

PAIGE CARTER

Deputy Sheriff

Cultivated Defacement *Season 3, Episode 5*

by:

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“Camille,” Zeus whispered through the small hole he’d created in the concrete wall. “It’s Zeus, do you remember me?”

“What are you doing here?” Camille whispered back. “You’re going to get my brother killed. They’ll make it look like he was attacked by insurgents, but it’ll be them. Don’t do anything that will endanger my brother.”

“Too late,” Zeus mumbled.

“What does that mean?” Camille demanded.

“The team should be here any day,” Zeus informed her. “We’re going to rescue you, then we’ll figure out a way to get word to Vato. Once you’re safe, he can work things on his end.”

Camille remained silent for several long minutes. She was worried, now. Her older brother had always looked out for her. He had always protected her, and she knew this entire situation had to be hard on him. Harder for him than it was for her. But, she would not be the reason Vato was killed in action. What could she do? Refuse to go? That would make everything worse and Zeus, or one of the others, might be killed in the process. “Every one of you should have stayed out of this.”

“Well,” Zeus grinned. “You’re going to have to take that up with your brother. Because Vato’s the one that enlisted our help.”

“He did?” Camille asked in surprise. That changed everything. “Tell me the plan.”

“My plan didn’t work so well,” Zeus admitted. “I was hoping they would house us together. That way, when the cavalry arrived, I could protect you while they cleared the way for our escape. With you over there and me over here that is going to be difficult. I have three guards at all times. Do you know what the schedule is over there?”

“I used to have more,” Camille told him. “Until a few days ago. I assume that was your doing.”

“Probably.”

“Now, I guess they think I’m helpless,” Camille was insulted by that. “I’m not by the way. But, you have three and I have one.”

“That’s good,” Zeus began to plan. “Cover the hole so they can’t see it. I’ll contact you when I’ve worked something out.”

“You? But, you’re also a prisoner,” Camille argued. “How are you going to rescue me?”

“I’m a prisoner by choice,” Zeus informed her. “And I think I might be able to make this work. Did I tap into your cell or just one near you?”

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“No, it’s mine,” Camille answered. “I can see the hole. I’ll move the bed, so it’s hidden, but they never come inside anymore. They just open the door and hand me the food. Sometimes they will shackle me and take me outside after dark, but mostly they just leave me alone.”

“We knew they took you outside,” Zeus admitted. “Thor saw you one night, but he couldn’t get to you. There were too many guards.”

“Thor’s here, too?”

“He is,” Zeus affirmed. “He’s still on the outside and he was supposed to call in the rest of the team. They were in Utah, so it may have taken a few days to get here and formulate a plan; but, we need to be prepared. They could show up any time. When they do, we’ll need to move quickly.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Camille fretted. “Vato’s going to be in danger the second I’m out of their grasp. You have to find a way to get word to him in Iraq. He can’t die because of me.”

“We’ll warn him, somehow,” Zeus promised. “Now, pretend I’m not here. They can’t know we’re talking... or planning. It will spoil everything if we’re discovered.”

Camille moved the bed to cover up the hole. When the guard peeked through her window, she was standing on the far end trying to look out the small window.

“What are you doing?” the guard demanded.

“I just wanted to see the sunlight before dark,” Camille climbed back down. “Even when you take me outside, it’s after the sun sets. I haven’t seen daylight for weeks.”

“Don’t you try anything funny,” he ordered before moving back to the chair he’d been lounging in. He hated guarding prisoners. He’d rather be outside, walking the perimeter. He glanced back at the closed door, he could understand her need to see the outdoors. And, the sun would be setting within the hour. If he was going stir crazy working an eight-hour shift down here, she must be bonkers by now. He could allow her that simple pleasure. What harm could it do? He snatched up his magazine and once again began to daydream about building the perfect hotrod. Two more hours and he’d be off-duty. He couldn’t wait to hit the club, Sandra was supposed to be there tonight. There was nothing like spending time with Sandra.

Paige jerked awake at the sound of the phone. “Hello.”

“Did I wake you?” Dax asked, knowing he did.

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“No,” Paige fibbed.

“Liar,” Dax smiled. “I just wanted to let you know we’re putting the plan in motion today. By late afternoon, Zee and Camille will be rescued, safe, and secure. Depending on their condition, we may start home; or, we might need to layover for a day. I’ll give you a call tonight if we’re staying.”

“Be careful,” Paige requested. “I know you’ve got it covered but just be careful. Reynolds is unpredictable.”

“Don’t worry,” Dax tried to sooth. “We’ve got this. Now, go downstairs, make a pot of coffee, and fix yourself something for breakfast. I woke you early enough that you have time to eat before heading out.”

Paige grumbled as she climbed from the bed, but she complied. “Call me as soon as you can, okay?”

“I promise,” Dax glanced at the noise behind him and spotted Hawk motioning him back inside. “I love you.” It was getting easier for him to tell her, now that he’d taken that first step.

“I love you, too,” Paige swallowed hard. She also missed him and wondered if she’d ever be able to get a good night’s sleep without Dax curled up next to her. It seemed to be the only way she was sure the man was okay. “Go plan your op,” she ordered. “I can tell you’re anxious to go. Just tell Hawk and the rest of the merry band of brothers, I’m going to hold them personally responsible if anything happens to you today.”

“Yeah,” Dax grinned. “I won’t be relaying that message any time soon. I’ll be fine, we all will. Go arrest someone, it’ll make you feel better.”

“See ya,” she replied before clicking off. She was going to worry. And, she was going to be grumpy at work now. So much for her game face. She was stressed and when she was stressed, she was impatient and intolerant. Jericho didn’t like it when she was intolerant. Well, he was just going to have to deal with it. If he complained, she’d tell him to take it up with Dax when he got home. She smiled, visualizing the response she would get from that demand. Maybe she’d keep it to herself.

Paige had just pulled out of her driveway, third cup of coffee doctored and secure in a travel mug – she needed the energy - when Margie called for her over the radio.

“Go ahead, Margie.”

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“Can you respond out to the Cook farm?”

“Ten-four,” Paige made a U-turn and headed that way. “What do you have?”

“Vandalism,” Margie said cryptically.

“Tagging or something else?” Paige asked, reaching for the mug and taking a long sip of the hot liquid.

“Something else,” Margie replied. “He uh... well, Darren Cook is insisting his wheat field was vandalized by aliens.”

Paige spit out her coffee. “Can you repeat that?” She asked as she tried to wipe the sticky mess from the steering wheel.

“No,” Margie refused. “He’s waiting for you up by the house. Said he’ll escort you back to the scene of the crime.”

“Copy,” Paige sighed, knowing this was the last call she should be taking in her current, stressed out, state. Dealing with Darren Cook and his alien vandals was going to take every ounce of patience she possessed. At the moment, she gauged her tolerance level to be about negative five.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” Dax lowered the binoculars and focused on his men. “It’s a large building and we only have five men. Wooley, you stick with me. Thor, you’re with Hawk. Jeeves, you hang back like we discussed. I want you in position to get to either team if there’s an emergency.”

“I’m not staying outside,” Jeeves argued as he studied the large building. “It’s too far away. I need to be inside. I can find a place to take cover and wait. We all go in, then the four of your split off and I’ll wait somewhere in the center.”

