

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Swindling Nomads *Season 3, Episode 4*

by:

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“Stop messing around,” Marko barked. “If any of those shops have a silent alarm, the police will be here any minute.”

The three teens inside the truck laughed. Russo stopped the truck and waited for Marko to reach for the handle again. The instant he did, he punched the gas. The tires started to squeal, then caught, and the truck lunged forward again. The boy’s laughter increased as they slapped each other on the back and waited for Marko to catch up.

“Do it again,” Freddie demanded.

“Maybe we should get going,” Russo hesitated.

“Naw,” Johnny disagreed. “One more time.”

Russo shrugged and waited for their partner in crime — literally — to reach the passenger side of the vehicle. The instant he reached out, Russo stepped on the gas. This time, Marko was able to grab the door handle. He gripped the metal and held on tight. When the truck lunged forward, he lost his footing and went down — hard. His knee collided with the asphalt surface of the parking lot, but he still didn’t release his grip on the handle. The truck continued forward as his leg scraped along the black surface.

“Stop the truck,” Freddie called out. “I think Marko’s hurt.”

Russo slammed on the brakes and was about to get out and check on his friend when the passenger door was flung open and an angry Marko climbed inside. He slammed the door so hard the window shook. “Drive!” he demanded as he glared at the trio. “And, Gino is going to hear about this.”

“You’re going to rat us out for having a little fun,” Johnny pouted from the backseat. “That’s cold, man. And it’s a dirty thing to do. We didn’t say a word when you rounded that bend last week and threw Russo out the back. He could have been seriously hurt, but we all just kept it to ourselves.”

“That was different,” Marko knew he had a weak argument. They had covered for him, even with the large goose-egg prominently displayed on Russo’s forehead.

“How so?” Russo practically whispered.

“That wasn’t a job,” Marko insisted. “This was reckless. We could have been caught while you had your little fun.”

“Yeah,” Russo kept his eyes on the road. “You keep telling yourself that. One day, you might even believe it. Go ahead, squeal to Gino. But, just know... we’ll all remember it; and, next time, you’ll be the one with consequences.”

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“I’m not going to tell Gino,” Marko relented. “I would have if the police had grabbed us. We got away though; so, as I see it, there’s nothing to tell.”

Russo smiled inwardly, knowing he’d won that battle.

Paige slowly woke to the sun on her face as it peeked through the bedroom window. She could hear the birds chirping in the background as a light summer breeze came through the open window and settled onto her motionless body. She smiled and slowly opened her eyes, expecting to see Dax lying next to her. He wasn’t there. She frowned, shoved the light covers away and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Why did he leave so early? She pushed to her feet and made her way down the stairs.

The instant she stepped into the kitchen, she smelled the succulent aroma of fresh coffee. She was drawn to the magic machine like a moth to flame. Once she had a cup prepared, she made her way out the front door and settled into her large Adirondack chair, prepared to enjoy her morning ritual. A glance in her neighbor’s direction told her Dax hadn’t gone home. His front porch was filled with three large men. Hawk, Jeeves, and Wooly were clearly working on something. Paige assumed it was related to Zeus. The man was still missing, and they were all frantic and worried. So, where was Dax?

Paige stood and moved to stand next to the railing that ran across the front of her house. A movement caught her eye, and she spotted an elderly man headed her way. He looked a bit scruffy and out of place in this neighborhood. He continued up the sidewalk and appeared to be headed her way. A noise at the side of the house drew her attention away from the man, momentarily. She turned and immediately spotted Dax coming around the corner.

“What are you doing, now?” she asked. Before Dax could answer, the stranger on the sidewalk reached Paige’s front gate, paused, frowned, looked down at a clipboard he was carrying, then back at her. He realized she was watching him and his demeanor changed, immediately. He tried to act casual and nonchalant — but failed. Something was up with that guy.

“I’m looking for something,” Dax told her as he leaned against the railing next to where she was standing.

“What?” Paige asked absently as she watched the man disappear up the sidewalk and around the corner.

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“I was thinking,” Dax focused up the road, wondering what had Paige so distracted.

Paige refocused on Dax. “Yes?”

“I’ve searched my entire house top- to- bottom for the information Ahmed was trying to deliver. It’s not there, I’m sure of it.”

“So,” Paige considered, “you think he hid it at my house?”

“I think he might have,” Dax nodded. “He was watching us, he’d know we are involved; and, with Zeus and Carmen always around, he would need a safe place to stash it until he could touch base with me and let me know where it was. Plus, he had to know Nassar was after him. Ahmed wouldn’t keep valuable Intel with him when he was being hunted by a terrorist. A sadistic, ruthless, inhumane terrorist. He would have hidden it somewhere and I think that place might be your house. Do you mind?”

“Do I mind him hiding it here, or do I mind you looking?”

“Well,” Dax smiled as he took the mug from her hand and slowly sipped her coffee. “We really can’t do anything about the first, so I’m asking about the second.”

“No, I guess I don’t mind,” Paige yanked the cup of coffee back and took a sip. “Get your own, pal. I need the kick before I head in and get ready for work.”

“I already had two cups,” Dax shrugged. “Woke early with the idea and decided to get started.”

“You could ask them to help,” Paige motioned to his men.

“Actually,” Dax sighed. “I’m going to give the search a few more minutes then I’ll head over and help them. We need to locate Zee. I’m worried about him, Paige. He’s been gone too long without contacting me.”

“I know,” Paige shifted to face him. “For what it’s worth, I think he’s okay. Nathan firmly believes he’s just being cautious and maybe he found something.”

“If he found something,” Dax disagreed. “He would have called the rest of us in. This isn’t like him. I think he’s in trouble and can’t call us. And, I think it has something to do with Thor.”

“I agree,” Paige leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. “And, I think that should be the lead you follow. Locate Thor and I’m pretty sure you will locate Zeus.” She turned and headed back inside the house. It was time to get ready for work.

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Paige stepped into the office and glanced around. Where was Gage? She made her way to Margie's desk to ask.

"He's on a call," Margie advised. "In fact, you might want to head over and help. He's over by the Market on Main. Said it's a mess. Someone hit every business in that area last night. Broke windows, stole thousands of dollars of property, and got away clean."

"Nobody gets away clean," Paige disagreed. "There will be clues. We just need to find them." She turned to leave when Jericho walked through the door. His face told them all they needed to know. Something happened that morning, and the boss was not happy.

"What's wrong?" Margie asked. "What happened?"

"Where's Clayton?" Jericho said in answer.

"He's dealing with the burglaries down on Main Street," Margie advised.

"When it rains it pours around here," he turned to address Paige. "I need you to look into something for me."

"Sure," Paige followed him into his office. "What's up?"

"Mrs. Kidder," Jericho began.

