

# PAIGE CARTER

*Deputy Sheriff*

## *Hijacked Innocence* *Season 3, Episode 3*

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*by:*

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Nathan Porter paced in front of the large bank of windows that ran the entire wall of his home office. Back and forth, back and forth... the waiting was going to kill him. He glanced at his phone, willing it to ring as he pivoted and headed in the opposite direction. *What was taking so long?*

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“He’s headed for the ramp,” Detective Kett called out. “Fontan, you in position? One male, late twenties, approximately five-seven, one-eighty is headed your way. He’s wearing a black hoodie, jeans and a dark-colored ball cap. Looks like it has some kind of logo on the front.”

“I see him,” Detective Russell Fontan answered. He clipped the walkie on his belt and bolted toward the suspect. The wily bugger was dodging and weaving around cargo bins in an attempt to fade into the shadows and disappear. *Not gonna happen.* Fontan picked up the pace, leapt over a barrel his cunning prey had toppled in his wake, and spotted the man just as he was attempting to climb a chain-link fence. Fontan smiled. *Big mistake.* He pushed his body to move faster, reached up, snagged the man’s baggie jeans, and gave them a forceful yank. The shocked felon went down hard, Fontan landed on top of him.

Within seconds, he was on his stomach, the cop straddling his body. His arms were yanked behind his back in an attempt to secure the cuffs. The suspect was still a little dazed, wondering what had just happened. But, he wasn’t ready to give in. Instead of accepting his fate like a man, he decided to resist. One wrist was already cuffed, but the other was still free. He tried to swing it around, to cold-cock the officer. At the same time, he frantically began kicking his legs hoping to knock the cop off balance so he could escape. He missed, and the cop held firm.

Fontan was ready for the attempted punch. He dodged, shifted his weight, gripped the man’s arm, and forcefully pulled it behind him. The fight only lasted seconds. Once the cuffs were secure, Fontan stood to catch his breath. Why did they always fight the inevitable?

“I didn’t do nothing,” the young guy barked out of habit. They both know he had done something... for starters, he ran.

“Suspect is in custody,” Fontan reported in. “Who wants to transport?”

Officer Livia Halse responded. “I’m headed your way, should be there in about two minutes. I’ll take him off your hands.”

“Copy,” Fontan reached down and yanked on his prisoner’s arm. “Stand up, you’re taking a little ride. Anything you want to tell me before we make this all official?”

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“Yeah,” the man glared at the cop who had chased him down, wondering again how that had happened. Cops were supposed to be out of shape and easy to evade. Not this one, he probably never had a donut in his life. “I want a lawyer.”

“Of course you do,” Fontan shoved the prisoner in the direction of the female officer who had just arrived. “He’s all yours. Any others outstanding?”

“Naw,” Halse shook her head. “We got ‘em all.”

“Branning getting a warrant to search the ship?” Fontan asked.

“I think the L.T. is working on it — here locally,” Halse told him. “He sent T-Bone to rile the judge. Probably used Branning’s case file to do it, but he’ll get it done.”

“Sounds good,” the two strangers escorted their prisoner back toward the waiting vehicles. Fontan was from Chicago, part of a team of detectives sent over to assist the New Orleans’s PD on a joint operation spearheaded by some bigwig General. He didn’t care how he got here. He was determined to catch every last SOB that had anything to do with his friend’s death. Brian Stewart was a good cop, a great cop really... but he was a better man. He deserved justice and Russell Fontan believed he was just the guy to make that happen. Livia Halse was a local. She worked the port here in New Orleans and was finally starting to get noticed by her superiors after six long, hard years on the street. She desperately wanted to make detective and hoped this was the year she could make it happen. With any luck, the current Op would be the bump she needed to push her to the top of the list.

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The instant Nathan’s cell phone began to chime, he answered without even glancing at the display. “Status?”

“Nathan?” Paige asked, confused.

“Paige,” Nathan said impatiently. “I’m going to have to call you back. I’m expecting a call.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Nathan practically barked. “I’ll call as soon as I can.” He disconnected, feeling slightly guilty about his abrupt demeanor. Before he could question his actions, his phone chimed again. “Porter,” he answered this time.

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“Sir,” Lieutenant Caiden Norquist came across loud and clear. “The ship is secure and we have four individuals in custody. We don’t believe any escaped at this time, but the prisoners are not cooperating.”

“And the ship?” Nathan asked. “Do you have access?”

“Like I said, the ship is secure but we’re waiting on a warrant to board the vessel and conduct a search.”

“Do you need assistance with that?” Porter began running names of judges in the New Orleans district through his mind. Several owed him favors.

“Not at this time, no,” Lt. Norquist replied. “We’ve got it under control. With the federal warrant, the overwhelming list of crimes your men from Chicago brought down with them, and the fact that two of the suspects tried to flee; then, when they were apprehended they resisted... we’ve got PC. I expect approval any minute now. The probable cause is overwhelming, don’t worry. No judge would deny it. Those Dicks from the windy city have done their homework, that’s for sure. It’s smoothed the way for all of us to get results.”

“It was one of theirs that lost his life,” Porter reminded him. “A colleague and a friend. They’re determined to find and apprehend everyone responsible. I have no doubt they’ll come through for you. They’re not going to stop until this is over. Give me a call once you search that cargo ship. I don’t care what time it is. I want to know what Reynolds was shipping and the final destination.”

“L.T.,” Officer Brock Doogan approached his supervisor. “We have the warrant.”

“Warrant came through,” Norquist informed. “I have to go.”

“Call me when you know what’s on that ship,” Nathan demanded before he disconnected. He turned and stared out the window wondering if he should call Paige now, or wait until he had more details. It only took a second to decide.

“Hello?” Paige answered. “Nathan? What’s going on?”

Porter smiled and began to fill her in on the operation currently underway at a busy New Orleans port. Once he was finished, a deafening silence that seemed to last forever filled the air. “Paige?”

“And, you didn’t tell us earlier because you don’t want Carmen to know?”

“I didn’t tell you because there was nothing to tell,” Porter corrected. “In fact, I debated the timing but figured you would want to know.”

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Paige proceeded to demand the details... all of them, no holding back. Once she'd completed her interrogation, she sighed. "Okay, will you call me when you find out how it goes... the warrant I mean? Once they figure out what Reynolds was shipping will you promise to call back?"

"It might be late," Nathan warned.

"Yeah," Paige sighed. "Well, I doubt we'll be getting much sleep out here, anyway."

"Why?" Nathan sobered. There had to be a reason Paige had called in the first place.

"Zeus is missing," Paige notified him. "No one has been able to contact him for two days. Carmen is going out of her mind. Dax is worse than a hungry bear and Hawk isn't much better. We'll all worried. He promised to check in. The team is trying everything we can think of to find him."

"Travis Boudin is good at what he does," Nathan refused to use the man's nickname. "He's a Ranger and a good one at that. He's gotten himself out of worse situations than this, plenty of them. Even if he's been captured, Reynolds won't hurt him. He couldn't explain it."

"Like he didn't hurt Dax?"

"That was different," Nathan insisted.

"How, exactly?" Paige wasn't buying it. "We're dealing with the same people. If they enlisted the help of Nassar, a known terrorist, what makes you think they wouldn't enlist another one?"

"Because we're onto them," Porter said casually. "And, Reynolds knows it. He's watching his step here in Washington. He wouldn't take that kind of risk, not now. I'm sure of this, Paige. Boudin is fine. He may have been captured, but if he was... he's locked up somewhere secure, but not suffering. I think it's more likely he's just being cautious. He may have gone silent because he found something and he can't risk the enemy locating him. Give him another day or two before you start to panic."

"Hawks talking about sending in the team," Paige warned. "The only thing stopping him is you. He knows you're working on something and he doesn't want to be a complication. I'm wondering if either one of you will ever come clean; or, let the rest of us join the cool kid's secret squad of rebels. We need to be in on the entire operation for this to work, Nathan."

"I needed to talk to you about that," Nathan admitted. "I've been working on getting your security clearance reinstated. Dax and Carmen are already clear. Sean Wilken's came through this afternoon. I'll have Carmen update his access immediately. I'm still waiting on yours. It's

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a little more complicated because you left the Bureau. The feds don't like to bring in locals on that level, but they'll do it. I'll go to the president himself if I have to."

"Is that necessary?" Paige frowned.

"I think it is," Nathan assured her. "Because I need the freedom to communicate with my team. I need you to know what's going on, when it's happening... not after the fact. And Hawk has too many contacts. He's in the loop, because I haven't been able to block him out."

"And reinstating my clearance will allow you to do that? Keep me in the loop, that is?"

"It's the only thing holding me back," he admitted. "Now, I need to know what Dax has decided about the others. I can get their clearance updated... no problem. But, I'm waiting on your conclusions before I move forward. Does Dax think he can trust his team?"

"We still don't know about Thor," Paige admitted. "He's also missing, but I think that's by design. He doesn't want us to find him."

"And the others?"

"Dax has decided to trust them," Paige sobered. "He's not a hundred percent sure, but he's close enough. Zeus is a hundred and ten percent. I think Wooley's the same. I agree with him on those two. Then there's Jeeves. He's harder for me to read, but Dax says he's good-to-go."