“That wasn’t the plan,” Hawk argued.

“He’s right,” Dax decided. “We all go in that door there,” he pointed to the side of the building. “That’s where you said they took Zee, right?”

“Yeah,” Thor nodded. There were currently two men guarding the door. “When he approached, there were only two men just like now. But, as soon as Zeus stepped through the gate, the men called for backup. We need to be prepared for reinforcements.”

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“We stick to the plan,” Dax ordered. “Hawk, you approach the duo first. We’ll hang back and cover you. Once we see how they handle things, we move in. I want silence and stealth every step of the way. We move as a unit down the stairs and into the basement. We know that’s where they have to be, based on the floor plan it’s the only place that makes sense. I just hope they only have the two because we are not prepared for additional prisoners.”

“Who would they have?” Thor asked.

“We’ll deal with whatever we find,” Wooley interjected. “We have a secret weapon on the inside. Zeus may have already set things up to make our job easier.”

Dax grinned, there was no telling what Zee had been doing since he was escorted inside. Sitting idly by while he waited to be rescued was the only thing off the table. “Hawk, you’re up.” Dax directed the instant they reached the front gate. He moved to the right and got into position. The other men took up their pre-arranged posts as well. They all waited to see how the guards would handle an intruder.

“Stop,” one of the guards yelled. “Don’t come any closer. State your business.”

“What is this place?” Hawk asked, taking another step forward. The two men didn’t seem to notice.

“It’s private property,” the second guard took a few steps forward. “You need to leave immediately.”

Hawk waited until the second guard took another step toward him. His movements were smooth and lethal. He shifted, bringing his elbow up to connect with the man’s temple. The guard went down immediately. He was out cold, sprawled in a large heap on the gravel driveway before the second guard realized there was trouble. Hawk maneuvered behind the remaining obstacle, wrapped his large arm around his neck and pressed firmly against his windpipe. The man passed out in a matter of seconds. He carefully lowered the dead weight to the ground and propped him against the outer wall, securing his wrist to a metal pipe with a zip tie. He turned to motion to the men, but they had already secured the first guard and were in position behind him.

“The instant we step inside, we turn right,” Dax ordered. “The stairwell should be no more than thirty feet on the left. You know what to do when we get to the bottom. Jeeves, you’re on your own. Find a safe place and stay quiet.”

The team moved silently into the warehouse. The instant Dax reached the bottom of the stairs, he realized their carefully laid out plan was a bust. Reynolds had made some major alterations to the original floor plan. And, apparently, he had managed to complete all of them off the books. There was no record of the modifications anywhere.

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“Now what?” Wooley asked.

“We stick together,” Dax decided. “Jeeves, move in with us. You’re no good to us out here.”

Hawk moved in behind Dax and the five men made their way silently down the long corridor. At the end of the hallway stood a metal door. Dax reached out, expecting to find it locked. It wasn’t. Once again, he realized he was dealing with amateurs. “Pick up the plan once we’re inside. I’ll go left, Hawk and Thor go right. Jeeves...”

“I’m on my own,” Jeeves answered. “Got it.”

Inside the door was another door to the left and a short hallway to the right. After approximately fifty feet, it made a sharp ninety-degree turn to the left. Dax and Wooley waited until Hawk and Thor disappeared around the corner before they opened the door and moved forward. Just inside, they encountered a guard. The man was obviously taken by surprise and wasn’t prepared for trouble. Wooley disarmed him quickly and Dax slid open the door on the first cell, motioning for Wooley to escort their prisoner inside. Once the guy was locked up tight, his keys safely in Wooley’s pocket, they continued forward. They paused when they came to another corner. Dax pulled a small mirror from his pocket and used it to survey the area. He spotted a guard about half-way down the center aisle and another man sitting on a chair at the far end. Through the mirror, he watched as Thor moved forward to deal with the guard at the end. Dax darted forward and reached the center guard just before he could activate his walkie and call for help. By the time Dax and Thor had the guards incapacitated, Wooley had the door open and was handing a large pack to Zeus.

“I think you forgot something,” Wooley said, holding out the duffle that contained all of Zeus’ tools.

Zeus smiled and dropped the large bag on his bed. He slid open the side pocket and pulled out several items. “Tell Camille we’re coming.”

“What? How?” Thor glanced around.

“Through that hole,” he pointed to the area where he’d carved a hole in the block.

“Camille,” Thor called out. “Stand back, we’re coming to get you.”

Zeus finished attaching a short fuse to the concoction he’d just hastily thrown together. “Stand back,” he called through the hole. “Move to the far corner, Camille.”

“Okay,” Camille moved away from the hole and put her hands over her face.

“You too,” Zeus ordered the men. “Anyone got a light?”

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Dax pulled a small metal lighter from another pocket on his vest and handed it to Zee. “Today would be nice. What kind of explosives expert travels without a lighter?”

“The kind that left in a hurry,” Zeus was grinning as he flipped the lid on the expensive lighter and flicked the roller with his thumb. He pressed the small flame to the fuse and dove for cover.

For a small device, the thing packed a punch. Cement flew in all directions as a large hole appeared in the wall. Jeeves was at the door to the cell in seconds. “Anyone hurt?”

“Naw,” Dax brushed the dust off his pants. “We’re all good. Camille, we’ve gotta move.”

A tiny woman appeared in the opening. Thor moved forward and lifted her over the debris that was now scattered in chunks all around them.

“The guard’s coming,” she warned.

Hawk moved forward and positioning his body to the right of the large hole. The instant the guard stepped into the opening, Hawk had him around the neck and incapacitated. “Let’s move,” he called out as he lowered the man to the floor.

“The group moved quickly back the way they had come. They expected trouble on the way out, but all they encountered were two additional guards that had heard the explosion and decided to investigate. They were dealt with by Hawk and Dax while the others continued forward. Once outside, the group flanked Camille as they silently made their way into the trees. The entire operation took less than ten minutes.

Once they were inside the car and driving away, Jeeves asked the question they all had on their minds. “Why was it so easy?”

“I don’t know,” Dax frowned. “But I’m changing the plan. We head home.”

“You think Reynolds sent men to the motel?” Hawk considered.

“Might have,” Dax confirmed. “I’m not taking any chances. We just rescued Camille, I’m not risking her safety any more than necessary. We cleaned out the room before we left this morning. There’s nothing we need there. She’ll be safer in Utah until we can get Porter to stash her in a safe house somewhere. Grab that map,” he ordered Hawk. “Find me an obscure route that Reynolds would never dream we would take.”

“We have to call Vato,” Camille demanded. “He’s going to be in danger, we have to warn him.”

“First,” Hawk opened the map. “We have to avoid an ambush.”

“Carmen,” Zeus was using Thor’s phone to call his girl.

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“Zeus?” Carmen answered. “Is that really you?”

“Yeah, baby, it’s me and I’m fine,” he grinned, relieved to hear her voice. He could hear the worry and concern; and, for the first time, realized she cared as much as he did. “We’re all fine. We can talk later. Right now, I need those mad hacker skills of yours. See what you can find as far as video, maybe Reynolds has a security system, or scan traffic cams, anything you can get us. We think his men may be setting up blockades. We’re heading out now, on our way back home to you, but we need to find a safe route out of here.”