"You want me to investigate Manti's oldest citizen?" Paige frowned. "What'd she do? Forget to pay for a bag of yarn?"

"It's not that kind of day, Paige," Jericho warned. "She's the victim. Some guy, drifter most likely because she didn't recognize him, convinced her the roof on her house was in need of repair." He passed a sheet of paper over to Paige and waited for her to read it.

"This is way too high," Paige looked up at Jericho. "It's an old scam, mostly used by gypsies and conmen. They convince an elderly citizen or a single mom that they need work done on their home, a leaky pipe or a roof repair, demand half up front and the rest when the work is done. Then, they promise to send a crew over in the morning. Instead, they take the money and run."

"That's the long and short of it," Jericho settled back in his chair with a sigh. "I agree, eight grand is high. It would be closer to five for the entire job. He bid high, demanded half and walked away with four thousand dollars. Joy Kidder bit and lost. She's not destitute, in fact, she can probably afford it more than most of our elderly population; but, she still took a pretty big hit."

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“And it pisses you off on principle,” Paige realized. “Did she have a description of the man?”

“That’s where he made his mistake,” Jericho smiled. “Joy may be old, but she’s still sharp. The man looked to be in his mid-to-late sixties. She said he was scruffy looking, but she chalked that up to his occupation. Thought if he was out getting dirty roofing houses, he wasn’t going to be clean-cut and wearing a suit.”

“About five-eight with a tight beard and mustache?” Paige asked, annoyed at herself for not confronting the man this morning.

Jericho frowned. “Do we have another victim already?”

“I saw him this morning,” Paige admitted. “He was headed for my house, at least I thought he was. The instant Dax stepped around the corner, he changed gears and disappeared.” Paige considered. “He seemed confused, glanced at a clipboard then focused on me and my house again. Do you think they’ve accessed tax records or something? Maybe they’re working from a carefully planned out list of homes owned by one person... probably females.”

“Why do you say they?” Jericho asked. “You saw one guy and Joy only dealt with one guy.”

“Because it’s always a team,” Paige considered. “I’ve worked these fraud cases before. They don’t stick for long. They move into town, take in a pre-determined sum and then they move on to the next town; or, head one state over and start up again. It might be a good idea to bring Shawn in on this, see if they have anything in the works on this group. If they don’t, I have no doubt they will. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I thought he was still assigned to Porter,” Jericho questioned. “If that’s the case, he won’t be much help on this.”

“He is,” Paige confirmed. “And, I doubt he’ll have time to help me work it. But, he still has contacts and access to their system. He can at least tell me if a large group of drifters is on the radar; or, if we’re dealing with a group that’s gone undetected until now.”

“If they have a pattern, how would they go undetected?”

“Because they choose their victims carefully,” Paige advised. “I think they were going to target me this morning. I made the list because I’m single and live in an older home. They assumed I would be an easy mark. They have access to records but not personal Intel. They didn’t know I’m a cop. Mostly, they focus on the elderly because most of them won’t make a report. They’re vulnerable and when they fall for a scheme like this one; they get embarrassed, don’t want to admit to their loved ones they fell for such an obvious scam, and they hide it. Groups like this can operate for years before getting caught.”

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“You’re approved to call Shawn,” Jericho decided. “But, I want him to know this is my case and I’m not turning it over to the feds. I want these guys caught and in a cage. This is personal, Paige. Joy...” he wasn’t sure how to continue.

“She’s important to you,” Paige provided. “I get it. I don’t know her well, but she’s a great supporter of law enforcement and I’ll do my best to get her justice.”

“Thanks,” Jericho sighed. “Do you think that man is still in your neighborhood?”

“No,” Paige said confidently. “Because I had a feeling he was trouble and I drove the area before I came in. He’s gone for now.”

“Then head over and see what you can do to help Gage on his burglary,” Jericho decided. “From what I hear, there’s a lot of damage and the property value is significant.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” Paige said on her way out the door.

Paige pulled into the lot of the Manti Market and took a minute to survey her surroundings. There was a lot of damage to the surrounding stores and she wondered why nobody called the crime in while it was in progress. She took another minute to get the big picture before starting across the large parking area. She had only gone a few short steps before Gage was at her side.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he admitted. “It’s a mess. I have statements from most of the owners, but I haven’t even started to sift through the evidence. Well, I’m hoping there’s some evidence to sift through. These guys are beyond livid and if I don’t catch the group responsible, the publicity is going to get ugly.”

“I can’t worry about that,” Paige shrugged. “We’ll catch them because these guys need to be caught, not because it will look bad if we don’t.”

“It’s all a part of the whole and you know it,” Gage disagreed. “The mayor is going to be all over Jericho for this. Tilly Hovey is a donor and she’s more upset than the rest. Apparently, Mayor Fowler assured her there was no reason to install a fancy security system. Claimed her donation ensured protection at all times.”

“Politics,” Paige shook her head. “Guess the mayor is going to learn a valuable lesson over this, too. Why didn’t anyone call this in last night?”

“This is a small town, Paige,” Gage glanced up when a truck pulled into the lot. “There’s Keith Duvall. I need to go interview him. Anyway, so far none of these shops have alarms. Only one has a camera. Robert Bentley, right there on the end next to the market. He has a

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small system on the far end of his building, but the camera is angled more toward the street to catch illegal parking. I'll be surprised if we get much from it. He's pulling the footage now. Where do you want to start? Collecting evidence or viewing the video?"

"I'll follow you over to talk to Duvall," Paige decided. "While you get his statement, I'll take a look around and see if I can find something that will lead us to the perps."

"Good luck," Gage grumbled. "So far, I've found a lot of damage, but not much else to go on."

Paige made her way carefully around the store. Gage was right, the guys that did this had obviously done it before. She didn't find any fingerprints on the doorknob, the inside counter or the cash register. She was slowly moving toward the back when Gage approached.

"I'm done here," he told her. "Keith doesn't have anything that will help, just a lot of anger and frustration like the rest of the victims. Let's go look at the video."

They made their way further up the sidewalk and stepped into a small clothing store – mostly specialty items. Robert Bentley was working to sweep up the broken glass left when the large display window was broken out completely. A rock rested on the floor about three feet from the destruction.

"Don't suppose you can get prints off a rock," Robert said with a sigh.

"Sorry, but no." Paige moved toward the counter. "Gage said you have video. Can you take a minute and show us what you found?"

"Sure," Robert rested the handle of the broom against the wall and moved forward. "I looked, already. I doubt there's anything that will help, but your welcome to it."

The two deputies followed the shop owner into a back office. It was small and not meant to accommodate three people, especially when one of them was a large, muscular ex-linebacker turned cop. They huddled around the small screen and watched as a group of kids — late teens to early twenties — joked around in the parking lot. They were messing around, not letting one of the kids into the truck.