"And Hawk?"

"I say Hawk is in the clear," Paige said without hesitation. "I know Dax is wavering on him, but it's only because of me. Hawk has some serious issues where I'm concerned. I think it's clouding the subject more than it should."

"That's because Dax cares about you," Porter understood the rub because he felt the same way. "If Hawk can't support that, you have to wonder why."

"I don't wonder," Paige smiled. "I know. It's because I won't back down. I won't just blindly follow his every whim and he doesn't know how to deal with that. I have an amazing mentor with the same hang-up. He's a general... resides in Washington these days, maybe you know him."

"Don't start, Paige," Nathan warned. "It's been a difficult day."

"With the exception of Thor, I say the team is fine," she answered his initial question. "For the most part, Dax agrees. Which is why he's decided to bring us all back together on this."

"Good," Porter paused. "You should probably know, I've been doing my own investigating. I have a friend looking into all the men. So far, they check out. I'm not seeing

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anything alarming. No red flags to indicate their working with Reynolds or his group. Waylon should be done in the next day or two. I'll let you know."

"Jeff Waylon?" Paige asked. "As in Homeland?"

"Yes," Nathan affirmed. "But keep that to yourself. I don't think the others trust that department since Williams kidnapped Dax."

"If Jeff doesn't find anything, there's nothing to find."

"I agree," Nathan settled into his executive chair. "Now, how are you doing?"

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Paige had just pulled into the parking lot and was headed into the office when Margie called her to assist on a missing child report that came in earlier that morning. Seriously? How did a seven-year-old go missing at six o'clock in the morning? "Show me enroute."

She sighed deeply and wondered if this was going to be another long day. She was already tired and grumpy. By the time she got off the phone with Nathan and relayed the information to Dax and Carmen, it was after midnight. The op in New Orleans had gone well. All the players on the ship were in custody and the team had recovered a boatload – pun intended — of high-powered weapons and military grade drones. That was the part that worried everyone. Why was Reynolds shipping secret military drones to the Mediterranean? When you combined that with his association with Nassar, and the death of the informant Dax knew from Iraq... the possibilities were terrifying.

Paige made a left out of the parking lot and started toward the victim's home.

"Logan's on scene, but he needs assistance," Margie advised. "Haviland was there initially, but he had to clear and head to court. They already did a thorough search of the home and yard but didn't find the boy. Lovato is still checked-out on the call, but it doesn't list his current location. I think Reed told him he could handle things at the residence until you arrived. Shows here Lovato began a cursory check of the surrounding neighborhood about ten minutes ago. He hasn't checked off yet, so he may still be in the area."

"Copy," Paige accelerated and flipped on her lights. Might as well take advantage of the empty roads. She knew she was hyped up on caffeine, three cups of coffee would do that. But, with less than five hours sleep and a long day ahead Paige thought she might need another jolt. She just hoped it lasted until lunchtime. Otherwise, she'd be struggling to fight off a major crash; and, with a missing kid... she couldn't afford to lose focus. It only took a few minutes to

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arrive at the residence and see the scene was chaotic. Logan rushed out the front door and met Paige in the driveway.

“It looks like an abduction,” Logan said in greeting. “The back door shows signs of a break-in but the kid’s room made us question that assumption. The bed hasn’t even been slept in. We decided to look into things a little more, determine what we had, before issuing an Amber Alert. Havilland helped us clear the house before he had to take off. The boy’s not inside. Just to cover all the bases, Lovato is driving the area and he’ll talk to any of the neighbors that he encounters along the way. He’s supposed to be off, but he said he’ll stick if we need him. Once he gets back, we were going to initiate the abduction protocol. Netty Simmons, the mother, says her son went to bed early last night,” Logan added. “About nine. She claims she turned in around midnight. When she got up this morning, he was gone. She insists he was kidnapped.”

“And she didn’t hear it?” Paige had a hard time believing that.

“She says she took a sleeping pill,” Logan said hesitantly.

“But you think...?” Paige asked.

“I think she was drunk, probably passed out and didn’t stir when the perp used a pry bar or something like it to open the back door. Or, the kid ran and made it look like someone broke in the back.”

“What do we know about mom?” Paige moved to the back of her vehicle and pulled out a folder. “Any arrests? DUIs? Public intoxication? Anything to indicate she has a problem?”

“I didn’t get that far,” Logan began but stopped when Netty Simmons rushed out the front door and ran toward the cop car.

“What are you doing to find my baby?” she wailed.

“Ma’am,” Paige said with more patience than she felt. “If you could just go back inside, I’ll only be a minute and then I have some questions.”

“But...” her bloodshot eyes focused on Logan. “I already answered his questions.”

“I know,” Paige set a hand on the woman’s back and gave her a gentle push. Too bad the red, swollen eyes wasn’t from crying. “But I have a few of my own. Please, just go inside. I’ll be right behind you.”

Logan waited until the woman was stepping through the front door before he spoke. “Now you see why I think the problem was alcohol?”

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“Yeah,” Paige closed her eyes and took a long, soothing breath. “She wreaks. It’s like the alcohol is seeping out of her pores. You get the Amber Alert going and I’ll deal with her.”

“Uh...” Logan was frantically trying to remember what had to be done to activate the alert.

“Call Margie,” Paige grinned. “Once she activates the system, call Sheriff Walters. You don’t want him blindsided with this before he has his morning coffee.”

“Right,” Logan pulled out his phone and dialed the office. He watched Paige as she strode up the front stairs and disappeared into the house. He just hoped Margie knew what to do because he was completely lost; and, his back-up was now inside dealing with a half-drunk, slightly belligerent mother.

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“Okay,” Paige settled into a chair as far away from the woman as possible. “I need you to walk me through last night. Start from when... what is your son’s name?”

“Brodie,” Netty sniffed.

“Okay,” Paige nodded. “Start from when Brodie got home from school until you went to bed.”

“I already...”

“I know you went through this with Deputy Reed, but I need you to go through it with me,” Paige pressed. “Before you do, can you tell me about Brodie’s father? Does he live here... with you?”

“No,” Netty scowled. “Walker left us two years ago.”

“Okay,” Paige made a note in her pad. “So, you and your husband are divorced?” No response. “Does he live in the area?”

“No,” Netty shifted. “Why do we have to talk about Walker?”

“I’m just wondering if your son could be with him.”

“If Walker took him, it’s still kidnapping,” Netty folded her arms in front of her body. “I want him arrested if he has my boy.”

“Where does Walker live now?” Paige tried to get her back on track.

“I don’t know,” Netty plopped her hands into her lap. “Why you gotta ask questions about him? He’s gone, that’s all I know.”

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“Does he have visitation rights?” Paige pressed.

“Sure, sometimes,” Netty mumbled. “He keeps in touch with Brodie. But I don’t want to talk about my Ex.”

Paige decided to shift gears. She’d look into the father later. “Okay, can you walk me through the evening? Brodie got home from school at what time?”

“Beats me,” Netty turned her head defiantly. “Normal time, I guess.”

“And that would be...?”

“Around three, maybe?” Netty said it more as a question than an answer.

“Three o’clock, then.” Paige jotted that on her pad. “And when he got home, were you here?”

“Sure,” Netty glanced at the window.

*Interesting*, Paige thought. *She wasn’t home. Maybe the neighbors can tell me if that’s normal.* “What did you do? Pick it up from when you first saw Brodie after school and walk me through the routine.”

“This is stupid,” Netty jumped to her feet. “You should be out looking for my kid. Why are you in here hounding me?”

“I’m just trying to get a clear picture of what happened,” Paige sighed inwardly. This was going nowhere fast. Netty was hiding something.

“Brodie got home and went to his room,” Netty gave Paige a defiant, challenging glare. “He stayed up there until I called him for dinner. We ate, he went back upstairs to do homework and a few hours later he went to bed. I was up longer... watched tv for a bit, then I went to bed. It was a long day, so I took a pill and was out cold until I woke up this morning. I went to make sure Brodie was getting ready for school and he was gone. That’s when I came down to the kitchen and saw the door, realized someone broke in, and I called the police.”

Paige frowned and wondered what time the boy was really taken. Logan said the bed didn’t show signs of use... Brodie was not abducted in his sleep; after midnight. She focused on the mother... she wasn’t going to get anything more from her. Not right now, anyway. “I know Deputy Reed took a look around, but do you mind if I search the house?”

“What for?” Netty dropped back into her chair. “Those three men already searched everything. A woman’s bedroom should be private but they even walked through there. I don’t think I’ll sleep... knowing strange men went through my clothes. They probably sifted through my panties, too.”

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*Yeah*, Paige thought. *You only wish*. “Do you mind? I’d feel better if I made a second round just to be sure.”

“Brodie’s not here,” Netty folded her arms again. “But, if you have to, go ahead and look for yourself.”

“Thank you,” Paige moved into the kitchen. She wanted to get a look at the door. She was so focused on the damage, she didn’t see Jericho step up beside her.

“Maybe we should test that woman,” the sheriff whispered softly so only Paige could hear. “You got a PBT in your car?”

“Somehow,” Paige stood. “I doubt she’d voluntarily agree to a breath test at the moment. Portable or stationary. But, it would be interesting wouldn’t it? What’s your best guess? Point zero eight? Or, over ten?”