Carmen dropped into her executive chair and started searching for anything that would give her a visual on the area. Zeus could hear the click, click, click of the keys as Carmen’s fingers flew over the keyboard.

“Okay,” Carmen finally said. “Reynolds has security, and it’s tied to another office building in Flagstaff. Looks like five minutes ago seven large SUV’s funneled out of the parking garage in a hurry.”

“What tipped them off?” Zeus wondered. “I assume they were headed for the warehouse.”

“They were,” Carmen continued to tap on the keyboard. “Okay, here’s another angle. Looks like they saw Hawk take out those two guards at the door. And, I can see all of you enter the building.”

“They were headed our way, so what happened?” Zeus wondered.

“I’ve got a traffic cam,” Carmen advised. “Let me sync this up with the warehouse footage. Okay, yeah. Looks like they split off at the same time you exited the building. When you disappear into the trees, they changed course. I’m watching another traffic camera, but they never come through this intersection.”

“Any idea where they went?” Zeus asked.

Carmen was scrolling through cameras, trying to find the convoy. “Got ‘em,” she exclaimed. “Four SUVs are headed north up eighty-nine and they’re really booking it.”

“That’s them,” Zeus decided. “Avoid eighty-nine.”

“Hawk,” Dax barked. “I need a road.”

“I’ve lost the other three, but it looks like they may have split off and headed up I-15,” Carmen advised.

“We can’t take fifteen, either,” Zeus told Hawk. “I’m guessing they’re working their way north until they find a remote area they can set up and wait. They couldn’t get to us at the warehouse so they’re planning an ambush.”

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“Take forty to Winslow,” Hawk decided. “Then, we’re going to head north on eighty-seven until we intersect one-sixty and continue north into Utah. Just after Hanksville, we’ll intersect I-70 and head west to the Emery cut-off. From there we’ll head north into Castle Dale and cut over the hump into Manti.”

“Tell Carmen the route we’re taking in case we run into trouble and need Porter to send in reinforcements,” Dax decided. “We’ll switch off when I get tired and drive straight through. I’m guessing we’ll hit Manti sometime tomorrow.”

Zeus handed the phone to Hawk, who relayed their route and told Carmen to notify Porter they were on their way home. He also told her to let the General know Reynolds had men looking for them on eighty-nine and probably I-15 as well.

Paige was standing in the middle of a wheat field when her phone rang. She glanced at the display and saw it was Dax. “Did it go okay?” she said in greeting.

“Too well,” Dax admitted. “We didn’t have any trouble at all. Carmen can’t get us anything off the satellite for several hours. But Reynolds men have the main highways covered. We think they’re waiting for us somewhere along the way. We’re taking back roads, which will take longer, but we should be home sometime tomorrow.”

“And Zeus is okay?”

“Yeah,” Dax smiled. “He’s fine and so is Camille. He’s already talked to Carmen so that should put her mind at ease. Hawk asked our favorite tech guru to contact Porter. He’s working on better satellite from the high-tech stuff they have at the Pentagon. We need to know if those guys continue on to Manti or turn back when they realize they lost us.”

“That’s good,” Paige spotted something on the ground and crouched to get a better look.

“You sound busy,” Dax observed.

“Naw,” Paige smiled. “Just chasing aliens.”

“What? Never mind. I won’t keep you.”

“Zeus,” Camille pressed. “You promised we would warn Vato.”

“Paige,” Dax added.

“Yeah,” she straightened and continued to walk the elaborate design that had been pressed into the field overnight.

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“Can you call Porter,” he began. “Ask him to find a way to contact Vato in Iraq. He needs to know we rescued his sister and he could be in trouble. Apparently, Reynolds has men watching him over there and Camille thinks they’ll orchestrate an accident of some kind to take him out permanently.”

“I’ll call Nathan,” Paige assured him. “He has ways. Tell her not to worry.”

“See you soon,” he ended the call and relayed the information to the group. Then he settled in for a long drive home.

“I understand why you think it was aliens,” Paige said for the third time. “But, it wasn’t. I’ll prove it, but you have to give me space to investigate.”

“How’d they get in there, then?” Darren Cook demanded. “A vehicle would have left tracks. They had to drop down from the sky and land right there in my field.”

“And you think their spaceship was shaped like that? With the large spiraling circle in the middle and three circles on the outside?”

“Sure,” Cook insisted. “The middle part is where they travel — you know, the main section of the pod — and the three circles would be the landing gear.”

“How about we just agree to disagree? You operate under the assumption aliens created this mess and I’ll look for a more human answer,” Paige was tired of this nonsense and wished, more than anything, Gage was the one to get the call this morning. She glanced up at the sound of a vehicle and was relieved to see her boss pulling up next to the field. He could deal with the unreasonable homeowner while she searched for actual clues to explain the anomaly.

“Darren,” Jericho said in greeting. “Paige.”

“Your deputy is being difficult,” Darren said immediately. “How can you deny the obvious, I say?”

“And that would be?” Jericho grinned when he saw Paige rolling her eyes.

“Aliens,” Darren said, exasperated. “Clear as day. What else?”

“I think maybe we should rule out human involvement first,” Jericho suggested. “Then we can look at possible terrestrial activity.”

“That’s what she said,” Darren actually pouted. “You think I’ll get in the papers? You think I’ll be famous?”

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“The Enquirer loves this stuff,” Paige mumbled. She shrugged at the look of censure she was getting from her boss. “I need to make a call,” she changed the subject. “Dax called. Everything went well but I need to give Nathan some information.”

“I’ll handle things here,” Jericho understood just how much that news meant to Paige. She could use a minute to unwind. Clearly, Darren Cook was grating on her last nerve.

Paige moved up the hill, away from Cook and her boss. She needed privacy for this call. She settled onto a rock and dialed her favorite general.

“I already spoke to Carmen,” Porter advised. “I’m working on it, Paige. I’ll make sure the boys get back unharmed.”

“Camille, Vato’s sister, is worried about her brother,” Paige answered. “Dax was hoping you could find a way to get word to him in Iraq. Let him know Camille is safe and he might be in danger.”

“They think Reynolds will take him out,” Nathan realized. “They were holding his sister for leverage. Now that’s been thwarted, Reynolds men will no longer be able to control Vato. He’ll become a liability.”

“Exactly,” Paige was glad he understood so quickly.

“I’ll handle it,” Nathan assured her. “I have a contact in Baghdad. He’ll know who to trust out there. Don’t worry about Vato, he’ll get the message. So, does that mean Dax trusts his team member again?”

“He doesn’t know what to think,” Paige said softly. “I know he wants to, but after that call...”

“He’s being cautious,” Nathan finished for her. “I don’t blame him. You don’t always know who your friends are. I’ve learned that lesson well over the past few months.”

“I’m sorry Reynolds turned out to be dirty,” Paige understood just how much Nathan Porter was struggling with the betrayal. He chose his friends wisely and didn’t trust easily. Reynolds actions would impact him for a very long time.

“We have to accept things as they are,” Nathan tried to shake off the disappointment. “Anyway, I’ll get word to Vato and I’ll make sure the others have cover. Anything else?”

“Nope,” Paige stood. “That pretty much covers it. Now, I have to go investigate some aliens. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Aliens? Never mind, you can tell me tonight when I call.”