"You need an alarm," Paige told Robert. "They were out there long enough that if even one of these stores had an alarm, those kids would be in custody right now."

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“I thought of that,” Robert said glumly. “And, I even considered installing a system last summer. Then, things got tight and I decided it wasn’t necessary. I’ve now decided it is. Not that it will do me any good at this point.”

“Stop it right there,” Paige demanded. “Back it up a bit. Yeah, right there. Do you have a way to take a screenshot of that image?”

“I think…” Robert said, playing with some of the controls. “Okay, there you go.”

“Now,” Paige straightened. “Can you print that photo for me? I need to take a closer look at that exact spot.”

Gage frowned when Robert looked to him for answers. Gage just shrugged, he never could explain Paige or her methods; so, he wasn’t going to try. The three of them walked out of the room together. Robert paused at a small table at the end of the hall and retrieved a single sheet of paper, handing it to Paige immediately.

“I’ll be over at the Market—in the parking lot,” Paige said, hopeful for the first time since she’d arrived.

The two men followed her out, still wondering what she saw that they missed.

Paige stepped outside and studied the photo. It only took a couple seconds to identify the spot she was looking for. As she approached the location, she spotted the skid marks left by the truck in question.

“What will that tell us?” Gage asked, studying the marks but still not understanding what had sent Paige on the hunt.

“Here,” she shoved the photo at her friend. “You might want that for the file.” She crouched, pulled a pair of tweezers and some rubber gloves from her pack and carefully placed a rock into an evidence bag.

“You’re collecting a rock for evidence?”

Paige ignored him as she slid a clump of dirt into the same bag.

“Paige?”

Paige stood and handed Gage the evidence. “I can definitely see pine needles and I think that might be sage. We’ll have to send it to the lab to confirm. I took the rock, so they can analyze it as well. I believe they can match the clump of mud to the mud that has dried on the bottom of that rock. If so, it will help prove my theory.”

“Which is?” Gage asked, perplexed as he studied the small bag.

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“I think they’re staying up the canyon,” Paige continued to study the ground. “I think they parked in a designated camping area or a meadow and got mud on their tires. Then, I think they drove the gravel roadway and that rock got caught in the tread of the tire locking the mud inside until they played their juvenile game that got one of them injured. And, that’s when the rock and the mud came loose.” She came to an abrupt stop and crouched again to study the asphalt. “And here we have some blood and tissue.” She pulled a pocket knife from her kit and began carefully scraping the asphalt until a clump of dried blood and what looked like skin tissue dislodged from the hard surface. She dropped it into an evidence bag and secured it. “Now you have DNA.” Paige was counting on using the results to positively identify their criminals.

“How in the world did you find blood and tissue evidence in a parking lot half the size of a football field?”

“Patience and tenacity,” Paige grinned and handed the second evidence bag to Gage. “Throw that in the truck and let’s go take a look at the other shops. I doubt we’ll find anything, but we have to look.”

It was three hours later when Paige stepped back into the office and headed for her desk. Gage was on his way to the lab and she wanted to take the rest of her shift to narrow down possible targets on her own case. She was sure the conman — or men — would strike again and they would target another single woman or an elderly resident. She wanted to be there when he did.

Paige glanced up when Jericho stepped from his office and shut the door. “Go home, Paige,” he ordered. “It’s an hour past shift and I can’t justify more overtime.”

Paige glanced at the clock and realized he was right. “I just need five minutes, then I’m leaving.”

Jericho approached her desk. “For what?”

“I’m generating a list of possible targets,” Paige told him. She waited as Jericho made his way around the desk and stood, reading her list over her shoulder.

“It’s a good list,” Jericho admitted. “But you missed Jesse Anderson. He’s ninety-two and a bit senile. He’d be an easy target if they thought to check. I know you said women, but...”

“Women and the elderly,” Paige quickly added Jesse to her list. “And he fits the profile perfectly. He’s old and lives alone. I’m going to head out first thing tomorrow. I want to sit down with each of them, determine if they’ve already been swindled and warn them just in case

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they're on his list. He has a list, I know it. It's what he keeps on that clipboard he carries. I could have..."

"Not really," Jericho disagreed. "You had a suspicion, but I hadn't told you about Joy yet. Even if you had questioned him, you would have been forced to let him go on what you had at the time. Don't beat yourself up over that. Let's just catch him now that we know."

"We will," Paige said confidently. "Because he's going to hit at least one of these targets and they'll be ready when he does."

"Goodnight, Paige," Jericho started for the door. "Keep me posted. By the way, Gage said the lab confirmed your findings. That was sage and pine needles in the clump of dirt you found. They also said, preliminarily of course, that the rock had the same substance. They'll analyze further but Gage is going to head up the canyon in the morning and look for that truck. At least we got that on camera. It should be easy to recognize."

"Then, I guess you and Margie are on your own tomorrow," Paige hit print and looked over at her boss. "At least for a few hours. Call me in if something pressing comes up. I can hit the names on my list tomorrow afternoon if I need to."

"I do know how to take a report, Paige. I was doing it before you got your first kiss."

Paige snatched the document off the printer and groaned. "Don't remind me. It was an experience I'd like to forget."

Jericho was laughing as he left the office.

Paige pulled into her driveway and shut down her vehicle; then, she just sat behind the wheel pondering for several minutes. She must have lost track of time because she jumped at the knock on the window.

Dax took a step back when Paige pushed open the door. "You okay?"

"Long day," she grabbed her bag and her list, secured her vehicle, then headed for the front door. "You?"

"Didn't find anything hidden around your house, yet."

"But, you still think it's here?" Paige realized.

"I do," Dax followed her inside and waited while she deposited her duty belt and her file onto the couch. "There's something else we need to talk about."

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Paige looked up in surprise. She should have known there was a reason he met her in the driveway. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Dax assured her. “Carmen located Thor.”

“Where?”

“He’s holed up in a dive,” Dax settled into one of her lounge chairs. “Some little motel in a small town in Arizona.”

“There’s more,” Paige knew instantly.

“There’s a factory,” Dax began. “It’s just outside of the same town.”

“And it’s owned by Reynolds,” Paige knew instantly. “What do you think it means?”

“I have no idea,” Dax admitted. “Carmen got me the number to the motel and Thor’s room number. I was thinking of calling... just to see, you know. See if Zee is with him and if either one of them will fill me in.”

“But you’re worried he might bolt, again.”

“That’s the thing that’s holding me back,” Dax said soberly. “I think I need to go there, to confront Thor in person. It’s the only way I’ll know.”

“You’ve already decided,” Paige accused. “When are you leaving?”

“Hawk and Carmen want tonight to plan. The team will head out tomorrow,” Dax advised. “They want to check satellites and try to figure out if the manufacturing plant is active. We’ll play it by ear from there.”

