid we doubled booked your spa appointment and I’m going to need to find a new time that will work for you. One of the other guests already scheduled that spot yesterday. I’m afraid Brook forgot to put it in the book. I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience....”

The door flew open and an angry woman stood in the opening. She had her hands on her hips and was clearly prepared to argue. Paige didn’t give her a chance. Within seconds, the woman was spun around and pinned against the wall. Before Shirley Wilmoth knew what was happening, she was cuffed and shoved to the side so Sean and Gage could go after her husband. Paige heard a commotion and guessed the man... Joseph Wilmoth... must have resisted. She peeked around the corner and saw Gage marching the man toward the door. “Trouble?”

“Naw,” Gage grinned. “Piece of cake.”

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“You tackled him, didn’t you?”

Gage didn’t answer, but his grin grew wider. “I’ll deal with these two, you should probably help Sean secure all that evidence. They’ve got stacks of fresh bills spread all over the second bed.” He shook his head as he grabbed the woman’s arm and marched the couple down the stairs.

Paige stepped into the room and studied the scene, then she pulled out her phone and dialed her boss.

“How can I help you, Paige?” Jericho answered.

She ran him through the situation and asked how he wanted to handle the Secret Service. “We’re going to need a warrant for a thorough search. I’m sure the equipment is somewhere in this room. And, White will need to be notified although I’m more inclined to call Elliott and let him know we have his suspects in custody without his man’s assistance or cooperation.”

“Let me handle the call up north,” Jericho offered. “And, I’ll call Tolman. He should probably be in the loop on this one, even though he won’t be the one filing charges.”

“In the meantime,” Paige added. “Sean and I will package up the evidence that’s sitting out in plain sight. They have to have at least a hundred thousand neatly piled on the bed.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

It was less than ten minutes later when Paige’s phone began to ring. She glanced at the display and smiled. “Bank of deception,” she said in greeting. “Where your crisis ensures our prosperity.”

“Seriously, Paige?” Elliott laughed. “What if I had loaned my phone to the local SAC?”

“Then I guess you’d have some damage control to deal with,” Paige shrugged. “I assume Walter’s filled you in.”

“Yeah,” Peter sighed. “Sorry about White. I wanted to send Anderson, but he was out on assignment. Maybe you could take a picture of those unicorns and make sure Sean Wilkens is right in the middle of the photo.”

“Sounds like Jericho was thorough,” Paige shot a glance at Sean. “So, how do you want me to handle this?”

“Your DA is working something out with Sutton; the federal prosecutor here in Salt Lake,” Peter told her. “It’s going to end up in federal court but the two of them can work it out. That part doesn’t matter. I’m going to tell you, White is going to fight you on the arrest. He wants this one, which is why I’m counting on you to fight back. He needs to learn a lesson and a

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couple letters in his file hasn't done much to correct his behavior. Maybe losing a collar he wants will be a wake-up call, especially when I don't back him on it."

"Losing it to Sean is going to make things worse, but I'm giving it to him," Paige decided. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No," Elliott sobered. "I also heard about the trouble you guys are having out there. Give Sean my best and tell him he has my full support. How are you holding up, kid?"

"Kid?" Paige laughed. "You not even ten years older than me."

"Eleven, actually."

"A whole decade," Page challenged. "Better start looking for care centers in the area, how are the dentures holding up?"

"You laugh, but wait another ten years and you'll understand," Peter answered. "My mind says 'let's go' but my body says 'no way, pal.' It's frustrating to realize I'm not Superman, anymore."

"You'll always be Superman to me," Paige promised. "Okay, I'm going to let you go now. Gage has already transported the couple to holding. Any word on our warrant?"

"I'm guessing Tolman and Sutton have already taken care of that," Peter answered. "Let me know if you need anything else on my end. And, don't let White bully you. He has a habit of sticking his foot in his mouth when it comes to the locals. Unfortunately, most of them are so relieved when he's finally gone, they never make a formal complaint. Do you plan to change that?"

"Probably not," Paige decided. "I prefer to handle guys like Ray White myself."

Peter laughed. "I'm thinking that will probably be worse than anything I could dish out. Don't be a stranger, kid. My assignment here is temporary, but I'm only a phone call away."

"Ditto," Paige said before disconnecting.

"I'm not taking credit for this bust," Sean said the minute Paige hung up. "First, I shouldn't be involved at all. This doesn't have anything to do with the FBI and I can't even connect it to Nathan's project. It's all yours and you won't change my mind, so don't even try."

"Publically," Paige said. "I agree. But, in private... I say we rub this in a little. I expect White to arrive any minute. And, Peter wants a picture of you sitting on that bed with all the evidence in the background. So, park it buddy. I always follow orders from a superior."

Sean snorted but complied. That's how White found them when he stepped into the room with the warrant.