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Paige disconnected and turned to head back to the field when something caught her attention. She made her way to the other side of the hill and crouched down to study the ground. A vehicle was parked here recently. She pulled out her phone and dialed Jericho.

“What’d you find?”

“Ask Darren if he ever parks his truck on the other side of this hill,” Paige answered.

“He says no,” Jericho said a moment later.

“Then I think I found your aliens and they don’t use a spaceship for transpo.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Jericho decided. “Minus Cook. He’s headed back to the house to call the Messenger. He’s hoping if the local paper takes notice, the big national syndicates will catch on.”

Once Jericho arrived, Paige showed him what she had found. The two of them documented the area where the vehicle had been parked, thoroughly. Once that was finished, they searched the surrounding area and discovered a small trail where the grass and wheat had been wallowed down by what looked like foot traffic. Paige couldn’t find wheel marks but there was a clear path leading to the field where the design began. She figured whoever did this, started and ended in the same spot. Then, they packed up and followed their original trail back to the vehicle and drove away. She hadn’t determined the method they used to make the design yet, but she was confident she would – eventually. The thing was too large to have been made by one man stomping the wheat into the ground. He, or they, had to have some kind of device. Probably something they drug behind them that pressed the stocks into the ground as they went.

It was late in the evening when Paige finally stepped into the office and headed for her desk. She spotted the green rubber alien prominently displayed in front of her keyboard and smiled. “Looks like Havi’s back.” She turned when she heard him laughing. “Cute.”

“I thought so,” Havilland settled into his chair. “Just my luck, aliens visit Manti, and I’m scheduled to work the late shift.”

“Maybe they’ll come back,” Paige suggested. “Be sure to keep a camera on you at all times, just in case.”

“You figure out whodunit?”

“Nope,” Paige settled into her chair. “But I will.”

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“You’re sure this is okay?” the analyst questioned as Nathan maneuvered the satellite into position.

“Why don’t you head out and grab yourself a cup of coffee,” Nathan suggested.

“You know I can’t leave you in here alone, sir,” the man declined.

Nathan was about to respond when the door opened and Mike Harris, the Secretary of Defense, stepped inside. “Take a break,” Harris ordered the shocked employee that was now standing at attention. The man rushed out the door, obviously happy to have an escape. “Nathan.”

“Mike,” Nathan said casually as he studied the data the satellite was now collecting, hoping he got the coordinates right.

“Mind telling me what this is about?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Porter answered without taking his eyes off the screen. He was now sifting through highly classified images Homeland Security had captured through various means along the route from Flagstaff to Utah. He found what he was looking for almost immediately. Several vehicles had left Flagstaff and were now headed toward Utah on both I-15 and US-89. Dax had been smart to find another way home.

“This is a secure room and you are manipulating expensive satellite systems and accessing private data for what I can only assume are personal reasons,” Harris challenged. “I need an explanation, one that justifies all of this,” he waved his hand around the room. “Otherwise, I’ll be forced to report you to the ethics committee and we both know they’ll jerk your credentials. Not even your vast number of contacts will save you, this time.”

Nathan smiled at his old friend. “It’s official business, Michael.”

“Official committee business,” Mike asked for clarification. He knew Porter well. The man wouldn’t lie, but he would deceive.

“That’s right,” Nathan punched in a few more buttons and waited for the new images to come into view. “And we both know I have the knowledge, the credentials and the authority to utilize this system when our nation’s security is at stake.”

“And, we also know Homeland Security would need to be notified of such an event,” Mike once again said in challenge.

“Jeff has been appraised,” Nathan smiled. “That surprised you? Waylon’s a good man. I trust him completely. And, like you said, Homeland should know about any threat inside our borders.”

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“If you are using my equipment and utilizing my men in the Middle-East,” Mike countered. “I should know.”

“Lock the door,” Nathan considered. Someone in the chain had called in the big guns. Maybe it was time to read Harris in. The satellite was in position and he just learned all he was going to from the sparse video available in the database. He could take a quick break. “I’ll tell you a story. One that you will need to keep to yourself. I’m talking the highest level here, Mike. You can’t even share it with the Undersecretary.”

“Tell me,” Harris said flatly. “Then we’ll discuss who is authorized to have the Intel.”

Nathan decided that would have to do. Once Mike knew there was an operative in his ranks, he’d understand the need to keep it under wraps. Reynolds was well connected in Washington. He was also good friends with Undersecretary Bratton. He settled in and started at the beginning. When he finished, Harris was frowning.

“You’re right,” Mike said softly. “Nobody can know about this. How the hell did the information on our drones get into the hands of our enemy? We discovered the flaw, but that was supposed to stay hidden until they were replaced.”

“In a word,” Porter sighed. “Reynolds.”

“Right,” Harris considered. “He would have received all the data because he was working on a replacement. And the drones that were aboard that ship? Were they the new design? The one he was pimping to the Pentagon?”

“They were,” Nathan said soberly. “We have a cluster on our hands, Mike. I’m trying my best to contain it.”

“And you’re using Hamilton and his team as your boots on the ground?”

“It seemed like a good solution,” Nathan shrugged. “They were going to rescue Dax no matter what I said, and they have the skills to handle whatever mission might arise in the future.”

“And this Vato,” Mike frowned. “What is his real name, anyway? Can we trust him?”

“That remains to be seen,” Porter said honestly. “But, I felt it was important to warn him. And, he needed to know his sister is safe. Whatever he’s been doing out there, it was under duress. And someone under your command orchestrated that as well.”

“It should be easy enough for me to find out who altered the orders,” Mike considered. “I’ll have to look that up myself and, that alone, will come off as suspicious.”

“If you can give my tech access,” Nathan offered, “Carmen can find it without anyone knowing she was even in there.”

Cultivated Defacement

“She’s that good?”

“Better.”

“Then consider it done,” Mike stood. “Now, I have some work to do but I want to be kept in the loop on this. Up until now, you’ve been handling everything on your own. That stops today. I’m not the enemy, Nate. I can watch your back in ways nobody else can. Meet me back here tomorrow at fifteen hundred and we’ll decide where to go from there.”

“Thanks, Mike,” Nathan stood. He could trust Mike Harris. They went back a ways, and the man was the only person alive that could get away with calling him Nate.

“And Hamilton? Is his team currently in danger?” Mike asked.

“Some,” Nathan admitted. “I’m just keeping an eye out, for now. Reynolds has men positioned on the two main highways, most likely they are hoping to intercept the cargo and return it to the warehouse. Hamilton and his men would be expendable at this point. If the convoy continues into Manti that might pose a new threat.”

“Do me a favor and put those things back where you found them,” Mike pointed at the satellite equipment. “I have a better solution. One that won’t cost a fortune and won’t mess up any covert ops we have underway that might be counting on that imagery.”

“And that is? The other plan, I mean?” Nathan turned back to the equipment and began readjusting knobs.

“I think it’s time we ran a few exercises,” Mike smiled. “See how well our Blackhawks can maneuver over a populated area.”