Paige didn’t like it, she was worried that Dax would get hurt again and he wasn’t completely healed from Nassar and his horrendous torture sessions. Before she had a chance to say anything there was a knock on the door. She used the interruption to calm herself and shove down the panic and the fear she was feeling. Dax was leaving no matter what she said. She knew him well enough to know that. She swung open the door and spotted Carmen.

“Can I come in?” she asked, glancing at Dax.

“Sure,” Paige pushed the door wider and stepped back so her friend could enter.

“Hey, Dax,” she began. “The satellite images are up. It looks like some kind of secure operation. There are guards everywhere. What do you think that means?”

“Well,” Dax glanced at Paige while he considered his answer. He could tell she wasn’t happy about his decision to leave, but he wasn’t sure what she expected him to do. Sit around

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and wait, hoping for the best; but, expecting news his friend was dead? That wasn't going to happen. "The place belongs to Reynolds and he does manufacture top-secret military products. It could be where he's building his drones, or the other military weapons he's contracted to provide the government. Your guess is as good as mine, at this point."

Paige couldn't hold back any longer. "Dax, you haven't recovered yet. I don't think it's a good idea for you to confront highly trained military guards that now work for Reynolds. There has to be another way. Wait a few days, try to call Thor and see what he says. You don't have to do this. Send the guys in to handle it if you're worried Thor will spook."

"Paige," Dax began.

"Carmen," Paige pushed. "You know I'm right, don't you? Do you agree they should wait?"

Carmen studied Paige for several seconds but didn't respond.

"You, too?" Paige said in challenge. "I'm not... never mind." She turned, left the room, made her way through the kitchen, and out the back door.

"Sorry," Dax stood. "I have to deal with this."

"I think you should let me do that," Carmen decided. "She's just worried about you; and, dealing with you tonight is just going to set her off."

"What does that mean?" Dax demanded.

"It means," Carmen smiled. "That your ego and your sense of duty will get in the way of your compassion, and that's the last thing she needs right now."

"Go back over to my house," Dax decided. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Nope," Carmen headed for the kitchen. "Hawk is waiting for you. He wants to get started on a plan." She rushed down the hall and picked up the pace as she crossed the kitchen headed for the back door. She paused momentarily, then let out a relieved breath when she heard the front door slam shut. Carmen stepped onto the back porch and settled into the chair next to Paige. "He's going to be okay," she began.

"You don't know that," Paige disagreed. "And I needed your help back there, thanks for the support."

"Paige," Carmen sighed. "You wanted to know if I agreed, I don't. And, I won't lie. Not even for you. Plus, I think you should be supporting me on this and you're not. I was there for you when Dax was missing, every step of the way. I never once said 'hey, you need to wait. Formulate a plan to make sure everyone is safe before you rush in and try to save Paige's man.'"

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I worried, I was completely stressed out knowing Zeus would do anything to save Dax, even risk his own life, and he wasn't completely healed either."

"I didn't say..."

"I know Dax is important to you, but Zeus is important to me and he's missing, now." Carmen stood and began to pace. "It feels like you are saying Dax is more important. Then, and now."

"I'm not," Paige sighed. "Carmen, I'm not saying that at all."

"Then what?"

"I'm saying..." Paige threw up her hands in frustration. "I don't know what I'm saying. I just know I can't go, not right now. We have two big cases at the office and when I called Shawn, he said he can't help. He's in New Orleans, dealing with the ship Nathan seized."

"I knew that," Carmen admitted. She sat back down next to her friend. "I'm worried, too. I can see those guys are conflicted, every one of them. They want to believe in Thor, but what is he doing in Arizona? Why is he living in a motel right by Reynold's operation? Why is he trying so hard to stay off the grid? And what happened to Zeus because I don't care what anyone says... Zeus hasn't called me because he can't. It's the only explanation and that alone terrifies me."

"Okay," Paige tried to push her own fear aside and focus on her friend. "I don't know what's going on with Zeus. But, Nathan is sure that if he has been captured, he's still safe. He doesn't believe Reynolds would risk exposing his involvement in their secret operation. He's under a microscope while Nathan's team looks into the shipment of drones and weapons they seized in New Orleans. That's why Shawn is out there, he's working to trace the final destination. Reynolds knows that, and the last thing he needs is more scrutiny."

"Nathan could be wrong," Carmen insisted.

"Of course, he could be," Paige relented. "But he's not."

"Why?"

"Because those guards are outside Reynold's facility," Paige said confidently. "Whatever he's got going on inside is tied directly to him. He might capture Zeus and hide him inside, I think that's possible. But, he would never commit a felony on his own property. It's the reason he enlisted the help of Nassar and Williams – plausible deniability. Either Zeus isn't there at all, in Arizona; or, he's safe. I'd bet my life on it."

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Carmen stared across the backyard for several minutes, considering what Paige was saying and the logic she used to get there. It seemed sound. “Okay,” she finally agreed. “So, conversely that means if Dax goes after Thor and Zeus, he will also be safe.”

“Not if he confronts Reynold’s men on their property,” Paige disagreed. “They have a right to protect the place. In fact, they have an obligation to do so. If those guys go in, guns blazing, they could all end up dead. And, Reynolds will just say his men feared for their lives.”

“Paige,” Carmen scolded. “Give them a little credit. You know this is what they’re good at. They’re the experts. They’ve executed at least a hundred missions just like this. And, you’re going to have to start trusting Dax sometime. Trust him on this. He trusts you, I think it’s time you return the sentiment.”

“I trust Dax,” Paige argued.

“Sure, you do,” Carmen laughed. “That’s why the first thing out of your mouth was you can’t go. You need to relinquish a little control and have a little faith. I realize you only know Dax as the carpenter next door; but, according to Zeus, Dax is the best there is when it comes to planning and running an op. He’ll be okay. First, because he’s Dax and he’s good. But, also because Hawk couldn’t live with himself if anything happened to Dax on his watch. Especially now. It’s simply unacceptable.”

Paige did smile at that. “It’s not like I have a say in the matter, anyway. Dax wasn’t discussing it with me. He wasn’t looking for input to make the decision. He’d already decided, and he was simply relaying the plan.”

“Is that what bothers you?” Carmen asked. “Because you do the same to him. I don’t think either of you knows how a partnership is supposed to work. This is all new and you’re struggling with the basics. I guess that’s what happens when two strong-willed, bull-headed people fall in love.”

“Who said anything about love?” Paige frowned at the knot that had just formed in her stomach. Did she love Dax? Yeah, she did. But, she wasn’t willing to voice that particular vulnerability out loud. Not even to Carmen.