“Higher,” Jericho glanced back. “I think she’s a regular consumer. Come upstairs, I want to show you something.”

Paige frowned. Just how long ago had the good sheriff arrived on scene?

The two of them made their way back through the living room, across the foyer and up the stairs. The instant Paige stepped into the hallway, she saw it. “Looks new.”

“That’s what I thought,” Jericho moved to the large indentation in the wall. The sheetrock was pushed in near the bottom of the wall, just above the floor. “What’s your assessment?”

“It’s the right size,” Paige crouched to study it closer. “Now, we just need to figure out how it got there. I’m guessing the back of Brodie’s head.”

“But who is responsible?” Jericho straightened. “Mom or the intruder?”

“I want to see his room,” Paige also stood. “Logan said the bed wasn’t slept in, but mom said Brodie went to sleep at nine. Her story doesn’t match the evidence.”

“After you,” Jericho held out a hand and followed Paige into a small child’s bedroom.

“There’s no sign of struggle in here,” Jericho observed. “The kid is seven and clearly he wasn’t sound asleep when... whatever this is, occurred.”

“I agree,” Paige moved to the boy’s closet.

“Do you think we issued the alert prematurely?” Walter’s continued to glance around the bedroom looking for something that would tell him what happened. A child didn’t just disappear in the middle of the night, not in his town.

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“No,” Paige crouched to get a better look at the kid’s shoes. “Logan wasn’t sure either, so he waited. If this was an abduction, we’re already behind. It had to be issued, we can always cancel if we decide on foul play by mom.”

“Alright,” Jericho turned to face Paige. “Well, I told Dean to bring the Command Post over. He should be arriving any minute. Let’s regroup, debrief Lovato, and go from there.”

“Sounds good,” Paige pulled a small camera from her bag and took a picture of the closet.

“What’s that for?”

“I think a pair of shoes is missing,” Paige straightened. “There appears to be a break... right there,” she pointed to a section on the floor of the closet. “See, there are his boots, dress shoes, then a break before his old tennis shoes, those water shoes and the sandals.”

“Okay, that makes sense, though. He’d slide something on before he left if he ran. But, if he was abducted and the perp woke him up when he came in, he had to walk out of the house on his own. Maybe he was still wearing a pair from earlier in the day. He’s too big to carry forcefully; unless there was a big struggle.”

“And there wasn’t one,” Paige interrupted. “Nothing is disturbed in here. Netty has a small table at the foot of the stairs with a plant on it. If Brodie was kicking and fighting, the table should be knocked over. It wasn’t. But if he wasn’t abducted where is he?”

“What if someone did take him, but he left the house on his own?” Jericho supplied.

“Let’s go outside,” Paige decided. “There’s something I need to tell you about that damaged door.”

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“Okay, listen up,” Jericho called out. “We’re going to work this as an abduction until we know different. Lovato, I need you to pull out one of those forms over there and start listing the addresses you covered already. We’re going to make sure we check every single house in the immediate area before we go home tonight. We start with the next-door neighbors and fan out from there. We talk to the occupants and ask for permission to search their yards and the house if they’ll let you.”

“Got it, boss,” Lovato moved to the small table and began to transfer his notes to the official record.

“Paige?” Jericho gave the signal for her to share her discovery.

“I took a closer look at the back door, the one in the kitchen,” she began.

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“The break-in,” Logan provided.

“Or, the break-out.” Paige corrected.

“What do you mean by that?” Lovato’s head shot up and he focused on Paige.

“I recognized the lock on the door,” Paige began. “There was one in my house when I first moved here with mom. I hated it. You couldn’t get out of the house without a key if it was locked. Mom changed ours out right away, I think she hated it as much as I did.”

“I noticed that,” Lovato was still watching Paige, there had to be more.

“At first glance, it looks like someone kicked in the back door,” Paige continued. “But when I took a closer look, there were groove marks. Inside. I think it’s possible Brodie was locked inside the house and he’s the one that pried open the door when he left. It’s also possible Brodie let someone in, the front — friend or foe — they tried to go out the back, couldn’t and the bad guy pried it open.”

“Either way,” Jericho considered. “The door was damaged from the inside, not the outside like we all originally assumed.”

“There’s another possibility,” Lovato spoke up. “One nobody wants to consider. Maybe, the drunk mother did something to the kid, deliberately or accidentally, then damaged the door to make it look like it was a break-in to throw us off if we discovered the body. There’s something off with that woman and it’s not just stale whiskey.”

“We’ve all considered it but I’m rejecting it... for now. We operate under the assumption Brodie Simmons is still alive,” Jericho looked around the motorhome at his crew. “Lovato, you take Dean and continue the door-to-door. I want to hit every house within a quarter-mile radius. Logan, you see what you can do to track down the father.”

“She said his name is Walker,” Paige broke in. “I’d start with Walker Simmons. That’s the name Brodie uses and maybe they just kept it after the divorce.”

“Thank you,” Logan said as he mentally kicked himself for not getting the dad’s name himself. He’d only been on the job full-time for a month and he was already screwing up.

“Paige, I want you to start tracking the rest of the relatives. We need to know everything there is to know about this family.”

“Someone needs to question the mother again,” Paige objected. “I can take that.”

“No,” Jericho brushed her off. “You see what you can get the family to tell you. I’m taking Netty Simmons. She’s already jerked this office around enough. I’d like to keep you in reserve to play good cop if I can’t get answers my way.”

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They were just about to split up when Havilland flung open the door and made his up the stairs, pulling the flimsy barrier closed behind him. “Court didn’t take long, what do you need?”

“You okay to stay on a couple more hours?” Jericho asked his graveyard man.

“I’m fine,” he turned and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee. “Give me a job, boss.”

“I want you to take the assignment I gave to Paige,” Jericho decided. “We need to contact friends and relatives and get a clear picture of the family dynamic. Paige, I interrupted your search of the home. Go back and finish while I speak with Ms. Simmons.”

“Got it,” Paige stood. “That’s going to take a while because I’m going to be extra thorough. This time around I’ll be looking for Brodie, but I’m also going to scrutinize every nook and cranny for evidence.”

“Check in with me when you’re finished,” Jericho ordered. “That goes for all of you. I could use another team to scour the neighborhood, but it will have to wait. I’ve also put a call into Gage and the other Reserves. I expect them to arrive any minute. Once Margie gets the phones transferred to Laurel Bluff; so, they can handle anything else that comes in today, she’s headed our way. Check in here at the Command Post periodically. Margie will handle logistics and document what we’ve done and what still needs doing. Lovato, Gage will touch base with you when he arrives. Let him know what’s been covered so he can coordinate the search efforts in the other direction. Any questions?”

Since nobody had any, the group disbursed to handle their assignments.

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It was over an hour later when Paige stepped back into the Command Post. She spotted Havilland immediately. Her friend looked worse than she felt.

Margie emerged from the rear section of the motorhome. “I can’t decide which one of you looks worse. I take it you didn’t find anything in the house?”

“Nothing that tells me what happened to that kid,” Paige dropped onto the tiny couch in frustration. “Anything from the family?”

“Logan couldn’t reach the father,” Havilland admitted. “He traced him to St. George, but he’s not answering his phone.” Havilland pulled out his notes. “I talked to Walter’s sister. She said he’s a foreman on a construction crew down south; but, when I called his job, they said he’s in the field and can’t be disturbed.”

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“But he’s there?” Paige wondered. If Walker Simmons was working today, he had a pretty good alibi.

“He is now,” Havilland sighed. “The woman won’t tell me when he got there. For all I know, it was five minutes ago. I told Logan I’d take this over so he could go help Gage and the team with the door-to-door.”

“Keep trying,” Paige requested. “We have to know what dad knows. He divorced Netty so anything he tells us is tainted, but she said something strange when I asked her about her ex-husband.”

Havilland frowned. “What?”

“She said she doesn’t know where he lives, but that Brodie stays in touch. It’s unclear if there is some kind of visitation schedule in place. Margie, maybe you could contact the court and see what they can tell us.”

“I’ll let you know,” Margie turned and headed back toward what was originally a bedroom. They had converted it into an office space with a phone and a small table to use as a desk just big enough for a laptop and various maps. The table was currently covered with documents. Intel that only Margie could keep straight.

“Command,” Gage Clayton’s voice boomed over the radio.

“Go ahead,” Paige said into the mic.

“Paige, is that you?”

“It is,” Paige affirmed.

“I have someone that thinks they spotted the kid at the market. Can you head this way and help me interview employees? They’re getting ready to change shifts and I don’t want anyone to slip out before I have a chance to talk to them.”

“I’m on my way,” Paige stood and glanced at Havilland. “You could call the local department down there. Ask them to send a car over to the business and see if they can track dad in person. It might hold more weight if they’re confronted in person. They can just hang up on you if they don’t like your questions. It’s harder to dismiss a police officer standing in front of your desk.”

“I’ll give it a try,” Havilland decided. “Can’t hurt.”

“Oh,” Paige paused. “Can you call that friend of yours, the one that works in the Bluffs and see if he can track down a cell phone for the kid. I know he’s only seven, but dad may have provided a means to stay connected without mom knowing.”