“Can I recommend low elevation flying? That just might scare Reynolds men enough to back off,” Porter grinned. “The team is taking a different route home, but I’d like to shove a few birds up that arrogant prick’s behind right about now. Reynolds needs a wake-up call. In fact, do you have any Apache gunships in need of training?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mike was laughing as he left the room. Reynolds was messing with the wrong man. He should know better. General Nathan Porter was not an individual you could cross and walk away unscathed. Reynolds was going to learn that lesson first hand, the hard way. And, Mike was going to enjoy watching from the cheap seats. As far as he was concerned, Cole Reynolds was a traitor to his country and he needed to be brought down — hard. He was more than happy to provide any assistance his old friend needed to make that happen.

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Paige had searched the internet for hours. She'd read dozens of articles on crop circles and even skimmed through a few details on wheat fields. Nothing jumped out at her and she was no closer to figuring out the mystery than she'd been that afternoon. She was stumped, and it annoyed her. Then, just before she left the office, Jericho informed her the Sanpete Messenger had picked up the story. Darren Cook convinced some reporter they were dealing with aliens. She wanted to know if Manti was the new Area 51. Top that off with the fact Dax still wasn't home and she was in a foul mood when she stepped through her front door. The annoyance was bumped up a notch when her phone began to ring. She picked it up just before it switched over to voicemail.

"You need to make Hamilton and his team back off," a strange, clearly distorted voice warned. "Tell them to mind their own business or their interference is going to cost all of you. You don't want to test me. Back off or die."

"Idiot," Paige said before she slammed down the phone and dialed Porter. He needed to know there was a new threat.

Nathan was torn. He was feeling a strange combination of satisfaction and terror. Obviously, Mike's Blackhawk training did the trick. But, in return, Reynolds was now threatening Paige, and Dax wasn't around to keep an eye on her.

"I can hear your worry from here," Paige scolded. "First of all, he said to warn Dax. I can't do that until he gets home. Once he does, you can give my neighbor strict orders to protect me, again. We both know you're going to, so let's not pretend otherwise. And, I'm going to get Carmen over here to trace that call. She might not be able to do anything on my end, but she can hack the phone company's records and see where the thing originated. Once we know that, we'll deal with it. Reynolds is just upset because we stole his insurance policy. Whatever he had planned over in Iraq just got derailed and he's feeling desperate. You did warn Vato, right?"

"He knows," Porter sighed. "My contact confirmed the message was delivered an hour ago. Call me as soon as the team arrives. I have a man waiting in the wings. He's going to head down there and pick up Camille. At least she'll be safe until this is all over."

"Nathan," Paige said softly. "Be careful. The best way to make me pay, would be to harm you. And taking you out would solve a lot of their problems."

"The feeling is mutual," Nathan warned. "And I don't like knowing you're out there by yourself tonight. The unit is on their way, but it could be hours before they arrive. Can you do me a favor and have Carmen stay with you? She's probably more vulnerable than anyone right now."

Cultivated Defacement

“I’ll call her as soon as we hang up,” Paige promised. “I need her to take a look at the phone, anyway.”

“Goodnight, princess,” Nathan responded. “Stay safe and I love you, kid.”

Paige was still smiling at the simple endearment when Carmen answered her call.

“Are they back?”

“No,” Paige answered. “Not yet. But, I need you to pack an overnight bag and head to my house.”

“Why?”

“I got a call,” Paige was choosing her words carefully. “I need you to see if you can trace it. And, it was a threat. I’d feel better if you didn’t stay home alone tonight.”

“They threatened me?” Carmen frowned.

“No,” Paige said slowly. “They threatened all of us. Said something bad was going to happen if the guys didn’t back off. Since they won’t, I need you where I can protect you.”

“And who will protect you?”

“I’m a cop,” Paige said, offended. “I’ll protect myself. I’ll be waiting.” She disconnected the call, unwilling to argue with her friend over this. Once Zeus was home, Carmen could stay with him. Until then, she was staying with Paige and that was non-negotiable.

Paige woke to a man standing in her doorway. She grabbed her gun and pointed it in the general direction of the intruder.

“Paige,” Dax said unconcerned. “It’s me. Put that way before you shoot someone. Why are you so jumpy tonight?”

“I had a phone call,” Paige told him.

“What kind of call?”

“A ‘stop looking into my business or die’ kind of phone call,” Paige said in response.

“Someone threatened you?” Dax moved across the room and settled onto the bed next to her. “Do you know who?”

Cultivated Defacement

“I called Nathan,” Paige told him. “And, Carmen is working on it.”

“Are you sure it has to do with Reynolds and not a case you’re working?”

“I’m sure,” Paige sat up and gave him a gentle kiss. She was so happy to have him home, but she didn’t want to overdo it. “He, well they, the voice was distorted. They said, tell Hamilton to back off. Tell him to mind his own business or all of you will pay; or, something close to that. Then he said back off or die.”

Dax was fuming. They solved one problem, and another popped up. “Did it scare you? Worry you?”

“No, Dax,” Paige said irritated now. “It pissed me off. I called Nathan to let him know, then I made Carmen stay with me.”

“And, you decided to sleep with a gun under your pillow.”

“I always do that,” she said defensively.

“Not always,” Dax knew she didn’t do that when he was here. “Sorry I had to leave you again. Nothing is going to happen. Not to you, not to Carmen, not to anyone. These guys are worried, that tells me we’re hitting them where it hurts. But, threatening me and my team, through you... now, they’ve gone too far.”

“I’d say they went too far when they kidnapped and tortured you,” Paige said flatly. “And when they shot you, but semantics, right?”

“That too,” Dax stood and started to undress. He slipped into bed beside her and pulled her against him. “I missed this.” He kissed the top of her head and finally relaxed. He was beat from driving thirteen hours, the long way, but he also missed their conversations. “Maybe you could tell me about the aliens.”

Paige moaned. “Not you, too.”

“You’re the one that left me hanging,” Dax accused.

Paige cuddled up against him and relayed the details of her case.

Dax was laughing by the time Paige finished. He loved this time together, loved hearing her tell him about her day. Loved her. “So, what’s next?” he pushed his own emotions aside, not knowing what to do with them or where they would lead. He was satisfied to wait, to coast along for a while, rather than push and risk making a mistake.

“I have no idea,” Paige said in frustration. “But, if my phone wakes me up again... I’m pulling that sucker out of the wall.”

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“Sorry,” Dax kissed her forehead. “I guess I should have let you sleep.”

“That’s not it,” Paige brushed that aside. “It’s being pulled out of bed for nonsense that irritates me. You should have seen Darren Cook. There was no reasoning with that man. He is convinced aliens are responsible and he wouldn’t even consider a more logical explanation. Jericho said Darren lit a fire under a reporter and she’s printing some nonsense about aliens, Area 51, and a Manti invasion.”

“That should be interesting,” Dax decided. “But where are you going to go from here?”

“To sleep?” Paige evaded.

“I can see you’re tired,” Dax pulled her closer. “Let’s sleep on it and we can discuss it further in the morning.”

“Okay,” Paige yawned and within seconds she was fast asleep.

Dax didn’t go down as easily. He was fuming inside. Threatening Paige had just sealed Reynold’s fate. If Nathan didn’t take him down good and hard, Dax would. Reynolds could come after him, threaten him, but threatening the woman he loved — that was so far over the line, you could no longer see the line. Reynolds was going to pay dearly for his arrogance and he wouldn’t even see it coming.