“Denial is futile,” Carmen stood. “I know you love him, and he loves you. Now, you two just need to figure out how to live with that knowledge and accept it. I’ve got to get back, now. We have to come up with a plan.” Carmen hesitated. “Paige?”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to be okay with this,” Carmen whispered. “I need you to be okay, because I’m terrified and if I can’t talk to you about it...”

Swindling Nomads

“I’m okay with it,” Paige said, feeling a little guilty that she’d reacted the way she did. “We’ll get through it, together.”

“Thanks,” Carmen nodded and headed back to the team. She was going to spend the entire night planning. The men would be safe, they had to be.

Zeus glanced out the window of his cell to make sure the guards were in their usual positions. One on each end of the hallway, and one directly in front of his door. All clear, business as usual. *What was taking the guys so long?* He was fine, but what if Thor hadn’t called in reinforcements? With each passing day, he became even more worried about the outcome. There was no way his friend could rescue two people on his own. Not in this facility. Zeus had realized, almost immediately, they had locked him in a different section than the one they were holding Camille in. He was alone with his guards over here. Camille, was on the other side of the building, separated from him by a large cinder block wall. A wall he was slowly chipping away at. He knew he couldn’t break through the thing, but he wanted to make contact. Camille needed to know he was here for her and the team would rescue her — somehow. He just hoped her cell was close enough to his that she could hear his whispers. He couldn’t call out to her or the guards would hear and stop them. He crouched on the floor, pulled out his Benchmade tactical knife, and once again began to chip away at the concrete barrier. He’d have to buy a new one if he ever got out of here, this one was going to be toast. While he worked, he again started to wonder if he’d made a big mistake. Maybe getting captured and leaving the rescue plan to Thor wasn’t such a great idea.

Paige was just pulling out of Jesse Anderson’s driveway when her phone started to ring. The ancient old man was a little senile, but he was a character. She had liked him immediately. Paige was still smiling when she said hello.

“It’s Dax,” he said in greeting. He still wondered if Paige was avoiding him. He had worked late the night before and she was fast asleep when he climbed into bed. When he woke this morning, she was already gone. He knew he should never have let Carmen deal with the problem. Now, he had no idea where he stood with the aggravating, stubborn woman.

“Hey,” Paige pulled to the side of the road. This might be a long call and the next house was only two doors down.

Swindling Nomads

“Can you meet me somewhere?” Dax asked. “We’re leaving in two hours and I need to talk to you before I go.”

“I’m working,” Paige said, still angry about the entire situation.

“Paige?” Dax sighed. “Please.”

“I need to make one more stop,” Paige decided. “If you can give me twenty minutes, I can meet you at the park on Main Street.”

“I’ll be waiting at one of the picnic tables,” Dax agreed. “Thanks.”

“See you in about twenty,” Paige disconnected and wondered what this was all about. She continued to sit there for another five minutes, trying to push the frustration and resentment away before she met with her next potential victim. Then, she put the car in gear and pulled into Maxine Taylor’s driveway.

Dax was already there waiting when Paige pulled into the park. She was late, it took longer to get the story from Maxine than it should have. Bottom line, they were too late. Maxine had already been scammed out of three thousand dollars. She didn’t tell anyone because her ex-husband was taking her back to court, hoping to get full-custody of their children. Maxine was worried that being the victim of a con would make her vulnerable. She wasn’t willing to risk it, not while she was dealing with the pending trouble from her ex. They had another victim, but she was an uncooperative one. Maybe Jericho could talk some sense into her. Paige would ask him once she made it back to the office. She pulled into the spot next to Dax’s truck and headed for the table where he sat waiting. She was fifteen minutes late and he probably arrived early. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Dax stood, watching Paige’s reaction closely. She stopped abruptly but didn’t step away, didn’t retreat from his presence, that must be a good sign. “Like you said, you’re working.”

“What did you need to talk to me about?” Paige asked hesitantly.

Dax moved forward and pulled her into his arms. He pressed a kiss to her forehead then shifted so he could look her in the eyes. “Are we okay?”

Paige shrugged. “Sure.”

“Paige, are we okay?” he asked again.

“I don’t know,” Paige admitted. “I’m…” how to finish that sentence?

“I know I didn’t handle things the right way last night,” he began. “I…”

Swindling Nomads

“You handled things the way you always do,” Paige disagreed. “You told me what you’re going to do. I’ve been briefed on the plan.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” all the things Carmen had said to him the night before flooded his mind. He studied her face but still couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “I’m in love with you,” he finally whispered. “Yeah, I know. It terrifies me, too. But, there it is. And I’m honestly not sure what to do about it. I just know I do love you. It was the only thing I kept thinking, while I was lying there on that cold concrete floor, while I was leaving the message in code on the wall hoping you and Zee would find me, while I was running through the woods and again while I was lying on the cold, hard ground with a gunshot wound. I just kept thinking, ‘I’m in love with Paige Carter and she’s never going to know how I feel.’ Then, I got out of the hospital and I couldn’t admit it. I kept waiting, thinking I would know when... or I guess I should say if, you ever felt the same way.”

“Why are you saying it now?” Paige was worried he was telling her he loved her because he didn’t know if he was going to make it back this time, and that thought terrified her.

“Because I needed to,” Dax shrugged. “I need you to know how I feel about you and I need to know we’re okay. I need you to know I’m going to Arizona because I have to, not because I want to. I need you to know you are just as important to me as Zee. I need...”

“I know,” Paige sighed. “And if you haven’t figured out that I love you, too...”

She didn’t finish because Dax pulled her close and kissed her, a long and somewhat desperate kiss. When he finally came up for air, he didn’t release her. Instead, he pulled her closer and held on tight. “I should have told you that sooner, but I didn’t know how. The timing seemed to be all wrong.” His ribs were killing him, he must have pulled something the day before while he was searching for the package Ahmed had come to deliver. He wouldn’t tell Paige that, though. It would only make things worse and he didn’t want her to worry. “I have to leave today. I hope you understand why I have to do this.”

“I do,” Paige took a step back then moved to sit on top of the picnic table. “It’s Zeus, you have to go. And, once I got over my annoyance that you were telling me the plan instead of working together to come up with a plan, I accepted that. I just don’t like knowing that I have no say. I don’t like feeling like we’re two people living our own lives, separately but together.”

“I don’t like that feeling, either,” Dax settled onto the table next to her. “I know I’m guilty of leaving you out of the planning. But, do you realize how often you do the same to me?”

“Carmen was pretty clear last night when she pointed that out to me,” Paige bumped shoulders with Dax. “Is that why you’re so enlightened this afternoon? Did Carmen have her learn to be partners talk with you before you guys finished for the night?”

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“She did,” Dax smiled. “Guess it worked. She gave me the ‘I know you love her so stop trying to deny it’ speech.”