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“Good idea,” Havilland grabbed his laptop. “I’m also going to get a warrant for the phone records to the house. If you see Jericho, have him quiz mom about Brodie’s electronics. If she says he doesn’t have any... she’s lying, or oblivious.”

“He has a PlayStation in his room,” Paige provided. “Can’t you access the internet from one of those? A seven-year-old might know how to do that on his own.”

“I’ll follow it up,” Havilland assured her. “Go, help Gage. I’ve got this.”

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Paige stepped into the large grocery store and glanced around, looking for Gage. When she didn’t find him, she approached a checker and asked for directions. Once the woman had finished, Paige decided to conduct an informal interview on her. “Before I go, do you know this kid?” She held up her phone to show the friendly woman a picture of Brodie that filled the entire screen.

“Sure,” Vickie said. “I know Brodie. He comes in with his mom all the time. I know he’s missing, and that breaks my heart. I hope you find him soon. That kid’s an angel. Wish mine were as well-behaved as that one.”

“Is he always with his mother, or does he come in with anyone else?” Paige asked.

Vickie squinted her eyes in concentration. “Once, maybe six... seven months ago, he came in with a man. I got the impression it was his father, but I’m not sure why. He didn’t come through my line so it couldn’t be he told me that. I just thought... well, they looked a lot alike; and, I thought it was good that he spent time with his dad. Got him away from that mother of his for a while; and, that could only be a good thing.”

“Why do you say that?” Paige picked up on the tone as well as the words.

“I don’t like to gossip,” Vickie sighed. “And I don’t. But, well... you being the cops and that kid missing...”

“I understand,” Paige pushed. This might be important.

“Well, it’s just that... I’d wager, Netty’s an alcoholic,” Vickie lowered her voice. “She mostly comes here when the Liquor Store is closed. Stocks up on beer since you can’t get anything stronger. I heard she prefers the hard stuff. Anyway, more than once, she’s been falling down, stupid drunk. Bart had to kick her out one day, she was so belligerent and...” Vickie sighed. “I don’t know how to put it, really. She was just mean and... well, volatile. Several customers complained and Bart didn’t have a choice, he had to escort her out. I felt terrible for the kid, he looked so embarrassed and... desperate.”

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“Brodie was with her?” Paige said, surprised.

“Yeah,” Vickie glanced around again. “I know I should have called... the cops, I mean. But, I was working and Bart was so angry. That day, Brodie’s the one that drove them home.”

“You saw a seven-year-old boy drive a car?”

“No,” Vickie said quickly. “Not me.” She motioned to a young kid bagging groceries. “Toby saw him. Came inside and told me right away. We really didn’t know what to do and Toby didn’t want to get on anyone’s bad side. Said if I wanted to report it that was up to me, but he wasn’t going to cooperate. He’s a kid and I think calling the cops scared him.”

Paige glanced at the kid and decided to drop it. There wasn’t anything she could do about it now. But... how often had Brodie driven his drunk, mean, violent mother home?

“What can you tell me about the man?” Paige asked. “The one you thought was his father.”

“I only saw him twice,” Vickie said slowly, glad the officer hadn’t pushed her on the illegal driving. “Like I said, the last time was a few months ago. I think he came in one other time, a weekend last year... around July, I think. I know it was summertime and they looked really happy. Brodie looked happy. Not timid like when he comes in with his mother.”

Paige was not liking the picture she was starting to get of Brodie Simmons life. She’d hold off on judging the mother, or the father, until she had more information; but, she was starting to wonder if Walker Simmons could have his son and he didn’t want anyone to know about it. She was trying to decide if she had any other questions for the checker when Gage stepped up next to her.

“Did you interview Vickie?” he asked.

“Just finishing up,” Paige assured him. “How many more?”

“I think we’re finished,” Gage glanced around. “I didn’t talk to the bagger, but I think I’ve covered the rest. You want to head back to the Command Post and brief the sheriff with me?”

“I’ll meet you there,” Paige decided. “I’ll stop over, see what the bagger can tell me. Don’t wait, I’ll only be a minute.”

“You sure?” Gage glanced at the bagger. He couldn’t be more than seventeen.

“Yeah,” Paige gave him a little shove. “He’s just a kid, I doubt I’ll get much.”

“Alright,” Gage decided. “I’ll see you back at the CP.”

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Paige stepped into the motorhome and made her way to the passenger seat. The entire office was crammed into the tiny space making it difficult to move around.

“Now that Paige has arrived,” Jericho began. “I want to go around the room and get an update from each of you. This kid has been missing for hours and we’re still no closer to bringing him home.”

“If we want to,” Paige mumbled.

Havilland heard her and wondered what she meant by that. He was seated in the comfortable driver’s seat and thought he was the only one that caught Paige’s quiet response.

“Havilland,” Jericho focused on his part-time deputy. “You go first.”

“Dad is still missing,” he began. “Logan contacted the office where Walker Simmons works, earlier this morning. I’ll let him tell you about that conversation but the short of it is... they lied. The secretary said Walker was at work and out in the field coordinating a job. I talked the local police department into sending an officer over to check. Walker wasn’t there and hasn’t been there all day. In fact, one of the workers told the cop the crew was supposed to work late last night to make up for some delay. Said he didn’t get off until sometime after ten. Walker got a call right after nine that made him visibly upset. He had a brief discussion with the manager and left. He hasn’t been seen since.”

“Any idea who called?” Jericho asked.

“I’m waiting for the phone company to get me the records,” Havilland continued. “The warrant came through about thirty minutes ago so I expect them any minute.”

“You think it might have been Netty?” Logan asked.

“I think it was Brodie,” Havilland told him. “There’s no way a call from a crazy, alcoholic ex-wife made him upset enough to leave a job. But a kid? His kid, with a serious problem? Yeah, that would do it.”

“You can add mean and violent to that description,” Paige added. “The clerk and the bagger said Netty is meaner than a junkyard dog when she’s intoxicated,” she shared a glance with Jericho... both of them recalling the large, round indent in the wall upstairs. “There was an incident, Netty had to be kicked out of the store.”

“Yeah,” Gage added. “Several of the employees told me about that. It was one Sunday, about a month ago. Netty came in with Brodie to buy some beer. She was so drunk she couldn’t walk straight and she bumped into a kid that was there with his mother. Netty went off, threatened the boy and then lit into the mom. The customer complained and she was just the first

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of several. Bart Rollins was in the store that day and had to kick her out. Escorted her to the parking lot and told her if she ever came back drunk again, he'd call the cops. He was livid, but after he cooled down a bit he got to feeling guilty, on account of the kid. Said he went back into the parking lot to check on them and they were already gone. He assumed they walked up the road to the convenience store."

"They didn't," Paige sighed. "The bagger, Toby, was in the parking lot. Netty was livid about getting kicked out and she was yelling at Brodie, blaming him for the whole thing. Then she pushed Brodie toward the driver's side of the car and handed him the keys. That's when Toby tried to intervene. He told Netty she couldn't let a kid drive the car, they'd both end up dead. Netty shoved him into a line of shopping carts and told him to mind his own business. Then, she shoved Brodie toward the car and told him to drive home. Apparently, the boy was worried about a stranger seeing him drive and he tried to talk Netty into walking home. She lashed out, slapped Brodie across the face and told him to do as he was told. Toby started to leave, but was stopped by Brodie who begged him not to tell anyone what happened. Brodie said it would only make things worse. Toby decided to let it drop. I asked him why and he said it was the terrified look Brodie gave him."

"I knew there was something off with that woman," Lovato grumbled.

"Are you still awake?" Paige teased. "Or are you talking in your sleep?"

"He's going home as soon as he reports," Jericho answered. "Go ahead, Mike."

"I don't have much to report," Lovato began. "We've talked to someone at every house on this street; both sides all the way to the intersection. Most of the neighbors allowed us inside to search in window wells and under beds. There were a couple that balked so we just moved on. The kids not here, not in the immediate area, anyway." He handed Margie a sheet of paper. "That's the complete list of who we talked to at each house, what time we made contact, and at the bottom, there's a list of addresses that need a follow-up."

"I appreciate the extra duty," Jericho held out a hand to Mike. "Now, go get some rest. I might need you back on tomorrow if we don't wrap this up tonight."

"I'll call you after I get a couple hours, see where things are at," Lovato promised. "For what it's worth, I think you should let Paige give that woman hell. She might get answers that we can't." Then, he turned and headed out the door.

"I can talk to her again," Paige offered.

"Maybe later," Jericho glanced at Gage. "Anything else you want to add?"

"No," Gage shook his head. "I think Paige got more at the market than I did."

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“Okay, Dean?”

“Lo pretty much covered it,” he shrugged. “We also checked the sex offender register and there are a couple guys in the area; but, none on this street. The ones that live within a mile of here all have alibis. It’s all in my notes. Some are airtight, others have a little more wiggle room. I’m leaning towards the family on this one. If the dad came here to get his kid though, he must have done it in the middle of the night. None of the neighbors saw or heard anything.”

“Well, based on the timeline,” Havilland considered. “Walker left work just after nine. We don’t know how urgent that call was, but it would take at least three to three and a half hours to get here. And that’s if he came straight here, didn’t stop in at home for a change of clothes or a shower first.”