The following morning, Paige was once again awakened by the ringing of her phone. “I need to shut that thing off before I settle in at night,” she mumbled before snatching up the receiver. “Hello.”

“Hope I didn’t wake you,” Havilland greeted. “I know sleeping beauty needs her rest.”

“What do you want?”

“Grumpy much?” Havilland said cheerfully. “Don’t hang up. The aliens are at it again. Another crop was hit last night. Different design, but I want you to take a look and see if the method is the same.”

“Right,” Paige climbed out of bed. “Because otherwise, we have a rival terrestrial visitor competing for the blue ribbon award by making crop circles.”

“You know,” Havilland grinned. “I hadn’t thought of that. Let me run it by the owner and see what he thinks.”

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“Oh,” Paige slipped into jeans and a tee. If she had to report early, she was going to be comfortable. “Then you decided you don’t want me to respond out there and take a look.”

“Have some coffee before you come out,” Havilland ordered. “You’re pretty unreasonable before you have your morning brew.” He disconnected before she could respond.

Once again, Paige found herself walking through a large wheat field first thing in the morning. Good thing she didn’t have allergies. “Same method,” she confirmed. “Different design. And, hum...”

“What?” Havilland asked.

“I don’t know,” Paige took a moment to turn slowly in a circle and survey the entire field. “There’s something different about it. I’d almost say this one was made by an entirely different person. The circles are different. More pronounced. Yesterday, the circles were sloppy, I guess you could say. These are perfectly round, and I bet if you measured them, each one would be exactly the same distance apart.”

“So, what does that mean?” Havilland was frowning. “Rival aliens after all?”

“No,” Paige started to walk again. “Did you find where they parked the truck?”

“Yeah,” Havilland pointed toward a ridgeline. “Up there, just like you said.”

Paige nodded and moved to check the area for herself. Even this was the same, but different somehow. The entire thing was strange, and she found herself more perplexed than she wanted to be. “Let’s just document it and then we can compare this scene to the information I gathered yesterday. Looks like you got your wish, Havi.”

“What’s that?”

“The aliens came back to say hello,” Paige laughed as she made her way to the edge of the field to start snapping pictures.

“So, what we have here... is a failure to communicate,” Havilland grinned as he dropped into his chair. “I mean, on the alien’s part. If they’re going to send a message to us earthlings, the least they could do is make sure we understand what they’re saying.”

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Paige was doing her best to ignore her colleague at the moment. She was searching the internet for answers and so far, she hadn't found any. There were various ways the crops had been tagged with strange art, but none of them seemed to be at play in Manti.

Jericho stepped through the front door, paused to retrieve messages from Margie, then turned to address his deputies. "You two, in my office."

"Now you've done it," Havilland accused. "It's my first day on the job and I'm already being called into the principal's office."

"It's hardly your first day," Paige shook her head. "And, I wouldn't call Jer the principal. Might touch a nerve."

"What do we have?" Jericho asked the instant the duo settled into his visitor chairs. "And I don't want to hear one word out of either of you about aliens."

"Kill-joy," Havilland mumbled.

"That's right," Jericho smiled. "But then you didn't have a forty-eight-minute conversation with Ellie over at the Messenger this afternoon. Darren Cook has her riled up and she's caught wind of the new situation over at the Kelly farm. She's not going to back off any time soon. Prepare yourself, the article is going to be absurd. She's calling Manti the next Area 51. And, we're part of the conspiracy. Seems we decided to house those creatures and conduct experiments. Where is beyond me; but, there you go."

"We are not dealing with aliens," Paige grumbled. "And she can quote me on that."

"Oh," Jericho grinned. "She did. But, what do you know? Have you ever been abducted? Probed? Returned to this planet to walk among the earthlings collecting data for space beings?"

"No," Paige said slowly. "But while we're on the topic, maybe you can explain that whole anal probing thing to me. I mean, you're an alien and you travel millions of miles to check out your neighbors; and, the first thing you want to know is what's up their..."

"Enough," Jericho stopped her. "That is something I refuse to think about, not now... not ever. Just solve this thing before we have another incident. Otherwise, I'm shutting off my phone and going fishing. You can send someone to get me when ET is behind bars or heading home."

"Seriously," Paige sighed. "I'm working on it. I know it's manmade. I know where they parked, the route they traveled, and we know the results. Other than that, I've got nothing. They're being careful, but they're also sloppy. If they wanted the community to really believe the symbols were made by terrestrial beings, they never should have parked their vehicle so close to the field."

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“Maybe they didn’t care,” Havi suggested. “Maybe, the point wasn’t to fool the locals. Maybe they have some other motive that we just haven’t figured out, yet.”

“Maybe it was the owner of the field and he wanted the publicity,” Paige suggested. “Darren Cook was pretty quick to involve the media.”

“Darren is an idiot, but he’s not the culprit,” Jericho disagreed. “That man is star-struck, as in the outer space kind. He wants it to be aliens, but he doesn’t have the nerve or the imagination to pull this off himself.”

“Then who?” Paige focused on her boss. “You’ve lived here longer than either of us. Who would do this and why?”

“Figure that out,” Jericho decided. “And you’ll crack the case. Let me think on it, but off-hand I’d rule out the adults. None of the other farmers would destroy another man’s field that way. And, the only reason I can think of to wipe out a man’s livelihood — is revenge. Unless you can locate someone that has it in for both Darren Cook and Martin Kelly, there has to be another explanation.”

“I’m going to head back out to Cook’s field,” Paige decided. “Maybe there’s something out there I missed.

“Not likely,” Jericho turned to Duncan Havilland. “Go home, this can wait. Those fields aren’t going anywhere.”

“Maybe I should head back to Kelly’s place and take another look around.”

“It’s a waste of time,” Jericho insisted. “Go home. You’ll be working with Reed tonight. Keep an eye on the kid, will ya? He’s coming along quickly, but he’s still green.”

“Will do,” Havilland drove home, exhausted. It had been a long night and he was completely stumped. He was still thinking about vandalized crops when he drifted off to sleep.

Paige was sitting at her desk, reviewing her evidence when Gage Clayton stepped up to her desk. He dropped the afternoon edition of the local paper on her desk.

Paige glanced at the headline... ‘Are there aliens living in Manti?’ There were two large pictures of the crop circles plastered side-by-side taking up the rest of the page. She shoved it aside immediately. “Get that off my desk.”

Gage laughed. “You need to see page five,” he insisted.

Cultivated Defacement

“Let me guess,” Paige straightened and focused on her colleague. “Local law enforcement is impeding the public’s right to know. They’re hiding something. Deputy Carter says there are no aliens.”

“Didn’t see that,” Gage picked up the paper and turned to the page in question. “But, that would have been better than this crap.” He dropped the paper back on her desk and pointed to a website at the bottom of the page, just beneath Ellie’s article.

Paige almost disregarded the listing but paused. “Did you look it up?”

“Yeah,” Gage nodded. “And you should, too. Someone has set up a voting pool. The public is supposed to vote for the best artwork based on very specific criteria.”