“My friend isn’t exactly subtle,” Paige smiled. “We’re fine, Dax. I understand why you have to go. I’m just frustrated with the timing. I wish I could help. I wish I could go with you, but I can’t. I’ve already found two additional victims this morning. These guys are working fast and if I don’t catch them soon, they might vanish, just move on to the next town before I can stop them. Then, there’s the burglary that Gage is working.”

“Why do you need to be there?” Dax wondered. “Why does it bother you that I’m running an op and you’re stuck here doing your job?”

“Well,” Paige stared at the empty ball field. “When you put it that way, it sounds kind of ridiculous., even to me.”

“This is my job, Paige. It’s what I do best,” Dax assured her. “I realize you don’t know that. I mean, all you’ve seen me do is rehabbing — in more ways than one.”

“You’ve been working with Nathan,” Paige disagreed. “Somehow I keep forgetting that. And, he’s impressed with your talent and experience. I guess I know you’re good at this. I just worry that’s all. I don’t know what you’re walking into. I don’t know how many men you’re going to be up against and I just feel like you’d be safer if I had your back.”

Dax smiled. “I probably would be, but my men will have my back. Can you try to trust me? I know what I’m doing, and after going over the satellite images and the other Intel Carmen dug up, I’ve handled worse in my sleep. These guys are not as sophisticated as we originally believed. In fact, I don’t think those men are ex-military. I think Reynolds is using an amateur security firm. We’ve got this covered. I’m more worried about Thor, truth be told.”

“You think he’s muscle for Reynolds?” Paige frowned. She still didn’t believe that, not completely.

“I’ve always trusted my men, completely. Now, I don’t know what to believe.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Paige said knowing it was true. “Now, I have one more stop I need to make before I head into the office to check in with the boss. And, you need to run through the plan one more time before you hit the road.”

“You know me well,” Dax stood and gave her another kiss. “I’ll miss you.”

“Me, too,” Paige admitted. “Be careful and call me, okay? I need to know you’re alright. And Carmen is anxious to hear anything you can tell her about Zeus. She’s more stressed about this than she lets on.”

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“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Dax promised before he climbed into his truck and drove away.

Paige watched him as he pulled onto the highway. She continued to watch as he slowly disappeared. She was glad she’d taken the time to meet with him, but now... she needed to get back to work. She was so preoccupied as she approached the next home on her list that she almost didn’t see the man climbing into his truck. She smiled and slowed, allowing the mysterious drifter time to pull in front of her. She’d check on the resident later. Right now, she was going to follow the sixty-something vagabond and see where he went. She left plenty of space between them as she maneuvered through town. They made the turn onto the canyon road and it only took Paige a few minutes to realize they were headed into the wilderness. So, this gypsy was camping out in the back country. Kind of seemed cliché to her but, too each their own.

They had just left the paved section of the roadway when her phone began to ring. She reached out and answered it, never taking her eyes off the truck ahead.

“Paige,” Jericho said impatiently.

“Hey, boss.”

“Where are you?” he demanded. “You should have been back hours ago.”

“I’m nearly finished with the interviews,” she advised. “I found two additional victims and was on my way to the last home on the list when I spotted my suspect. I’m following him as we speak. We’re headed up the canyon. I’ll let you know when he lands.”

“Be careful,” Jericho warned. “Gage is still up there looking for that truck. If you run into trouble, call him. I’d head up there myself but the mayor called. He’s demanding a meeting. Apparently, he wants answers.”

“I have one for him,” Paige offered.

“I’m not sure I dare ask,” Jericho smiled.

“Tell him to hire Havi full-time,” Paige provided. “Tell him, if he had taken your advice and brought on another deputy we would have been able to staff the graveyard shift adequately and the kids may have been caught in the act.”

“I’m not sure it’s wise to poke the bear when he’s angry,” Jericho grinned.

“That’s the perfect time,” Paige disagreed. “Poke him hard and then walk away with the honey. We need Havilland and he knows it. Gotta go, I’ll check in later and let you know what I found.”

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“Be careful, Paige,” Jericho said again before disconnecting.

Paige held back so the driver in front of her wouldn't realize he was being tailed. He had to know the vehicle behind him was a police unit — it was well-marked. Even if he had missed the markings on the side, he had to notice the large light bar prominently displayed across the top. She was trying to hold back, to make the man think she was just doing routine patrol in the area. If she didn't make any overt movements, it might work.

They traveled up the steep gravel roadway for several miles. Paige was beginning to wonder if he was taking her on a wild goose chase but as they neared Skyline Drive, his vehicle started to slow. Suddenly, he took a turn onto a dirt road. She stopped at the bottom and waited. She knew this trail. It was a dead-end that led to a large camping area in a meadow. When she was sure he was well on his way to his temporary home, she made the turn and headed for the encampment. She frowned when she came around a bend and spotted Gage's truck parked on the side of the roadway. She pulled in behind him and shut down her unit.

Gage exited his vehicle at the same time she exited hers.

“What are you doing here?” Paige questioned.

Gage pointed toward the large camp. “Found my truck. Why are you here?”

“Found my suspect,” she pointed to the man that had parked his vehicle and was walking toward the large group.

“Then our cases are connected,” Gage frowned. “There are several teens living up here. I was trying to come up with a plan to weed out our burglars.”

“They know we're here,” Paige watched as the entire group stopped what they were doing and focused on the two deputies. “Let's just go over and have a chat.” The two of them began walking towards the group.

“Jericho told me about Joy,” Gage admitted. “He's more furious than I've seen him in a long time.”

“About that,” Paige glanced at her friend. “I get the anger on principle, but this has to be more. What's the story there?”

“It... well, it has to do with your mom's murder,” Gage admitted.

“It's okay,” Paige pressed.

“Jericho was a mess after that happened,” Gage began. “He hid it from most of the town but a few people that had always been close to him knew there was more to the story. Now we know he was in love, but back then...”

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“He kept it a secret.”

“Yeah,” Gage sighed. “Anyway, Margie saw how devastated he was and so did Joy. That lady took Jericho dinner every night for two whole years. She took care of him... still does, I guess.”

“And, he’s upset because he feels like he didn’t take care of her,” Paige realized. “Now it makes sense.”

“How do you want to handle this?” Gage asked.

“I want to call Forest,” Paige decided. She paused, pulled her walkie and called their local Forest Service rep.

“I’ll be there in five,” Forest advised. “I’m just up the road on Skyline, but I’m not sure how I can help.”

“I think they’ve been here longer than the 14 days,” Paige provided. “Can’t you just impound their vehicles for overstaying their welcome?”

“They have been there longer,” Forest confirmed. “I stopped by and checked on them sixteen days ago. I could tell they had already been there for several days.”

“Did you warn them about the maximum camping limit?” Gage asked over the air.

“I did,” Forest advised as he pulled in behind Paige’s truck. “I’ve arrived, wait up and we’ll confront them together.”