“I think he came straight here,” Jericho decided. “If Brodie’s call made him abandon his job, he wouldn’t waste time at home. He’d pick up his kid and shower when he knew the boy was safe.”

“I need to point out, we’re all jumping to a lot of conclusions,” Paige warned. “We have evidence in the house that doesn’t match mom’s story and a large dent in the wall; but, that’s it.”

“And dad rushing out after a call,” Havilland corrected.

“And the reports from the market that mom is abusive when she’s drunk,” Gage added. “I think we all know she was drunk.”

“Logan?” Jericho turned to his newest deputy. “This was originally your call, do you have anything to add?”

“Just that I agree,” Logan frowned. “Netty Simmons has been lying to us from the beginning. It’s the reason we waited to issue the alert. Nothing seemed to add up.”

“What about the alert?” Dean asked. “Do we cancel it or leave it active? Someone might see dad or the kid and call it in?”

“For now, we leave it,” Jericho told them. “We don’t have the kid so we don’t know he’s safe. Plus, Paige is right. Dad is the prime suspect; but, we can’t rule out the possibility we got it wrong. We have no idea, at this point, who has Brodie Simmons.”

“So,” Margie addressed the group. “Where do we go from here?”

“Any word on those tips that we sent to Laurel Bluffs?” Jericho asked.

“Not so far,” Margie shook her head. “They’ve gone through several of them; but, so far, there doesn’t seem to be a valid lead. The two detectives Chief Beckett sent over are currently inside the residence keeping an eye on our complainant.”

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“Paige, do you have anything to add?” Jericho asked, then held up a hand when his cellphone began to ring. “Sheriff Walters.”

“Hey, Jericho,” Chief Bruce Gorrell said in greeting.

“Hey, Bruce,” Jericho answered. “Thanks for all the help your guys have been giving us down there. I really appreciate the assist.”

“I have an update,” Gorrell said.

“Good news, I hope,” Jericho settled into the seat Lovato had abandoned.

“A local nurse that works the graveyards shift in the ER over at Dixie Medical contacted our office,” Gorrell advised. “She said Walker Simmons brought Brodie into the ER just before four this morning. She got off duty, went home and crashed. Didn’t see the Amber Alert until she woke and checked her phone.”

“She’s sure it was Brodie and his father?” Jericho asked.

“She says yes,” the Chief confirmed. “He even used his real name and Brodie’s.”

“What were the injuries?”

“That’s the bad news,” Gorrell sobered. “The kid was in bad shape. He told the doctor he was riding his bike and crashed. He said his mother told him he was fine and he should just sleep it off. He called his dad when he started to feel dizzy. Walters drove up, and when he saw the shape Brodie was in, he decided to take him home and make sure he got proper care. The nurse asked Walker why he drove all the way back to St. George before he sought medical attention. He said Brodie seemed fine until they were a few miles away from home. The dizziness got worse and he felt nauseous. Walker decided to make the trip to the ER.”

“Were the injuries consistent with a bike crash?” Jericho asked.

“She said yes and no,” Gorrell ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “It was possible they were telling the truth, but she thought it was suspicious. She called DCFS, but the duo was gone when the case agent arrived.”

“What are the chances we can see the kid’s medical records?”

“Without a warrant, nil,” Gorell said without hesitation. “But I think, with the Amber Alert, the abduction, and the injuries... I can convince Judge Winston we need a warrant.”

“Keep me posted,” Jericho ended the call.

“Brodie’s injured?” Logan asked. “Is it my fault, because I waited on the Amber Alert?”

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“No,” Jericho shook his head. “Walker took Brodie into the ER around four this morning. I think something happened in this house and Brodie called his father for help. I think Walker Simmons saved his son. He didn’t kidnap him.”

“And, that’s why there’s no sign of a struggle,” Paige added. “Brodie called his dad and was waiting for him when he arrived. He escaped willingly. We just need the phone records to confirm our suspicion.”

“We got them,” Margie stepped back into the main section with several sheets of papers. “At 2117, a call originating from Netty’s residence was made to Walker Simmons cell phone. It lasted...” Margie paused to do the math. “Twenty-three minutes.”

“Really?” Paige said in surprise. “That long?”

Margie handed the documents to Havilland. Duncan skimmed through them and pulled out a single page. “Walker made a call to an unknown number at exactly twelve-forty-two. That call lasted just over a minute.”

“Hey kid, I’m here. Meet me out back and be sure to bring your things,” Dean surmised. “He could have told Brodie to stay on the line until he made it outside.”

“But the back door was locked and he couldn’t get out,” Logan added.

“So, he broke out,” Paige ended.

“How do we prove it?” Margie asked the group.

“We find the kid,” Jericho answered. “Bruce is working on a warrant for the medical records. That’s going to help in court, but it does nothing to help us find the kid.”

“Havilland,” Paige called. “Where’s that list of relatives you were working on?”

“Right here,” Havilland pulled out his notepad. “I made contact with everyone on the list except the younger brother. Uh... here it is, the name is Keith Simmons and he lives in Ivins.”

Paige looked at her boss. “Know anyone in Ivins?”

“No,” Jericho pulled out his phone. “But I’m sure Bruce does.”

“Where is Ivins?” Gage asked.

“It’s north of St. George,” Paige answered. “Have you heard of that Tuacahn place?”

“Where they have those outdoor plays?” Margie asked.

“Exactly,” Paige nodded. “I think that place is in Ivins, or just outside of it in the State Park... what was the name of that?”

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“Snow Canyon,” Jericho provided after he hung up the phone. “Bruce said he’ll send someone over to this Keith Simmon’s place and see what they find.”

“So what do we do in the meantime?” Dean asked.

“Well,” Jericho looked at Havilland. “You go home and get some rest. You’ve been on nearly fifteen hours straight.”

Havilland hesitated but he knew he wouldn’t last much longer. “Call me in if you find the kid, or I guess if you don’t. I’ll snag six to eight hours and call the CP to see where things stand.”

“Thanks,” Jericho said sincerely. “I appreciate the long shift.”

“What about the calls that come in tonight?” Dean asked.

“Beckett said he can spare a couple cars,” Jericho told the group. “I’m still working out a schedule and it’s going to depend on what Bruce finds down south.”

“I can stay on,” Dean offered. “Man the Command Post tonight if you want.”

“Let’s see how this plays out,” Jericho turned to Paige. “You look almost as bad as Duncan. You up for another interrogation?”

“Netty?” Paige asked.

“Yeah,” Jericho smiled. “I think it’s time we bumped up the pressure.”

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It was nearly seven o’clock that night when Chief Bruce Gorrell and his men located Walker Simmons. He was picked up near Santa Clara by one of Gorrell’s men. Brodie wasn’t with him but dad remained in police custody, and would until they got answers. So far, after over three hours of interrogation, he still wasn’t talking.

“No wonder those two split,” Paige grumbled when Jericho finished his update. “They’re both stubborn and uncooperative.”

“Actually,” Dean smiled. “I think Ms. Simmons is just hung over and maybe having withdrawals. She’s gone all day without a single drink.”

“Well, not since we arrived anyway,” Paige corrected. “I’m not sure she didn’t start the morning off with a Bloody Mary... or ten. That woman oozes alcohol like a bad perfume.”

“Margie,” Jericho called.

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“Yeah,” Margie said absently as she stepped from the back holding a stack of papers. When Jericho didn’t continue, she finally glanced up.

“Do you have something important?” Jericho asked.

“Not sure,” Margie set the papers on the counter. “What did you need?”

“According to Bruce,” he advised the entire group. “Walker isn’t talking. He’s now demanding his lawyer. They’ve tried to locate the guy, but the lawyer isn’t answering his phone at the moment. I’m calling this for tonight but I need someone to stay and keep an eye on the house. I don’t want mom going anywhere and I’d prefer it if she were sober when I return in the morning. I know...” he added at the loud groans. “If she has something stashed inside, it’s out of our control. We don’t have a reason to arrest her without the boy. But we don’t have to make it easy on her either.”

“I’m still willing to take the night shift,” Dean offered. “I came on later than the rest of you, so I’ll cover it. If we get word from St. George, I’ll call it in.”

“Since you’re here,” Jericho agreed. “Go through all the notes. Make sure we covered every residence and double check that stack of leads over there. We skimmed through them as they arrived and sent the obvious ones to the Bluff detectives; but, I want you to go over them again. See if we have anything from the St. George, Santa Clara, or Ivins area. We want to follow-up on anything we get from down south. Paige and Logan?”

“Yeah, boss,” Logan said immediately.

“You two be prepared to head down first thing,” Jericho ordered.

“To St. George?” Logan frowned.

“To St. George,” Jericho affirmed. “You’ll head straight to the local PD and hook up with Chief Gorrell.”

“Won’t he be upset?” Paige wondered. “Kind of sends a message you don’t trust him... or his men.”

“No,” Jericho approved of the question but he’d already covered that. “Bruce and I think it would be better if you coordinated with him and his men. Consider it an inter-agency task force. You’re familiar with the house, mom, and the witnesses up here. They’re familiar with the area down there. And, Paige?”

“Yeah?”

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“I want you to interview the father,” Jericho studied her. “But, make sure you get some sleep first. You look like the walking dead. Tell him about the dent in the wall, get on his good side and see if he’ll open up.”