“Like?” Paige asked as she turned to her computer and punched in the site. Both photos, the same ones used by the newspaper popped onto the screen. Beneath each photo was a score sheet. Visitors were supposed to rate composition, creativity, originality and overall appearance. “Interesting,” Paige sat back in her chair. She considered for several seconds then picked up the phone and dialed the paper. It took three transfers and several attempts at stalling, but she finally got the information she needed. The journalist hadn’t taken the photos, she’d been provided the images anonymously.

Paige glanced up when Jericho stepped out of his office. “Hey, boss. Mind if I work from home for the last hour?”

“Why?”

“Because I have a job for my personal consultant,” Paige smiled.

“What did you find?”

“Gage can fill you in,” Paige shut down her equipment and started for the door. “I’ll let you know if we get anything. Thanks, Gage. You may have just broke the case... well, two cases. Havi will owe you one if this pans out.”

“I like that idea,” Gage grinned and settled in to take care of his own paperwork.

“Paige,” Carmen protested. “I can’t be your personal hacker.”

“Do I need to call Nathan?”

“Fine,” Carmen dropped into her chair. “But, if I get into trouble over this...”

“You won’t,” Paige assured her. “It’s official business.”

“Right,” Carmen started tapping on keys and Paige was lost immediately. “But I don’t work for Sanpete County, do I?”

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“Maybe it’s Reynolds, trying to distract us,” Paige grinned. “You better take a look, see if you can track the information of the person that owns that site.”

“Which would mean,” Carmen shut out of one program and opened another, “he succeeded.”

“What’s taking so long?” Paige complained.

“I’ve spoiled you,” Carmen decided. “They tried to cover their tracks. Set up the website with a phony email and it’s one of those free sites so they didn’t have to provide a credit card or personal details.”

“Then, you can’t track it?” Paige asked, disappointed.

“After all this time,” Carmen sat back and glared at her friend. “You still insist on insulting me.”

“You found them?” Paige said, starting to get excited now.

“I found the location where the IP address is located.” Carmen pointed to the screen. About halfway down was a Manti address.

“I’m not familiar with that family. Does it give you a name?”

“Nope,” Carmen sighed. “Give a girl the world and she demands the universe. I guess you’re going to have to drive out there and see who lives there the old-fashioned way. You know, the way the really good detectives do it in the movies.”

“The movie detectives don’t have Carmen the Magnificent,” Paige jumped to her feet. “And I don’t have to drive, I have my own secret database. I’ll just run tax records and see who the RO is.”

“I think I should come with you,” Dax said as he watched Paige slip on her sturdy black boots and buckle her duty belt.

Paige glanced up. She studied Dax for several seconds before realizing he was serious. “I guess you forgot the whole... I stay home and fight crime while you save the world bit?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Dax smiled, stood and wrapped his arms around her. “I just don’t like you sneaking around, alone, after dark looking for bad guys. Will you at least take Duncan with you?”

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“Havi is meeting me up the road from the target,” Paige assured him. “And, I think I like this. You know, having the roles turned around on you. I very clearly recall sitting in that same chair, worrying about you and not knowing what you were walking into. It might do you good to experience a little of what you put me through.”

“I experience it every day, Paige,” Dax scowled. “You risk your life every time you walk out that door and climb into that patrol car. I only risk my life on rare occasions. Maybe, you worrying about me now and again will do you some good.”

“Okay,” Paige relented. “Point taken. I’ll be careful, I’ll have Havi, and if I know Jericho, he’s going to show up and take point. I won’t be alone, and the guys will have my back. Seriously, I’m dealing with crop artists. What do you think they’re going to do? Slap me with a paintbrush?”

“I don’t think they used a paintbrush to destroy those fields,” Dax settled back into the chair. “And with that kind of cavalier attitude, I have no idea why I get so worried.”

Paige grinned. “It’s a talent. Don’t wait up, I could be late.” She moved to the chair, leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. “You know, you wouldn’t want me any other way.”

Now, Dax grinned. “If you switched those jeans out for a little leather mini-skirt and ditched the tee for...”

Paige didn’t know if he finished that sentence, she simply walked out the door, down the stairs and into the crisp, clear black night. It was time to get to work. She needed to find something that would link that house to her crime. She couldn’t use the data Carmen retrieved, not in court. She didn’t have a warrant to access it. Their only hope was finding something tonight, at the residence or on the truck, that would give her probable cause. Her gut was telling her if she could just get inside that house, she’d find the device they used to trample down the wheat. Maybe in the garage or the truck... it was there, she was sure of it.

Paige and Haviland were parked several yards up the road from their target. So far, they weren’t seeing anything that would help. Jericho had called. He was on his way to their location. Once he arrived, they’d decide how to proceed. The deputies had pulled their marked cars into a small ravine off the side of the road so the vehicles wouldn’t be visible from the roadway. The precaution was probably unnecessary, but they didn’t want someone leaving the house to spot the units and get tipped off.

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“Can’t Carmen just send you the data, anonymous like?” Havi asked. He had moved from his vehicle and was now settled into Paige’s passenger seat. “Then, we could use that link to get a warrant to search the entire property.”

“Based on what?” Paige asked. “They could just say they thought the designs were cool and they wanted the town to get involved and pick their favorite. Even with the website, the evidence is weak.”

“Then why are you and the boss out here in the middle of night, working the graveyard shift, to hold surveillance on a house?”

“Because,” Paige said softly, “my standard is much lower than the District Attorney’s.”

“And, apparently so is his,” he pointed to the back of the vehicle. Jericho had just arrived. They watched as their boss switched off his headlights and maneuvered into position using the bright light of the nearly full moon.

“Where do you think they’re going?” Paige asked when two men in their early twenties exited the house and made their way to the large pickup parked next to the house.

Havilland climbed over the seat to make room for his boss. He made it just as Jericho was pulling open the passenger’s door.

“Get in,” Havilland said in greeting. “I think they’re on the move.”

Jericho jumped inside and pulled the door shut, barely missing the side of the embankment. Paige was already on the move. “Now I remember why I usually drive.”

Paige just smiled as she continued to make her way up the gully. The vehicle was sliding and bouncing as she gripped the wheel harder and tried to maintain control. Havilland swore when his head hit the top of the roof.

“Slow down,” Jericho said softly. “If these are the culprits, there’s only one place they could be headed. Even if we lose them, we’ll get there in time to catch them in the act.”

Paige hesitated, then slowed the vehicle to a reasonable speed as she finally located the spot she was looking for. The gully leveled out, making it easy to climb back onto the roadway. Once her tires hit the pavement, she was off. Jericho might know where the guys were headed, but what if he was wrong? She couldn’t lose them, this was her only shot and she wasn’t going to blow it.

Several minutes later, Paige had caught up to the car in question. She held back, not wanting them to know they were being followed. They would see her headlights, there was nothing she could do about that, but they wouldn’t be able to make out the markings or the light

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bar on top. She had to give Jericho credit, he was right. The men were pulling off the highway onto the long dirt drive that led to Connor Mackay's wheat field.

"Hold back," Jericho ordered. "Can you drive without the lights or do you want me to take over?"

Paige glanced up at the bright moon, shrugged, and shut off the headlights. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust but, she was actually surprised at how clear the roadway was with the bright orb lighting the way.

"If they stay true to form," Havilland said from the back, "they should stop up there on the hill."

"Where do you think we should set up?" Paige asked Jericho.