The minute Forest stepped in beside them Paige asked the question again. “Can you impound their vehicles?”

“We normally just issue a ticket and insist they move,” Forest considered.

“But can you?” Paige pressed.

“I guess, technically I could,” Forest decided. “But these guys would fight it and we’d probably lose the case in court.”

“I don’t care about court,” Paige shrugged. “I just want a chance to look at the vehicle so Gage can identify the truck as the one used in a burglary.”

“Let’s just threaten them with the impound and see how things go,” Forest decided. He really didn’t want to deal with the hassle or try to justify his actions to his boss.

The three officers approached the group as a cohesive unit.

“I realize you told us we could only stay fourteen days,” Paige’s suspect began.

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“I think I was pretty clear on the rules,” Forest said in response.

“Yes, you were,” a second man stepped forward. “But, you see... one of the women fell ill and she’s not up to traveling at the moment. We just need a few more days, then we can move on and you’ll never see us again.”

Paige was studying each of the occupants closely. When she spotted the teen in the NFL Jersey, she grinned. “Gage?”

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t that the autographed Jersey you and Mark gave Mr. Duvall? The one he had hanging on his wall in his sports shop. The one that was stolen in a burglary the other night?”

“Yes, Paige,” Gage grinned. “I believe it is.”

Paige moved toward the kid and unsnapped the holder on her belt that contained her handcuffs. “Kid, you are under arrest.”

“What is the charge,” her suspect demanded.

“Possession of stolen property,” Paige said casually. She spotted another boy listening to a new iPod, ignoring the activity around camp. “Gage, cuff him as well. I believe that is the electronic device that was taken in the same burglary a few shops down from Duvall’s place.”

“You know,” Gage nodded. “I think you’re right.”

“You can’t just march into our home and start arresting our kids on trumped-up charges,” another of the men protested. “I bought that iPod for my son.”

“I assume you have a receipt, then,” Gage inquired.

“Of course not.”

“Then he’s going to be transported with this one,” Paige had cuffed the kid and started for her truck. “Oh, and that guy over there,” she pointed to a male sitting in a chair away from the crowd. “He matches the description perfectly of one of the men seen leaving the scene. He’s going to have to come with us as well.”

“Unless you have a warrant, Marko will not be going anywhere,” the conman moved in front of Paige in an attempt to block her path.

Forest stepped forward, thinking he would deal with the arrest, since Paige already had one in custody. “Come on, kid.”

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The conman who had victimized at least three of the town's most susceptible citizens moved in front of the kid and held his hand out, blocking Forest from proceeding.

"You don't want to do this," Forest warned.

The man took another step forward, pressing the palm of his hand against Forest's chest in an attempt to stop the apprehension.

"That is interfering," Forest shifted to break contact. "Put your hands behind your back, sir. You are also under arrest."

"This is preposterous," the man yelled as Forest cuffed him and gave a little push to get him moving.

"The rest of you, remain where you are," Gage advised. "You asked for a warrant, I can make that happen — on the entire camp. I think we have enough PC to convince the local DA. And when Tolman goes after a warrant, he never fails."

"What's your name?" Paige asked the kid she'd cuffed.

"Johnny," the kid grumbled.

"And yours?" Paige turned to the man she'd followed up the canyon.

"I don't believe I have to answer that," he glared at her. "I want a lawyer."

"That can be arranged once we get to the station," Paige settled the kid inside the back seat and turned to see Gage escorting a limping young man her way. "Tell Tolman you need a warrant for his DNA. He matches the description of the kid in the video and with that limp, I think that's enough to prove he's a match."

"I was thinking the same thing," Gage motioned to his prisoner. "You willing to transport this one while I contact Tolman and wait for the warrant. I'd hate to give them time to ditch the evidence."

"No problem," Paige turned to Forest. "You okay with that one?"

"I'll follow you down," Forest shoved the man into his vehicle then climbed behind the wheel.

On the way down the canyon, Paige called Jericho.

"I'm sending Reed up to help Gage," Jericho decided. "Dean and Havilland are still at the races and Lovato needs to cover this afternoon. You think he'll be okay until Logan arrives?"

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“I think the younger campers are star struck,” Paige decided. “They realized Gage is the famous Clayton linebacker. The adults, they’re behaving for now. It’s a good idea to send Logan in to help, but I think Gage has things under control. How did things go with the mayor?”

“I walked away with honey,” Jericho laughed.

“And, you said it wasn’t wise to poke the bear,” Paige grinned. “When does Havi start?”

“I’ll coordinate that with his chief,” Jericho decided. “I’ll be at the station when you arrive. I want to be there when you talk to the man stealing from our most vulnerable citizens.”

“See you soon,” Paige clicked off. “You do know you’re both in a lot of trouble?”

The response from the back seat was silence.

Gage got his warrant and located the majority of the property stolen in the burglary. Two additional kids had been taken into custody. Jericho had convinced all three victims, including the uncooperative Maxine, to come into the office and see if they could pick their scam artist out of a line-up. They all picked her bearded nomad immediately. Once he was booked and fingerprinted, Paige discovered his name. Gino Pasqual was in the system. No big surprise there. But, she hit the jackpot when she located a felony warrant out of Colorado for Gino, a man named Arturo and a woman named Jasmine. They, too, were now in custody. Tolman was pleased with the results, Jericho was happy that \$20,000 in cash had been recovered and would eventually be returned to the gypsy’s victims and Paige was happy she was going home on schedule for the first time in a very long time.

Well, she was happy until she pulled into the drive and remembered she was alone. Dax and the team were on their way to Arizona. If her calculations were correct, they should be arriving within the hour. She just hoped Thor would cooperate and provide the answers they so desperately needed.

She had changed, poured herself a glass of wine and was pondering her options for the evening when her cell phone began to ring. “Hello, Nathan.”

“How are you, kid?”

“I’m fine,” Paige settled into the chair hoping her friend and mentor had time to catch up. “You?”

“I’m... well, I don’t know what I am tonight,” he admitted.

“What’s wrong?” Paige was instantly on alert.

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“Nothing’s wrong,” Nathan said slowly. “It’s just this mess with Reynolds. Your friend, Shawn, uncovered the information we’ve been looking for. The ship was headed for the Mediterranean Sea, we knew that but it’s the rest that worries me.”

“What did he find?” She knew Shawn would figure things out. He was like a dog with a bone when he was on a case.

“The drones and the weapons were going to be delivered to militants in Syria,” Nathan told her.

“How did Reynolds think he could get away with that?” Paige wondered. “Why would he even try? That’s... treasonous.”

“I think he’s in trouble,” Nathan said in response. “Financially, I mean. It’s the reason he was trying to sell that property where Nessar was killed and Dax was rescued. He was counting on the new contract, for the drones. I think he was just hedging his bet, so to speak.”