“You mean,” Paige frowned. “Provide a woman’s, softer approach?”

Jericho laughed. “Yeah, sure. Just do what you do and see if he’ll reveal where his son is. I’m leaning toward the brother, Keith. Bruce hasn’t been able to locate him and Brodie has to be with someone.”

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Paige stepped into the house and frowned. She expected to see Dax waiting but the entire house was dark... and eerily silent. She flipped on a light, removed her gear and started her search. It was several minutes later when she found him, fast asleep, in her bed. She moved to the adjoining bathroom, flipped on the light and turned to study his unmoving form. As she approached the bed, her anger flared... so hot, she could barely contain it. Dax had a large, ugly bruise on his upper arm and his breathing was shallow. His face was contorted, even in sleep; clearly he was in a lot of pain. Had he damaged his ribs again? Should she wake him and make sure he was okay? Demand answers. A movement outside the window caught her eye, she pivoted, and was out the door in seconds.

“Paige,” Hawk said in greeting. He could see she was angry and he didn’t blame her. She must have realized Dax had re-injured himself.

“Don’t Paige me,” She leaped onto the back porch and moved to stand over the cocky Ranger. “What happened to him?”

“Why don’t you ask him,” Hawk lifted a nearly empty beer bottle and took a long swig.

“He’s asleep,” Paige growled. “And by looks of things, he needs all the rest he can get. What did you do to him?”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response,” Hawk nearly laughed. Somehow, that just intensified Paige’s anger.

“What happened,” Paige leaned forward, placing one hand on each of the armrests. She had to force air through her nose, out her mouth. Slow, deliberate breaths. Before she punched the irritating man in the face.

“Dax got a wild hair,” Hawk sighed. “We tried to stop him, but you have to know how he gets. He decided he was going to find whatever Ahmed left him... even if it killed him.”

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“And you just let him,” Paige straightened. “Great friend. Real classy of you. Let the guy with a broken ankle and a few broken ribs destroy his house... and his health, for something that’s probably not even there.”

“I tried to stop him,” Hawk sounded a little defensive. “He was fine... Until he insisted on checking out the crawl space.”

“Under the house?” Paige practically yelled.

“Is there another one I don’t know about?” Hawk asked flatly.

“You know,” Paige turned and started to pace the small back patio. “For someone who claims to care about Dax... someone that insists he’s looking out for his pal... you suck.”

Hawk was out of his chair and across the distance before Paige saw him coming. He moved forward, blocked her path and glared down at her for several seconds. His hands were clenched by his sides and he was trying to decide on a response when he stopped himself. Dax wouldn’t want this. He wanted them to get along, needed them to find some kind of truce. “I don’t want to fight with you, Paige. I won’t. I tried to stop Dax, but he wouldn’t budge. Ahmed died trying to get Intel to him. That alone would drive Dax to push his limits. Then, add in the fact he feels helpless and we still can’t find Zeus...”

“And, he had to do something,” Paige sighed and dropped into a chair. “I get it, but I also have to go out-of-town tomorrow and I was counting on you guys to keep him... safe.”

“Dax is safe,” Hawk tried not to be offended. “And I did stop him. Otherwise, he’d probably be up on the roof clearing the gutters as we speak.”

Paige smiled at that... because Hawk was right. “How bad is he? He sounds like he can barely breathe.”

“He tweaked a rib while he was under the house,” Hawk frowned. “Idiot. I told him to let me go down there, but the control freak didn’t trust me.” His frustration finally came through.

“He does trust you, Hawk,” Paige heard the tone and she was starting to feel sorry for the arrogant man. She didn’t want to, but the fact that Dax hadn’t completely exonerated his friend was taking a toll.

“Right,” Hawk settled back into his chair. “That’s why he had to go under the house to look for clues. Because he totally and completely trusts me to share anything I might have found.”

“Is that what you think?” Paige said amazed. “That Dax thinks you’ll find something and hide it from him?”

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“You got another explanation?”

“Sure,” Paige kicked up her feet and rested them on the cushioned ottoman. “He’s a control freak. This is his house, he knows his house better than anyone. Do you honestly think... if you had crawled down that spider-infested hole and declared the area was clear... that Dax wouldn’t have shoved you out of the way and investigated for himself?”

Hawk smiled, but didn’t respond.

“Exactly,” Paige said in triumph. “Because the idiot has to be in charge, has to lead his men... has to freakin’ pretend he’s Superman and can...” Paige paused, trying to come up with the analogy she wanted.

“Save the world?” Hawk provided.

“Right, single-handedly save the world,” Paige agreed. “Glad you finally get it. This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with him. It’s driving him crazy. All of it. The fact that Zee is still out of contact and Dax can’t rush in and save him like he did in Mexico. This Vato guy is still in Iraq, so he can’t drag him in and interrogate him until he confesses the truth... whatever that is. But most of all, that he’s on the injured list and he can’t just wave his magic wand and have a miraculous recovery. He’s vulnerable right now and I should have realized having you standing over him, telling him to stop, to be careful, and take it easy...would only make him more determined to continue.”

Hawk studied Paige for several seconds without responding.

“What?”

“I just realized how perfect you are for him,” Hawk admitted. “And I know we got off to a rocky start. I can’t say I can wave my magic wand and make it all better; but, I will try. From now on, I’ll try to be more...”

“Human?” Paige grinned. “Be still my heart.”

“Nice,” Hawk reached for the empty bottle, picked it up, realized it was empty and set it back on the table with a resounding thud.

“Lighten up,” she straightened. “But seriously, I have to go out-of-town tomorrow on a case. Do me a favor... watch out for him. Don’t tell him he can’t do something. Don’t ask him to let you do it. Just step in and do it. I’m trying not to worry, but when I saw that huge bruise that he didn’t have when I left, when I realized he’s in pain and is having a hard time breathing... I panicked. I really do not want to come home to find he’s back in the hospital.”

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“Give me a little credit,” Hawk rested his elbows on his knees. “I’m his friend first, his subordinate second. I’ll make sure he doesn’t overdo it again. I was already out here kicking myself because I didn’t stop him sooner.”

“Then I won’t add to it,” Paige stood. “By the way, did you find anything?”

“No,” Hawk frowned. “Nothing. And, there are very few places we didn’t check.”

“Well,” Paige considered. “You and Dax are the only two people that knew Ahmed. Put your heads together and figure out where he would stash something. I’m sure he tried to catch Dax alone, but with Zeus in town... he was never alone. If he wasn’t with Zeus, he was with me.”

“Have a safe trip,” Hawk stood. “And I think taking a day to brainstorm is just what the doctor ordered. I’d do what I can to keep him out of trouble. Maybe you could do the same... stay out of trouble that is. Because you’re right, Dax is vulnerable right now. And as much as I hate to admit it, you’re the only one that can truly help him through this.”

“Give it time,” Paige called over her shoulder as she descended the stairs. “He’s coming around. And if you’re actually going to be nice... he might forgive you sometime this decade.”

She laughed when Hawk flipped her the bird and wondered if that was the start of a tentative friendship. She hoped so, for Dax... she seriously hoped so.

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Paige stepped into the police station and approached the large desk. “We’re here to see Chief Gorrell.”

“Deputies Carter and Reed?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Logan pulled out his badge and showed the cop his ID card.

“They are upstairs, to the right, first door,” the man directed. “They’re waiting for you.”

“What does that mean?” Logan asked as they started up the stairs.

“No idea,” Paige said casually. “Hopefully, it means they got Walters talking.”

The two of them stepped through a door marked “Investigations” and approached the window. They went through the same procedure as they’d gone through downstairs before the clerk buzzed them in and directed them to the far end of the long hallway and to the right. When they rounded the corner, Paige came face to face with five men. And they were all staring at her with curiosity they didn’t even try to hide.

## Hijacked Innocence

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“Uh,” Paige held out a hand. “I’m Deputy Paige Carter and this is my partner, Logan Reed.”

“Deputy Carter,” a tall man in a dark suit, jet-black hair and a friendly face stepped forward. “Chief Gorrell.” He took her hand first, gave it a shake then turned to Logan and repeated the gesture. “Walters is speaking with his attorney at the moment. I’ve been assured, once they’ve had a few minutes alone... I’m going to get answers.”

“Great,” Paige glanced at Logan, casually surveyed the other men, then focused back on Gorrell. “Jericho wanted me to try to speak with him when I got here but...”

“I agree,” Gorrell assured her. “I want you to go in with Detective Don Timpson. Don?”

“Sir,” a man that looked about fifty with red hair and a bright red mustache answered.

He was only five-seven, maybe five-eight and a little on the heavy side but he held himself well and his mannerism screamed competence. Paige hoped her initial impression was right because they were going to need a good detective if they were going to find Brodie and solve the mystery of what really happened.

“I want you to go in with Deputy Carter,” Gorrell began.

“It’s just Paige,” she smiled at the man she’d be working with. “We’re all friends here.”

“Paige,” Gorrell corrected. “Don, you take the lead because you’ve been dealing with him since he arrived but let her work him some. I have no idea what Kavanaugh has up his sleeve, but you will not let him take control of this situation. He’ll try, believe me... he’s going to try.”