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“What are you doing?” he demanded. “You’re going to contaminate the evidence.”

“Corralling unicorns?” Paige said in answer as she snapped a couple more shots. “Did you bring the warrant?”

“I have it,” White held the paperwork, still scowling. “This is the most unprofessional display I’ve seen in a long time. I guess I should have expected it... given Wilken’s involvement.”

“And I suggest you tell Peter Elliott exactly how you feel,” Paige suggested.

“Elliott? What does he have to do with this?” White asked, confused.

“Oh,” Paige flicked her hand nonchalantly. “He’s the one that asked for the photos. Apparently, he wanted to make sure Sean here got the credit internally... even if he could get recognition for the bust publically.”

White’s face turned a bright shade of red. “Elliott is...he thinks Sean made the arrest? He believes Wilken’s solved the crime?”

Paige stepped forward to crowd White’s space a little... similar to the way he loomed over her desk the other day. “He knows Sean is the one that solved the case. He knows Sean is the one that arrested the suspects. He knows Gage and me... we just assisted Sean because technically, this wasn’t his problem. Oh, yeah... it was actually yours. How’s that ‘real investigating’ working for ya?” She snatched the warrant out of his hand and began reading the language. Once she was sure it covered the entire room, she dropped it on the bed in front of White and began carefully searching for evidence. It might not be her case anymore, but she was going to make sure the feds put these two away for a very long time.

“Hey Carmen,” Paige greeted. She was finally on her way home after a very long, aggravating day. At least White was on his way back to Salt Lake. With any luck, she’d never have to work with that guy again. Even the satisfaction of rubbing another Sean Wilkens win, Ray White loss in his face didn’t counter the man’s annoying personality. Good riddance!

“Zeus called,” Carmen replied. “He’s in Texas. Thor was down there a couple days ago, but he’s long gone. Zeus is going to grab a few hours’ sleep, then he’s heading to Kentucky. Paige, Thor doesn’t know anyone in Texas. What was he doing there?”

“Does Vato?”

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“You still think he’s working with Vato on this?” Carmen asked skeptically. “I was there, Paige. In the room, while we were all frantically trying to find Dax. You know as well as I do, Thor didn’t have the slightest clue where his friend was being held.”

“I do know that,” Paige agreed. “Doesn’t mean he’s innocent. Maybe Vato didn’t tell him. Maybe this Vato guy is playing Thor. Appealing to his emotions, his sense of duty or loyalty, and he’s only telling Thor what he wants him to know.”

“Do you really believe that?” Carmen asked. “Because Zeus doesn’t. And since I don’t know Vato and neither do you... I think I’m going to trust Zeus. He’s smart and a good judge of character. I think he’d know if his friend went off the rails.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Paige admitted. “But, I do know Dax is conflicted. He wants to believe Thor is still on his side. He wants to hold out hope that this Vato is, too. But, he’s having doubts. I don’t think any of you realize just how much this entire incident has impacted Dax... or his confidence. And, honestly... I think Zeus leaving him this way has made it worse.”

“Don’t try to push a guilt trip on me... or Zeus,” Carmen objected. “Dax has the other guys to help him. Thor is out there alone. You know Zeus, he had to help a friend in need. Even if that friend refused to ask for his help.”

“I know,” Paige sighed as she pulled into her driveway and shut down the car. “But, I’m counting on you to keep me in the loop. And, if you even sense that Zeus is in trouble, I need to know. I promised Dax we’d step in at the slightest hint of danger. Dax can’t lose Zeus over this. He’d never get over that. I know the team is broken at the moment, that there’s not a lot of trust between any of us... but you have to promise me this, Carmen.”

“You are putting me in a difficult position here, Paige,” Carmen said softly. “I think I love him. I never thought I’d fall for anyone... not like this. He’s trusting me and I won’t betray that trust. But, if I want you to go after him if there’s danger. I need Dax to be there, to protect him from himself and his trust in a friend that might betray him. But, what if never forgives me?”

“If he’s in danger, he’ll forgive you,” Paige said confidently. “Because he’ll know what you did, you did out of love. Now, it’s been a long day and I still have to check in with Nathan. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Hang in there, and Carmen?”

“Yeah?”

“Remember you’re my friend first,” Paige said as she climbed from the car. “I’m here for you... no matter what. If you need to talk or if things get lonely out there alone... you always know where to find me. I have a feeling Zeus leaving is going to be just as hard on you as it is on Dax.”

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“Love you, too,” Carmen answered. “Catch you later, Nathan needs me check into something and get back to him tonight. So, I’m off to work. Goodnight, Paige.”

“Night,” she disconnected and stepped through the front door. She smiled when she saw Dax was waiting. She could definitely get used to this. And, was that little jolt contentment or panic? Only time would tell.