“At the expense of American soldiers?” Paige said in disgust. “There is no excuse he could give that would justify his actions.”

“I agree,” Nathan said wearily. “He’s not the man I thought he was. He’s not the friend I thought I knew.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Paige realized Nathan was upset over the discovery. He had befriended Reynolds, had vouched for him – more than once – and he was now realizing just how drastically he’d misjudged the man. “Is Shawn staying in New Orleans or will he go to Chicago to help with the murder investigation?” They still hadn’t caught the man who actually killed Bryan, a good Chicago cop who was killed doing his job.

“I’m sending him to Chicago,” Nathan told her. “He wants to help the locals out there get justice for their man and I think it’s a good idea. I can always call him away if I need him.”

“I agree,” Paige wondered if she should mention Dax.

“I hear your man and his team is headed to Arizona,” Nathan switched topics.

Well, that answered that. “He is. He’s hoping he can get some answers from Thor. I can call you if you want. Once I hear from him, I can let you know what they find.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Nathan relaxed. “Now, tell me about your day. Catch any bad guys?”

“Actually, I did.” Paige proceeded to tell Nathan about the case with the nomads. They talked for over an hour and when she hung up, she was feeling better. Nathan could always do that, cheer her up when she was feeling down. But, now what? It was too early for bed and she

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was too hyped to relax in front of the television. An idea hit her and she went upstairs to grab her shoes.

An hour later, Paige was studying the small metal box that had been attached to the underside of her front porch. It had to be the information Dax was looking for. The question was, what to do with it now that she had it. The doorbell rang and she jumped in surprise. Who could be visiting her this late at night? She shoved the box under the couch and moved toward the window, snatching her service weapon off the couch as she went. She peeked out the window and relaxed. *Carmen.*

“I was bored,” Carmen advised. “And, I’m jumpy and impatient. I want to know if they found Zeus already and I know, logically, they haven’t even arrived. The waiting is killing me.”

“Me too,” Paige admitted. “I need to show you something. Lock the door and have a seat.”

Carmen frowned. Her frown turned to open curiosity when Paige pulled a metal box from under the couch. “What is it?”

“I think it’s the Intel Ahmed left for Dax,” Paige admitted. “What should I do with it?”

“Well, duh,” Carmen jumped to her feet. “We open it and take a look inside.”

“But,” Paige moved into the kitchen and set the box on the table.

“If it makes you feel better, just say you turned it over to a member of Porter’s top-secret intelligence committee. That would be me. Now, open it already,” Carmen insisted.

Once Paige pried open the box, they realized it contained a flash drive. “Should we plug it in?”

“Absolutely,” Carmen jumped to her feet and started for the door. “Wait for me, I want to do this on my computer. It’s safer and it will be secure. Then, we call Nathan and report what we find.”

The team had just left the freeway, headed for the cheap motel when Dax’s phone began to ring. He was now riding shotgun, Hawk had taken over the driving about an hour before. He glanced at the display, expecting Paige or Nathan. He was wrong. “Hello, Thor. We’ve been looking for you.”

“I need your help,” Thor told him. He just hoped he was doing the right thing. He’d spent two whole days trying to find a way inside. Trying to come up with a plan to rescue Zeus and Camille without calling in the team. He finally had to admit, it was impossible. He needed help.

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“With what?” Dax asked, hating that even that request made him suspicious.

“I know it’s asking a lot, but can you meet me in Arizona?” Thor worried Dax wouldn’t come. “And bring the team with you. We need to rescue Zeus... and Camille.”

“Camille?” Dax sat up straighter. “As in Vato’s sister Camille?”

“Yes,” Thor affirmed. “I’ll tell you everything once you get here.”

“Well,” Dax said flatly. “You’re in luck. We’ll meet you at your motel in twenty minutes.”

“I knew Carmen was good,” Thor realized she had traced his phone when he tried to contact Vato. “I just didn’t realize how good. I guess I’ll see you in twenty.”

“That was odd,” Hawk said when Dax disconnected. “You think he’ll bolt?”

“No,” Dax considered. “We should be ready for a trap, but I think he was sincere. He sounded desperate. I believe he does need our help to rescue Zee. The question I want answered is how did they capture him in the first place.”

“I’d like to know that, too,” Wooly straightened in the backseat. “But, I’d also like to know why Thor is avoiding us. He should have called us before he tried to call Vato. The man is half-way around the world, on assignment. What is Thor up to?”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Jeeves mumbled. “Hopefully, we’ll find out in about,” he glanced at his watch, “fifteen more minutes.”

“Hope springs,” Hawk said as he took a turn onto the road that housed the motel.

“Paige,” Nathan said in answer. “I didn’t expect to hear from you again tonight.”

“We found something,” Paige advised. “Carmen has analyzed it and she wants to send you some files. We need to know if she should use the secure network you set up or something else.”

“What did you find?” Nathan was now alert. This was important.

“I located the flash drive Ahmed was trying to deliver to Dax,” Paige told him. “It has top-secret video. Training exercises that show our drones are faulty. It also shows how to disable them or how to gain control and use them against us. I have clear evidence our enemy has done that on more than one occasion. There are other files, but some of it is in code. I think Dax could probably decipher it, but he’s not here. I mean, Ahmed was bringing it to him, he has to know how to read it... right?”

Swindling Nomads

“Tell Carmen to use the folder I set up for her,” Nathan advised. “The one only the two of us can access. I’ll study the material and decide how to handle it from there. Give me a day or two. This ties Reynolds into far more than I originally believed. There are only a few, carefully selected and high-level individuals that know the problems our drones are having. It’s the reason the Pentagon pushed for full replacement months ago. We’ve kept the flaws close to the belt so they couldn’t be used against us by our enemies.”

“And Reynolds knew,” Paige realized. “Because he was competing for the contract to replace them.”

“Exactly,” Nathan sighed. “You can tell the team about this if you need to but nobody else. I need to formulate a plan, but we need to give the men time to deal with Arizona first.”

“Why do I think you know more about this mission in Arizona than I do,” Paige grumbled.

“Paige,” Nathan sighed. “I know more about everything than you do. It comes with age. I’ll call you in a day or two with a directive. Thanks for calling me immediately and goodnight.”

Paige went to bed feeling lonely and depressed. Dax hadn’t called. Did he get to the motel okay? Was Thor there when they arrived? Was he cooperative or combative? She tossed and turned for hours before she finally drifted into a restless sleep.

The phone rang at one in the morning. It was Dax and he had a lot to tell her. Once he finished filling her in on Zee, Vato’s sister Camille, and Thor’s version of Vato’s involvement, she took over and filled him in on finding the flash drive and what she and Carmen had found inside.

THE END