“I’ve dealt with Milton Kavanaugh before, sir,” Timpson assured him. “I know how to handle him.”

“Good,” Gorrell turned to Paige.

“I’ll just follow his lead,” Paige assured him. “I’ll get the hang of his rhythm, no problem. I’m used to working with local detectives with various levels of experience, and I’ll just follow along. Don’t worry.”

“I heard you left the FBI to go local,” one of the detectives finally spoke.

“Rylan,” Gorrell warned.

“No,” Paige shrugged. “It’s fine. I did leave Quantico to go back to my roots. I was just lucky and Jericho had an opening. I think it worked out pretty well.”

## Hijacked Innocence

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“So does he,” Bruce assured her. “Believe me, he couldn’t stop singing your praises when he decided to send you out to my neck of the woods. Made me promise not to try and steal you away. Said he was sure, once I saw you in action, that’s exactly what I’d try to do.”

“I’m kind of partial to Manti,” Paige smiled. “So, it wouldn’t do you any good.”

“And what about you?” Gorrell turned to Logan. Before he had a chance to finish the question, the door to the interview swung open and a stout man in his forties stood in the opening.

“Gentleman,” he glanced at Paige. “And lady. My client is ready to give you his statement. Who will we be dealing with today?”

“Told you,” Gorrell warned Timpson.

Don Timpson held out his hand, motioning the attorney back into the room. He followed the lawyer inside. Paige took up the rear, closing the door behind her. Logan would just have to fend for himself for a while.

“I’d like to start this meeting...” Kavanaugh began.

Timpson held up a hand, and the attorney stopped speaking but was clearly annoyed at the interruption. Timpson moved to the far wall and opened a panel. After switching the recording equipment on, he moved to one of the chairs and settled in. “This is a follow-up interview with Walter Simmons and his attorney, Martin Kavanaugh. The interview will be conducted by myself, Detective Don Timpson with the St. George Police Department and Deputy Paige Carter from Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office. The time is eleven-twenty-three. Case number is SG18-5026. Mr. Simmons, for the record, during the first interview yesterday is it true that you were read your Miranda Rights and initially you chose to waive those rights and speak with us.”

“Yeah, that’s true... at first,” Walter mumbled.

“Once we got into the details of your son’s disappearance, you then decided to invoke your right to counsel?”

“Yeah,” Simmons answered.

“Are you willing to talk to use now?”

“He said I should,” Walter shrugged.

“Does that mean yes?”

“Sure,” Walters scowled.

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“Before we start,” Martin broke in. “I think you should see the evidence my client has obtained regarding this situation.” He pulled a folder from his briefcase and drew out several photos. They were the pictures of Brodie’s injuries.

Paige glanced at the pictures the attorney had slid across the table, trying to strategically maneuver them into her view for effect. It wasn’t going to work... she’d already seen them. Chief Gorrell obtained a warrant hours ago and had shared the information immediately. “I’ve seen them,” Paige said casually and pushed them back toward the attorney. “We both have, I believe.”

“Yeah,” Timpson held back a grin. He liked this cop... and clearly, Martin Kavanaugh just received his first disappointment. “I looked at those hours ago. Mr. Simmons,” he turned back to his suspect. “When we concluded the last interview, I asked you to tell me where you son is staying. We need to locate him, assess his condition, and conduct a brief interview to determine what is going on here.”

“Before we get to that,” Martin tried again. “I have spent the entire morning with Judge Winston. He has granted temporary custody of Brodie Simmons to his father,” he placed a court document on the table. “Feel free to read through it but he’s also issued a temporary protective order against Ms. Netty Simmons until the parties can have a formal hearing in front of Judge James A. Ross, the magistrate that ruled on the original divorce and custody arrangement. In the meantime, Walter is willing to produce the boy for your inspection. I will need to be present for any questioning but I think we can clear this up rather quickly.”

Paige glanced through the document and determined it was legit. She had to admit it was a relief Brodie wasn’t going to be returned to his mother but before she got ahead of herself, she had some questions for Walter. “Mr. Simmons,” she began. “Can you tell me why you didn’t call the police?”

“What?” Simmons asked. “When?”

“Initially,” Paige pressed. “You got a call at...” she checked her notes, “twenty-one-seventeen. It’s my understanding you were still working... was scheduled to work for at least another hour that night. Instead, you took the call from your son and immediately left the area and drove over three hours to Manti. If your son was in danger why didn’t you contact the police? A simple welfare check would have resolved a lot of problems and you wouldn’t be here, in this room today. You wouldn’t have been booked for kidnapping last night. I’d like you to explain your reasoning; and, while you’re at it you can tell me why you didn’t get your son medical assistance for another three to three and a half hours. We do have hospitals up north, why wait until you arrived back here, in St. George? Seems a bit reckless and... Calculated to me.”

“Deputy Carter...” Martin objected.

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“No,” Walter held up a hand. “I’ll answer the question. I want this cleared up and I can understand her skepticism. I know there is a hospital in Gunnison, but what you might not know, is that Netty’s cousin is an ER nurse at that facility. I was afraid if I stopped in on my way home, Vanna would spot us, move Brodie to a secure room and call his mother. I couldn’t risk it.”

“Because prior to this,” Paige pointed to the court documents, “you didn’t have a right to take your son.”

“Don’t answer that,” Martin barked.

“I’m his father, I believe I have more than a right to protect him... I have an obligation.”

“Okay,” Paige wasn’t going to press that. “But there are other facilities. Why wait so long? Why not stop at another hospital along the way? You claim his life was in imminent danger, that he was already severely injured, yet... you didn’t seek medical assistance for over three hours. It was after four in the morning when you checked into the Dixie Medical ER.”

“At first, I wanted to take him straight to see a doctor. But, like I said, I couldn’t go to Gunnison. Then, after I got on the freeway, Brodie seemed okay. He even fell asleep for a couple hours. It wasn’t until he woke up and started moving around again that he complained about the headache. Then, he started saying he was dizzy. We were so close to home, I just figured we could make it. He was uncomfortable, but it didn’t seem urgent.”

“And you wanted to get back to town and call your attorney?” Timpson pressed. “You were still worried about the police. You couldn’t know if Netty had already discovered Brodie was missing.”

“Don’t answer that,” Martin responded. “My client has cooperated. You have the judge’s orders, I think it’s time you released him. Let him go out, pick up Brodie and we’ll return within the hour.”

“No,” Paige said immediately. “You, Mr. Kavanaugh, can call his brother Keith. Tell him to bring Brodie to the station. We will interview Brodie... and Keith. Then, if the story checks out, we’ll think about releasing your client.”

“Detective Timpson,” Martin began.

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Don stood and moved to shut off the recorder. “You can make the call from my office. Mr. Simmons, you’ll need to remain here until we get this all settled.”

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Once the three of them were back in the hallway, Martin Kavanaugh turned on the two officers. “How dare you treat my client with such disrespect? He’s been through more than any father should endure over the past forty-eight hours.”

“Because, I don’t care what that man has been through,” Paige said flatly. “My concern is for the child. And that man, the father who was so concerned... has put his son at risk at every turn.”

“Ms. Carter,” Martin seethed. “I don’t appreciate your attitude.”

“Gee, I’m crushed,” Paige glanced at Timpson, realized he had no intention of stepping in and continued. “That man in there, your client, has tormented and victimized his own son at every turn. He can’t tell me why he didn’t call us in because there’s no excuse for it. His son called his father in distress just after nine o’clock at night. What did Walter Simmons do? He got in a car and drove over three hours to intervene. I would have been there in three minutes. He left his kid in a dangerous situation, one where Netty Simmons was drunk, violent and unpredictable — for over three hours. To a kid of seven that had to be a lifetime. I can only imagine how terrified and vulnerable that kid felt — for over three hours. So, you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t hail your client a hero that swooped in and saved the day. And, by the way, those documents that you are so proud of... that temporary order that you got the judge to sign off on this morning? Well, those would be permanent, they would have been issued yesterday, if Walter had done all this the right way. Not the sneaky, underhanded way. Because anyone that arrived at that house the night this all happened and spotted Brodie in that condition, would have removed him from the home. And, yesterday morning, instead of frantically searching for a missing child, we would have been having an emergency hearing in front of Judge Ross to restrict Netty’s access and give Walter Simmon’s custody. And, he would have gotten it for free. But, hey... I guess you won’t share that little tidbit with your client. Kind of puts a damper on your celebration of excellence.” She left the two men standing there, speechless, and went to look for Logan.

Paige rounded the corner and nearly collided with Chief Gorrell. “Sorry,” she said as she came to an abrupt stop, wondering if he’d just heard her little outburst.

Bruce Gorrell just gave her a friendly nod, hesitated then decided to say what he was thinking. “I don’t think I could have said that better myself.”

“Oh,” Paige cleared her throat. “Uh...”

“Don’t ruin that amazing exit with an apology,” Gorrell advised. “And, you may want to know... Martin won’t have to explain any of it to Walter Simmons. There’s no soundproofing on that door. I’m sure he heard every word.”

Paige considered that for only an instant. “Good.”

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Gorrell smiled. "Jericho was right about you."

"In what way?"