"If memory serves me correctly," he unsnapped the seatbelt and leaned forward to get a better look. "Yeah, over there. Make sure you miss that small tractor and the watering trough but you should be able to park the car next to the barn. This time of night, it will be well hidden to anyone not specifically looking. And from the sound of those two, they're not looking."

"Are they drunk?"

"No," Havilland answered instantly. "They were driving too carefully. They're just being stupid kids and they think they're alone. We're far enough away from the house, nobody would hear them."

Paige rolled her window down to see if they could catch what the men were saying.

"I told you," the first guy said. "My design rocks."

"I think you're cheating," the second guy said. "There is no way your photo is getting twice the votes of mine. My design was harder, it was the bomb and you know it."

"I know it bombed," the other guy started to laugh hysterically. "Now's your chance to redeem yourself. And this time, try to get the circles straight. I bet that's why it's not getting as many votes. Your circles looked like a blind man made them. Take the backpack and I'll wait here. Same as before, if someone comes... you take off on foot and I'll meet you up the road when the coast is clear. They'll follow me, so you should get away clean."

"At least they have a plan," Paige whispered. "I want to see the device they used to make the designs. It has to be something homemade."

"I want to stop him before he destroys another man's field," Jericho said as he pushed open the door and climbed outside.

"I'm with him," Havilland jumped over the seat and followed his boss.

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“Suck up,” Paige grumbled as she gave in and exited the car. “But, don’t you two think we should have a plan?”

“I plan to stop the vandal,” Jericho said over his shoulder.

“Maybe you should plan to stop the truck,” Havilland suggested. “Don’t you have spike strips in the back?”

Paige sighed, climbed into the back seat of her vehicle and began searching for the tire spikes she always carried. It took far longer than it should have and she was beginning to wonder if Havilland had moved them on purpose when she finally spotted the bag. She snatched it up and headed toward the hill. Once she reached the edge of the field, she paused for a minute to try to locate the best route. She had to make sure she couldn’t be seen by the guy in the truck, but that meant avoiding the side windows and the rearview. If the guy spotted her, he’d bolt.

She decided her best option was to move just inside the tall corn field that butted up against the wheat field. She could easily make her way across the field and exit on the far side where it butted up against the hill. Then, all she had to do was crawl up the side of the hill and slide the spike strips under the tires.

She glanced back, trying to locate Havi and Jer. It took her several seconds before she spotted them approaching the field from the other side. They’d be in the open for a few minutes, but then they should be able to make their way through the corn and wait for the vandal to approach. If they timed it right, they could surprise him the instant he started to work. That didn’t give her much time. She’d have to hurry, but she thought she had just enough time to get the strips in place before anything went down in the field.

Paige dropped to her knees right before she reached the edge of the corn. The ground was still warm from baking in the summer sun all day. She slowly, quietly made her way up the hill pausing just before she reached the top to pull out the first spike system. She held her breath as she pulled her body onto the dirt road and slid the claws underneath the back tire. She shoved back, out of sight and prepared the second unit for deployment. This time, she crawled behind the truck and placed the strip under the back, driver’s side tire. She could hear the driver shifting around and waited for what seemed like a lifetime before she crawled slowly back to her hiding place just over the hill. She slid the last strip in front of the front tire on the passenger’s side and shoved it under the tire, making sure it was securely in place before backing down the hill a few feet. She couldn’t get to the driver’s side, so three would have to be enough.

As she turned to check on her colleagues, she realized they were in place and waiting for her. She gave them the thumbs up and wondered if they could see it. The moon seemed even brighter now than before and she hoped they got the signal. She was confident they did when seconds later, Jericho emerged from the corn, flashlight blazing.

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“Sanpete County Sheriff’s Office,” Jericho called. “Get your hands where I can see them.”

Instead of complying, the guy fled. He was quick and wily. Paige watched as he gained momentum and flew across the wheat field like it was a race track. Havilland was right behind him, he mirrored every turn and every dodge, then both of them disappeared into the large stocks of corn. Paige started to stand, then realized the vehicle above her had punched the gas, flattened three tires and had started to slide. The driver over-corrected and completely lost control. She jumped out of the way, just as the truck began to roll down the hill. The driver was lucky it was a small hill. Unfortunately, the truck was a total loss. Paige rushed to the upturned vehicle and yanked the driver through the window before he could regain his wits after the tumble he just took. Within seconds she had the cuffs on her suspect and was walking him toward Jericho.

“Nice catch,” Jericho nodded in approval. He was carrying a large backpack and a strange device the men used to make their designs. It had a large handle, Paige assumed that was to pull the thing across the field. The handle was attached to what looked like a large iron weight. The concoction was on a hinge so it could fold in half and fit in the bag. “That looks heavy.”

“Not too bad,” Jericho gave it a shake. “Pretty clever and it fits perfectly in this backpack. Makes it portable and... normal.”

“Where’s Havi?”

“Over there,” Jericho pointed to the flat, open area near the barn. Apparently, the second suspect hadn’t spotted the small tractor in time. He ran smack-dab into it and split his leg open on the edge of the bucket. Havilland had the kid cuffed and he was now trying to doctor the wound.

“I don’t think we thought this one through,” Jericho observed as they gathered around Havilland and his injured prisoner.

“What do you mean?” Paige glanced around, wondering what Jericho was referring to.

“Five people, one car.”

“Oh,” Paige frowned. “Well, these two are injured. How about I call medical and Havi can ride to the clinic with the prisoners while I take you back to get your truck?”

“That will work,” Havilland stood. “You’ll live, get up,” he ordered the man sprawled on the ground. The instant he was on his feet, Havilland moved him over next to the barn and helped him sit against the front wall. “What’s your name?”

“Michael Angelo,” the guy said.

“Cute,” Havilland said without humor. “Add false info to the police. Now, Einstein. You’re real name.”

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“Rick Hughes,” the guy pouted. “And that’s police brutality. I got the blood to prove it.”

Havilland grinned. “If you can’t see, that has nothing to do with the police. I saw the tractor fine and you colliding with a fixed object while fleeing is not police brutality. But, hey... go ahead, lodge a complaint.” He motioned to Jericho. “He’s my boss.”

“Well,” Rick considered. “He must have a boss.”

“Yeah,” Jericho told him. “The community.”

“You wrecked my truck,” the second guy focused on Paige.

She ushered him over to the barn and settled him in next to his friend. “You got a name?”

“Sure,” he smirked. “Everyone got a name.”

“Doesn’t matter to me, smart guy. I can book you as John Doe or I can use your name. The judge can sort it out for all I care. And, I suggest you bring that attitude to court with you. The judge, he really likes punk kids that are too cocky for their own good.” She glanced up when she spotted the headlights coming their way. “Rides here.”

It was two in the morning when Paige finally slid into bed. Dax shifted and draped an arm over her waist. She thought he was sleeping until he pulled her close and pressed a gentle kiss on the side of her neck.

“I told you not to wait up,” Paige whispered.

“I was never that good at taking orders,” he whispered back.

Paige smiled, thinking that was probably true.

“Catch any aliens?” Dax asked.

“Yep,” Paige yawned. “Two of ‘em.”

“Hum,” Dax said, half asleep.

They both dozed off, exhausted but content.