"I'd love to steal you away, but I've been warned; so, I won't," Gorrell shifted slightly. "Your partners in that room over there. We use it for observation. We all enjoyed the first time you put Kavanaugh in his place, I'm sure Logan will be sorry he missed the second."

"Maybe we could just keep that one our little secret," Paige suggested. "I promised Jericho I'd behave."

"Not on your life," Gorrell laughed. "I couldn't if I wanted to. My guys have ears like a hawk; when they want to. Give them an assignment they find unpleasant and suddenly nobody hears anything. Put a feisty cop in the hallway with an arrogant lawyer and the entire unit becomes a captive audience. Let's step inside the observation room. It's a little more comfortable in there. I have Jill watching for Keith and Brodie, she'll bring them back when they arrive."

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It was nearly eight o'clock when Paige climbed into her patrol car and headed for home. Another twelve hour day. She hoped it was the last for a while. She needed some downtime. It was nearly four by the time she tied things up in St. George and she and Logan hit the road. She talked him into stopping for dinner in Cedar City, then they drove straight through from there.

The interview with Keith was short. He didn't know anything first hand. His brother showed up at his home early yesterday morning and said they needed a place to hide out for a while. He didn't hesitate to help out... especially once he saw Brodie's injuries.

Brodie gave a detailed account of what happened the night he left. His mother wasn't home when he arrived after school. He headed for his room to work on his homework and didn't come out until it was time for dinner. Netty still hadn't arrived, so he fixed a peanut butter and jam sandwich and opened a bag of chips. He was just finishing off his last bite when his mom got home. She saw the open chips and went off without warning. Brodie tried to get away, but she just followed him up the stairs and attacked him in the hallway just outside his bedroom. That's when he fell and struck his head on the wall. The kid had a serious goose egg and a concussion to go with it. He crawled into his room and Netty left him alone for a couple hours. Brodie thought she went back downstairs to drink some more. Just before nine, she returned and attacked again. He wasn't sure what set her off the second time, but he was afraid what would happen if she came back again. That's when he called his dad.

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Paige knew the rest and she was relieved the brave kid wouldn't have to deal with the drunken outbursts ever again. That didn't mean she would forgive the father. She knew she was right, he had endangered his son for no reason. But, in the end, things worked out okay so she wouldn't dwell on it... well, not for long anyway. She glanced up, spotted her house and sighed. Now, for another unpleasant confrontation with another arrogant man who thought he knew best. She parked the vehicle and slowly made her way to the front door.

Dax was waiting for Paige to arrive. He hadn't seen her for nearly two days. He was asleep when she arrived home last night and she left early this morning before he got up. He stood, the instant she stepped through the door. "We need to talk."

"About?" Paige asked, settling into a chair to pull off her boots.

"What happened yesterday, why I did it, and how Hawk is not to blame for my actions," Dax sat back down.

"Did the big, bad Ranger tattle to dad?"

"Paige," Dax warned.

"Dax," Paige said in the same tone. "Look, I got home and saw you were injured and in pain. I confronted Hawk, he explained what happened, and we called a truce... I thought."

"You did," Dax sighed. "I knew you'd confront him so I wouldn't let up until he told me what happened. He was more honest than I expected, maybe because you do have a truce. Don't take this out on him, either."

"Okay," Paige moved to settle on the couch beside Dax. "Now, you get to explain it to me. Then, I get to explain to you why tearing your house apart from top to bottom was a monumentally stupid idea. After that... we'll play it by ear."

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Zeus was crouched between two large cedar trees. Reynolds compound was no more than a hundred yards away. He'd been camped out here, in the wilderness for nearly three days. His water supply was dwindling, his hip was killing him and his cell phone had died over forty-eight hours ago. Carmen was going to be livid. But, he couldn't bring himself to leave. He knew, without a doubt, if he was ever going to find Thor... it would be here, in the shadows.

A noise caught his attention to the left and he silently pushed his body further into the shrubbery. Seconds later, the man he'd been hunting appeared a few feet away.

## Hijacked Innocence

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Thor made his way through the desert wilderness as quietly and carefully as he could. He knew he was making noise, but Reynolds men were on the other side of the wall and he knew the rustling of a few branches wouldn't alert them to trouble. He had just settled in to wait and watch when a large man dropped down beside him. Thor jumped, cursed and re-holstered his weapon when he realized it was Zeus. "What are you doing here?"

"Funny," Zeus whispered. "That's exactly what I was about to ask you."

"Go home," Thor ordered.

"Answer the question," Zeus countered.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Thor accused.

Zeus waited, knowing how to handle his friend... knowing how to get the answers they all needed.

"I'm helping Vato," Thor relented. "He's stationed in Iraq and can't deal with the problem himself, so I promised him I'd handle it."

"What problem?" Zeus pressed. He still didn't believe Thor or Vato was involved in what happened to Dax; but, Thor had just confirmed he was working with their questionable comrade.

"Why should I trust you?" Thor asked. "You don't trust me."

"I'm here."

Thor looked away. He knew his team suspected him of wrongdoing and that hurt. He'd never done anything to deserve the skepticism or the lack of trust. But, Zeus was right. He was here, that had to mean something. "When you were in Mexico — in prison," Thor began. "I got a call from Vato. He said he got orders to ship out immediately. They came as a surprise because he was supposed to have downtime, you know? Anyway, he was frantic. Said he tried to call you, but you never returned the call and he couldn't wait any longer."

"Hard to make a phone call when someone is beating you half to death," Zeus pointed out.

"I know," Thor softened. "Anyway, he needed help or he was going to bolt. He was seriously considering desertion. Not for him," he added quickly.

"Why?"

"Because Reynolds and his men kidnapped Camille and nobody has seen her in months," Thor confided. "I've failed Vato, I promised him I would save his sister and I just barely found her. After all this time, I'm only now finding the location they are keeping her."

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“In there?” Zeus realized. There were at least a dozen guards and only one way in that he could see.

“Yeah,” Thor ran a frustrated hand through his hair and over his face. “In there. And no matter how many nights I sit here, scouting the place... I can’t come up with a foolproof tactical plan to get her out.”

“Maybe you need an extraction guy,” Zeus decided. “You’re sure she’s inside?”

“I’m positive. I saw her last night,” Thor admitted. “On the other side of the building. Two guys brought her outside just after dark. She was shackled and carefully guarded, but she seemed okay. I didn’t see any serious injuries, anyway.”

“Okay,” Zeus shifted to adjust his vantage point. “We’ll scout together, then we’ll generate a plan.”

“Aren’t you going to call Dax?” Thor asked. “I’m sure he’s the one that sent you. He doesn’t trust me and I don’t understand why.”

Zeus didn’t think it was his place to enlighten his friend, but it was his place to assist him. Together, they would free Camille and once she was safe... they’d decide how deep Vato’s involvement went. Until then? Zeus had a job to do. “My phone died a couple days ago.”

“You’ve been out here for days?”

“Nearly three to be exact,” Zeus grinned. “Just like the old days.”

Thor shook his head in surprise. “Do you need anything? Food? Water?”

“Water if you got it,” Zeus decided. “You got your phone on you? I should call Carmen and let her know I’m alright.”

“I didn’t bring it,” Thor admitted. “Nobody to call. I figured I was on my own on this one and if it rang...”

“The enemy would know your position,” Zeus nodded. “I get it. You ready to hear my plan?”

“You already have one?”

“Sure,” Zeus stood. “I’m going to walk up to the gate and see what they do. If I get lucky, I’ll be able to take them out two at a time. If not, I’ll get captured and they’ll take me to the same place they’re keeping Camille. Either way, I’ll be inside and I can develop phase two as I go.”

“That’s a terrible plan,” Thor objected. “If anyone is getting captured, it’s me.”

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“When did you become the extraction guy?”

“When did you take over tactics?” Thor challenged. “Because tactically speaking, having a second prisoner that we have to rescue is not even close to sound. You don’t even know they’ll keep you in the same place.”

“True, but once I’m inside I can look around,” Zeus brushed off his jeans. “I can scout the place from the inside rather than sitting out here in the dark wishing I knew how many bad guys there are, the floor plan, and where the prisoner is being held. Just because she seemed fine, doesn’t mean she is fine.”

“Zeus, don’t do this,” Thor practically begged.

“Thor,” Zeus paused. “You wanted us to trust you... well, I’m trusting you with my life. Now, you have to trust me. And if I can’t fight them off a few at a time, if they take me as a second prisoner, head back to the hotel, hunker down, and call Dax. Because, if I can’t get to Camille in twenty-four... I can’t get to her without help.”

“Zeus,” Thor began. It was a waste of breath because his friend had already disappeared into the thick cedar trees, heading for danger and imprisonment. And, this time... he was doing it on purpose. Thor waited, anxious and worried for his friend. He held his breath as five men surrounded Zeus guns drawn, tension clearly high. They must have called for help because another three men joined them almost immediately. It took less than two minutes for Zeus to be flanked on all sides and escorted, at gunpoint, into the large compound. Thor continued to watch the doorway where his friend had disappeared, continued to swear under his breath at Zeus’ reckless and idiotic plan. Then he stood, made his way back to his jeep and headed to his hotel room. Everything just got a lot more complicated; and, the only thing he knew for sure... Dax was going to kill him.